

Time and Space in J. G. Ballard's *Chronopolis*

Ignazio Sanna

In his essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel", Bachtin defines the chronotope as «a category concerning the form and content of literature» (Bachtin 2001: 230). It mainly concerns the time and space relationship, that is, *cronos* and *topos*. Among literary genres, science fiction is definitely the one which more than others deals with the notions of time and space, as in Wells' classic *The Time Machine* (1895), or in the countless galactic empires or interstellar voyages sagas.

James Graham Ballard was born in Shanghai, China, on 15th November 1930 and died on 19th April 2009. He's known to be an atypical representative of the science fiction genre. His inner space construct is exemplary of this, being in contrast to the predictable outer space of mainstream science fiction.

As is often the case in Ballardian narrative (as in *High-Rise* and *Crash*, for instance), the short story *Chronopolis* too – published for the first time in 1960 in *New Worlds* magazine – starts from the end, telling in an extended flashback how its main character, Conrad Newman, reaches his final condition. In this way beginning and end coincide, through a circular narrative path, recalling the geometric shape of the circle, which in turn refers to that of the clock dial, as Francesco Marroni comments (Marroni 1982)¹.

¹ «[...] in the eyes of the character the typical circular shape of the clock looks like a proper mandala which, according to Jung's definition, appears as a symbol of "a widening of the sphere of conscience and of conscious psychological life"» (Jung 1977: 85) [My transl.].

The story opens in medias res, with the description of Newman's situation and of the means through which, from his cell, he can wield his power over chronological time. This is a power which the other convicts do not have, namely a sundial built by Newman with what he has managed to find. He does not know yet, but it is the first step of the journey that will take him across the invisible border between the present time world in which he has grown up – in which the measurement of time is forbidden – and the past time world in which it is not only permitted but also functional to the needs of society.

In a 1983 interview by Catherine Bresson, twenty-three years after having written *Chronopolis*, Ballard says:

Time is a very strong theme in my fiction. [...] If you look at Renaissance paintings, a Vermeer or Rembrandt, or the Impressionists, Monet or Renoir, it's like *real time*. It's 3 o'clock in the afternoon and she's having a bath or having tea in the garden. You can set your watch to those paintings. Whereas the Surrealists are quite different; there's a world beyond Time. Time does no longer exist. I think all my fiction is really an attempt to get beyond Time into a different Realm [...]. (Ballard 1983: 163)

The timelessness Ballard refers to is a tension towards overcoming temporal limits, as actual borders to be crossed, as suggested by some of the key Surrealist paintings, like Dalì's *The Persistence of Memory* (1931). Ballard claimed more than once to feel attracted by Surrealist painting, especially that by Salvador Dalì and Paul Delvaux. Tellingly, in Ballard's works the visual elements are often essential.

In her introduction to the Italian edition of Bachtin's essay on chronotope Rossana Platone states: «Il cronotopo, che unisce in sé i rapporti temporali e spaziali, è stato artisticamente assunto dalla letteratura come categoria propria, dove i connotati del tempo si manifestano nello spazio, al quale il tempo dà senso e misura. Nel

cronotopo letterario il principio guida è il tempo» (Platone 2001: xvii)². As already stated, time is a basic element in Ballard too, and not only in *Chronopolis*. In a sort of declaration of intent entitled *What I believe*, published in the monograph dedicated to the British author by the American magazine *Re/Search*, Ballard maintains:

I believe in the death of tomorrow, in the exhaustion of time, in our search for a new time within the smiles of auto-route waitresses and the tired eyes of air-traffic controllers at out-of-season airports. [...] I believe in the non-existence of the past, in the death of the future, and the infinite possibilities of the present. (Ballard 1984: 176-177)

That is, a science fiction of the present time, in case of any doubts.

But let's get back to *Chronopolis*. Time control for Newman is fundamental, especially on a psychological level. He would have gone mad, if he could not wield it. And of course, as already stated, time control is a form of power. Being able to measure time means having a remarkable advantage over those who are not able to. In his essay on Ballard Michel Delville writes: «[...] *Chronopolis* centres upon the idea of time as related to psychological coercion and actual political oppression (as exemplified in the hero's rebellion against 'Time Laws' that prohibit the measurement of time) [...]» (Delville 1998: 14).

The city itself, which the author meaningfully calls *Chronopolis*, the city of time, is not explicitly temporally placed. The story could be set in an indeterminate future, not too different from our own present time, as well as in a kind of alternative present, consistent with the afore mentioned notion of a science fiction of the present time. In the past, all the activities in *Chronopolis* were strictly ruled by a system based on the working of clocks, in order to allow the relationship

² «The chronotope, which brings together time and space relationships, has been taken artistically by literature as a category of its own, in which time features appear in space, to which time assigns sense and measure. In literary chronotope, the leading principle is time» [My transl.].

between production and consumption to be totally efficient and conveniently rationalized. But as time went by the system became more and more unbearable, along with the increase of the population. Then all clocks were banned, along with the knowledge itself of the notion of time. That is why at this point the life of its inhabitants is marked –or rather not marked at all – by a disquieting indefiniteness. Since there is no way to measure time, all activities take place within blurred, fuzzy temporal outlines, to the point of instilling an unpleasant uneasy sensation in the more sensitive readers. Such uneasiness comes from the lack of «possibilità di conferire una dimensione umana al tempo, di lanciare un ponte tra la finitezza e limitatezza dell'uomo e l'infinito e indifferente trascorrere di Chronos» (Marroni 1982).³

The story reaches its climax when, through the help of Stacey, one of his teachers, the protagonist starts his voyage towards the city's past, towards the very heart of Chronopolis. Janice Best states: «As a figure, then, that is both temporal and spatial, the chronotope generates not only the encounters that advance the plot, but also the principal symbolic and metaphorical patterns of a work» (Best 1994).

Newman's encounter with the city marks indeed a turning point in the story, both at the diegetic level and at the symbolic level. It is the crossing of the limit beyond which the relationship with time changes. It is the intersection point between the (constructive) obsession of man for time typical of the character of Newman (the new man) and the (destructive) obsession of society for time, typical of the character of Chronopolis (the city of time).

Referring to his own studies about the Apache Indians of Arizona, the anthropologist Keith Hamilton Basso quotes these words by Bachtin: chronotopes are «[...] points in the geography of a community where time and space intersect and fuse. Time takes on flesh and becomes visible for human contemplation; likewise, space becomes

³ «Possibility to give time a human dimension, to lay a bridge between the finiteness and limitedness of man and the infinite and indifferent elapsing of Chronos» [My transl.].

charged and responsive to the movements of time and history. [...] Chronotopes thus stand as monuments to the community itself, as symbols of it, as forces operating to shape its members' images of themselves» (Basso 1984).

This is exactly what happens as soon as Newman, entering the long forsaken city centre, decides to quit his 'daily' past in order to live his own personal future in the past of the city. This is the point where the crossing of the ideal border separating the new city where he comes from and the old one in which he chooses to settle takes place. The abandoned city is the living symbol –rather, the living dead one – of the failure of the attempt by that society (or maybe society *tout court*) to control time and to submit it to its own needs. But even Newman, who would like to bring the zombie-like city back to life by reactivating the old clocks, also fails. He actually succeeds in repairing the big clock overlooking the square and the whole city from its tower, winning in a sense his personal challenge, but society rejects his prometheic role. It refuses his gift, time control, by means of its crime repression system. Gregory Stephenson remarks that «In 'Chronopolis' the author foresees that even if revolt against the dehumanizing regimentation of technological society should occur, it may well be succeeded by other forms of oppression, in this instance the Time Laws, the Time Police, and their agents» (Stephenson 1991: 37).

In this light, the story shows some ambiguity. Newman's actions seem to be aimed at restoring that kind of time control by means of clocks, which is described in basically Orwellian terms. «Stacey pointed up at the tower. This was the Big Clock, the master from which all others were regulated. Central Time Control, a sort of Ministry of Time, gradually took over the old parliamentary buildings as their legislative functions diminished. The programmers were, effectively, the city's absolute rulers» (Ballard 1971: 201).

And this is all we get to know about the identity of those who were in power at the time of the official control of time. Yet the character's intentions may be reasonably defined as libertarian. As a matter of fact, Newman's goal is not restoring the *ancien regime*. What he strives for is the liberation of man – and all the elements of material

life – from the limits imposed by the indeterminateness of the passing of time. Tellingly, those possessing power in such a post-synchronical society provided themselves with a special means for preventing this to happen, the already mentioned Time Police. After all, the story's main character can be seen as a sort of a *donquichottesque* hero fighting against the windmills of faceless power coming between him and the liberating function of the clocks, until the reality principle prevails and the price he has to pay for his foolish delusion is imprisonment.

Newman's adventure is conceived as a voyage simultaneously in time and space. In time because his decision to settle in the abandoned city, in his rebellion against the society of the present time where he comes from, takes him back to a condition of the past. And in space because he physically crosses the imaginary border separating the new city where he was born from the old city, among whose ruins he adapts to living illegally.

The end of Chronopolis shows the failure of Newman's utopia. The new man sees his attempt to build a dimension of freedom and autonomy thwarted, because of the prevailing police clampdown set up by such an Orwellian society. The ultimate result is that, in the conflict between non-place and non-time, uchronical place overcomes utopian time.

We can hazard a double reading of the notion of chronotope in *Chronopolis*. The first one canonically views the spatial element on the one hand, that is Newman's voyage from the new city towards the centre of the original one; and the temporal element on the other hand, from the present time of everyday life to the past time of the city, represented by its deserted centre. As the voyage goes on, architectural landscape progressively changes: «Mile by mile, the architecture altered its character; buildings were larger, ten-fifteen-storey blocks, clad in facing materials of green and blue tiles, glass or copper sheathing. They were moving forward [...], back into the past of the fossil city» (ibid.: 161).

The second reading, complementary to the first one, takes its cue from the notion of psychogeography, introduced by Guy Debord in 1955. In the first issue of the Situationist International bulletin,

published in 1958, psychogeography was presented as «lo studio degli effetti precisi dell'ambiente geografico, disposto coscientemente o meno, che agisce direttamente sul comportamento affettivo degli individui»⁴.

Starting from such a definition we can say that the influence of the environment on his behaviour is one of the reasons behind Newman's sudden decision to run away from Stacey, his guide inside the abandoned city. It is not by chance that the interplay between the psyche and the environment is one of the pillars of Ballard's poetics. We can go as far as to claim that quite often the landscape is even one of the main characters of his works, so high is the interplay level with human characters. According to Dan Lockton:

One of the many 'obsessions' running through Ballard's work is what we might characterise as *the effect of architecture on the individual* [author's italics]. [...] "I use 'architecture' here in a wide sense, including the whole of the constructed environment – physical, technological and social – because while, for example, *High-Rise* very clearly explores the way that architectural decisions can directly impact on human behaviour, some of Ballard's more recent works such as *Running Wild*, *Millennium People* and *Kingdom Come* concentrate more on the effects of constructed social and psychological environments on their inhabitants/users, and *Crash* of course examines intimately the interface between technology and our bodies, and how the technological landscape shapes our own obsessions. Indeed, the phrase "psychological effects of technological, social or environmental developments" in the Collins English Dictionary definition of 'Ballardian' is, while necessarily broad, impressively concise. (Lockton 2008)

⁴ AA.VV. 1994a: «The study of the precise effects of the geographical environment, whether intentional or not, on the affective behaviour of individuals» [My transl.].

Newman moves from a territorial point of departure (the new city), which identifies him as an anonymous citizen, to a territorial point of arrival (the old city), which bestows on him a new status, the one of the prometheic hero defying the will of gods – or more down to earth, the authorities – in order to give to Man the sacred fire of Time control.

As soon as he gets into the heart of abandoned Chronopolis, Newman realizes he has reached what for him is a sort of promised land. Yet it is no rational awareness. His escape is not planned, it is merely instinctive. Something inside him responds to that peculiar *call of the wild* coming from the very essence of the ghost city. From this perspective the story's main character is literally the new man, a potential new Adam. A man enabled by such a *call of the wild* coming from the city to restore that seemingly Edenic, primeval state, in which the passing of time and the possibility of its measurement were within the range of man as an individual. But he is an Adam who is victim of his own delusion. Just as breaking the apple taboo, symbol of (the tree of) knowledge, costs the original Adam and his entire offspring the loss of Paradise, breaking the clock taboo, symbol of the knowledge of time, costs Newman his freedom.

Chronopolis is somehow also a non-place, that is, literally, a utopia. As the Ballardian expert Matt Smith points out, Ballard likes to play with the notion of utopia:

One might say that Ballard is playing on the idea of Utopia. The word literally means 'no place' or 'non-place' and these areas that proliferate in *Crash*, *Concrete Island* and *High Rise* are precisely that: non-places, outside time, not of this world or of any other. As Marc Augé has said, "non places are the real measure of our time.... The airports and railway stations, hotel chains, leisure parks, large retail outlets". (Smith s.d.)

Therefore, it is a negative utopia, reeking of bleakness, namely, a dystopia. Which is another main feature of Ballard's fiction, somehow

connecting him to authors such as Orwell (1984, *Animal Farm*), Huxley (*Brave New World*), and Burgess (*A Clockwork Orange*). Although Augé uses the conceit of non-place in quite a limited sense - basically, non-places are all those spaces not related to identity, relationships or history, that is to say places of transit, such as airports and big shopping centres – it can be adapted, bending it slightly, to the Chronopolis in which Newman started living after escaping from Stacey.

It is a non-place inasmuch as it is not intended (not anymore) to accommodate the everyday life of its former inhabitants. It is also a non-time, an eternal present in which the marking of time is not welcome anymore. The city of time has been forsaken by its inhabitants in order to distance themselves from the dystopian society which created it. While the passing of time has turned it into a series of tumbledown places, offices and houses in ruin, a desolate architectural landscape. In true Ballard style, dystopia in Chronopolis dwells inside Newman's head, like Rick McGrath points out again when analyzing another of Ballard's stories: «in the short story *Low-Flying Aircraft* (1976) Ballard uses three paintings from his favourite surrealist, Dali, to make his definitive point: "The ultimate dystopia is the inside of one's own head". Ballard is saying Dali was right when he expressed memory's persistence in terms of time, death and beach fatigue desolation – we see the future through our repressed past»(McGrath 2008).

As already stated, after his escape Newman decides to settle in this city of time out of official time, which in the new city where he comes from is a non-time, since Time has been declared officially illegal, its measurement having been forbidden. In short, we have reached uchronia. Once again, strictly speaking the use of the term especially refers to a kind of fiction describing an alternative present time, as in *The Man in the High Castle* by Philip K. Dick, which is a hypothetical reconstruction of hypothetical events. Yet we can use it in reference to the very essence of the city of Chronopolis, in its meaning of lack of time.

Thus this analysis of *Chronopolis*, with a *coup de theatre*, reaches the odd conclusion that in this story the chronotope in the end is basically devoid of content, as though emptied of its sense. If space is a non-place and time is a non-time, the intersection point between space and time is where the result of their algebraical sum is zero. Therefore, if we represent Ballard's short story on a Cartesian graph, the exact point where the x-axis intersects the y-axis is where Chronopolis lies. As a consequence it is no longer visible. The city of time has disappeared.

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The author

Ignazio Sanna

Ignazio Sanna, University of Cagliari. Graduate student (Scuola di dottorato in Studi Filologici e Letterari), English and American, Literature, Comparative Literature, Science Fiction, Italian Literature, German Literature. My interview with J. G. Ballard for the Italian radio programme 'Palomar'(RAI, Radiotre), broadcast August 31, 1992.

Email: ignazio.sanna@amm.unica.it

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