Characters and Chronotopes in Mircea Cărtărescu' s *Orbitor*

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Résumé : *Défini par Mikhail Bakhtine comme „l'interdépendance intrinsèque des relations temporelles et spatiales qui sont artistiquement exprimée dans la littérature", le chronotope est intimement liée au développement des personnages, imposer leur statut. J'ai décrit et explique les chronotopes dans le roman de Cărtărescu: la rédaction du manuscrit, en regardant la fenêtre, à explorer l'univers intérieur, de la communication, la ville, la compréhension, la construction de l'identité des personnages par le biais de la mémoire et l'histoire du signes, le travail de l'histoire. Dans la littérature postmoderne, le chronotope et l'évolution des personnages sont connectés à la teory des fractales et nous ne sommes pas surpris de constater que tous ces elements sont subordonné à la langue et dépendent de l'interprétation. Les aventures des temps et des espaces sont des constructions linguistiques, qu'il doit être interprétées, pour trouver le sens du texte. Les formes mixtes, l'intégration mutuelle des chronotopes, l'hybridation impliquent une perspective différente sur la vie avec de profondes implications dans la définition de l'individu comme un être dialogique, dont l'existence est un Art de la Fugue.*

Mots clés : *le chronotope, la littérature postmoderne, les formes mixtes*

According to Bakhtin, one of the traits of literay genres is the specific way by which they reflect and unfold the chronotope, „the intrinsec connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature". [1] From this point of view, dramatic genre differs from the lyric one or from the epic one by means of constructing space-time, a category which is intrinsic to almost all forms of human discourses, as they rely on the relation between thought, language and the world. The chronotope is a literary convention regarding both form and content in literature that has the function of distinguishing between various representations of artistic sensibility, an expression of choices made by the writer. Bakhtin mentions that the literary chronotope is determined by the living artistic perception that differs from an abstract thought, because it does not separate time and space, but it seizes the chronotope as a whole that carries emotions and values. The chronotope determines the image of character whose evolution is built by means of both time and space. In postmodern literature, writing does not reflect a specific generic code, traditionally depicted through literary categories, intentions, views, the specific use of language, as it is inscribed in a more complex *Weltanschauung* and questions the relation with history, including genre history. Postmodern writing is a space of coexistence, narrative discourse blending with poetry, dramatic or critical speech, so that we can no longer speak but of genres of discourses, a multi-genres or inter-genres [2] or a new genre. As every genre possesses a certain code which is accepted by writers, the postmodern genre shall be described in terms of its particular code, a sum of different intermingled subcodes connected through writing. The roots of this genre defining postmodern writing can be traced back to the seriously-comic genre as opposed to grave genres as tragedy, epic, rhetoric, history. Bakhtin mentions some forms of seriously-comic genres such as the pamphlet, bucolic poetry, the Socratic dialogue, the Menippean satire, memorialistic literature, united by a carnivalesque view: "They all are dominated, in a smaller or greater way, by a specific carnivalesque view of the world and some of them are the direct expression of oral folk carnivalesque genres." [3] Carnivalesque or dialogical literature reinforces some of the most important features of the seriously-comic genre: changes of modes, of the temporal value of fictional entities (from a timeless, mythical world, legendary characters are transposed in a more vivid way, close to contemporary life), a critical attitude towards official forms of expressions (the critical exposure of conventions) and stylistic traits (polyphonic discourse, the lack of stylistic unity, and the proliferation of hybrid forms). This type of literature is one in which no boundary is

respected, on the contrary, it finds some pleasure in transcending the frontiers established through tradition. The code of postmodern literature sets the rules for connecting two or more sub-codes, and the most revealing one is the requirement to unite systems that are not usually in a concordance relation, in a single unity, consequently underlying the literariness of discourse. The result is the construction of a disrupted, ambiguous, ilogic fictional universe by linguistic and rhetorical devices that makes the reader focus on the expression level and, at the same time, find the substance and form of the ambiguity. Just to give an example of this writing, we can think of the so-called autofiction, a word coined by Serge Dubrovsky, which is characterized by the re-assembly of some features of the autobiographical genre in the specific manner of fiction, as the writer lends his name to his hero who acts in an invented world, sometimes far distant from what we can call a real universe. But not only the author is fictionalized in postmodern novels; this is also relevant for the reader, who figures as an actor in the novel, an actualization of the converted use of the epistolary genre. The reader is no longer passive or contemplative in relation to texts; he is involved in its existence and construction, solving the indeterminations or void points of the text. With postmodern works, the reader is forced to find different strategies as the text is outside the stream of cause and effect. Time and space, which might help him in discovering the hidden meaning of the text, are no longer coherent. Paul Smethurst thinks that the modern idea of time consists in linearity, progress and quantity, "whereas postmodern chronotopes are influenced by chaos theory and ideas from theoretical Physics concerning non-directional, non-linear and reversible time." [4] If modernism "was more concerned with the individual experience of 'private' time and escape from 'public' time", in the postmodern culture, "the emphasis is more on the spatial component of spatio-temporal relations." [5] Therefore, postmodern novels are organised in a different manner, as time-space influences the other elements of the text. "This change of emphasis entails a different organisation of the novel's chronotope and this […] has considerable impact on the space and time of narrative as well as the construction of worlds as representations of multiple time-space." [6] Apart from considering these configurations as a product of the postmodern ludic attitude, we shall consider them as techniques for constructing literature, regarding both discourse and history. This apparently inappropriate correlation of different types of discourses with a deep disregard for reasoning, logic and chronology involves a certain relation with history. A symptom of a postmodern attitude is a profound rejection of history as a structure with a given center that governs all other constitutive elements. The writing postulated as the assembly of disruptive discourses includes alternative histories of peripheral communities, possible histories placed in myth or in fabulous time accompanying the recognizable yet artistically transfigured history. Maybe it is too early to diagnose this re-orientation in interpreting history as a response to a totalitarian epoch, but a certain connection to it may be implied. It is obvious that these composite forms of postmodern discourse involve certain types of chronotopes besides the invariant ones. The approach towards postmodern novel is both poetical and hermeneutic, because I intend to describe the way in which the meaning of the chronotope is released and also to explain its significance. The heterogeneous discourse implies an unstable view of the world of the text, so the readers play an important active role in finding the path through the textual labyrinth. Their way of action is similar to a process of writing their own text. The underestimation of the language referentiality forces the discourse to turn to itself as an open universe connecting texts in the space of literature. The writing reflects the loss of the real pattern and provides the impression of scission, fragmentation, and rearrangement by its textual devices. The postmodern writer acts as a *bricoleur*: placed within a discursive network, the actual discourse is plural, heterogeneous and hybrid as the artist reinforces the idea of the past as a text. Since the past can no longer be understood in only one way

(supported and confirmed by tradition), writers prefer to work on a palimpsest or to attach different texts, fragments of text belonging to various types of discourses (of course, each one with its own manner of configuring time, space, history, and the individual). The distance between postmodernism and realist writing is obvious – it is that between ambiguity, plurality, heterogenity and unity, singularity, coherence or the opposition between plurality of codes and an absolute code. Linda Hutcheon defines postmodern novels as "historiographic metafiction," by which she means that fiction which has as its main theme the processes of history, problematising it in both fictional and historical narrative. These stories continue to develop histories, but, at the same time, to question history and historical representation. These novels "are intensely self-reflexive and, on the other hand, they claim to find their origins, paradoxically, in historical characters and events." [7] Historiographic metafiction includes literature, history and theory; it is self-conscious about the constructed nature of history and fiction and therefore it turns into a ground on which the forms and the contents of the past are reinforced and processed. It always acts within the conventions' area and subverts them. Historiographic metafiction tends to abolish genre boundaries and the decisive border between fiction and reality, disregarding the immovable features of literary genres. This is what can be called the carnivalesque form of postmodern writing, which draws attention to its own process of being created. Linda Hutcheon stresses the importance of discourse in problematising history, the individual, and intertextuality.

Historiographic metafiction concerns Mircea Cărtărescu, a Romanian writer and theoretician, as this new form of expression is related to history and literary conventions. His works reflect the concern for the postmodern phenomenon which defines his 1980 generation. He is the author of a postmodern epic called *Levantul*, in which he gathers the most important themes and techniques of postmodernism. *Orbitor* is an impressive trilogy on creation and the artist. *Nostalgia* is a book whose characters and plots will be partially continued in *Orbitor*. *Romanian Postmodernism* comments, among other features, on the new perspective on time and space in contemporary writings, that bear the influence of Mathematics, Physics, and deconstruction. According to the Romanian writer, in postmodern works, space is fractalic and time is 'weak', 'soft' and trans-historical, as they are subordinated to a process of de-realisation. While in modernism, time was perceived as tragic, nostalgic or pathetic, "postmodern time becomes 'weak', aesthetic […], perceived as a repository of images organised according to weak-artistic criteria: the pleasant, the amazing, and the delightful." [8] Postmodernism emphasises on its status as an artefact; parody and irony become pertinent forms of expression. The postmodern work is often metafictional, being self-conscious and proving the power of imagination to be able to create possible worlds which are later revealed as products of a complex mechanism. In *Levantul*, in the 10th *Canto*, fantasy is defined as the form that gives shape to the shapeless and the chronotope, the organizing principle, is "the quartz globe and the egg of other universes" [9], stressing the dependence of an entire fictional world on this category, and also the playful and lucid attitude of the author.

Mircea Cărtărescu's *Dazzling Light* (*Orbitor*) is a postmodern trilogy consisting of *The Left Wing* (1996), *The Body* (2002), and *The Right Wing* (2007). It is an impressive construction on themes such as writing, history, time, knowledge, and joining such literary motifs as: the city, the dream, the memory, the book, the quest. The heterogenity of the narrative discourse, the permanent oscillation between fantasy, fictional truth, a plausible fictional world and one disregarding all norms, the interference of realistic and fabled aspects, and self-reflexivity involve an original perspective on space and time, as well as on character. The author often suspends the narrative thread in order to comment on literary devices, on the mechanism which serves for the construction of the text which

seems to be done at the moment of reading. The author records his own feelings and persuades the reader – a textual device - not to search for the meaning of the Book, but to discover the deep dimension of his existence. In this historiographic metafiction, different worlds are bound together, native and foreign countries, proximate and distant faraway spaces, spaces represented in art or physics, recognizable or distorted in an anamorphotic way, spaces which cancel the common perception of time. Time is frozen, dilated, reinvented, chronology is intentionally altered, as the novel is organised on three different levels: a narrator speaks about Mircea, who writes about Mircisor (Mircea), a child who seems to be caught in his endless childhood. Worlds in worlds, spaces in spaces, which are to be divided in their turn, create an apparent discontinuity. And above all, the pleasure to observe and rearrange the exteriority and the interiority, forcing passage across their boundaries. Mircea, the author of the manuscript, does not only investigate his inner structure, he also questions some fundamental issues as time, memory, and existence. He feels himself being watched by a greater entity, someone that holds his world in an unknown dimension, out of the regular time and space, where these categories are probably absent. The whole universe is depicted as giant books with characters that write books, in which other characters build other worlds and so on. A constant preocupation is to place in parantheses what is considered normal, escaping from a limited existence. Existence is full of signs which are to be read and understood, while participating in life means knowing how to read signs. The problem of understanding and knowledge is the problem of reading the structures of signs and this asks for different strategies on account of the interpreter, the being. No strategy is better than the others, all interpretation methods are appropiate in the process of searching, because the final destination does not matter, an ultimate and absolute meaning, but the quest itself. This approach influences the set-up of events on the plot level, as well as the distribution of textual components on different coexisting, contradictory levels. Each component is forced to wear a mask and to change it whenever necessary, the moment of disguise being caused by a crisis in the character. The ambiguity (*ostranenie*) is ensured by multiple perspectives on certain elements which are forced to leave their usual contexts. The technique of counterpoint is complicated in an original manner. Multiple variations accompany a textual component, especially a character, so that it is not attached to a single, intelligible world, but to several. The entire universe in designed as a triple structure: up – glory of God, down, and underground. These holon-worlds are Everything. They are not only a part of a whole, but they are a whole consisting of parts on their turning a whole. The novel is a world of fractals, as the drawing on Anca's head or Maria's carpet. Every detail is decoded as a whole, which serves as an origin for another whole. Although appearing as an insignificant organ of the world, we represent, in some way, the entire world. Everything is everywhere suddenly and every moment; because the originating shuttle which began to create the world […] had printed the same configuration for all fragments of being, from top to bottom, from holons to holoarchy." [10] The fictional world in *Dazzling Light* is a multiple world universe with a vertical structure. The pattern could be the butterfly, an obsesive metaphor in the novel: larva-nymph-butterfly. Similiarities in structure are to be found in the novel, especially in those philosophical sequences; man is a whole consisting of organic matter, time and beyond time: organic being, temporal being and metaphysical being. "And if our life is nothing but the projected shadow of our body on time, perhaps we have a super-shadow, a more real and complex projection than the object itself, a shadow that lives in us." [11]

In this tripartite universe, "the subjective game with time" as identified by Bakhtin has a decisive role in configurating the characters. The temporal logic is suppressed by the agglomeration of all forms of distortion: dreams, hallucinations, intense, unbalacing feelings. This game with time is accompanied by the game with space, as Bakhtin shows.

The tripartite vertical arrangement of space is not new in literature; it can be found in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. If human memory and universal memory, Akasia, are connected to the way in which the text is created, it might be a "textual memory, as the past is everything"[12], including other texts. *Dazzling Light* seems to be written on a palimpsest; under the textual surface we can discover several texts belonging to such a literary tradition as that of Dante, Eminescu, Marquez, Dostoievsky. There is a revealing sentence which allows us to connect this novel to the *Divine Comedy*: „Today, when I find myself on the half of my life's arch." [13]The foreign discourse is to be read here: „Nell mezzo di cammin' di nostra vita", the first line in Dante's work. This correspondence provides clues for the reader and it is not a simply nostalgical assertion about the futility of existence. Analysing Dante's unique innovation with regard to space and time, Bakhtin suggests that only Dostoievsky was capable of reinforcing this special view on the chronotope. I think that Cărtărescu's novel ironically reinforces the innovation. *Divine Comedy* is constructed on a vertical plane, based on the features of "vision". Bakhtin reveals the specific aspect of the vision in contrast with real time: "the sense of what appears in this vision is out of temporality." [14] As the represented world of the text is made possible only by the productive world of the text, in Bakhtin's terminology, the work should critically resume the contradictions of the age to which it belongs. Cărtărescu focuses on the tensions defining postmodernity and transposes them into his work. The novel consists of a Dantesque view of the world: a world which moves up and down on a vertical scale. "The temporal logic of this vertical world is a pure simultaneity of all things (or the coexistence of all things in eternity). Everything that is separated in time on the Earth, is reunited in the pure simultaneity of coexistence. […] everything should be compared [*in order to understand the world*] at the same time, that is, in the section of a single moment, the whole world must be seen as a simultaneity. […] Only in pure simultaneity or […] in atemporality the true meaning of what it was, is or is going to be may be revealed, because the dividing factor, time, lacks reality and interpretation force." [15] An equivalent concept of this theory is the postmodern „asymptotic metaphor", a device for developing holon-worlds. The fragmented worlds composing the characters are to be joined together in the unlimited, in a total disregard with Aristotelian thinking. Between these parties, there are no longer temporal-historical relations, but only semantic ones, as Bakhtin suggests.

In the postmodern novel *Dazzling Light*, historical time is converted into an inner, subjective time, as the events belong to a narrative consciousness that evokes them (as in *The Right Wing*, when narrating about history is telling about a consciousness living that history). However, these narrative fragments, built on an intelligible horizontal drift of time, melt into the vertical chronotope. "The vertical line seems to compress in itself the horizontal one. […] There is a contradiction and an opposition between the formally-constructing principle of the whole and the temporal-historical form of some isolated images." [16] With Cărtărescu's novel, the opposition is faded as he builds fractalic worlds which resemble the whole. The novel in not a simply iteration of Dante's chronotope, as the text structure is enriched by thematic and stylistic features that customize the postmodern work. Among these, the chronotope of the city and the chronotope of writing are the most important. The history of the city is created through the selection of certain features made by the character. Bucharest, as a city in construction, is the metaphorical image of the manuscript. As the manuscript contains a great part of his creator, Bucharest is contaminated by this vision, so it appears as a mixture of organic and non-organic matter. Mircea tends to adjust the unsatisfactory space by imagining a mythology of the place with a different meaning: the city is not only the sum of the „attractors" that people can discern, but also a multiple discentered imaginary world. Mircea takes notice of the city in the same way in which he recreates his own reflection in the window: by adding unexisting impossible features as an achievement of creative subjectivity. Bucharest as a chronotope is formed of other chronotopes as the threshold, the statues, the street, the playground, the park, each one consisting of other chronotopes in their turn. The result is a

fictional geography which multiplies and decenters the image of the character. In the dream space, the sordid space turns into a mysterious one - signs that carry the significance. The threshold chronotopes, the window, the door, the terrace, the corridor are gates to the underground or to a magical place where initiation often occurs. These chronotopes determine the crisis and the transposition to a new view of life. They evoke a time that lasts only for a moment, but time is detached from the normal flow of biographical time. These moments, when the crisis is overtaken, are specific to a carnivalesque time which brings a new order of things, the outburst of the hidden, strange, uncanny aspects. The chronotope of writing is complex as it refers both to writing a text and understanding existence as writing it. Writing is based on a relation between coding and decoding the signs that are to be found everywhere: in space, in time, in the inner universe, in imagination, in gestures, and in music. A proper decoding serves knowledge, but the process of interpretation never ends.

Cărtărescu's novel is a *heterocosm*, a *heterotopia*, in the terms of Michael Foucault, that juxtaposes incompatible, undecidable spaces, on the one hand, intentionally created for mining and discrediting the usual order of things and language, and, on the other hand, for capitalizing the creative dimension of language. "The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epochs of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity, we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, and of the side-by-side, of the dispersed." [17] Connected to real spaces, heterotopia and utopia represent, contest and invert spatial arrangements to which they are interrelated. Their function is to deconstruct the giving spaces by some strategies as the continuous annexation of incompatible spaces (theatre, film, garden, carpet) or different times (museums, library), the assessement of the identity between the inside and the outside (the tomb). Heterotopias reflect and deny a real space, pointing it as un-naturalized, delusive, incoherent nature. Bucharest is a chronotope that combines other time-spaces by embracing what they are not but could be. The city is a spatial system whose components fiind themselves simultaneously under two or several dimensions, the recognisible being doubled by the virtual. Bucharest is a place where virtualities are actualized at the same time, as a garden with bifurcations. Postmodern writing combines different levels of ontological dimension through creative language, filling the space between letters and their meanings, as Gerard Genette defines figure. The town allows transitions to a deep level or to a higher one, to sacred spaces or hypothetical time-spaces. The history of the city is endogenous as it is a world made by words, and yet exogeneous, as it is an amount of other discourses that hide an ideology. To connect the world equals to connect various types of discourses, as there is nothing outside the language. Bakhtin considers that underneath every structure forming a discourse in a polyphonic novel there is to be found an ideology or a certain point of view about the world, so that the literary work carries a plurality of ideologies, of points of view that are expressed by linguistic contructions. Changes in stylistic registers determine transitions to possible worlds: 'the polyphonic novel, unlike the monologic one, recognizes and accepts a plurality of discourses, of ideologies and, associated to them, a plurality of points of view about the world. This is a metaphor, of course, although it is quite close to the specific literal approach in SF interplanetary motifs or in postmodern fiction. […] considering this metaphor in its literal meaning, projecting worlds that are materializations of discursive visions of the world, means to transform an epistemological motif into an ontological one", says Brian McHale [18], a critic who underlines the drift in postmodern literature from epistemology to ontology. The diversity of stylistic devices creates the fictional worlds because the focus is on the sign belonging to a semiotic system, a sign that encounters several meanings, passing from one instance of discourse to another. This is one of the strategies common to postmodern writers. In Cărtărescu's novel, the strategy consists in cutting the sign apart from its context and replacing it in a new context, developing at the same time a new chronotope. For example, there is a special scene in which Maria describes her childhood in Tantava, a village where Pagan and Christian customs coexist.

The revival of customs is intermediated by words, signs that will be processed on the part of the colocutor, in this case Mircea, the author of the manuscript in the novel. The story about the givings offered to dead people equals a departure point for a possible world, which has its source in the process of decoding and recoding developed by Mircea. In his story, this episode goes through a stylistic improvement and blends with other signs with a common semantic feature - *sacred*. Replacing the sign in a new context means imposing as dominant a denotative or connotative semantic marker. The result will be transcending from dystopia to utopia, from the profane to the sacred, from the circumscribed to the widened. Signs suffer a semantic interpretation everytime they are connected to a semiotic consciousness. People's House (Casa Poporului), a heterotopia on a certain level, probably related to the utopia of communist thinking, that has the function of symbolizing the power of the proletariat class and ist highest expression, is turned into a dystopia on a grotesque level. Casa Poporului is also the house of fictional people, the heterotopic place where all characters gather in the end. In the same way, the statues, inert objects, vaguely reminding of past, culture, science, defined as a mode of placing in simultaneity two temporal levels, the past and the present, are turned into animate objects on a different level. They speak, fight, love. The storeyed structure of the novel allows the mythic level to mingle with the realist one or with the symbolic one. The omnipresence of the sign *statue* determines the fusion of narrative levels and the repetition of the same sign ensures the unity of the novel. For example, some of the characters transform the natural state of a statue into an art, trying to bring to perfection the specific status of monuments, either by masking themselves, or by disguising, or by standing still. So, the statue seems to be a heterogeneous chronotope with multiple functions related to certain levels of the story, and, at the same time, it is clear that the manipulation of this sign is a method of constructing and deconstructing space. The statues are also placed on a vertical scale, allowing the drift underground as the tomb, a space that sets the characters in and out at the same time, places where two worlds are combined and sometimes where revelation occurs. Statues, tombs, houses are interconnected in the tissue of the town, a topology forming a system. Mircea deciphers the arrangement of places and finds their significance unfoldind the juxtaposed fields of the urban space in a hermeneutical process. The houses in which he lived are points of stability to which he returns either physically or mentally. Ștefan cel Mare, Floreasca, Uranus are the centres of his existence or symbolic nuclei of his decentred, split, contradictory universe. A special type of chronotope is the cultural one, that is a picture or the representational space of a literary form which is able to transform itself into frames for new actions and characters. Mircea transposes himself in the fairy-tale by activating a specific language or places his characters in a space that was initially described as a picture, a representational space. The main narrative strategy is related to a new perception of time and space of the postmodern writer and a specific sensibility towards their textual importance. The chronotope is intimately related to the development of characters, imposing their status. Writing the manuscript, watching the window, exploring the inner universe, communication, the town, understanding, constructing the identity of characters by means of memory and history of signs, the work of history are examples of chronotopes in Cărtărescu's novel. Intertextuality is an instrument for the construction of chronotopes, as it opens the space between two or several texts, belonging to different genres.

Time and space are two major categories onto which we understand and interpret reality, be it factual or fictional. These concepts are directly connected to the essence of being, to the peculiar way in which humans produce reality, in order to live in it, according to their deep and genuine nature. Man is a dialogical being, whose existence is an Art of Fugue. In postmodernity, there is a change in conceiving the chronotope, as the novel, a historiographic metafiction, is concerned with reading and writing space and time structures in multiple, heterogeneous ways. Time, space, adventures are only linguistic constructions, which are going to be interpreted, in order to find the sense of the text. In

Romanian post-totalitarian literature, the interest in mimetic function of writing seems to be preserved in some works that intend to criticize or disregard the totalitarian system. In others, the auto-representational function seems to be the organising principle of writing. Cărtărescu's novel is placed among the works concerned with the creative dimension of language that reveals various types of possible worlds.

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