

Transnational

Modernism and the Problem of Temporal Spatialisation in Franz Kafka's "The Great Wall of China"

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On the level of textual content, it can be said that modernist literature reflects a preoccupation with the change in one's views on and understanding of time and space in relation to human existence. The modernist project centres upon in-depth observation and representation of a distinct moment in time, rather than a chronological chain of events which has been understood to be the focus of literary realism. The transformation on the level of spatial and temporal conceptualisation is caused by socio-political, cultural and economic transformations in world history:

The notion of time as a steady course of continuous moments and the sense of space as an objective and fixed phenomenon, but above all the distinctiveness of the temporal and spatial dimensions of reality were fundamentally disrupted. The establishment of an objective global dateline and new conceptions of space and time stressing their dependency on the observer and the contexts in which they operate radically undermined the certainties built on the idea of a stable universe and a rationally fixed perception of the world.¹

Literary modernism puts to question the notion of "absolute space", or "[s]pace that exists as a background to events and processes and is not affected by objects or other entities in the universe"². This concept of "absolute space", which led to the concept of time and space as mutually exclusive, was stipulated by the Enlightenment scientific principles based on absolutism and rationalism and, therefore, has been associated with René Descartes (1596-1650), who posited that space is infinite, and Isaac Newton (1642-1727), who stated that space and

¹ "Modernism: Volume 1", ed. A. Eysteinnsson, V. Liska, *A Comparative History of Literatures in European Language* 2007, vol. 21, p. 251.

² *A Dictionary of Science*, ed. J. Daintith, E.A. Martin, Oxford 2010, p. 3.

time are distinct entities. The transitional landmarks which contributed to the rethinking of time and space from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century was the relational theories of Ernst Mach (1838-1916) and the notion that time is the fourth dimension of space proposed by Hermann Minkowski (1864-1909). Mach's critique on Newton's concept of "absolute space", as well as Minkowski's notion of time as the fourth dimension, were the founding stones upon which Albert Einstein (1879-1955) developed his general theory of relativity, which was first formulated in 1905 and later revised in 1916. Einstein's theory refutes the notion of a fixed continuity of time and space by maintaining that time and space are relative to the individual observer. Influenced by Einstein, modernist literature thus calls into question the realist linear narrative and the notion of space and time as *tabula rasa* waiting to be defined or assigned meanings: "In the modern novel, the traditional symmetry of life and narrative—whereby the account of the former takes the form of the latter, whose logic basically parallels the temporal order of human life—has been broken up".³

On the level of theoretical periodisation, however, scholastic attempts to define and conceptualise modernism as an aesthetic and intellectual movement have proven to betray the spirit of modernist scepticism towards fixity of time and space, the experimentalist spirit which makes modernism unique, described by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane as "the one art that responds to the scenario of our chaos".⁴ How does periodisation of modernism go against its deconstruction tendency? Having been allocated fixed temporal borders which span from the 1890s to the 1940s, the accepted nominal "make it new" definitions of modernism are Western Eurocentric as they privilege Western Europe as the origin and kernel of the modernist movement. Even though there have been attempts to expand the period range of modernism, Susan Stanford Friedman nevertheless cautions that "the danger of an expansionist modernism lapsing into meaninglessness or colonizing gestures is real".⁵ The expansionist attempts can only substantiate and solidify Western European modernity and modernism as the standard to which all other modernities and modernisms outside the West are measured. My argument finds its resonance in Friedman's "Planetarity: Musing Modernist Studies", where she advocates leaving the comfort zone of periodisation by rethinking its spatial politics which promotes the superiority of modernity and innovation of the West over the Rest:

Could it be that the anxieties about the geohistorical and generic expansion of modernist studies represents an uncanny desire to re-establish a particular early twentieth-century Western aesthetic style as the *sina qua non* of modernism? What is the ethics of that interminably repeated comfort zone? How are we to break the hold of the old modernist mold?⁶

I propose in this article that modernism can be better understood as a transnational movement by means of examining the dangers of dwelling in the comfort zone of temporal spatialisation

³ "Modernism: Volume 1", p. 251.

⁴ M. Bradbury, J. McFarlane, *Modernism 1890–1930. Pelican Guides to European Literature*, Harmondsworth 1976, p. 27.

⁵ S. Stanford Friedman, "Planetarity: Musing Modernist Studies", *Modernism/modernity* 2010, vol. 17, 3, p. 474.

⁶ *Ibid.*

on both the level of modernist literature's textual content and theoretical periodisation. The notion that modernism took place only in a fixed period of time fails to embrace the dynamism of change and transnational relativism which has made modernist literature "our art"⁷, or the intellectual and aesthetic movement of the "new", the "here" and the "now". Focusing on the subversive aspects of modernism as a "break" with the old and the past in particular contexts will enable the existing yet, oftentimes, obscure multifarious modernities and modernisms in different places and periods of time to emerge.

To "de-spatialise" time is not an easy task as it is often understood that time can only be perceived in terms of space and that spatialisation of time limits the power of the abstract, or the virtual, by making it strictly dependent on preferable material conditions. It is difficult to deny the fact that one divides one's time in a day into terrains where goals and actions are planned. One might picture mornings, afternoons, late afternoons, evenings, and nights as empty spaces on paper. Each demarcated time is like a page or a section in planners and calendars to be filled with the tasks required to be done at a certain point in time. It is not so easy to deny that one regularly "spatialises" time, or thinks of time in terms of space, on a regular basis. *Temporal spatialisation*, as I have mentioned, is based on the notion that space is fixed, a *tabula rasa* that is always there waiting to be defined and assigned meanings as one charts and re-charts the cartography of activities in each passing minute, or even in each passing second. To de-spatialise time, or to dissect the spatial politics behind the mainstream concept of temporality, I propose that we start by examining the history of space as a concept.

The notion of space as a fixed container can be traced back to Aristotle's *Physics*. For Aristotle, space functions as a receptacle of smaller objects, a "form" which contains "matter": "Anyway, since place is separable from the object, it is not form; and since it is a container, it is different from matter. It also seems as though anything which is somewhere is not only itself, whatever it may be, but also has something else outside itself".⁸ Thinking of time in terms of a vessel, Aristotle maintains that the past and the present can be understood in and through space: "Now, what is before and after is found primarily in place".⁹ It is this Aristotelian conceptual paradigm, presuming fixity to be the essence of space, which has been widely accepted as *sine qua non*. However, modernist literature, through stylistic experimentation, opens up a creative possibility in its treatment of space and time: *spatial temporalisation*, or the art of depicting and perceiving space in terms of time. The speaker in Virginia Woolf's short story entitled "Flying over London", for example, gives an account of her aeroplane experience and describes her view of London from above. Temporalisation of space, as in seeing and experiencing London's landscape in terms of time by means of imagining its past, can be seen reflected in the following passage:

Nothing more fantastic could be imagined. Houses, streets, banks, public buildings, and habits and mutton and Brussels sprouts had been swept into long spirals and curves of pink and purple like that a wet brush makes when it sweeps mounds of paint together. One could see through the Bank

⁷ M. Bradbury, J. McFarlane, *Modernism 1890–1930*, p. 27.

⁸ Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. R. Waterfield, Oxford 1999, p. 82.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

of England; all the business houses were transparent; the River Thames was as the Romans saw it, as paleolithic man saw it, at dawn from a hill shaggy with wood, with the rhinoceros digging his horn into the roots of rhododendrons.¹⁰

The vertical distance between the plane and the ground offers a new perspective which invites the voyeur/voyageur to see place in historical terms. The speaker imagines the River Thames during the Old Stone Age and the Roman Empire, hence temporalising the landscape she sees. However, there is a paradox which must be addressed. In the process of thinking of the place one has never seen in actuality (since the place in question existed only in the past) in terms of time, as reflected in Woolf's short story, one is also inevitably engaged in spatialising time. It has become apparent that temporalisation of space is, in fact, based on spatialisation of time, and *vice versa*. Jacques Derrida defines this spatio-temporal (inter)reaction and logical co-signification as spacing (*espacement*): "Espacement names the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space, the fact of *différance* that renders any self-identity or absolute self-presence impossible and that haunts all difference and repetition of the same".¹¹ Espacement leaves undecidable yet repeatable trace. It is the necessary condition of trace: "Derrida defines the trace as the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space, which he abbreviates as spacing (*espacement*)".¹² The question as to whether the images of the River Thames in the Palaeolithic and Roman times in Woolf's short story are derived strictly from temporalising space or strictly from spatialising time is impossible to answer. The evidence is untraceable:

[S]ince for Derrida the trace is always the trace of another trace, it does not give itself as simple origin. (For Derrida, trace is not a master word but an always replaceable term in an unmasterable series including *différance*, **supplement**, **writing**, **cinder**, and so on.) Nor can the trace be thought in terms of the logic of **presence**. Since every sign in its manifestation or apparent 'presence' always includes traces of others which are supposedly 'absent', the trace can be reduced to neither side of the presence-absence opposition so prized by the **metaphysical** tradition. The trace thus re-describes the entire field which the metaphysics of presence seeks to dominate throughout history. The trace names that non-systematizable reserve which is at once constitutive and unrepresentable within such a field.¹³

The term "trace" has been discussed at length in Derrida's *Speech and Phenomena*, a study of Edmund Husserl which was published in 1967:

Since the trace is the intimate relation of the living present with its outside, the openness upon exteriority in general, upon the sphere of what is not "one's own," etc., *the temporalization of sense is, from the outset, a "spacing."* As soon as we admit spacing both as "interval" or difference and as openness upon the outside, there can no longer be any absolute inside, for the "outside" has insinuated itself into the movement by which the inside of the nonspatial, which is called "time,"

¹⁰V. Woolf, *Flying over London in The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays*, New York 1978, p. 204.

¹¹S. Solomon, "L'espacement de la lecture: Althusser, Derrida, and the Theory of Reading", *Décalages* 2012, vol. 1, 2, p. 20.

¹²M. Hägglund, *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2012, p. 15.

¹³*Trace in The Derrida Dictionary*, ed. S. Wortham, London 2010, pp. 229-230.

appears, is constituted, is “presented.” Space is “in” time; it is time’s pure leaving-itself; it is the “outside-itself” as the self-relation of time.¹⁴

Derrida here stresses the relative space-time paradigm, as opposed to the absolutist separation of space and time. When the external (Woolf’s River Thames of her present) is internalised, the internal (Woolf’s imagination of the River Thames in the past) is also simultaneously externalised, or re(-)presented in the form of writing. In connection with the concept of trace, Derrida also revises Husserl’s concept of “augenblick”.¹⁵ The direct English translation of the word “augenblick” is “instant” or “moment”. The literal meaning of the word is “blink of an eye”. Husserl describes what he calls the “living present”, the present that we experience right now, as being perception, and maintains that the living present is “thick”. Why is it thick? The present is thick because the instant moment inherently consists of memories of the recent past, to the point that the past and the present become almost inseparable. Moreover, the present, as well as the past, is not a result of repetition or reproduction. Husserl’s spatialisation of time results in the notion that “now”, this very moment, is an instant point. For Derrida, on the contrary, “now” is not an instant point. The present itself is a reproduction.¹⁶ Therefore, each slice of immediate experience is necessarily unjust or violent. The violence imposed by the “now” and “here” is stipulated in Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (1993), of which the title alludes to the opening statement made by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels at the beginning of *The Communist Manifesto*: “A SPECTRE is haunting Europe—the spectre of Communism. All the Powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre;...”¹⁷ For Derrida, the spectre of Marxism becomes ever more hauntingly tangible after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The spectre which haunts Europe, an allusion to the spectre in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, is a reminder that time, as well as one’s experience of time, is disjointed:

GHOST

Swear

HAMLET

Rest, rest, perturbed spirit. So, gentlemen,
With all my love I do commend me to you,
And what so poor a man as Hamlet is
May do, t’express his love and friending to you
God willing shall not lack. Let us go in together
And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.
The time is *out of joint* [my emphasis]; O cursed spite
That ever I was born to set it right!
Nay, come, let’s go together.¹⁸

¹⁴J. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. D.B. Allison. Illinois 1973, p. 86.

¹⁵Ibid, p. 62.

¹⁶S.B. Rosenthal, *Time, Continuity, and Indeterminacy: A Pragmatic Engagement with Contemporary Perspectives*, Albany 2000, p. 33.

¹⁷K. Marx, F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, ed. F. Engels. Chicago 1906, p. 11.

¹⁸W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, London 2007, pp. 226-27.

In what ways is time “out of joint”?¹⁹ When we stand in front of a mirror and look at ourselves in the mirror, we are “distanced” from the mirror. That distancing is a necessary condition. We must be “spaced” away from ourselves so that we can simultaneously look through the eyes of the voyeur and become the viewed. The space between us and the mirror, however, remains invisible, and because of that, like a blink of an eye, manages to blind our eyes in an instant. We see ourselves projected in the mirror and yet, that self over there is our “other”. It is not possible to see ourselves as ourselves. This temporalisation of the spacing between us and the mirror is the “out-of-joint” blink of the moment, the untraceable trace left by the spacing between the living and the haunting dead, the voyeur and the viewed, the present and the past.

In this article, I propose that Franz Kafka’s “The Great Wall of China” [“Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer”], written in 1917 and published in 1931, is an example of a modernist writing which not only problematises the concepts of time and temporality as well as of space and spatiality, but also puts on centre stage the problem of theoretical periodisation of modernism. With its physical and ideological gaps and fragments, as well as traces of illusory and unfinished signification, the “piecemeal” construction of the Great Wall of China in Kafka’s short story not only exposes the process of spatialising time, but also reflects the modernist subtle (re-)evaluation of such a conceptual paradigm.

To begin, in Kafka’s story, the construction of the Great Wall of China is based on and driven by strong collective imagination. Workers and overseers labour unquestioningly with the image of a completed enclosing wall, the image of the future, constantly in mind. The wall’s construction does not commence from point A to point B. It is intentionally carried out in fragments. Kafka here stresses the rationale behind the Great Wall’s “piecemeal” construction, as well as the controversy which ensues:

But how can a wall protect if it is not a continuous structure? Indeed, not only does such a wall give no protection, it is itself in constant danger. These blocks of wall, left standing in deserted regions, could easily be destroyed time and again by the nomads, especially since in those days, alarmed by the wall-building, they kept shifting from place to place with incredible rapidity like locusts, and so perhaps had an even better picture of how the wall was progressing than we who were building it. Nevertheless the work could probably not have been carried out in any other way. To understand this one must consider the following: the wall was to be a protection for centuries; accordingly, scrupulous care in the construction, use of the architectural wisdom of all known periods and peoples, and a permanent sense of personal responsibility on the part of the builders were indispensable prerequisites for the work.²⁰

The problem of discontinuity is the spectre which haunts the speaker in Kafka’s story. The “how can a wall protect?”²¹ question is a rhetorical one. The speaker who asks this question is a Chinese historian. Looking back in history from the perspective of the present or, in

¹⁹Ibid., p. 227.

²⁰F. Kafka, “The Great Wall of China” in *The Great Wall of China and Other Short Works*, trans. M. Pasley, London 2002, pp. 58-59.

²¹Ibid., p. 58.

fact, from the perspective of the “future of his past”, to the time when the construction had just been launched and slabs of stone were still freshly installed, the speaker knows full well whether or not the wall has served its purpose: “For my own inquiry is a purely historical one; lightning no longer flashes from the thunderclouds that have long since rolled away, ...”.²² The answer here is: no, the wall has not served its purpose.

When we read Kafka’s “The Great Wall of China”, we also experience Derridean *espacement*. When we read the speaker’s account of the past, it can be said that we automatically spatialise time, or think of time in terms of space, which is a normal reaction. However, as I shall explain, Kafka’s story also subtly propels readers to do the opposite.

When one thinks of time in terms of space, in this case, in terms of the Great Wall of China, one tends to imagine the passage of time as a one-way trajectory. If the construction process of the wall from the beginning to the overall completion, albeit imaginary, resembles the process of time from the past, passing through the present, to the future, Kafka’s piecemeal construction disrupts the gradual processing of time, as well as of the wall, itself. What propels workers and overseers to understand and undertake the project of the Great Wall is the image of the future. What motivates them is the “promise” that one day the wall will be completed in its entirety or, in other words, all the missing gaps filled and the fragmented wall rendered whole:

This meant that many great gaps were left, which were only filled in by slow and gradual stages, and some indeed not until after the completion of the wall had actually been announced. It is even said that there are gaps which have never been filled in at all, and according to some people they are far larger than the completed sections, but this assertion may admittedly be no more than one of the many legends that have grown up round the wall, and which no single person can verify, at least not with his own eyes and his own judgement, owing to the great extent of the structure.²³

Kafka’s depiction of the piecemeal construction in “The Great Wall of China” therefore illustrates the disjointed time of the present. It shows that there is no such thing as a “present continuous” time setting. The notion of time as inherently “out of joint” is also put on centre stage in a parable within the short story. The parable, published separately in 1919 as “An Imperial Message” [“Eine Kaiserliche Botschaft”]²⁴, depicts the story of a dying Chinese Emperor who whispered his last words to a messenger. The messenger was assigned to relay the Emperor’s message to one of his subjects living in the farthest corner of the Chinese Empire: “but for the people in our village Peking itself is far stranger than the next world”.²⁵ The more the messenger struggle to travel across the vast realm of the empire with the message, the more readers come to realise that his mission is an impossible feat: “Our land is so vast, no fairy tale can give an inkling of its size, the heavens can scarcely span it. And Peking is only

²²Ibid., p. 63.

²³Ibid., p. 58.

²⁴R.T. Gray et al, *Eine Kaiserliche Botschaft in A Franz Kafka Encyclopedia*, Westport, Connecticut 2005, p. 156.

²⁵F. Kafka, “The Great Wall of China”, p. 68.

a dot, and the imperial palace less than a dot”.²⁶ The message, delayed by the unfathomable distance and the passing time, can never reach the intended recipient. As the message of the dying emperor travels across the vast land of China, the promise of the letter’s content remains, for the Chinese narrator in Kafka’s story, a pledge made in the *future’s past*. For Kafka the writer, this pledge, or Derridean promise, was made in the *past’s past*. For readers, the imperial pledge was made in the *present’s past*. China’s vast landscape, which can be regarded as a metaphor for time’s infinite boundaries, hindered the fulfilment of the Great Wall promise and obliterated the content of the Emperor’s message. However, the act of working towards a promise and the act of travelling despite the looming failure of never ever reaching the intended destination can nevertheless prove to be a statement in itself:

At once the messenger set out on his way, a strong, an indefatigable man, a swimmer without equal; striking out now with one arm, now the other, he cleaves a path through the throng; if he meets with resistance he points to his breast, which bears the sign of the sun, and he forges ahead with an ease that none could match. But the throng is so vast, there is no end to their dwellings; if he could reach open country how fast would he fly, and soon you would surely hear the majestic pounding of his fists on your door. But instead of that, how vain are his efforts; he is still only forcing his way through the chambers of the innermost palace, never will he get to the end of them; and if he succeeded in that, nothing would be gained; down the stairs he would have to fight his way; and if he succeeded in that, nothing would be gained; the courtyard would have to be traversed, and after the courtyards the second, outer palace; and again stairs and courtyards; and again a palace; and so on for thousands of years; and if at last he should burst through the outermost gate – but never, never can that happen – the royal capital would still lie before him, the centre of the world, piled high with all its dregs. No one can force his way through here, least of all with a message from a dead man to a shadow. But you sit at your window and dream up that message when evening falls.²⁷

Like the piecemeal construction, the promise leaves traces of illusory and incomplete signification only to be completed by the readers’ imagination: “Such was the world into which the news of the building of the wall now penetrated. It too came belatedly, some thirty years after it had been announced”.²⁸ As readers reach these passages extracted from the parable within “The Great Wall of China”, the Emperor’s message had long been sent out to the intended recipient. The message’s receipt was already delayed. The *espacement* readers collectively experience *within the walls* of the story and *as* the story itself, therefore, has already created gaps, or interstices, between the spatialised temporality of the distant past and the recent “past of our future” which, in fact, is the present. Moreover, the piecemeal construction and the *espacement* which ensues illustrate how the disjointed time of the present awkwardly awaits the filling of gaps through collective promise of the future. Readers in 2015 and beyond know, as Kafka knew in 1917, that the promise of the completion of the Great Wall would never be fulfilled. The sovereignty of spatialised time might only point towards an empty promise, as well as towards the obscure, even unknowable, content of the Emperor’s

²⁶Ibid., p. 66.

²⁷Ibid., pp. 66-67.

²⁸Ibid., p. 69.

message. Piecemeal construction, on the other hand, invites readers to imagine the content of the promise, the impossible project of a finished Great Wall. Spatial temporalisation is a modernist device which transforms the passive *voyeur* into a committed *voyageur* who travels along the almost unimaginable expanse of the Chinese landscape and the great expanse of time. For Derrida, a “promise” is a performative act: “Even if a promise could be kept, this would matter little. What is essential here is that a pure promise cannot properly take place, in a proper place, even though promising is inevitable as soon as we open our mouths—or rather as soon as there is a text”.²⁹ Since the promise that fulfils itself ceases to be a promise, it reflects a temporality which is “out of joint”.³⁰ My argument finds its resonance in Martin Hägglund’s statement in *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov*: “The condition of temporality is, strictly speaking, ‘undecidable,’ since it consists in a relentless displacement that unsettles any definitive assurance or given meaning”.³¹ Also, a promise is structurally open to the possibility of an “other” beyond oneself, a heterogeneous “other” and “temporality” to come: “The promise responds to the **future** and the **other**, it is **performative** in as much as it entails a pledge, an **affirmation** or giving that is not simply identical to or exhausted by its specific content. Even if the promise is not kept, its gesture retains a certain significance”.³²

The context of Kafka’s story reveals a particular modernity, which was an outcome of an unfulfilled promise of state security. The speaker of the short story, Kafka and readers of Kafka have the benefit of the hindsight of knowing the “future” of the Great Wall’s “past”, namely, the fact that the construction of the wall was never completed. Kafka and readers of his story might have learnt about the Chinese Revolution, known as the Xinhai Revolution, of 1911, which marked the end of over 2,000 years of imperial rule and the beginning of China’s republican era. The fact that the overthrown Qing dynasty, China’s last imperial dynasty, was of the Manchu ethnic minority reveals a deep irony. The Manchus are considered part of a nomadic ethnic group called Xiongnu. This nomadic group, portrayed by the authority as barbaric, was precisely the enemy from whom the Emperor in Kafka’s short story built the Great Wall to defend his empire.³³ Time has proven that the wall was far from being an effective defence. While emperors and dictators took turns ruling China, the people remained violently and unjustly oppressed in the name of the imagined enemy:

Against whom is the Great Wall supposed to protect us? Against the peoples of the north. I come from the south-east of China. No northern tribe can threaten us there. We read about them in the books of the ancients; the cruelties which they commit in accordance with their nature make us heave deep sighs in our peaceful bowers; in the faithful representations of artists we see these faces of the damned, their gaping mouths, their jaws furnished with great pointed teeth, their screwed-up eyes that already seem to be leering at the prey which their fangs will crush and rend to pieces. When our children misbehave we show them these pictures, and at once they fling themselves sobbing into our arms. But that is all that we know of these northerners; we have never set

²⁹J. Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, trans. C. Lindsay, J. Culler, E. Cadava, New York 1986, p. 98.

³⁰W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, p. 227.

³¹M. Hägglund, *Dying for Time*, p. 62.

³²*Promise in The Derrida Dictionary*, ed. S. Wortham, London 2010, p. 146.

³³*The History of Chinese Civilization: Vol. 2. Qin, Han, Wei, Jin, and the Northern and Southern Dynasties (221 B.C.E.-581 C.E.)*, ed. Y. Xinpei et al, New York 2012.

eyes on them, and if we remain in our villages we shall never set eyes on them, even if they should spur their wild horses and keep charging straight towards us; the land is too vast and will never let them through to us, they will ride on until they vanish in the empty air.³⁴

The *past's past* has left traces on the *present's past*. The Xinhai Revolution, which affected only the ruling class, was established on the fragments of its past. The fate of the common people had been sealed since the time of the Qin dynasty, when peasants were coerced and exploited in the construction of the Great Wall. The common people's poor condition of living remained untouched and unimproved through time.³⁵ Years under oppressive regimes under Shi Huang Di (also known as Qin Shi Huang), the first Emperor of China, and his successor led to inevitable repercussion: "The nature of man, flighty in its essence, made like the swirling dust, can abide no bondage; if it fetters itself it will soon begin to tear wildly at the fetters, rip all asunder – the wall, the binding chain, and itself – and scatter them to the four quarters of heaven".³⁶ The peasants successfully overturned the power of the Qin dynasty and ended its reign.³⁷ It is sadly ironic that the Great Wall's promise of security made to the people who built the wall and lived within its enclosure has proved to be nothing but a statement of tyranny and inequality. Likewise, the threat of a common enemy from the north proved to be a spectre of collective fear, which had been exploited to the fullest by emperors and noble elites. This spectre of the past returns to haunt the present day. This can be seen, for example, in the demonisation of Arabs and Muslims by the United States, particularly as part of the psychological warfare propagated by the George W. Bush's regime:

A strange boatman – I know all those who usually pass here, but this one was a stranger – has just told me that a great wall is going to be built to protect the emperor. For it seems that infidel tribes, and demons among them, often gather in front of the imperial palace and shoot their black arrows at the emperor.³⁸

Though Franz Kafka has been considered as quintessentially "one of the jewels in the crown of high modernism"³⁹ and of "German-language Modernism"⁴⁰ by many readers and scholars, the author and his works are rarely situated in the "particular modernity" of Austro-Hungarian Empire in which he lived and wrote. On the contrary, Kafka's stature as a writer has long been part of the Western Eurocentric theoretical periodisation of modernism, which demarcates modernism's temporal borders from around 1890 to 1940. "No, believe me, nobody would know Kafka today—", Milan Kundera insisted, "nobody—if he had been a Czech".⁴¹ Kundera's scathing comment on the possibility of Kafka being demoted to a less known or obscure writer had he written in the Czech language and considered himself a Czech confirms the notion that modernist literature, as well as its teaching and learning, has been a product,

³⁴F. Kafka, "The Great Wall of China", p. 64.

³⁵Y.F.L. Zhao et al, *An Outline History of China, China Knowledge Series*, Pekin 1982, p. 127.

³⁶F. Kafka, "The Great Wall of China", p. 62.

³⁷Jian B. et al, *A Concise History of China*, Pekin 1986, pp. 21-22.

³⁸F. Kafka, "The Great Wall of China", p. 70.

³⁹P. Bridgewater, *Kafka, Gothic and Fairytale*, Amsterdam 2003, p. 5.

⁴⁰*From Kafka to Sebald: Modernism and Narrative Form*, ed. S. Wilke, London 2012, p. 2.

⁴¹M. Kundera, *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts*, trans. L. Asher. New York 2006, p. 34.

as well as a promoter, of exclusionist theorisation and canonisation, against which Susan Stanford Friedman has emphatically cautioned:

We need to let go of the familiar laundry list of aesthetic properties drawn from the Western culture capitals of the early twentieth century as *the* definitional core of modernism. I'm attached to that list, as I have confessed. But we need to provincialize it, that is to see "high" or "avant-garde" modernism as ONE articulation of a particularly situated modernism—an important modernism but not the measure by which all others are judged and to which all others must be compared. Instead, we must look across the planet, through deep time, and vertically within each location to identify sites of the slash—modernity/modernism—and then focus our attention on the nature of the particularly modernity in question, explore the shapes and forms of creative expressivities engaging that modernity, and ask what cultural and political work those aesthetic practices perform as an important domain within it.⁴²

In order to de-spatialise the affixed time period of modernism, dismantling the notion of High Modernism as modernism's quintessence is needed as a necessary step. Kafka's work, written in a particular context of modernity experienced by a German Jewish writer living in Prague at the critical moments in the history of Austro-Hungarian Empire leading up to the Great War and its aftermath sufficiently proves that modernities and modernisms are multiple. I propose that by examining the "particular" one comes to see the overall montage of modernism's diversity and dynamism. Though oftentimes overlooked, such diversity and dynamism are inherent within the complex subjectivities of modernist writers and the untraceable "traces", or haunting undecidable spectres, of countless lives, thoughts and histories reflected in their works. In other words, a study of particular(ist) modernism reveals the indefinite versions and varieties of modernities which are deeply ingrained within the modernist movement from the beginning. To conclude this article, I shall briefly put my theory into practice in the following paragraph.

Franz Kafka wrote "An Imperial Message" at his sister Ottla's home on Alchimistengasse (known as Zlatá Ulička [Golden Lane] in Czech)⁴³, within the Prague Castle complex, in the spring of 1917. In the same year, he also rented a two-room flat in the Schönborn Palace in Prague's Malá Strana district.⁴⁴ From his flat, he could clearly see Laurenziberg, a hill known in the Czech language as "Petřín". Petřín hill is where the medieval Hunger Wall, [Hladová zed' in Czech], had been built in the fourteenth century by the orders of Charles IV (1316-1378), the first king of Bohemia to become Holy Roman Emperor. According to the legend, after the famine in 1361, the construction of the Hunger Wall was carried out only as a means to provide livelihood for the city's poor. This wall in Prague was therefore not meant to provide military protection, the purpose which most walls are expected to serve. Hence, the term "hladová zed'" has become a euphemism in the Czech language, signifying useless public work. Traces of the Hunger Wall can be found in Kafka's depiction of the Great Wall of China: "On the first

⁴²S. Stanford Friedman, *Planetarity*, pp. 487-488.

⁴³Though the meaning of the lane's German name, Alchimistengasse, is "Alchemists' street", alchemists never lived there. There is a legend, however, that sixteenth-century alchemists came to this particular lane to look for a reaction to produce gold. Hence, the street became rightfully known as "Zlatá Ulička", or "Golden Lane".

⁴⁴K. Wagenbach, *Kafka*, trans. E. Osers, London 2003, p. 112.

few pages of the so-called sixth octavo notebook begins the longish story ‘The Great Wall of China’, very clearly inspired by a historic site in Prague in the immediate vicinity of Kafka’s apartment”.⁴⁵ The similarity between the two walls in terms of being “hladová zed”, or walls of which promises were never fulfilled, becomes clearer when one also takes into account the particular context of world history in which Kafka lived and wrote. When “An Imperial Message” was written in 1917, it was several months *before* Kafka would come to know about his Tuberculosis condition. However, it was also several months *after* he knew that the Habsburg Empire’s war bonds in which he had invested his savings would not turn profit as expected. His homeland had plunged into an impossible war following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, heir presumptive to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his wife, Sophie, Duchess of Hohenberg, in 1914. Franz Joseph I died in 1916. In the same year of the Austro-Hungarian Emperor’s death, the Empire of China, an empire which a Chinese General named Yuan Shikai (1859-1916) attempted to reinstate in order to re-establish absolute monarchy in China after the 1911 revolution, had been brought to an end. Readers have the benefit of the hindsight to know the social and historical context of Kafka’s “Great Wall of China”, which reflects a sense of futility and despair on both personal and collective levels, as well as national and transnational levels. By avoiding the pitfall of temporal spatialisation which tends to label Kafka’s short story as only a High Modernist metaphysical allegory, one might come to embrace the possibility that the depiction of the Chinese Emperor in the short story might reflect Kafka’s perception of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire regime in passing. The people in Kafka’s time, of our *present’s past*, like the people in our time, *Kafka’s future*, collectively yearned for the comforting words from the past which had already arrived and, at the same time, had already failed to arrive “at once the messenger set out on his way”.⁴⁶

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 113.

⁴⁶F. Kafka, “The Great Wall of China”, p. 66.

KEYWORDS

spatialisation of time

ABSTRACT:

It is often understood that time can only be perceived in terms of space and that spatialisation of time limits the power of the abstract, or the virtual, by making it strictly dependent on material conditions. Modernist literature, it is often understood, appropriates this conceptual paradigm while hinting at a possibility that space can also be perceived in terms of time and that temporalisation of space deconstructs the façade of fixed and codified spatial meanings. Derrida defines this spatio-temporal (inter)reaction and logical co-signification as spacing (*espacement*). However, analysis of time and temporality, as well as analysis of space/place and spatiality, in modernist writing often falls into the pitfall of the problem of temporal succession and, subsequently, of the misconception that space is fixed. The problem of succession lies in the notion that time passes and ceases to be instant(ly), leaving only a Derridean “trace”, which is spatial. This notion is problematic as it is based on the implications that space is firmly fixed and passive despite temporal “spacing”, or succession, and that space is passively imprinted upon with traces of time. I argue that space is far from fixed and passive. Its dynamism renders spatialisation of time problematic. I propose that Franz Kafka’s “The Great Wall of China” (written in 1917) is a fine example of a modernist writing which not only problematises the concepts of time and temporality as well as of space and spatiality, but also puts on centre stage the problem of spatialisation of time. With its physical and ideological gaps and fragments as well as traces of illusory and unfinished signification, the “piecemeal” construction of the Great Wall of China in Kafka’s short story not only exposes the process of spatialising time, but also reflects the modernist subtle re-evaluation of such a conceptual paradigm.

MODERNIZM

Franz Kafka

temporalisation of space

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