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Brief encounter: *The Girl Chewing Gum*

ABSTRACT

When discussing his concept of literary chronotopes and that of the 'encounter', Mikhail Bakhtin uses the road as an example where 'the spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people intersect'. Using this framework, this article will examine the narrative, aesthetic and thematic concerns of The Girl Chewing Gum.

KEYWORDS

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In the last two decades Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the literary chronotope (time–space) has appeared in film scholarship with increasing regularity. From Michael Montgomery's (1993) use of the idea as a means of extending the traditional analysis of film genres through Vivian Sobchack's interest in film noir's chronotopic negotiation between the artistic text and the historical, post-war context (Sobchack in Brown 1997) to the study of how specific chronotopes underpin the fictional worlds of individual films, for example, Paul Dave's work on Roger Michell's 1999 comedy *Notting Hill* (Dave 2006), the Russian philosopher's conceptualization of the interdependency between space and time as expressed in art has proved a highly versatile tool. Robert Stam more precisely explains the chronotope's appeal in film studies:

whereas literature plays itself out within a virtual, lexical space, the cinematic chronotope is quite literal, played out concretely across a screen with specific dimensions and unfolding in literal time (usually

24 frames per second), quite apart from the fictive time-space specific films might construct.

(2000: 205)

It is with Stam's comments in mind, that I have chosen the chronotope as a framework in which to discuss the thematic, narrative and aesthetic concerns of John Smith's short film *The Girl Chewing Gum*.

The suitability of Bakhtin's chronotope to an investigation of *The Girl Chewing Gum* is helpfully highlighted by the director in the film's opening shot. The commands that the authoritative voice-over proffers within the first few seconds are a clever combination of spatial and temporal indicators appropriate to Bakhtin's description of the chronotope as 'one carefully thought out whole' (1981: 84). To elaborate: spatial instructions such as 'to the left' and 'across' are joined with temporal commands such as 'now' to foreground the film's fused spatiotemporal arrangement. This gains a further charge when the camera tilts upwards or, as the voice-over puts it, everything sinks slowly down, to reveal a large clock atop the plate glass company, which has hitherto been the film's focus. Showing the position of the clock's hands while discussing their rotation every hour or twelve hours powerfully demonstrates the 'intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships' within film (Bakhtin 1981: 84).

Although *The Girl Chewing Gum* draws attention to the cinema's inherent chronotopic tendencies by this self-conscious attempt to make time visible, there is also Smith's employment of a busy London road to consider. As Sobchack astutely remarks, the road is an exemplary – albeit minor – chronotope for Bakhtin (Sobchack in Brown 1997: 152). Indeed, the philosopher discusses the road as part of the concluding remarks to his major essay 'Forms of time and chronotope in the novel' and, moreover, seeks to position it alongside another of his categories, that of the encounter. He puts it thus: 'The chronotope of the *road* associated with encounter is characterised by a broader scope, but by a somewhat lesser degree of emotional and evaluative intensity. Encounters in a novel usually take place "on the road"' (Bakhtin 1981: 243). In his alignment of the road and encounter, Bakhtin goes on to note that the element of chance frequently features: 'The road is a particularly good place for random encounters' (Bakhtin 1981: 243). Certainly, the road's function as a meeting point for the most varied people is evidenced in *The Girl Chewing Gum*. In the first shot, for example, six figures of different ages and gender enter the frame as the director discusses the position of a trailer. There are the two boys who walk the pavement in the background, the two middle-aged men who rub shoulders as they cross the road in opposite directions, another bearded man who enters from the left and the woman who pulls a shopping trolley in the foreground. Crowding the screen at this point, they confirm the road as a spatiotemporal setting in which the most diverse figures collect and collide.

While the voice-over is not used at this point to highlight the diversity of the road's occupants, it soon acquires this function. First, it creates neat categories such as 'young' or 'old' in which to place and, thus, promote the various and varying individuals. Second, it draws attention to certain individuals' use of cultural/religious/social signifiers. The man in the turban is a case in point. Without the soundtrack alerting the audience to his imminent arrival, his fleeting appearance in the background and, therefore, contribution to the film's rich mix of people as governed by the chronotope

of the road could be easily missed. As regards the man in the white boiler suit the voice-over works in a similar but not identical way. Here, the man has sufficient screen time that his presence is likely to be noticed regardless of any verbal communication. However, by purposely alerting the audience to the boiler suit the voice-over inevitably makes us aware of the non-boiler suited men that surround this figure. Indeed, as the man leaves the screen he crosses paths with another who is coded as a typical office worker: trouser suit, shirt and tie, neatly combed hair, folded newspaper. The brief encounter between these two men adheres to Bakhtin's belief that the chronotope of the road collapses social distances: 'People who are normally kept separate by social and spatial distance can accidentally meet, any contrast may crop up, the most various fates may collide and interweave with one another' (Bakhtin 1981: 243). On the road then, various social classes, estates, religions, nationalities and ages intersect at one spatial and temporal point (Bakhtin 1981: 243).

The voice-over pushes Bakhtin's point somewhat further when it moves from detailed description into the realm of interpretation and/or assumption. A black family, for example, is said to be Jamaican whereas a mother and son are assigned specific ages. More interestingly, however, the voice-over begins to detail personality traits. Two boys, for example, are labelled 'naughty'. The increasingly open fictionalization of the film's figures leads the voice-over to explore some of the narrative possibilities offered by the chronotope of the road. After all, the most significant function of the chronotope is its ability to organize key narrative events: 'The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied' (Bakhtin 1981: 250). In *The Girl Chewing Gum*, therefore, scenarios such as the man on his way home or the dentist on his way to the bank are introduced. These are soon followed by an absorbing account of a young man as the thief of a local post office. As this man walks across the screen, the voice-over cleverly interprets his behaviour to support and strengthen the fiction. Hence, his hands which remain in his pockets throughout the shot are said to be gripping the butt of a revolver. It is in this moment that Bakhtin's idea that the chronotope shapes and serves narrative is best evidenced. In *The Girl Chewing Gum* the busy London road structures the narrative event of a robbery.

Intriguingly, as this fiction develops and the camera pans in pursuit of the 'criminal', the audience is made aware of a queue forming outside a local cinema. Although it is the second time that this queue has entered the frame, it now works with the voice-over's prior confession that he is speaking from Letchmore Heath, fifteen miles away, to highlight that *The Girl Chewing Gum* is, above all, a constructed, cinematic work. In this way, Smith confirms what has been suspected from the start: the film's primary concern is the spatio-temporal structure of cinema rather than that of the road. Importantly, this prioritization of the chronotope of cinema still permits an association with the chronotope of the encounter. As the voice-over device serves to suggest throughout the film, a more complex encounter always occurs beyond the frame, between the spectator and the spectacle. Indeed, the meaning of the film is shaped by this encounter. We interpret the events occurring in the film in the same way that the voice-over interprets the events occurring on the road. Thus, to conclude, the brief encounter that this article's title speaks of pertains to both the fleeting assembly of figures on-screen and the short (by conventional cinematic standards) encounter between the audience and the film text.

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