
The Location of Memory A Bakhtinian Reading of Bahram Beyzaie's *The Crow*

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Abstract

This study is concerned with the use of specific tools from Mikhail Bakhtin's comprehensive literary work in order to investigate the notion of time/space in Bahram Beyzaie's 1979 movie, *The Crow*. Employing the Bakhtinian notion of chronotope in the analysis of the movie as a cinematic text proves helpful in developing the notion of anachronotopicity, which is then utilized to investigate the workings of memory in the movie. The main characters' utterances, as means of communication and as other manifestations of anachronotopicity, are also explored. Finally, the issue of communicating with a public (or simply another person) in the narrative of the movie is discussed through the Bakhtinian spectrum of communication between monological and open-ended utterances and its relation with the introduced notion of anachronotopicity.

Keywords: chronotope ,anachronotopicity ,memory ,*The Crow* ,Bahram Beyzaie

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Introduction

Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975) is most famous for his theory of dialogism, a term used by Michael Holquist to refer to the interconnected set of concerns that dominate his thinking (Holquist, 2002: 14) Bakhtin himself never used this term, (ibid) yet it is derived from the fact that the most significant notion present throughout his complex and varied work is the notion of dialogue. In order to conceive his philosophy of dialogue, Bakhtin developed several tools such as heteroglossia, carnivalesque, polyphony, and chronotope.

Chronotope "expresses the inseparability of space and time: ". (Bakhtin, 1981: 84) Bakhtin asserts that "in literature and art itself, temporal and spatial determinations are inseparable from one another, and always colored by emotions and values. Abstract thought can, of course, think time and space as separate entities and conceive them as things apart from the emotions and values that attach to them. But living artistic perception (which also of course involves thought, but not abstract thought) makes no such divisions and permits no such segmentation. It seizes on the chronotope in all its wholeness and fullness. Art and literature are shot through with chronotopic values of varying degree and scope ". (ibid: 243), Holquist's clarification might be helpful in comprehending the notion of chronotope. According to him "in Bakhtin's post-Kantian universe the basic tool or instrument for judging the accuracy of our epistemological experiments is time/space or chronotope) ". Holquist (9-10 :2009 ,It

is" the instrument that permits calibration of the time/space coordinates without which thinking and communication—human understanding, indeed—would be impossible) ". (ibid(10 ,

Though Bakhtin first developed the notion of chronotope in order to investigate the structure of the literary form of novel, this concept of interwoven inseparable time/space is quite useful in comprehending and analyzing manifold forms of cultural products) such as photographs, movies (... ,and our own everyday experiences. Consequently, film studies can benefit from the notion of chronotope.

"The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic " ,Bakhtin asserts early on in his well-known essay on chronotope. (Bakhtin, 1981:85) Bakhtin's definition of chronotope (including the concluding remarks he added to his essay in ,1973 more than thirty years later than its original writing between 1934 and) 1938 (is so comprehensive that ,near the end of the essay ,he remarks" ,every entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope ". (ibid) 258 ,According to Holquist's reading of Bakhtin, chronotopes" provide the clock and the map we employ to orient our identity in the flux of existence) ". Holquist:2009 , (10He elaborates on that time/space coordinates" are the fundamental constituents of understanding ,and thus provide the indices for measuring other aspects of human existence ,first and foremost ,the identity of the self". (ibid) The identity of the self is clearly linked to memory. Thus ,Bakhtin's own

concluding remarks along with Holquist's explication provide the basis for what the present study tries to achieve.

This study makes an attempt in presenting a Bakhtinian reading of Bahram Beyzaie's 1979 movie *The Crow*, by employing the notion of chronotope in order to elucidate the workings of different levels of memory (which is clearly time-bound) in this movie. This is achieved by introducing the notion of anachronotopicity and situating its workings in things, occasions, and also some characters' way of being in the world. The main characters' utterances, as means of communication and as other manifestations of anachronotopicity, are also discussed.

The following reading of *The Crow* does not deal with the generic or, to be more precise, plot-generating aspect of the notion of chronotope. Rather, it concentrates on its merging aspect as a tool to define the dependence of human awareness on time/space as a whole.

The Chronotopic Analysis of The Crow Manifestations of Anachronotopicity

Filmed in black and white, *The Crow* starts with a blurred shot of a page of a newspaper on which a photograph of a woman titled "Missing" is discernible. Shortly, during a dialogue between Amān Isālat - a TV news anchor preparing at the moment to present the news - and his colleague, it is emphasized that the picture is that of a missing young woman. Isālat's wife, Āsīyih, is a young teacher at a school for deaf and mute children. The two live

in a two-storied newly built house with Isālat's mother - 'Aālam - and a maid. At first, they seem to be living the typical life of a middle-class family without children.

Yet, what comes to the fore early in *The Crow* is the way in which Āsīyih experiences her family life along with her social life. Her experience can be described as exilic, since she is the one who is not comfortable with the new social norms, suitable for the time and the ever-changing space she is living in (mid-1970s Tehran). The norms related to her husband's social circle are the ones she particularly finds awkward and embarrassing. The people belonging to this circle are mostly Isālat's colleagues in the news media who can safely be regarded as young middle-class professionals superficially pursuing Western fashion and behavior. Āsīyih prefers a much simpler yet more profound way of presenting herself in the society. This way or, more accurately, mode of self-presentation, while being authentic, belongs to a time/space that has gone. So Āsīyih, though being embedded in the contemporary chronotope (the present time/space), does not comply with its norms. This is what makes her an exile in the current state of affairs. What she represents belongs to a chronotope which has been somehow forcefully supplanted by the contemporary chronotope during the comprehensive modernization of the 1930s to 1970s.

In a sense, Āsīyih is an outcast in the time/space she is living. Her mode of being is anachronistic. As the term "anachronistic" etymologically denotes only time, I would like to suggest a new term which can be helpful in incorporating

the past-orientation of both time and space in one adjective: anachronotopic.

Āsīyih is inclined to embody this time/space, this contemporary chronotope, in her own specific way. To her husband, her particular mode of being seems tacky and out of fashion, both in the way she chooses her style and in her relations with strangers (more precisely, her husband's colleagues). She is not interested in embodying the fashion and etiquettes of the time which, to her, seem gaudy, disrespectful, and inauthentic.

A parallel to this sense of exile from a past time/space – in other words, this anachronotopicity - is the experience of 'Aālam, Āsīyih's mother-in-law. She is an aged woman who tries to imbue her own bland life with meaning by arranging gatherings with other fellow aged men and women (seemingly her acquaintances, yet there is no implication of a deeper friendship between her and any of the people who gather once a week in her home). They mostly talk about the past, its events and ambiance. They evoke an affective chronotope which is again far from the contemporary chronotope. This evocation and the resulting anachronotopicity is interwoven with the notion of memory and its role in shaping an identity which persists in the face of the contemporary chronotope - which seeks to alter it. This persistence of identity also becomes visible in Āsīyih's being, as elaborated earlier.

Another forceful agent in which anachronotopicity becomes manifest is the photograph of the seemingly missing young woman who, by the end of the film, is discovered as being 'Aālam in her

youth. It is first seen in the newspaper, then on television, and at last as a printed photograph in the hands of Āsīyih who finds it in a locked room belonging to 'Aālam. As a forceful reminder of what has been gone, which struggles against oblivion, this photograph induces a crack in the everyday living of characters in the new urban chronotope. First Isālat is engaged in finding the missing young woman in the photograph because she seems familiar to him. At the beginning Āsīyih discourages him from pursuing the case. She only becomes engaged after she herself experiences the fear of getting lost (of course from the point of view of others) when she gets on the car of a stranger by mistake and he threatens to kidnap her. After managing to escape from the stranger's car, Āsīyih finds herself in a part of the city quite unknown to her. This part of Tehran, shown through the quickly changing shots by fast editing, comprises remnants of Old Tehran (Tehran-e Qadīm), some unchanged (an old alley at the side of which a metal Hamsa [خمسه] or Abbas ibn Ali's hand [پنجهی ابوالفضل] is installed; an old watchmaker's shop), some in the middle of transformation (alleys and streets in the midst of construction), some completely transformed (a wall painted with a huge advertisement of 7up; a shop's window full of women wigs). This sequence, along with other sequences showing the face of the city in *The Crow*, demonstrates how Tehran itself is a site at which the past chronotope cuts into the new contemporary chronotope. As a result the city itself becomes the locus of anachronotopicity in *The Crow* by carrying the urban memory of a time/

space that has got lost.

Throughout the movie a search is going on for finding the missing woman shown in the photograph. This photo seems to be “all that is left to insist that the person was indeed once there.” As Edkins eloquently articulates in her account of the missing people and the politics associated with it, photographs “cut into continuous, homogeneous time and the territorialization of space.” (Edkins, 2011: 1) By making visible the absence of the missing young woman, the photograph is another element in which the contemporary chronotope is disrupted and dislocated. Thus it acts as another agent of anachronotopicity. At the end of the film, the role the photograph plays by its cutting into the contemporary chronotope can be interpreted as a representation of the gradual dislocation (space-wise) and disruption (time-wise) that the mother-in-law, along with the city, has undergone. The dislocation is represented in the ever-changing face of the city. This is achieved by shots of Tehran-e Qadīm (literally meaning “Old Tehran”) as Āsīyih - twice alone and once accompanying ‘Aālam - explores it on foot. The memory of a time past permeates these places as ‘Aālam recounts her own youth for Āsīyih. This audio-visual disruption and dislocation of the contemporary urban chronotope makes the city itself the locus of anachronotopicity, i.e. retackling the past time/space at the present time/space, as expounded earlier.

‘Aālam’s effort to secure an identity which is seen and relished (as a young woman) for her now old self through the act of sending a photograph of her youth

to the newspaper office is an example of what becomes possible “through the gates of the chronotope.” (Bakhtin, ۲۰۸ : ۱۹۸۱) She succeeds in entering the sphere of meaning as her son and daughter-in-law chase after the young missing woman (‘Aālam’s youth) and her dwelling. The anachronotopicity of the photograph is emphasized in a dialogue between Isālat and his colleague in the first half of the film. After his colleague suggests that he should stop by the address provided in the missing note, Isālat declares that he has searched the place. He states, “It’s been a garden, but thirty years ago. There is no Delgosha Pass today. The place has been transformed into a public promenade. Such an address has not been existing for years now.” The disjunction between the address provided in the missing note (read out loud several times in the movie by different characters) and its contemporary place produces a dialogue among time, place, and their associated memory lost in the face of urban transformation. Consequently, the impossibility of emplacing the unknown person or family who is looking for the young woman in the photo (who supposedly live at that address) brings a tangible incongruity to the here and now or, more precisely, the contemporary chronotope. This discordance is another locus of anachronotopicity in *The Crow*.

What ‘Aālam does – sending a photograph of her youth to the newspaper office – demonstrates the salient role memory plays in what has been phrased as “the chronotopic organization of meaning.” (Sandywell, 1998: 196) According to Annette Kuhn’s observations,

As a generation enters old age, its members will try to fashion meaningful stories from their individual and collective lives, assessing their roles as protagonists in their own life stories and proposing fitting closures to these stories... Often, too, the stories themselves have an elegiac quality: they are a summing up of a life; ... a farewell. Elegy can sometimes embody a transcendence of its own, as if a particular life story stretches towards a meaning above and beyond the individuality of its narrator. (Kuhn, 2004: 106-107)

In other words, what Kuhn describes shows how sharing one's memory with another person can associate one chronotopically with a time/space that has been lost. This process of sharing one's memories introduces anachronotopicity in the present time/space (the contemporary chronotope which at the surface seems all-encompassing) through acquiring meaning for one's own life experiences. This is what she also tries to achieve by recounting her memories to Āsīyih.

Anachronotopicity's Linkage to Cultural Memory

The cinematic representation of the meaning – which 'Aālam, as a woman who has entered old age, tries to achieve through revealing her recollections to Āsīyih – provides another locus of anachronotopicity. This filmic anachronotopicity has the potential to be associated with Mieke Bal's linking of individual memory to cultural memory. Bal assumes the term 'cultural memory' as signifying that memory can be perceived as a cultural phenomenon as well as an individual or social one. (Bal, 1999: vii)

Cultural memory is “neither remnant, document, nor relic of the past, nor floating in a present cut off from the past.” It rather “links the past to the present and future.” (ibid) 'Aālam's recollections, which little by little give shape to her memoir dictated to Āsīyih (who writes it earnestly), imbue the present time/space (or the contemporary chronotope) with the past time/space. This past time/space or the chronotope denoting a specific place (Tehran) at a specific historical period (first Pahlavi era) has been subjected to oblivion. To quote Beyzaie himself, “We are a nation who have put our own preceding two decades out of our mind. Our new generation has put the memories of its preceding ten to fifteen years out of its mind. This is not a privilege, but a trait. As if we want to forget the past and, presently, we've become addicted to contemporary life.” (Beyzaie, 1977: 749) *The Crow*, thus, as the audiovisual representation of this oblivion (seen in *Isālat* and almost all the minor characters) is at once the site of anachronotopicity. The chronotopic juxtapositioning of multiple shots of *Tehran-e Qadīm* in the narrative of the film visualizes the struggle of the urban space in the process of modernization. In other words, *The Crow* envisions “the history of a lost nation that was suspended between an adopted modernization and a cultural past that tended to be forgotten.” (Sheibani, 2011: 105)

What is more, what 'Aālam does with her own photograph is a rebelling form of making herself the protagonist of her own life story. (Kuhn, 2004: 106) She wants to be noticed for who she had been and who she is now. The intermingling of

her life with the place (Tehran-e Qadīm) pushes the story of her life beyond her own individuality and, by means of the institution of cinema, her life and the lost life of Tehran-e Qadīm becomes part of collective memory.

Sheibani asserts that by “Approaching film as history, Beizai raises questions about the modern sense of self-identity and reactivates Iranian collective memory.” (Sheibani, 2015: 212) Looking at this history through the lens of chronotope and regarding it as the chronotope comprising a past time and transformed (more precisely, modernized) space engenders a sense of past-oriented identity in the characters of ‘Aālam and Āsīyih, in contrast with the contemporary identity of Isālat.

‘Aālam’s act of sending a photograph of herself (belonging to her youth) to the newspaper office and requesting indirectly in a side note sent along with it that it be published is an act of linking individual memory to social memory – that of her son and her daughter-in-law and the media – in the narrative of the film. The film itself links this resulting social memory to the cultural memory of a nation in the throes of modernity through the very act of spectatorship. If we view “cultural memorization as an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously modified and redescribed even as it continues to shape the future,” (Bal, 1999: vii), *The Crow* runs the process of cultural memorization each time it is watched. It does so not only at the time when it was first publicly screened – only for three days (Omid, 1995: 749) – but also today, after forty years.

The above notion can also be elaborated

through what Assmann counts as one of the characteristics of cultural memory: “the capacity to reconstruct” (Assmann, 1995: 130). Quoting Halbwachs, Assmann asserts “no memory can preserve the past. What remains is only that ‘which society in each era can reconstruct within its contemporary frame of reference.’” (ibid) *The Crow* is a cultural product produced by a member of the contemporary society according to the contemporary frame of reference. By showing the implications of contemporary agents’ (Āsīyih’s and ‘Aālam’s) dealing with time (as past) and with space (which has gone under tremendous transformation), *The Crow* reconstructs what has entered the imagination of its contemporaries. “Cultural memory works by reconstructing, that is, it always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation.” (ibid) Through *The Crow* (its narrative, its visuals, its soundscape), which is aimed at an audience, the present yet past-oriented experiences of the characters enter the sphere of cultural memory.

Anachronotopicity in Language

In Bakhtin’s view, chronotope is tied closely to the characterizations of language itself. (Wirtz, 2016: 348) Thus, the language or more precisely the words uttered by characters at specific junctures in the film is another locus of anachronotopicity, either directly or metaphorically. An example of the former is ‘Aālam’s sharing memories of her youth with Āsīyih, which is discussed earlier. An example of the latter is a few lines of dialogue between Isālat and Āsīyih when she becomes conscious after having

lost her consciousness by encountering the corpse of another missing young woman being found. Āsīyih reveals her worry for the missing young woman in the photograph, and Isālat, trying to comfort her, says, “Why? What’s the difference? It’s not only her. She’s like all the others. This city is crowded. There are people who get lost and are never ever found.” His last sentence can be read as metaphorically referring to what Beyzaie states about *The Crow*: “The film is about a people who have lost their history.” (Beyzaie, 1977: 749) These figures (i.e. people who get lost; history), belonging to a chronotope which has been replaced by the new chronotope, continue to loom over the new time/space in this dialogue. That is how language becomes a locus of anachronotopcity by bringing forth the figures of the past either directly or through being read as metaphor.

In another occasion, when ‘Aālam is telling Āsīyih of her youth and the latter is writing these memories, Āsīyih suddenly declares that “in our family, memory is regarded as luxury. No one has a memory worthy of uttering.” Taking family as a metaphor for the Iranian urban society in general, Āsīyih’s declaration can be associated with Beyzaie’s saying that *The Crow* is about a people who have lost their history. (ibid) In other words, here language is a tool for enunciating ideas about the notion of memory which is essentially oriented towards a time/space that is no more. As the verbalization is ripe with metaphor, again the language becomes a locus of anachronotopcity. That is, in this occasion, the chronotope of the past cuts through language at the

present time/space (or the contemporary chronotope) and disrupts it.

During Āsīyih and ‘Aālam’s visit to Tehran-e Qadīm Āsīyih asks why they do not go to see ‘Aālam’s childhood neighborhood. “What do you know of its whereabouts? It’s been years that my neighborhood has got lost,” ‘Aālam retorts back. She continues to recount a time when she and her now dead brother tried to find their childhood neighborhood. “Yet we came across an imaginary world, a place where everyone was like a stranger to us.” ‘Aālam’s recounting, mingled with images of people and places from Tehran-e Qadīm, brings forth ‘Aālam anachronotopcity both in language and in the form of “loss of a sense of belonging to a neighborhood.” (Kuhn, 2004: 107) ‘Aālam does not feel any belonging now to the neighborhood in which she has been brought up. This makes explicit the fact that she’s been uprooted chronotopically from the place to which her memories are still attached. Judging by the way it is expressed in language, the encounter with the “imaginary world” in ‘Aālam’s words is a harsh encounter with the present time/space (or the contemporary chronotope).

Anachronotopcity in Open-ended Communication

The issue of communication deserves elaboration here. In Bakhtin’s framework, each utterance takes place at any point in the spectrum shaped between monological and open-ended communication. As Sandywell eloquently explains:

In place of a closed and monological epistemology Bakhtin formulates a historicized vision

of reality endlessly refigured from ‘open-ended’ relational processes of communicative interaction. The logosphere of human culture, for Bakhtin, incorporates an unfinalizable dialectic between the conflicting impulses of unity (closure, monologue, authoritative discourse) and alterity (openness, dialogue, carnivalesque humour, dissemination). (Sandywell, 1998: 197)

If, in light of the above formulation, the contemporary chronotope (or the immediate time/space) is regarded as a definite closure in which the majority of subjects in a society are firmly established, then the anachronotopicity in the way ‘Aālam and Āsīyih live and express themselves can be seen as a manifestation of the impulse of alterity. What constitutes the conflict of this impulse with the impulse of unity is their trying to communicate with others while fiercely adhering to what they consider their roots (i.e. individual memory and experience). It should be noted that “the issue of communicating with a public” is Beyzaie’s own concern. (Beyzaie, 1977: 749)

Here, I would like to draw attention to how Beyzaie comments on his own occupation as having a hand in creating audiovisual media – movies – which are obviously means of communication with a public or, in other words, are intended to be consumed by an audience. The notions Julia Kristeva offers in her influential article of 1979, entitled *Women’s Time in English*, will be helpful here. This article came out only two years later than

the making of *The Crow* and, though developed in a European context, the questions it raises about the function of media is very much related to what Beyzaie explores in *The Crow*. Kristeva asks

Is it not true that the contemporary media revolution... implies an idea of time as frozen or exploding according to the vagaries of demand, returning to its source but uncontrollable, utterly bypassing its subject and leaving only two preoccupations to those who approve of it: who is to have power over the origin (the programming) and over the end (the use)?” (Kristeva, 1979: 17-18)

While Beyzaie does not make his own opinion regarding this issue fully explicit, there are various situations in *The Crow* which demonstrate how this works in practice. Beyzaie explores the debatable role of news media in covering incidents and also in providing information regarding social/environmental urban issues. His exploration shows the implications of either shooting (to be more precise, documenting) the scene or broadcasting it through television (on definite programs at specific hours intended to be consumed by a definite audience). Examples of these are a less than two-minute interview about air pollution conducted by Isālat right on the spot with no preparation; a less-than-thirty-seconds interview with a worker of an industrial workshop; a less than two-minute coverage of fake mourning over a fake death (the corpse under the cloth is later shown to be an alive actress) as a consequence of fake

carelessness and imprudence. In these occasions, by showing that what appears to be factual on television broadcast is, in fact, simple masquerade or at best careless documentation, the subtle boundary between fact and fiction is transgressed several times. Consequently, the role of media in addressing manifold issues – many of which related to the working class – is criticized not-so-subtly. The uncontrollable time designated by news media to programming and to consumption (or ‘use’ according to Kristeva) utterly bypasses the subjects (the person who is interviewed and the audience of the resulting television program). The demands of the contemporary news media (at the time/space of *The Crow*, i.e. mid-1970s Iran) seems to establish fake one-dimensional communication with its audience. This type of communication can be situated at the monological side of the spectrum of communication proposed by Bakhtin. Open-ended communication through the television during the course of the film takes place just in the few occasions of announcing that the young woman in the photograph is missing. These occasions are open-ended in what they communicate because they are after eliciting a response from the audience, i.e. helping in the search for the woman in the photograph. Yet, as discussed earlier in the dialogue between Isālat and his colleague, the address which is read in the announcement has ceased to exist for years. Thus the announcement itself, while belonging to the category of open-ended communication, becomes the locus of anachronotopicity. On another level, these announcements can be interpreted

as the only occasions where the audience, despite their not having a role in the time when the announcements are broadcasted, are not bypassed (using Kristeva’s term). Rather they are invited to choose whether to become involved with what is announced (through some action like starting their own search) or not. Therefore, Kristeva’s account of the way media is produced and consumed finds its resonance in Beyzaie’s filmic commentary in *The Crow* on the same issue by taking an explicitly critical stance towards news media, as shown in the examples given above.

Conclusion

In *The Crow*, the mutual implication of temporal and spatial imaginaries makes memory a crucial part of the cinematic (or, to be more precise, audiovisual) narrative. Memory is invoked by ‘Aālam’s dictating of her memoir to Āsīyih and takes shape in the form of the urban places they visit (either alone or together) in Tehran-e Qadīm during the course of the movie. Consequently, the intricate combination of language and image in giving a cinematic shape to memory makes *The Crow* a rich site (as a cultural product of a certain time in history) to investigate the involvement of the more profound notion of chronotope that Bakhtin emphasized in the latter part of his famous essay.

In this study, introducing the notion of anachronotopicity (which has its roots in the Bakhtinian chronotope) proved beneficial in delineating the workings of identity, memory, and communication (either through everyday language used in one-to-one interactions or through news media) in *The Crow*. The notion of

chronotope can also be used in order to investigate the constellation of different cultural products. In this light, *The Crow* can be studied chronotopically with regard to other filmic productions dealing with the same themes.

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