Chronotopographies

Chronotopes and the Crafting of Fictions

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[E]very entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope. (Bakhtin 258)

Modern thought—from René Descartes to Immanuel Kant, from Galileo Galilei to Isaac Newton—played an important role in shaping Western conceptions of time, space, and the subject as stable and unchanging categories, untouched by worldly matters.[1] To this day, these attitudes towards time, space, and the subject permeate philosophy and the sciences, which makes it difficult for those of us who have been schooled in these modern ways of thinking to identify and understand transformations that appear to affect these seemingly basic categories. In this essay, I present the idea of chronotopography, which is what I call fiction that is both investigative and creative, and that plays, messes, and invents with what Mikhail Bakhtin calls chronotopes—combinations of time, space, and subjectivities.

Many scholars agree, although for different reasons, that there have been fundamental shifts during the last few decades regarding how time, space, and/or subjectivities are conceived. Even with scientific and political disagreements regarding how to best understand these shifts, one can still easily think of a few examples. The 1980s and the 1990s saw the rise of a new type of globalized space—albeit one with ancient colonial roots—built upon complex fluxes of supply chains and precarious labour. Advances in information technology through the 1990s and 2000s dislocated notions of time and space; it is now commonplace to instantaneously share digital information across vast distances, for those who can afford to. In the 2000s, while the global North went through neoliberal and conservative governments, simultaneously feeding off of the economic imperative of growth and the ever-mounting fear of terrorism, that same decade brought hopes of more social justice to millions of forsaken people in Latin America as a number of centre-left presidents came to power—although these hopes have now been mostly crushed.[2] In the late 2010s, modern workplaces and working hours have become much more demanding and now shape peoples' lives: how and where they live, how they distribute their time, and how they take care of themselves. The average person has limited space that they can consider their own, and cities' public spaces seem to diminish everywhere, while business giants like Amazon and Google claim enormous urban areas for themselves. To top it off, climate change is making what was most reliable for thousands of years—the weather, the seasons, and biochemical cycles—more and more uncertain. How are we to understand such a different world using our previous ways of thinking? Most importantly, how are we to imagine other ways of existing?

Chronotopographies are stories that are looking for radically-other dispositions of times, spaces, and subjectivities. Today, chronotopographies are stories that want to break not only through the gridlock of capitalist realism—"the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (Fisher 2; Fisher's italics)—but also through wholesale modern utopianism still animated by dreams of progress, growth, technofixes, and, above all, human supremacy.

In order to propose the concept of chronotopography, I have drawn from many different sources, but the most important one for this text can only be Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin was a twentieth-century Russian philosopher of language and art who developed the concept of the chronotope in the 1930s[3] to talk about how time, space, and subjectivity influence each other, especially in literature. Inspired by Marxist philosophy of history, Bakhtin saw literary genres as constantly changing, evolving, fusing, and disappearing in relation to aesthetic, ethical, economic, moral, philosophical, and other values. We may call this type of analysis Bakhtin's "historical poetics." It is upon his concept of the chronotope that I aim to build the concept of chronotopography.

My interest in chronotopographies lies in their capacity to craft fictions that challenge hegemonic regimes of temporality, spatiality, and subjectivity—that is, hegemonic chronotopes. These fictions confront and reinforce each other, bringing about new worlds. Chronotopographies are a special sort of fiction that direct acute attention to the three components of the chronotope—time, space, and subjectivity. The term chronotopography is not entirely unheard of in English-speaking academia (Roderick; Howell and Beckingham), stemming as well from Bakhtin's work on the chronotope. However, it has not yet, to my knowledge, seen a thorough methodological and conceptual development. Further work on the notion of chronotopography will not only make chronotopes more noticeable, but it will also make the active production of chronotopes visible, through the reworking of their three components.

My work was set in motion by realizing that stories can make history, that fictions are present in every being's most elementary actions, and that fictions shape the most basic elements of our experience of reality. Even though the rest of this text mostly focuses on

literature, due to Bakhtin's interests, I use the term "fiction" very broadly here, akin to Isabelle Stengers' way of deploying it when talking about the sciences and philosophies: every scientific or philosophical theory, every creative work, and every mode of existence is fiction, at least at some point in its history.

In this essay, I aim to elucidate Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope and to construct that of chronotopography. The first section presents an overview of Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, as seen in the essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel." Bakhtin's theoretical works have a complex philosophical and linguistic background that will not be possible to reproduce in this essay. I focus on the most basic characteristics of the chronotope, and the relation between represented chronotopes—also called literary or fictional chronotopes—and real chronotopes—also called actual chronotopes. The former are those chronotopes crafted by the author in the act of composing their fictional work, while the latter are those chronotopes that make up the historical, ever-changing, lived world. These real chronotopes are the author's raw materials and also the reader's footing in the act of reading, although most of the time the author and reader do not share their chronotopes; they are often separated by temporal and spatial distances, and have different subjectivities.

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In the second section, I bring a definition of fiction in order to develop the concept of chronotopography as a unique kind of fiction that confronts existing chronotopes. Chronotopography is not an attribute essential to any given fiction; it is a relational story, a form of functioning, that can only exist insofar as it opens a path beyond contemporary temporalities, spatialities, and subjectivities.

1. Chronotopes

In order to develop the concept of chronotopography, it is first necessary to establish the nature of the chronotope, and its relation to different manners of inhabiting and producing time and space. A chronotope is the crystallization of a specific combination of time, space, and subjectivity in a single entity that we may find in fiction as well as in the world. In a chronotope, these three categories condition each other mutually, and shifts in any one of them may produce a general transformation in the chronotope. What the concept suggests, then, is that there are connections—visible and invisible, conscious and unconscious—between certain temporalities, spatialities, and subjectivities and that these configurations are situated and contingent.[4]

To Mikhail Bakhtin, the chronotope is, above all, a concept of literary theory, even if its initial inspiration lies in relativistic physics. It is "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin 84). Furthermore, Bakhtin emphasizes that the chronotope "expresses the inseparability of space and time" (84). Equally indissolubly, "the image of man in literature . . . is always intrinsically chronotopic" (Bakhtin 85). Bakhtin erects his historical poetics on top of this constructed object of analysis—this crystal of time, space, and subject—and,

in the same essay, develops a study that includes many different kinds of texts—from classic Greek narratives to nineteenth-century French and Russian novels. The chronotope may seem, when so introduced, a difficult concept to articulate in the analysis of fiction. To Bakhtin, however, the chronotope takes shape in simple forms: as the road in chivalric romances or picaresque novels, the castle in gothic novels, the literary salon in Balzac's works, and the

rural village in Flaubert's novels. These unities, which can appear to be no more than background—mere accessories for the plot's unfolding—actually contract into themselves the three components of the chronotope. The gothic castle, for instance,

> is saturated through and through with a time that is historical in the narrow sense of the word, that is, the time of the historical past. . . . [T]he traces of centuries and generations are arranged in it in visible forms as various parts of its architecture, in furnishings, weapons, the ancestral portrait gallery, the family archives and in the particular human relationships involving dynastic primacy and the transfer of hereditary rights. And finally legends and traditions animate every corner of the castle and its environs through their constant reminders of past events. (Bakhtin 245–246)

As we can see in the example above, the chronotope of the "gothic castle" suggests a very specific combination of temporalities and spatialities where every corner of the castle associates objects and their disposition to a long human history conceived in dynastic fashion. This castle is a space appropriate for a certain kind of subjectivity, that of the noble—even if a decadent one—while any other would be out of place. The chronotope, then, exists precisely to make visible this articulation where time, space, and subjectivity mutually constitute each other. It is important to mention once again that these characteristics are not necessary; they are constructed and can be reappropriated, creating something new. When Bakhtin describes the chronotope of the road by the end of his essay, it is specifically its many transformations that interest him: how the theme of the chance encounter on the road changes from classic and medieval literature to romantic and historical novels of the nineteenth century (244–245).

Even if there is often a dominant chronotope in a certain work of fiction—the gothic castle in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* or the road in Miguel de Cer-

vantes' *Don Quixote*—"each such chronotope can include within it an unlimited number of minor chronotopes; in fact . . . any motif may have a special chronotope of its own" (Bakhtin 252). That is why the goal of chronotopic analysis is never to discover or design the one and only chronotope of a specific narrative. On the contrary, one must map the great variety of chronotopes present and take note of their combinations, dispositions, and hierarchies. Any chronotopic study must keep in mind that "[c]hronotopes are mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships" (Bakhtin 252). The major and minor chronotopes that make up a fictional work are, according to Bakhtin, all created "in a real, unitary and as yet incomplete historical world . . . [t]herefore we may call this world the world that *creates* the text" (253; Bakhtin's italics). Here, we start to see what Bakhtin calls real or actual chronotopes as opposed to literary, fictional, or represented chronotopes.

Despite his focus on literary science, Bakhtin gives great importance to real chronotopes, because they are necessary constituents of human experiences in the world and the ultimate source of all fictional chronotopes. He affirms that "[o]ut of the actual chronotopes of our world (which serve as the source of representation) emerge the reflected and *created* chronotopes of the world represented in the work (in the text)" (Bakhtin 253; Bakhtin's italics). He draws a clear, distinctive line between the two types of chronotopes, stating that "we must never confuse . . . the *represented* world with the world outside the text (naive realism)" (Bakhtin 253; Bakhtin's italics). We must not jump to the conclusion that this opposition between the represented world and the world outside the text reproduces oppositions such as true and false or real and unreal. Bakhtin's point is that "the real and represented world resist fusion" (Bakhtin 254); they are not the same and cannot be made the same. However, "they are nevertheless indissolubly tied up with each other and find themselves in continual mutual in-

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teraction; uninterrupted exchange goes on between them" (Bakhtin 254). That is, real chronotopes constantly serve as raw material for new represented chronotopes, while represented chronotopes enter the real world and enrich it in a continual renewal as the work comes into contact with different real chronotopes—as time, place, and the people that come into contact with the work change.

If the road, the castle, the salon, and the rural village are good examples of longstanding literary chronotopes, what are some emblematic real chronotopes? Bakhtin does not give us many examples, but an important and informative one is the agora. To him, it is important to understand that the Greek public square was not simply a space among others, a replaceable background. Quite the opposite, the agora was an "all-encompassing chronotope, [where] the laying bare and examination of a citizen's whole life was accomplished, and received its public and civic stamp of approval" (Bakhtin 132). The subjectivities that could take part in the agora's activities were fundamentally different from those that could not. The former had their lives open to public scrutiny, but were the only bearers of true citizenship, while the latter were mostly anonymous and had meagre political power. Only a certain kind of man could occupy this subjectivity, which granted public pull, but captured these subjectivities into the demands of the chronotope, forcing them to respect its spatiality and the temporality of its proceedings. This example shows the "reciprocal capture" (Stengers, *Cosmopolitiques* 68) between time, space, and subjectivity in the chronotope. In a true chronotope, there is a mutual determination between these three poles, and it is only possible to break free via

the emergence and proposition of new chronotopes.

What Bakhtin calls actual or real chronotopes are, I advance, objects we can only delineate by paying a special kind of attention, looking for the reciprocal capture of time, space, and subjectivity. Naming them "real chronotopes" is surely problematic, as it seems to relegate fiction to the position of the unreal or false. While I choose to keep Bakhtin's preferred term for now, we must keep in mind that fictions have actual material existences, which constantly couple and decouple with other fictions, bodies, critters, sciences, and so on—a point I will return to in the next section.

Real chronotopes may be the object of study of researchers across disciplines, even if the articulation between time, space, and subjectivity is not always in the foreground. Michel Foucault's works are probably some of the most well known that effectively direct our attention to mutual determination in, what Bakhtin calls, real chronotopes. Foucault's now classic analysis shows that discipline produces disciplinary subjects by means of specific kinds of temporalities and spatialities. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault demonstrates that new technologies of power emerge during modernity, forming the regime of disciplinarity. Disciplinarity is not to be found in a transcendental plane, exerting power from without, but in the very shape of the chronotopes that produce and enforce it: the prison, the school, the barracks, and so on. It is no surprise then that Foucault's reflections on how to break free from the grip of discipline do not look for individual change, but changes in the form of subjectivation, which must necessarily take regimes of temporality and spatiality into account—as it was put most ex-

plicitly, I believe, in his essay "Different Spaces." In "Different Spaces," Foucault employs the concepts of heterotopias and heterochronias, "elsewheres" and "elsewhens," to talk about chronotopes strange to their time and their surroundings. Puritan societies, honeymoons, Jesuit reductions, brothels, and pirate ships are examples that the philosopher deploys. All of these are real chronotopes and would benefit from the systematic approach of a Bakhtinian framework, mapping their internal (time, space, and subjectivity) and external (other real and fictional chronotopes) relations.

Chronotopes, whether real or fictional, have existence in reality, and their continuous circulation, recombination, and dialogue shape and transform our possibilities of inhabiting the world. Despite the long persistence of some chronotopes, they are not transhistorical entities. They are crafted collectively inside historical communities, which also means that what temporalities, spatialities, and subjectivities will give form to our future is up for grabs. The question of how to affect, parasitize, or sabotage dominant chronotopes is what brings us to the subject of chronotopography.

2. The Power of Fiction

I suggest we understand the term chronotopography as a type of fiction that directly engages with chronotopes. Its goal is not only to perform chronotopic analysis—that is, to make explicit certain combinations of time, space, and subjectivity—but also to affect these very compositions by creating new chronotopes, new propositions of what the world can look like and how it can function. As stated before, fiction has a broad meaning here. It is the radical "And if?" that "expresses and invents a positive meaning for the fact that it became possible, at a certain moment, to resituate an aspect of the familiar reality within a much vaster imaginary reality where what we know is only one story among others" (Stengers, *Power and Invention* 136). In this sense, a fiction can be philosophical, scientific, and/or artistic. Crafting new chronotopes, or

performing chronotopography, is about interweaving different kinds of fictions, which are themselves part and parcel of yet other chronotopes. As Stengers puts it, "[a] fiction, even if it is the product of an individual, always expresses what a history enables this individual to think, the risks that he is capable of taking" (*Power and Invention* 136). The concept of chronotopography aims to detect and enhance the radical leaps of imagination taken by fictionists who shape novel chronotopes; these leaps are a crucial part of, as Donna Haraway would say, worlding new worlds.

No fiction, however, can draw its power exclusively from the act of creation by the author, much less are the consequences of such creation predictable. That is to say, no chronotopography exists on its own, by essence. Bakhtin affirms very strongly that the effects of the represented chronotope—that is, the work of fiction—depend greatly on its interactions with the real chronotopes that it comes into contact with, which may happen long after said fiction first comes to light. A fiction is historically chronotopographical, because it only is so as far as it challenges hegemonic chronotopes, which are constantly changing—despite the persistence of some of them.

What, then, are the hegemonic chronotopes that radical fictionists are helping readers create against? The last 25 to 35 years, in the West, seem to be marked by transformations in relation to time and space, and the reconfiguration of subjectivities and forms of subjectivation. How people dwell in the world, what they call themselves, how they see themselves, how they connect to other people, how they spread geographically, how they tell their personal and collective stories, and how they plan their lives have changed fundamentally.

A series of events have attracted this shift, but two are typically indicated as central: the fall of the Berlin Wall, as shorthand for the fall of the USSR, and the ecological crisis (Latour; Koselleck). Both events reorganized the globe irreversibly. The first made an ideological divide crumble, which was determining everything from interna-

tional geopolitics to singular subjectivities on both sides of the political spectrum. The second brought the Earth, in all its materiality, back to public debate in a novel way, which made previous assumptions of infinite resources and the image of the planet as a passive environment—mere background to the development of civilization and the enterprise of humankind—absurd.

The breakdown of the Soviet project gave rise to the fancy that the hegemony of Western liberal democracy was the end of history, the apex of humanity's ideological evolution (Fukuyama). The future would be defined by pure social and technological progress, the perfecting of a final model. Complete certainty about what was to come made it a sort of permanent present. Almost at the same time, the climate crisis put an end to the imagined linear evolution of social models—capitalist and socialist equally. In the 1960s, ecological social movements gained strength with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, with its fabulation of a future when birds would no longer sing in spring due to the uncontrolled use of pesticides. This perspective reorganized the collective expectations of people at that time, as they wished for a certain past to return to the present through the conservation of ecosystems, while projecting a future—at the same time—by asking 'what kind of planet will the next generations inherit?'. However, the problem of mere conservation fell to the background in the 1990s as climatological forecasts became both more uncertain and more frightening. It is extremely difficult to imagine the future of the Earth—and humanity's future on it—but everything indicates that it is impossible to perpetuate current Western socioeconomic models (Merchant; Stengers, *Au temps des catastrophes*). What the historian Reinhart Koselleck calls the metahistorical conditions, space-time conditions that repeat and make us capable of foresight—like the seasons or animal migrations—have lost their fixity and are now at the foreground of human history (83–85).

These two great late-twentieth-century happenings—and we could

add others, like the reconfiguration of the colonial enterprise by the so-called global North over the South (Stengers and Pignarre 88–90)—are sources of uncertainty that give no sure footing to contemporary subjects. It is no wonder then that, despite the polemics around it, the proposition of the new geological epoch called the Anthropocene has so quickly taken hold of the West's imagination, and that "we are pressured from all sides to climb on [its] bullet train" (Hache 108). The Anthropocene, despite its apparent catastrophism, seems to put everything back in its place: Western science is still the gatekeeper of which entities matter to our collective life, capitalism still regulates the global flows of matter and people, and people are urgently called to action to, finally, not do or change very much. That is why Émilie Hache urges us to have a "creative and undisciplined relation . . . towards the Anthropocene" (109). Can we not come up with richer stories? Is our capacity to invent new worlds really that feeble?[5]

But what is another world made of? Chronotopography, the fictional fabulation (Burton) of chronotopes, a laboratory of virtual modes of existing, is the main *locus* of this questioning. At the same time, fiction can also be a safe space in which to imagine the, sometimes spectacular, end of the current world (Szendy). Contemporary speculative literature is fertile soil for chronotopographical creation, but this increasing move toward inventiveness as an attempt to deal with the ordeals of the present can also be seen in the philosophies and the sciences.[6] Since the 1960s at least, speculative litera-ture simultaneously tries to tackle the challenges set by the changing temporal, spatial, and subjective conditions and to affect the course of the present, as indicated by the question in the title of J. K. Ullrich's column in *The Atlantic*, from August 2015, "Can Books Save the Planet?". Authors like Kim Stanley Robinson, Octavia Butler, Jeff Vandermeer, and Ursula K. Le Guin research, in their fiction, topics as diverse as human-alien symbiosis, the writing of constitutions, the terraforming of Mars, and the limitations of state agencies in dealing with ecological change. Their works are related to many others that play with chronotopes, searching for new ways of arranging their components—works such as utopias, dystopias, weird fiction, *voyage extraordinaire, conte philosophique,* magical realism, and, of course, science fiction and fantasy.[7]

Although chronotopographies are not limited to any specific genre, there is a growing feeling that realism cannot, at least for now, help in worlding new worlds. From the nineteenth century onwards, realism has become the predominant genre—maybe it would be more adequate to speak of structure or image of thought—over every other form of fiction. Preferring narration in the third person, linearity, standard language, and situations close to the reader's common sense, realism has the pretension of portraying the world such as it appears. Through a chronotopic approach, it is noticeable that realism often limits its creations to situations already given by hegemonic chronotopes—that is, times, spaces, and subjectivities firmly situated in capitalism, heteropatriarchy, racism, and so on. Of course, even non-realist fiction almost always reproduces these limitations, even in faraway galaxies and magical lands. However, minor genres such as the ones mentioned have more and more frequently become spaces for experimentations of all kinds that feed the political imagination.

Science fiction, more than any of the other so-called "genre fictions," has the potential to make latent futures emerge through the art of fiction. However, more often than not, what we find in science fiction stories is the reproduction of tropes like the conquest of the frontier, but now with lasers or in space. Even texts that seem more critical—the stories of H.G. Wells, for instance—often employ allegories that denounce the state of things but offer no alternatives to the imagination. However, there are narratives, especially by women, that not only denounce historical injustices, but also weave new forms of producing and combining times, spaces, and subjectivities, reshaping—concerning the latter—what race, gender, and even the human species can mean.

Le Guin's fabulation on gender in *The Left Hand of Darkness,* for example, remains to this day a challenge to hegemonic subjectivities by analyzing what a world could be like if human(like) sexuality functioned in a completely different manner. In Le Guin's narrative, the rethinking of sexuality does not simply entail different individual behaviours. Time is measured differently, according to the sexual cycles of the inhabitants of Gethen. Their architecture, their religions, and their family structures are all different because of this one radical leap of imagination. Despite its many qualities, however, this fiction would be much less meaningful to a collective of people not haunted by the gender binary. Its chronotopographical status is not universal; it is chronotopically situated.

Final Remarks

This essay is still only an initial development of the concept of chronotopography. My aim has been to establish its general outline and some of its applications, building on Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope. First, I presented

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the chronotope in some detail, following Bakhtin's words, drawing attention to the distinction between real or actual chronotopes, and represented, fictional, or literary ones. The former refers to historically experienced forms of temporality, spatiality, and subjectivity, while the latter is a fictional combination of these categories, created by one or more authors through their contact with real chronotopes. The chronotopic approach, either in fiction or in actuality, always invites us to question which temporalities are suggested in a spatiality, which subjectivities is it open to, and so on. This allows us to see more clearly the concrete unfolding of political imaginations, to stand by or stand against.

In the second section, I suggested that chronotopography is a special sort of fiction. It exists as a speculative take on this or that real chronotope, or as the invention of new chronotopes. It allows for not only critiquing hegemonic chronotopic forms, but also inventing new forms of shaping the world. Chronotopography is always a relational form of fiction, because it only happens as an encounter of many chronotopes in a given historical moment and place. It is

something less than a complete entity, a lure for our feelings. If we are lured, we may enter into a reciprocal capture in which we will become something else. Once we open ourselves up to see these agencies, for they act upon us whether we acknowledge them or not, "we are truly dealing with the thousand and one sexes of the fictions that, at a given period, we are capable of" (Stengers, *Power and Invention* 137).

Finally, there is an evident political concern implied in the investigation of how the borders of chronotopes are established, especially hegemonic ones. For today, in the West, it is no longer only about who gets to rewrite the past or who will get to write the future. Even if the sides may not be all that clear, we are now at open war between those who would keep forcing the same fictions spawned in the same chronotopes onto others, demanding submission to certain conceptions of time, space, and subjectivity, and those who are looking for temporalities, spatialities, and subjectivities that will diverge us from our current path and maybe—hopefully—create the conditions for a dialogue with non-modern and non-human chronotopic experiences.

Notes

[1] One can argue that these thinkers did not intend to define these categories in these ways. Nevertheless, the modern definitions are a consequence of their works.

[2] This text was first written in 2016, in the aftermath of the coup that removed Dilma Rousseff from the presidency of Brazil. At the same time, other countries in Latin America were moving towards different types of far-right extremism. Since then, the pendulum has swung back.

[3] Despite having been written in the 1930s, the essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" was first published only in 1975.

[4] To Bakhtin, chronotopes have a motif, such as the motif of meeting—associated with the public square or the salon—or the motif of encounter—seen most often in the road. These aspects of chronotopes are relevant, but are beyond the scope of this essay.

[5] Since the writing of this text, much has changed for the better in the Anthropocene debate.

[6] We can think of Stengers' cosmopolitics, Latour's experimental metaphysics, Haraway's Chthulucene, Viveiros de Castro's description of Amerindian perspectivism, and Tsing's multispecies ethnography as powerful chronotopographies capable of simultaneously mapping and affecting chronotopic combinations.

[7] This is not to say that every text in these genres plays with time, space, and/or subjectivities.

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