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Narratives of the Threshold: Timescape and the Novel in the Anthropocene

ABSTRACT

This article develops a timescape perspective on the novel. It contends that timescape provides an analytical tool which prises open the novel's capacity to confront the Anthropocene with narratives of the threshold. Timescape pertains to the imperceptible interactions between life and matter. It juxtaposes the culturally inflected notions of human time with Earth's nonlinear temporal orders. Such reciprocities acquire a chronotopic and narrative expression in the novel, as testified by a sample of three British fictions under discussion: Maggie Gee's *The Flood* (2004), Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), and Will Self's *The Book of Dave* (2006). These novels explore multitemporality in threshold situations, whose narrative pauses at once enhance and estrange the experience of time. Their respective timescapes disclose not only the existential crises inflicted by the Anthropocene, but also the planet's temporal alterity.

KEYWORDS: timescape, novel, Anthropocene, narrative, threshold

STRESZCZENIE

Narracje progu: pejzaż czasowy i powieść w antropocenie

Artykuł omawia perspektywę pejzażu czasowego w gatunku powieści. Wskazuje, że pejzaż czasowy to narzędzie analityczne, które na pierwszy plan wysuwa zdolność powieści do skonfrontowania antropocenu z narracjami progu. Konceptualnie pejzaż czasowy dotyczy nieuchwytnych interakcji pomiędzy życiem a materią. Uwydatnia skomplikowane zestawienie kulturowo ukształtowanego ludzkiego czasu z nieliniarnym porządkiem czasowym Ziemi. Powieść nadaje tym wzajemnym relacjom chronotopiczną i narracyjną ekspresję, co przedstawiono na przykładzie trzech brytyjskich powieści: *Powódź* (2005) Maggie Gee, *Nie opuszczaj mnie* (2005) Kazuo Ishiguro oraz *Księga Dave'a* (2006) Willa Selfa. Wymienione powieści eksplorują różnorodność czasu, łącząc chronotop progu z narracyjnymi pauzami. Ich

pejzaże czasowe ujawniają nie tylko egzystencjalne kryzysy wywołane przez antropocen, lecz także czasową inność planety.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: pejzaż czasowy, powieść, antropocen, narracja, próg

Introduction

Despite being a highly contestable designation of the current geological age, the Anthropocene suggests a profound shift in understanding the human relationship to Earth. Timothy Clark has characterized this situation in terms of a threshold. In *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (2015), he indicates that human impacts on the environment have produced a borderline condition which has both an existential and an epistemological dimensions. Existentially, the Anthropocene reveals self-destruction, since its unplanned effects range between climate disruption, nonbiodegradable pollution, and species extinction. Epistemologically, the new age of Man discloses self-deception, because the “modes of thinking and practices that were once self-evidently adequate, progressive or merely innocuous become, in this emerging and counter-intuitive context, even latently destructive” (Clark, 2015, p. 21). Poised at this threshold, culture accosts a renewed exigency: it needs to recalibrate the self-centred ways in which humans relate to Earth.

Said exigency affects both genre and narrative. Being the product of progressivist modernity, the novel witnesses probably some of the worst challenges in its history. Since its emergence in European literatures between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, novelistic narrative remained largely oriented towards the predictability of time and space, and novelists focused on the development of human character. However, the increased awareness of the Anthropocene has put stresses on the scope of the novel’s narrative strategies, largely because time and space have proffered a deranged logic. In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), Amitav Ghosh famously identifies this problem as “a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (2016, p. 9). He uses the genre of the novel to show that it struggles with the derangement. Despite being the “manor house” of serious fiction, it loses out to various “generic outhouses,” which are better suited to narrativizing the world and humanity amidst the crisis (Ghosh, 2016, p. 24). For that reason, some critics deny the novel its hereto dominant status among narrative genres. Jesse Taylor privileges climate fiction as a form rooted in the epic, romance, and natural history. For him, the novel carries too strong a link with the exploitation of the physical environment, which makes it “the *wrong* form in which to

tell the stories of Anthropocene resistance” (Taylor, 2018, p. 126). Ursula Heise, in turn, promotes science fiction, which resembles the epic in that it puts “entire species, on a planetary scale of space and on a geological scale of time” (Heise, 2018, p. 282). Unlike science fiction, the novel allegedly fails to scale up the imagination to other-than-human realities.

Albeit justifiable, such criticisms ignore the historically attestable adaptability, generic capaciousness, and prefigurative imagination of the novel as a narrative genre. In his influential analysis of Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s poetics, Mikhail Bakhtin has acknowledged the novel’s aptitude to contemporize itself: “Genre is reborn and renewed at every new stage in the development of literature and in every individual work of a given genre” (1984, p. 106). In the more recent studies, critics note that the novel adapts itself to the narrative demands of the Anthropocene on several crucial levels. It readjusts its literary functions, such as “character, setting, milieu, class, time, and representation” (Trexler, 2015, p. 16). It also recombines and transforms existing genres (Vermeulen, 2020, p. 62), as well as adopting extant narrative templates for its own “narrative repertoire” (Caracciolo, 2021, p. 23). In *The Value of the Novel* (2015), Peter Boxall looks to the novel’s prefigurative powers and advocates their heuristic role in the Anthropocene. Exhibiting an inherent ability to narrate “a time that has no narrative quality” (Boxall, 2015, p. 114), the novel foreknows the times that exceed both individual human experience and the experiences of an entire human species.

In this article, I develop a timescape perspective on the novel, a genre whose ostensible crisis has been incited by the emerging derangements of the Anthropocene. I argue that timescape offers an analytical tool which highlights how the novel diffuses narratives of self-destruction and self-deception, constituting narratives of the threshold instead. My argument develops across two sections. First, I conceptualize timescape at the intersections between sociological and geological notions of time, bringing them to bear on the literary theories of time, including the chronotope and narrative discourse. Second, my discussion explores a sample of three British fictions: Maggie Gee’s *The Flood* (2004), Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005), and Will Self’s *The Book of Dave* (2006). In their own unique ways, these novels exemplify narratives of the threshold. Their timescapes juxtapose the culturally inflected time of human life and activity with Earth’s temporal orders.

A timescape perspective on the novel

The Anthropocene presents a problem of time. Naming a new geological age after Man, it downstages the complex collisions and connections between human time and Earth’s temporalities, as far ranging as planetary

rotations and microbial life cycles. To approach such a wide multiplicity of time, I repurpose Barbara Adam's sociological notion of timescape and complement it with Marcia Bjornerud's viewpoint on how geological time leaves a narrative record. Then, I refine timescape through reference to two theories of novelistic time: Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope and Gérard Genette's narrative discourse. This theoretical configuration allows me to substantiate the use value of timescape in relation to the novel as a genre.

In *Timescapes of Modernity: The Environment and Invisible Hazards* (1998), Adam pits timescape against the once dominant Western epistemologies which appointed the human in the role of an objective observer of infinite vistas of space. From the Renaissance discovery of perspective to the ensuing development of cartography and Newtonian physics, Earth was reduced to a geometrically mappable entity whose temporal existence had only a numerical significance. Timescape purports to undo these modern habits of thought, which have fed off what Adam calls "the industrial way of life" (1998, p. 9). She defines timescape as a dual perspective. On the one hand, it unmaskes the legacies of the damage done to Earth; on the other, it uncovers the frequently imperceptible interactions between life and matter, which have "their rhythmicities, their timings and tempos, their changes and contingencies." As time tends to work "outside and beyond the reach of our senses" (Adam, 1998, p. 10), timescape places human time among Earth's processes, whose unveiling defies linear causality, progressivist teleology, and detached observation.

Attending as it does to Earth's multitemporality, Adam's timescape lacks the sufficient narrative power to explain how time makes meaning. In *Timefulness: How Thinking Like a Geologist Can Help Save the World* (2018), Bjornerud addresses this question by infusing geological insight into literary concepts. She adverts to Frank Kermode's seminal distinction between the two aspects of time which inform fictional temporalities: *chronos* and *kairos*. By the former, Kermode means the chronometric ticking of the modern systems of time measurement, whereas the latter implies the humanization of "time by giving it form" (2000, p. 45). Unlike *chronos*, *kairos* correlates with what Kermode has famously dubbed "the sense of an ending," or the containment of time between the covers of a book. Bjornerud extrapolates Kermode's categories onto geological duration. For her, *chronos* is "the raw experience of time, stripped of narrative," while *kairos* denotes "time imbued with meaning" (Bjornerud, 2018, p. 168). The former category always already precedes and enables the latter: *chronos* "could happen without rocks (representing *kairos*), but not the other way around" (Bjornerud, 2018, p. 40). Accordingly, rocks serve as repositories of time, which becomes meaningful only as part of a discernible stratigraphy. In the Anthropocene, this layered, palimpsestic record of

geological time summons up a timescape in which the human trace on the planet becomes inextricably entangled with numerous other nonhuman vestiges.

Devised to register both the multiplicity of time and its humanized import, timescape draws additional energies from Bakhtin's chronotope and Genette's narrative discourse. The major precepts of both theories have been well rehearsed in highly comprehensive studies (Morson & Emerson, 1990; Gingrich, 2021). For the sake of this article, I adapt one element from each theory respectively: the chronotope of the threshold and the pause in the narrative movement. Said elements may appear irreconcilable for methodological reasons. Indeed, Bakhtin deals with the time-space relationships prevalent in individual periods of literary history. Genette, in turn, scrutinizes narrative universals and abstracts himself from their concretizations in time and space. Yet these fundamental differences can reinforce each other in the conceptualization of timescape.

In the "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel" (1938), Bakhtin contextualizes the chronotope of the threshold alongside motivic chronotopes. This group stems from the four motifs recurrent in fiction. Further to the threshold, it includes the chronotopes of the road, the parlour, and the private room. Bakhtin accords the threshold with the utmost importance, precisely because it evidences itself in public places and fractures the singularity of time. The threshold marks a site of multitemporality. It features a transition, a "crisis and break in a life," whose time "is essentially instantaneous" (Bakhtin, 2001, p. 248). Yet for Bakhtin, crisis always occurs inseparably from carnival and mystery, whose temporal asynchronies evoke a Breughelian landscape: "These times (...) are interwoven with one another much as they had been intermingled for centuries on the public squares of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance" (Bakhtin, 2001, p. 249). The chronotope of the threshold grounds timescape in the long tradition of oppositional culture, which sought to celebrate time outside its officially endorsed regimentation. This tendency gains a renewed relevance in the Anthropocene, a threshold at which a heteroglossia of time calls for a narrative form.

Timescape takes formal shape in what Genette describes as the "rhythmic system of novelistic narrative" (1983, p. 112). In *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1972), he singles out four narrative movements: ellipsis, pause, scene, and summary. Their alternation in the novel creates a rhythm which bears out the relationship between story time and narrative time. In ellipses, narrative time comes to a standstill; rather, it moves in pauses. Scenes are characterized by an equal movement of story and narrative time, while summaries display an excess of story time over narrative time. For Genette, the pause presents the main narrative movement

in which narrative time not only predominates, but also approximates that of the story. When pausing, narrative comes into its own. It asserts itself like any other kind of activity, “intense, intellectual, and often physical” (Genette, 1983, p. 106). The pause enables a moment of contemplation, which has the potential to produce the most varied explications of time. The formal perceptibility of multiple temporal designs renders the pause congruent with the chronotope of the threshold. They both conspire to engender kairotic narrative instances.

Adopting a timescape perspective on the novel presupposes fulfilling an almost self-contradictory task. One needs to foreground the novel’s position at the threshold of its own narrative and chronotopic capabilities, which presents a dual challenge. The novel has to align human time with Earth’s temporal registers and narrativize that alignment in ways that make sense to the human. In what follows, I inspect how three British novels rise to this challenge in the timescapes they comprise.

The novel at the threshold of the Anthropocene

Published during the first decade of the present century, *The Flood*, *Never Let Me Go*, and *The Book of Dave* experiment with the genre of the novel. To varied effects, they enlist sociogenically induced catastrophes to test the genre’s capacity to cleave time open beyond the linear rigours of progressivism. Thus, *Gee* and *Self* revisit the ancient trope of the flood. In *Gee*, the event occurs in slow time and culminates dramatically in an inundating tsunami. In *Self*, it remains largely unrepresented and evidences itself as either a visionary prefiguration or a bygone myth. Either way, the flood heralds a renewed temporal existence for the novels’ characters. Ishiguro, in turn, resorts to the Faust-Frankenstein motif, which he contemporizes with the technoscience of genetic engineering. In his novel, human clones get caught up in an existential conundrum. Their unquestioning fidelity to human time clashes with the prospect of a posthuman temporality, which they may share with Earth. Like Ishiguro, *Self* expresses concern about the proliferation of biotechnologies. Yet he assigns a contrasting time consciousness to genetically engineered beings. Additionally, the three novelists show a cognate understanding of the socioeconomic inequities contributing to the Anthropocene. The rich and the privileged endure time more comfortably due to the easier access they have to deposits of time, be it organic matter or carbon resources. *Self* emphasizes further how the petrocultural extractions of time render both past and future immediately present in a worrying echo of Eliotic idiom: “If all time is eternally present // All time is unredeemable” (Eliot, 2015, p. 179). Yet the novels I sample profess

to redeem time. Their narrative movements pause at comparably meaningful, kairotic moments where human time confronts Earth's temporalities. These threshold confrontations correspond to the novels' timescapes.

Gee's *The Flood* supplies a kairotic ending in its final section. Titled "After," it refuses to end with an obliteration of "three thousand generations of humans," which the preceding chapters spell (Gee, 2004, p. 336). Instead, Gee salvages and even resurrects most of her characters in a post-diluvian time. This salvific gesture occurs in Kew Gardens, a site which entangles a multitemporality. It validates recreation by evoking Eden. It also embodies the centuries-long human labour to cultivate the planet, foreshadowing thus the promissory New Jerusalem of John of Patmos's Book of Revelation. The "ideal city which was always waiting" reconciles Gee's characters (Gee, 2004, p. 341). Through a narrative pause, the novel surveys how both friends and foes partake of a carnivalesque conviviality. They chatter and play football in what appears to be a holiday in "the place of perpetual summer" (Gee, 2004, p. 338). The narrative pause intensifies when everyone eventually yields to the terrific heat, lies down, and starts dreaming. Lying at the threshold of Earth's new climate regime, humans enter into an oneiric relationship with time (Shadurski, 2023, pp. 334–335). Gee's narrator observes:

City suspended over the darkness. Above the waters that have covered the earth, stained waters, bloody waters, water heaving with wreck and horror, pulling down papers, pictures, peoples; a patch of red satin, a starving crow, the last flash of a fox's brush. City which holds all times and places (Gee, 2004, p. 341).

This parataxis uses a circular frame to lift the perennial city of dreams above the planet's flowing vastness. Gee grants her characters the ability to dream in a manner that keeps their recumbent bodies afloat. The narrator also joins the dreaming humanity in an ultimate act of universal redemption: "See, here they come, where all are welcome. Here we come, to lie down at last" (Gee, 2004, p. 341). In the novel's timescape, humans redeem time by dreaming, while Earth does so by flooding. The antihuman logic of Earth's engulfing temporalities at once estranges and enfolds oneiric time.

Being a flood fiction like *The Flood*, *The Book of Dave* invites consideration prior to *Never Let Me Go*. Whereas Gee splits her narrative sequences into those happening before, during, and after the flood, Self splices together his respective temporalities. Subtitled "a revelation of the recent past and the distant future," his novel equips its narrative present with a cross-temporal, Tiresian view. Self's chapters follow an unchronological order, creating a cyclical feedback loop in which the future satirically

inverts and perpetuates the carbon addictions of the past. The past, in turn, founds a plastic-worshipping future, while remaining largely committed to its own petroculture. The vicious cyclicality of human time permeates the novel's imagery. Over the centuries, the London Eye evolves into a gruesome clock-like wheel which crushes the dissenters. The eternal return it epitomizes loops back to the medieval practices of punishment and torture.

The Book of Dave enables a speculative redemption of time. It endows the past with a kairotic moment (Edwards, 2019, p. 223), which anticipates the emancipatory path that the future may follow. Dave Rudman, the novel's protagonist, has given up his job as a London cabbie and takes to walking in suburbia. As he enters an Essex landfill, the narrative pauses to record his instantaneous acceleration into deep time:

The great wave came on, thrusting before it a scurf of beakers, stirrers, spigots, tubes, toy soldiers, disposable razors, computer-disc cases, pill bottles, swizzle sticks, tongue depressors, hypodermic syringes, tin-can webbing, pallet tape, clips, clasps (...) – and a myriad other bits of moulded plastic, which minutes later washed up (...), forming salt-bleached reefs, which would remain there for centuries (Self, 2007, p. 404–405).

Unlike Gee's, Self's parataxis contains no water. Rather, it carries an overwhelming tide of consumerist plastic, which defines the materiality of the future. Although Dave brackets himself out as an equally culpable agent of the Anthropocene, his insight discloses the enormity of sociogenic time. The novel enhances this epiphany by marking the figurative limits of linguistic representation: "The screen had been removed from his eyes, the mirror cast away, and he was privileged with a second sight into deep time" (Self, 2007, p. 404). In renouncing his mediating lenses, Dave abandons the poststructuralist domain of all-pervasive language. The experience of a landfill thrusts him towards the threshold at which a viscous world emerges before him.

Alongside such ineluctable emergence, the novel's final episode offers a tentatively hopeful resolution. Set in the postdiluvian future, it features three "ill-sorted figures," including a lisping "moto." Being a bioengineered cross between human and pig, the moto has the intelligence of a human child and the capacity to produce oil. The latter circumstance makes the creature vulnerable on the cusp of a newly robust extractive obsession. Since its life depends on Earth's time of days and seasons, it follows the party of social outcasts who look to defend their island's pastoral rhythms and uncommodified cartography. The three dissenters oppose the official petroculture which threatens to catch their little outpost in a cycle

of fungible artificiality. Carnavalesque as it is, their enterprise speaks directly to Dave's earlier kairotic illumination, which holds the key to the novel's timescape. Described as "a green foetus floating in its amniotic lagoon" (Self, 2007, p. 451), the island embodies Earth's self-regenerating temporalities. Their fluidity provides a stark riposte to the plastic viscosity foreseen by Dave.

In Gee and Self, the flow of time correlates with their novels' generic status as flood fictions. Distinctly, *Never Let Me Go* bears a science-fictional inflection. Ishiguro appoints Kathy H. as his novel's first-person homodiegetic narrator. Being a human clone, she stands in a dubious relationship to human time, which she aspires to reaffirm and redeem. Throughout her highly meticulous account, she addresses time in an "urge to order all these old memories" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 37). Kathy's commitment to order brings out the carefully stylized registers of her narrative voice, which progresses from the bland conversational tone of the novel's opening paragraphs to the vexed lyricism of its final pages. Such a tonal progression endorses the novel's generic interest in the development of human character. Yet it also testifies to Kathy's own endeavour to humanize herself through imitation. Acting on her compensatory beliefs, she thinks that every clone should use art to reveal their soul (Parkes, 2021, p. 194). This developmental teleology undergirds the timescape of Ishiguro's novel.

The concluding episode of *Never Let Me Go* delivers its kairotic moment. Having lost her friend Tommy to the donations programme, Kathy awaits the harvesting of her vital organs. She drives among the empty fields in search of solace. After she stops, her narrative also pauses to disclose her situation in time:

I found I was standing before acres of ploughed earth. There was a fence keeping me from stepping into the field, with two lines of barbed wire, and I could see how this fence and the cluster of three or four trees above me were the only things breaking the wind for miles. All along the fence, especially along the lower line of wire, all sorts of rubbish had caught and tangled. It was like the debris you get on a sea-shore: the wind must have carried some of it for miles and miles before finally coming up against these trees and these two lines of wire. Up in the branches of the trees, too, I could see, flapping about, torn plastic sheeting and bits of old carrier bags. That was the only time, as I stood there, looking at that strange rubbish, feeling the wind coming across those empty fields, that I started to imagine just a little fantasy thing (Ishiguro, 2005, pp. 281–282).

Instead of parataxis, Ishiguro uses repetition to foreground the drifting quality of time. As the wind sweeps across the earth, time no longer flows. It whirls in eddies of undecomposed waste, which either piles up around

solid objects or continues to coast before landing elsewhere. Kathy seeks momentary redemption in the drift of time. She imagines all of her losses, especially Tommy's death, reassembling themselves from the pieces of floating rubbish. Yet her narrative curtails that redemptive assemblage. Kathy leaves the scene to "drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 282). Her departure forecloses the opportunity to reflect about her metonymic affinity with the plastic flotsam, in whose drift she should discern herself. Inclined towards having a soul instead, Kathy moves away from the threshold at which posthuman time gathers up in the wind. Such self-humanization disallows her to embrace the time that humans have not cut out for her. Whereas Self's carnivalesque motos find tutelage in their island's regenerative rhythms, Kathy is probably too grave to become windborne. Similarly to Gee and Self, Ishiguro heightens the striking difference of Earth's temporalities, yet his timescape bids an untapped potentiality of time as drift.

Conclusion

Be it socioeconomic inequalities, plastic pollution, or genetic engineering, the novel confronts the Anthropocene with narratives of the threshold. As exemplified by the writing of three British novelists, these narratives constitute a timescape in kairotic situations, where the otherwise imperceptible workings of time gain both a chronotopic and a narrative dimensions. Considered from a timescape perspective, the novel prises open time beyond its culturally informed progressivist containments. The characters of Gee's, Self's, and Ishiguro's novels face temporal derangements at the threshold, which presents them with the opportunity to accept Earth's multitemporality in a carnivalesque move against the official culture of time. Occurring within narrative pauses, the chronotope of the threshold at once enhances and estranges the characters' situation in time, as becomes evident in the paratactic approximations of the flood and repeated circulations of windborne debris. Oneiric, engulfing, self-regenerating, and drifting, timescape uncovers time that refuses to end. For human time not to fold in on itself, narratives of the threshold explore the planet's temporal alterity.

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