

Lost in Time and Lost in Space: Chronotopes in Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day*

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Abstract

In his 1937 essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin coins the term "chronotope" to discuss the inherently interconnected nature of time and space in narrative constructions.

According to Bakhtin, there are a number of specific chronotopes (or space/time configurations) that help to define literary genres. Applying Bakhtin's concepts to Thomas Pynchon's novel *Against the Day* (2006), this thesis examines how the idea of narrative space/time can clarify Pynchon's use of genre to make socio-political commentary.

The first chapter of this thesis focuses on Bakhtin's "road chronotope," which is characterized by the chance meeting of people in spaces devoted to movement and transport. In such narrative spaces, we often witness the condensation of social class, time, and history. New York City functions as such a space in *Against the Day*, and Bakhtin's ideas help explain how and why Pynchon can embed the 9/11 tragedy inside a scene set nearly a hundred years earlier.

The second chapter focuses on Bakhtin's "threshold chronotope." In fiction, the threshold chronotope is a temporal space removed from the normal flow of narrative time, and often the setting for a character's extended inaction or contemplation in a moment of crisis. One recurring group of characters in *Against the Day* is called The Chums of Chance, a group of boy aeronauts who crew the airship *Inconvenience*. The narrative intentionally separates the Chums from the other characters both physically and metaphorically.

Using Bakhtin's idea of the threshold chronotope helps clarify their position in the novel, explaining why they are often presented as more fictional than the other characters. Moreover, the Chums' position on the threshold of the novel's action distances them from the real historical events that are described, providing readers with space and time to contemplate the novel's political import.

Chapter One

Spaces, and in particular, urban spaces, are built of countless personal experiences and interpretations that coalesce into a distinct location. *Against the Day* establishes its New York City through the lenses of temporal, social, and generic layering. Richard Hardack suggests that "[n]arrative style is a political act in Pynchon, for it involves the control, impersonation, mixing, and repetition of voices and identities" (95-6). The roads between text and reader, past and present, lived experience and the temporal bandwidth of future readers, and between distinct genres are all utilized for specific purposes to flesh out a multi-faceted space containing multiple temporalities. The attacks of September 11, 2001 altered the political, cultural, and physical landscape of a city without a singular definition.

Chapter Two

With the Chums of Chance, the use of the boy adventurer genre, and the insipid purity typified in its characters, the novel takes this idea to transcendent absurdity, and hides the boys behind multiple thresholds in order for them to retain their disconnection from the corruptive nature of mankind. They, whether ultimately successful or not, become the arbiters of a new civilization bent on not giving in to the capitalist and political follies of the world below them. The thresholds put before them are a barrier keeping them physically, culturally, and metaphorically above the other characters in the novel. The Chums of Chance are given the opportunity to seize a happier ending than their narrative colleagues. *Against the Day* gives them an apparent agelessness and timelessness, thus making them something different, and perhaps better, than the rest of humanity. They are one potential ideal for us as readers to seek, a future that may turn out better than the warring, conniving, cynics on the surface. "Such is the representational significance of the chronotope" (Bakhtin 250).

