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Space, Time, Genre: Paul Auster's (Post)modern Chronotopes

Summary

Delineating the significance of the genre, which is the crucial concept under consideration in the proposed thesis, John Frow states that it "is, amongst other things, a matter of discrimination and taxonomy: of organising things into recognisable classes" (51). Literary generic conventions, thus, can be examined in terms of distinguishing tenets, such as narratological structures and techniques, dominant and recurring spatialities (chronotopes), specified issues and motifs explored by authors, or formulas providing plot-organising principles, amongst others. Hence, on the most basic level, a distinct set of genre-specified features enables a proper cataloguing of works exhibiting similar generic implications.

Yet, it must be emphasised that genres are not homogeneous constructs devised so as to cater for new classificatory necessities of literary works produced in changing socio-cultural conditions of society. As Ronald Primeau aptly suggests, "[a] genre stores what we may have forgotten or forsaken, and that genre memory makes possible at the same time shortcuts as well as creative uses of formulaic patterns" (17). New generic categories are marked with echoes of its predecessors and, hence, tend to contain traces of literary formulas, themes, and re-defined spaces ascribed to the tradition of particular genres. Therefore, the concept of genre memory mentioned by Primeau makes it possible to examine a given generic category "as a historical phenomenon, a dynamic system of features evolving in its variants" (A Zgorzelski "Science Fiction" 296).

The focal point of the thesis is the evolution of chosen genres of Paul Auster's literary oeuvre – detective fiction (*The New York Trilogy*), the psychological novel (*Man in the Dark* and *Travels in the Scriptorium*), the road novel (*The Music of Chance*), and the Bildungsroman (*Mr. Vertigo*) – which has led to the emergence of their generic variants exhibiting tenets slightly or extensively altered in comparison to their traditional predecessors. The selected novels are examined in reference to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the novelistic chronotope (space-time) which is the principal methodology applied in the thesis. Bakhtin maintains that "it is precisely the chronotope that defines generic distinctions" ("Chronotope" 85) since it serves as the centre for the representation of the literary worlds characteristic of different genres. In literary works, one may observe different arrangements of time and space as substrates modelling other functions of the text, such as the major motifs, themes, the

construction of characters and their sense of identity. According to Bakhtin's assumptions, spatio-temporal continuums to a large extent determine the generic classification of a given literary work. Yet, the hypothesis also operates in the opposite direction – generic conventions impose particular chronotopes which are further transformed by the authors for the purposes of their represented realities. In my scrutiny on Auster's writing, thus, I explore the abovementioned interdependence between a given genre and the dominant chronotope(s) with the scope of the research narrowed down to three fundamental spatio-temporal dimensions – the room, the city, and the road.

The thesis is divided into the introduction, the conclusion, and three chapters where two of them concern the genre and chronotopes determined by them (the detective novel: the city, the room, the psychological novel: the room) and the focal point of the third one is the chronotope of the road and conventions defined by it (the road novel, the coming-of-age story). Each chapter consists of the theoretical part devoted to the particular generic convention and the analytic section that discusses Auster's works in reference to the dialogue with the tenets of the tradition of the analysed genres and the chronotopic dimension of the represented realities.

The first chapter revolves around *The New York Trilogy* – a collection of three related works: *City of Glass* (1985), *Ghosts* (1986), and *The Locked Room* (1986). The focal point of the generic part is on the similarities that Auster's trilogy bears with detective fiction before the postmodern one in terms of the fundamental formula and its elements, temporal relations as delineated by Todorov, as well as recurring roles. The chapter also discusses how *The New York Trilogy* deviates from the tradition (ontological aspects foregrounded, no closure – open ending) to create a smooth transition from the generic examination to the spatial one which is devoted entirely to the recurring chronotopes in the postmodern story of detection.

The second chapter focuses on the tenets of the psychological novel and concerns the analysis of *Man in the Dark* and *Travels in the Scriptorium*. It highlights the interrelation between the chronotope of the room (or rather the locked room from the protagonists' perspective) and the limits of the individuals' imagination. In the case of Auster's novel, yet, the room carries a double meaning – it is, indeed, a place where a story is produced, but it may also relate to the author's mind.

The focal point of the third chapter has been motivated by a literary theme and simultaneously a chronotope present in literature since ancient times, namely the road. The metaphorical understanding of the road (as, for instance, the path towards one's goal or the process of development) intertwines with the literal one as a spatio-temporal dimension. The novels under examination in the third chapter are *The Music of Chance* and *Mr Vertigo* which

represent Auster's dialogue with the traditional road narrative and the Bildungsroman respectively – the generic conventions in which the figurative and the spatial meanings of the road complement each other. The structure of the discussion yet differs from the ones from the previous chapter since the starting point for the examination is not the genre itself, but the chronotope which defines the aforementioned generic categories.

In the final part, I summarise the main research theses and conclusions.

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Frow, John. *Genre*. USA & Canada: Routledge, 2005.

Zgorzelski, Andrzej. "Is Science Fiction a Genre of Fantastic Literature?" *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1979. 296-303.