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Space and the Postmodern Fantastic in Contemporary Literature

 The Architectural Void

Patricia García

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First published 2015
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

García, Patricia, 1983-
Space and the postmodern fantastic in contemporary literature : the architectural
void / Patricia García.

pages cm. — (Routledge interdisciplinary perspectives on literature ; 44)
Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Space (Architecture) in literature. 2. Postmodernism (Literature)
 3. Fantastic, The, in literature. 4. Geographical perception in literature.
- I. Title.

PN56.S667G37 2015
809'.93384—dc23

2014047684

ISBN: 978-1-138-82422-5 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-74082-9 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by codeMantra



Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

Space and the Postmodern Fantastic in Contemporary Literature

"This impressive study of the postmodern Fantastic makes a fresh foray into the terrain through its sustained emphasis upon the paradigms of space and place. Its genuinely global reach is especially exciting and, for those readers whose access to literary texts is too often restricted to works written or translated into English, García's insights into the Hispanic writings of José María Merino, Patricia Esteban Erlés, José B. Adolph and others, opens up a particularly rich literary landscape."

—Lucie Armitt, University of Lincoln, UK

Arising from the philosophical conviction that our sense of space plays a direct role in our apprehension and construction of reality (both factual and fictional), this book investigates how conceptions of postmodern space have transformed the history of the impossible in literature. Deeply influenced by the work of Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar, there has been an unprecedented rise in the number of fantastic texts in which the impossible is bound to space—space not as a scene of action but as an impossible element performing a fantastic transgression within the storyworld. This book conceptualizes and contextualizes this postmodern, fantastic use of space that disrupts the reader's comfortable notion of space as objective reality in favor of the concept of space as socially mediated, constructed and conventional. In an illustration of the transnational nature of this phenomenon, García analyses a varied corpus of the Fantastic in the past four decades from different cultures and languages, merging literary analysis with classical questions of space related to the fields of philosophy, urban studies and anthropology. Texts include authors such as Julio Cortázar (Argentina), John Barth (USA), J. G. Ballard (UK), Jacques Sternberg (Belgium), Fernando Iwasaki (Perú), Juan José Millás (Spain) and Éric Faye (France). This book contributes to Literary Theory and Comparative Literature in the areas of the Fantastic, narratology and Geocriticism and informs the continuing interdisciplinary debate on how human beings make sense of space.

Patricia García is Assistant Professor in the School of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies at the University of Nottingham, UK.

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- 31 **Space and the Postmodern Fantastic in Contemporary Literature**
The Architectural Void
Patricia García
- 32 **New Directions in 21st-Century Gothic**
The Gothic Compass
Edited by Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Donna Lee Brien

“A mis padres, por su casa feliz”

List of Figures

2.1	Henry's Displacement from Himself (© Dark Prince).	49
2.2	Learning the New Distances (© Dark Prince).	50
2.3	Henry's Dislocation (© Dark Prince).	50
2.4	At the Mont-Saint-Michel, Trying to Attract Another Meteorite and Reverse the Slippage (© Dark Prince).	51

Acknowledgments

There are many people I would like to thank for making this book possible.

First of all, my kindest acknowledgments are for Dr. David Roas (Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona) for his generosity and rigorous academic insight, and for Jean-Philippe Imbert (Dublin City University) for his creative drive and patience during all these years. Without their professional and personal support, this book would certainly have been a much less creative and enriching experience. I also very much value the assistance of Prof. Dale Knickerbocker (East Carolina University) for his helpful feedback regarding this subject of research.

I am also indebted to Dublin City University and the Irish Research Council for trusting this project with funding.

Furthermore, I want to thank all those authors with whom I have been in contact throughout these years, who sometimes even provided me with their original works by email and post. Among these are Jean-Paul Beaumier, David Roas, Cristina Fernández Cubas and Claude-Emmanuelle Yance. In addition, I deeply appreciate the support of authors Ángel Olgoso, Fernando Iwasaki and Jean-Pol Sternberg (as a representative of Jacques Sternberg), film maker Jeremy Clapin and production company Dark Prince for allowing the partial reproduction of the short stories “Los palafitos”, “La casa de muñecas”, “La Brume” and “La Banlieue”, and of captions from the wonderful short film “Skhizein” to illustrate my argument.

I am immensely grateful to all those friends who made research a much less lonely activity. Special thanks go to Adrián Unger for his ability to draw bridges between quantum physics and the everyday world, to Míde Ní Shúilleabháin for being a model reader of my work and to Antonio de Linares for envisaging a light at the end of the tunnel. I also very much appreciate the support of all those friends and family who provided me with a change of scenery, generously offering me their houses in different countries during times of study and writing.

Finally, my most personal thanks go to my parents for their invaluable practical help as private secretaries every time I was in urgent need of references, books or documents (which was very often) and, most importantly, for not expecting anything from this book other than it making me happy.

“Le nid de l’homme, le monde de l’homme, n’est jamais fini. Et l’imagination nous aide à le continuer.”

(Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de l’espace*)

“En el palacio que imperfectamente exploré, la arquitectura carecía de fin. Abundaban el corredor sin salida, la alta ventana inalcanzable, la aparatosa puerta que daba a una celda o a un pozo, las increíbles escaleras inversas, con los peldaños y la balaustrada hacia abajo.”

(Jorge Luis Borges, “El inmortal”)

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
Introduction: The Arkhitekton	1
1 The Fantastic of Place and the Fantastic of Space	12
2 Body: (Not) Being in Space	48
3 Boundary: Liquid Constructions	81
4 Hierarchy: Spaces Inside-Out	107
5 World: Ontological Plurality	134
Conclusion: The Fantastic Dimension of Space	160
<i>Bibliography</i>	169
<i>Index</i>	183

Introduction

The *Arkhitekton*

“No being exists or can exist which is not related to space in some way”.

(Isaac Newton)

Jorge Luis Borges once remarked in a conversation with Alifano (1983) that reality needs a centre, a map, a structure; without architecture, there is no universal coherence. Thus, even the labyrinth—a construction designed to confuse man but with a logical architectural form—is nevertheless an image of hope. “Somehow we are saved”, said Borges (in Mualem 2012:74), as long as the real can claim ‘an architecture’.

With this statement, Borges emphasised the necessity of believing in a constructed (or *constructible*) reality for this reality to be manageable: only then does cosmos escape chaos. This philosophy of reality as potentially constructed by the subjects who inhabit it—a vision far removed from the objective, immutable, positivistic ‘real’—sums up the relativist postmodern *Zeitgeist* of which Borges’ fictions and essays have been precursors. What is even more interesting is that this idea of a constructed real is not so recent after all: in fact, it can be traced back to the Greek root of the word ‘architect’ (*arkhitekton*). From the Greek words *arkhe* (“the beginning” or “origin”), *arkhon* (“the ruler”) and *tekton* (“builder”, “creator of artifice”), one of the multiple meanings of this term represents the origin transformed by the architect into a defined, and thus habitable, space for the human being. By setting boundaries to the world, the architect constructed a space in which man could dwell. The architect in Western civilisation had the power and skill (*tekton*) to manipulate the origin (*arché*) into ‘liveable’ space. Moreover, the etymology suggests that the action of ‘building’ can be understood not only as giving material shape to physical space but also as ‘raising’ reality from the origin, hence the origin of architecture as a divine activity in Western mythology (cf. Azara 2005). This not only advances the foundational idea of reality as a human construction but also asserts the importance of spatiality in human experience: architecture is a structuring principle of reality. John Ruskin captured this beautifully at the opening of *The Poetry of Architecture* with the statement: “no man can be an architect, who is not a metaphysician” (1905:1).

2 Introduction

Space—in particular in the ways we articulate it—is a means by which we organise the world. This, in turn, introduces the category of space as a man-made construction. Such an understanding of space represents a radical departure from the tradition that has predominated in Western culture for centuries, whereby space was regarded as a simple container in which the human being dwells: a given, objective and measurable entity, perceptible only in its mathematical dimensions. Space, according to the previous etymological reading of the word ‘architect’ (and architecture), is constructed by the human for the human.

This book, anchored as it is in a parallel between architecture and literature as arts of building an artificial reality, is born from both an observation and a hypothesis. The observation is that the literary Fantastic—understood here as the incursion of an impossible element into a realistic frame shared by narrator and reader—is not found only in the haunted houses, remote castles and further Gothic enclaves of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century; neither is it limited to its migration into the city, as occurred at the turn of the nineteenth century with the acceleration of Modernity, nor restricted to appearances in such contemporary spaces as metro stations or airports. There is a modality of the Fantastic which, while first envisaged in a few short stories of the nineteenth century such as “The Fall of the House of Usher” (E. A. Poe 1839) and greatly influenced by the metaphysical Fantastic of Jorge Luis Borges and the everyday Fantastic of Julio Cortázar, is consolidated within the corpus of the last decades. In the texts belonging to this modality, physical space does not provide the frame in which the Fantastic will appear; instead space *is* the Fantastic. Holes that render invisible those who happen upon them, structures that entrap and devour the individual, elastic constructions separated by fluctuating distances, intermittent buildings that disappear and reappear as they please, tunnels that compress distances, compartments that invert the logical order of the big in the small and spaces that suddenly multiply—these are some of the examples of this textual phenomenon. In this modality, the impossible supernatural element *does not take place in space* but is rather *an event of space*, bound to some architectural element or to the (normal, logical) physical laws governing this dimension. Without a doubt, this phenomenon has textual precedents. However, it is only from the late seventies onwards that its presence has been observed within a multitude of cultural and literary traditions. Furthermore, it is in this postmodern context, when the dimension of space has been reevaluated from sociohistorical, scientific, philosophical and literary angles, that this literary phenomenon is most in need of investigation.

The hypothesis, on the other hand, stems from a philosophical concern, one relevant to the linkage between physical space and the weakening experience of reality in the postmodern context. In the following paragraphs, the relevant aspects of this context are outlined in order to illustrate how this assumption took shape.

THE 'SPATIAL TURN' IN POSTMODERNITY

Over the past few decades, a large number of literary scholars (e.g., McHale 1987; Ryan 1991; Álvarez Méndez 2002; Aínsa 2006; Westphal 2007, 2011a) have demonstrated how the reconfiguration in our way of understanding space in the late twentieth century has not only accentuated the significance of narrative space but has also prompted a reconfiguration of the category of the real, which inevitably affects its counterpart, the fictional. This has given birth to a form of literature bearing the label of 'the postmodern'.

The terms 'Postmodernism' and 'Postmodernity' have been the centre of polemic discussion in literary and cultural theories, the first term tending to being employed as an aesthetic movement while the latter is often associated instead with the cultural and historical aspects. For the purpose of this book, this conceptual distinction will be ignored since both aspects are not easily separated one from the other, in particular with interdisciplinary studies. While it is not my intention to contribute to this debate, it may be useful to specify what is to be understood by 'postmodern' in this book and then to apply this definition to the more constricted and relevant frame of the postmodern Fantastic. I will briefly discuss two well-established approaches. McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) defines Postmodernism as a shift from the epistemological concern shaping Modernism (How can knowledge be attained?) toward a characteristic ontological one (What is 'real'? What is not 'real'? What is a world? How does a world come into being?). This change of dominant is particularly present within cultural and aesthetic productions from the late sixties until the present day. Lyotard's perspective on the postmodern (1979), in contrast, concentrates on epistemological doubt. His theory of the end of Grand Narratives calls into question the 'truth' of any official and universal discourse. Lyotard's understanding of reality as narrative suggests that subjectivity is inherent in any discourse aimed at legitimising history and other fundamental epistemological constructions of Western culture. Narrative, then, is always an incomplete testimony of reality, and since our means of expressing the real is narrative, all views on reality are necessarily incomplete. The epistemological and ontological dominants are in many cases not easily abstracted from each other, in particular in the case of the postmodern Fantastic; a preoccupation with both *the nature of reality* (leading to a reexamination of the real/fictional) as well as with *our limited means of gaining truth* about reality dominates the themes and plots of the postmodern Fantastic, as the following chapters will show.

Positivist claims of an objective reality that is external to the individual are today tenuous, given that even scientific research has now been proven to be vulnerable to the subject carrying out the research. The major breakthrough originated with Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity (1905 and

1915), when Einstein demonstrated that time and space were inextricably bound up with one another, redefining the structure of physical reality into a four-dimensional space-time continuum. Space was found to be affected not only by time but also by mass, in particular by the presence of high density mass, causing it to warp. This was the end of the Newtonian certainty of time and space as absolute, uniform categories, independent of the physical contents of the universe. Newton's perspective, which had dominated the scientific scene for over three hundred years, yielded to the relativist model. Even more influential, from a philosophical point of view, were the later discoveries of quantum mechanics, in particular Heisenberg's Principle of Indeterminacy (1925). As is well known, this principle establishes that at a subatomic level the behaviour of the object being monitored is necessarily impacted by the presence of the observer. This was a definite shift away from positivistic idealism of the nineteenth century, with science now forced to recognise its own limitations and paradoxes.

In consequence, the idea of an attainable, absolute model of knowledge vanished, to be replaced by a view of the real as inevitably deriving from how the subjects in it perceive it. Once more, as in the figure of the *arkhitekton*, the subject regained the ability and responsibility of being the author of his/her own reality.

Relativism was, however, to propagate beyond the realm of physics. Einstein's Nobel Prize formula concerning the equivalence mass-energy was to be a crucial step toward the atomic and digital age. In just a few decades, its repercussions infiltrated everyday life in the form of a technological revolution that deeply affected conceptions of distance and location by, for example, facilitating the transmission of large amounts of information across long distances in a matter of seconds. Parallel to this, phenomena of wide-reaching impact like the atomic bomb accelerated a global consciousness and prompted a redefinition of human geography. The Second World War triggered large volumes of immigration across geopolitical borders, while the Cold War was to see the rapid emergence of a succession of states as well as further geopolitical restructuring, boosted by the fall of the Iron Curtain and the enlargement of the European Union. In the socio-urban domain, the reconstruction of the postwar urban landscape originated a new model of contemporary city (cf. "Postmetropolis", Soja 2000). Simultaneously, in the historical domain, the process of de-colonisation encouraged advocacy for the end of a single centre of reference in favour of a multiplicity of points of view. This concurrence of events was to render it increasingly evident that notions of identity and culture could not be ascribed to a single stable territory. Geography no longer referred only to the physical place in which the human being was located; it also encompassed a variety of dimensions intertwined.

Not only have advances in physics and a series of historical confluences reconfigured our vision and experience of space, they have also given rise to an unprecedented interest in the dimension of space within academic

discourses. While never ignoring the fact that we are temporally bound beings, during the past few decades, the so-called Spatial Turn in the Humanities and Social Sciences has increasingly emphasised the importance of spatiality in understanding the history of the human being and of its artistic products. In a famous conference in 1967 entitled “Des Espaces Autres”, Michel Foucault predicted that we were entering an era in which thinking in spatial terms would be key to understanding the increasing prominence of the simultaneous and the juxtaposed. The Spatial Turn has ensured that space—a physical and architectonic dimension, but also an intimate (Bachelard 1958), social (Lefebvre 1974; De Certeau 1980; Augé 1992), political (Foucault 1967), urban (Soja 1989), sexual (Massey 1994), cultural (Jameson 1990) and economic (Harvey 1990) category—is no longer a neutral concept and cannot be considered independent from that which it contains, and therefore neither can it be considered as immune to historical, political and aesthetic changes. Whereas from a mathematical perspective space is a relatively stable category, from a humanist angle space is a category with a history. Proof of this lies in the diverse ways in which space was conceived of throughout Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, Modernity or Postmodernity, as well as in the different paradigms of space in philosophy (e.g., the approximations by Aristotle, Leibniz, Kant or Heidegger) and in the history of physics (e.g., the theories of Newton and Einstein). What is more, as Jammer (1954) and Disalle (2006) have shown, even the objective concept of space in physics has evolved in tandem with these diverse philosophical propositions; and as such the study of space has been reasserted in human science as a scholarly field requiring and creating connections across disciplines.

In the domain of literature, the relatively recent interest in the spatial dimension in Literary Theory breaks from a tradition that prioritised time over space. This primacy of the temporal was to a large extent due to the generic distinction between spatial and temporal arts. Lessing’s influential essay “Laocoon: or the Limits of Poetry and Painting” (1766) was one of the pioneer essays in positioning literature within the temporal. From this perspective, the literary text is conceived of as a succession of words, sounds and events while, for example, sculpture or painting instead offers objects juxtaposed in space and simultaneously apprehended. Space in narratives often seemed to have no further function than to supply a general background for the action.

This restriction has been challenged since the middle of the twentieth century as manifold contributions have convincingly argued that the selected, described, represented and symbolised spaces are of central value to literary analysis (e.g., Mikhail Bakhtin’s *chronotope* [1975], Franco Moretti’s literary cartographies [1998, 2005], Marie-Laure Ryan’s cognitive approach to narrative [1991, 1993], Bertrand Westphal’s geocritical method [2007] and Robert Tally’s interdisciplinary summary on human spatiality [2013]).

However, it appears that this Spatial Turn in Literary Theory is not yet consolidated in the scholarship of the Fantastic. On the one hand, existing methodologies on space in narrative (Hamon 1972; Ronen 1986; Soubeyroux 1993; Pimentel 2001; Álvarez Méndez 2002) traditionally centre their approaches on realist literatures. The Fantastic, if mentioned at all, appears as an ambiguous category and very often refers to any form of supernatural intervention. The result is that there is no comprehensive model for analysing space in relation to the Fantastic ('Fantastic' considered as a particular narrative form and not as a meta-category for the imaginary or supernatural; see Chapter 1).

On the other hand, while there are plenty of studies in which 'fantastic space' acts as a metaphor for a large variety of aspects—such as the transgression of literary genres, the unconscious or the confrontation with the domain of the other—the list of studies focusing on space as physical dimension recreated in the fantastic text is extremely limited. Campra (2001) and Roas (2011) remind us of the central function that the dimension of space occupies within the literature of the Fantastic: spatial references and detailed descriptions of places are key devices that enable the reader to identify with the space that is presented as realistic. That allows for the generation of the impression of verisimilitude required prior to the fantastic transgression. As regards space as theme, the spatial category is present from the foundational studies by Castex (1951), Caillouis (1975) and Todorov (1975). However, even in these works, space appears bound to time in one interdependent category, forming the cluster of "space-time distortions". Following on from this intellectual move toward exploring the intersection between time and space, some more recent studies (Aguirre 1990; Fournier Kiss 2007) have identified the thematic potential of settings. Such studies emphasise the chronotopic nature of certain settings and analyse the evolution of the Fantastic according to the function and symbolism of these settings. However, is narrative space to be limited to those referential or chronotopic values? What new perspectives can be obtained by foregrounding spatiality in the fantastic text? This book, dedicated to exploring the linkage between the Fantastic and space in the postmodern context, has been inspired by these questions.

THE POSTMODERN FANTASTIC AS A PHENOMENON OF SPACE

The production of a large volume of texts questioning the objective nature of reality has given rise to a specific form that has been labelled as 'postmodern Fantastic' (Grossman 2000; Horstkotte 2004; Roas 2011). With Jorge Luis Borges and, subsequently, Julio Cortázar as founding fathers, the postmodern Fantastic was to consolidate across different literary traditions from the 1970s onward. What gives coherence to the texts that fall under this