

Structures of Epic Poetry

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Robert Kirstein

An introduction to the concept of space in ancient epic

1 Preliminary remarks

In the last few years, research on ancient epic poetry has received a number of new impulses from the field of narratology.¹ This is particularly true with regard to approaches that deal with the topic of ‘space’. Indeed, many ancient epic poems could even be described as ‘spatial-epic poems’. This is immediately evident when Andersson (1976, 15 and 53) speaks of “visible space” in Vergil’s *Aeneid* as contrasted with “latent space” in Homer’s works, which are characterised by a relatively low level of spatial determination (de Jong, 2012a, 21). Still, de Jong (2012b) and de Jong (2012c) and others have used a spatial-narratological approach to illustrate that space and its narrative representation play central roles in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.² Such discussions illustrate the importance of a ‘narratology of space’ for a better understanding of the poetic techniques and semantics of ancient epic poems, and in furthering the development of an overarching diachronic theory of narratology. Fundamental works on the topic include de Jong’s volume *Space in ancient Greek literature* (2012d) as well as the anthology by Skempis/Ziogas *Geography, topography, landscape. Configurations of space in Greek and Roman epic* (2014).³

This chapter serves as a brief introduction to the individual contributions on the concept of space in epic poetry, which compare the portrayal of ‘real-world locations’, in particular ancient cities (Behm) and landscapes (Fuchs and Behm), to mythical places (Kersten) and the closely related abodes of the gods (Kersten) and the dead (Reitz). After a short summary of the recent developments in the

* A more comprehensive version of this paper in German will appear in Stefan Tilg’s and Eva von Contzen’s *Handbuch Historische Narratologie* (forthcoming).

1 Cf. de Jong (2014, 137) and Kirstein/Abele/Nil in volume I.

2 One has to keep in mind that the development of narrative theory has been primarily based on the modern novel; cf. Skempis/Ziogas (2014b, 3) and von Contzen (2015, 100).

3 See also the contributions on epic poetry by de Jong (2012a), de Jong (2012c), Klooster (2012a), Klooster (2012b), and Harder (2012). See, moreover, Danek (2009, 287–91), Purves (2010), Tsagalis (2012), and de Jong (2014, 105–31). For further references on the narratology of space in classical literature, see de Jong (2014, 130–1).

field of classical scholarship on space in general, this chapter provides a succinct overview of the ‘spatial turn’ and its impact on the literary sciences as well as the most important systematic approaches to a narratology of space.

2 The ‘spatial turn’ in the literary sciences

The concept of the spatial turn in its current form can be traced back to city planner Soja’s *Postmodern Geographies* (1989) and *Thirdspace* (1996). It can be briefly described as the consideration of space in the cultural, social, and literary sciences, which has led to a new understanding of space as a knowledge-producing factor and has made it possible to analyse spaces and spatial representations as a constitutive element in overarching processes of appropriating the world.⁴

The spatial turn no longer depicts space as an unchangeable element, but rather as a fluid and subjectively experienced and processed constituent element.⁵ As a “child of postmodernity”⁶, the spatial turn is associated with a broader movement to overcome the uniquely modern fixation of time and temporal phenomena and to rehabilitate the concept of space from its status as the “impure stepbrother of time”⁷. This distancing from an idealistic interest in mind and time has triggered

⁴ For more on the spatial turn and the topic of space, cf. Osterhammel (1998), Schroer (⁵2016), Frank/Gockel, et al. (2008), Döring/Thielmann (2008b), Warf/Arias (2008), Frank (2009), Hallet/Neumann (2009b), Bachmann-Medick (⁴2010, 284–328), Günzel (2010), Grethlein (2013), Nünning (⁵2013), Skempis/Ziogas (2014b, 1), Aulke (2015), Gerok-Reiter/Hammer (2015, 482–8), Haas/Wischermann (2015, 27–31), and Barker et al. (2016). On the origins of the term ‘spatial turn’, cf. Döring/Thielmann (2008a, 7). Fundamental texts on space have also been collected by Dünne/Günzel (⁷2012) and Günzel (2013); a dictionary on the *philosophy of space* has been edited by Günzel (2012a). On the ‘topographic turn’, which focuses on the production of space with topographical cultural techniques, cf. Böhme (2005), Frank/Gockel, et al. (2008, 8 and 16), Bachmann-Medick (⁴2010, 311), and Gerok-Reiter/Hammer (2015, 488). For definitions of the spatial and topographical turn, cf. Günzel (2010, 100–2). There has also been significant discussion about the difficulties associated with the concept of a ‘turn’ and its occasionally inflated use, cf. Frank (2009, 53–6), Bachmann-Medick (⁴2010, 7–57), and Haas/Wischermann (2015).

⁵ Cf. Foucault (2005). For more on Foucault’s concept of ‘heterotopias’, which contradict and undermine the modalities and every day experiences of space as a kind of ‘anti-spaces’ (such as cemeteries), cf. Frank/Gockel, et al. (2008, 9–10) and Hallet/Neumann (2009b, 13–14).

⁶ Bachmann-Medick (⁴2010, 284). See also Döring/Thielmann (2008a).

⁷ Böhme (2005, p. xii). Cf. Soja (1989, 11), Foucault (2005, 931), and esp. Assmann (2012, 139): “Recent studies have repeatedly argued that too much attention has been paid to time, and not enough to space, and so while the modern age prioritised the former, the *postmodern* has opted for the latter.”

a new pragmatic interest in not only space, but also in bodies and physicality, in the world of things and aspects of materiality.⁸

Within this epistemological paradigm shift, the spatial turn replaces the idea of one space with a multitude of simultaneously existing and frequently overlapping constructed and relational spaces, of independent spaces that are created by both individual and collective cultural, social, and political processes of differentiation, and which are subject to permanent processes of transformation. The literary scientist and semiotician Lotman has incisively spoken of a “polyphony of spaces”⁹. Borders, the liminal crossing of these borders, the fundamental tension between centre and periphery, and the correlative link between topological opposites such as ‘top’ and ‘bottom’ and semanticisations such as ‘good’ and ‘evil’ play a critical role in his cultural semiotic model.¹⁰ According to Lotman (⁴1993, 313), “different heroes cannot only belong to different spaces, but can also be linked with different and occasionally incompatible types of spatial division. In such cases, the same world within a text proves to be divided in different ways for different heroes.”¹¹

For the literary sciences and narratology, the spatial turn represents a fundamental shift among the “essential constitutive characteristics of poetry”, space and time.¹² While older works, such as Lämmert’s *Bauformen des Erzählens* (1955) or Stanzel’s *Theory of Narrative* (1984) and *Theorie des Erzählens* (⁶1995) do not discuss space or only touch on it in brief chapters, more recent works such as Bal’s *Narratology* (2009) devote an extensive chapter to the concept of space, while other works integrate analyses of space and time into one chapter.¹³ And while the grand ‘classic’ literary scientific models focus on the temporal order and the diachronicity

8 Cf. Frank/Gockel, et al. (2008, 13) and Haas (2015, 27–31). For more on the concepts of body and space, cf. Hallet/Neumann (2009b, 27) and Böhme (²2012, 198).

9 Lotman (⁴1993, 328–9).

10 Cf. Lotman (⁴1993, 318–21). See also Koschorke (1990), Heinze/Möckel/Röcke (2014), and esp. Koschorke (²2012, 111–15, here 114): “In diesem Sinne haben moderne Raumkonzepte den Charakter von Schwellenkunden angenommen.”

11 Lotman’s spatial semiotics, Bakhtin’s chronotope, Cassirer’s mythical-aesthetic model of space, and spatial sociologies by Foucault, Levebvre, and Soja, represent some of the central sources of the spatial turn that became popular at the end of the 1980s; cf. Hallet/Neumann (2009b, 12–18) and Gerok-Reiter/Hammer (2015, 482–8). On Bakhtin and Lotman, cf. Frank (2009); on Lotman, cf. Koschorke (²2012, 116–34); on Bakhtin, cf. Schmitz (²2006, 76–90).

12 Cf. Ritter (1975, 1) and Nünning (⁵2013, 634–5). For more on the distinctions between narratology and literary theory, cf. Kirstein/Abele/Nil in volume I. On space and the representation of space as topics of literary studies, cf. Hoffmann (1978), Chatman (1989, 96–101), Jäger (1998), Würzbach (2001), Buchholz/Jahn (2005), Frank (2009), Hallet/Neumann (2009a), Bachmann-Medick (⁴2010, 308–11), and Gerok-Reiter/Hammer (2015, 488–94).

13 Cf. the detailed overview by Dennerlein (2009, 3 n. 10).

of ‘before’ and ‘after’, spatially oriented approaches emphasise the synchronicity and spatial (or chronotopic) interaction between objects, figures, and actions. Above all, they do not conceive of literarily depicted space as rigid, or as detached from figures and actions. Instead, it is seen as a dynamically integrated element which does not merely serve to frame the narrative, but it is rather a functional element of the narrative world that “develops the quality of a protagonist” on its own.¹⁴

3 Spatial narratology: systematic approaches

First, it seems appropriate to draw a terminological distinction based on the type of representation (media-related) between scenically presented (drama), depicted (film) and described (text).¹⁵

Along with Nünning (⁵2013, 634), literary spatial description can be understood as “an umbrella term for the conception, structure, and presentation of the entirety of objects such as settings, landscapes, natural phenomena and subject matter of different genres.” Space can thus be understood as a superordinate concept, and place as a subordinate concept, whereby place is unable to describe all of the objects that constitute a given space because a space also includes objects such as tables and chairs; in principle, any conceivable object can serve as a spatial object within a literary textual world.

A further distinction can be drawn between the story space and the space of narration. While the story space includes the entirety of places, settings, etc. in a given narrative, the space of narration refers to the space in which the narrating voice is located. If these concepts are combined with Genette’s terminology of narrative levels (as seen in Frank, 2017, 65), an opposition between diegetic and extra-diegetic space emerges.¹⁶ In Vergil’s *Aeneid*, the story space reaches from Troy to Carthage, from Sicily to Italy, and from the underworld to the seat of the Olympic gods. In contrast, the reader learns nothing about the space of narration and the narrative voice. But things are different after the intra-diegetic voice shifts in the second and third book: here, the narrative is passed on from the authorial

¹⁴ Piatti (²2009, 21), cf. Skempis/Ziogas (2014b, 1–7). The reasons for the widely claimed negligence of the concept of space in the literary sciences partially overlap with reasons for its disregard in the cultural and social sciences as well. Cf. Buchholz/Jahn (2005, 551), Bal (³2009, 133–4), Tsagalis (2010, 87–8), de Jong (2012c, 2), Gerok-Reiter/Hammer (2015, 481). On the question to what extent ancient sources can be challenged by modern theoretical approaches, cf. Hänger (2001, 17–20).

¹⁵ Cf. Buchholz/Jahn (2005, 553).

¹⁶ Frank (2017, 64–5) refers to Kahrmann/Reiß/Schluchter (²1991, 158–63).

narrator, the (external) primary narrator, to the character of Aeneas as an (internal) secondary narrator. Additionally, we learn that his space of narration is Dido's palace in Carthage.

In literature, space is always fictional space, regardless of whether the places and spatial objects described can be experienced in the real world or not. Piatti (2009, 23) has used the term “fictionalised spaces” to describe the former and the term “spaces of fiction” to describe the latter. Real objects that are represented in a fictional medium undergo a process of fictionalisation during the act of literary representation. Thus, the city of Carthage described in Vergil's *Aeneid* cannot be identical with the real city of historical Roman times. Details and concrete references to real places such as ‘here’ and ‘there’ activate the imagination of the reader, “but also obscure the fictionality”.¹⁷ Inversely, this does not mean that the real-world content of spatial objects, such as cities or landscapes, is completely eliminated through fictionalisation. On the contrary, a minimal amount of identical characteristics is necessary to ensure that readers can associate the object in the fictional text with the real world object in the lifeworld.¹⁸

Ronen (1986, 421) has presented a spatial narratological model based on the cognitive linguistic concept of the frame: “a frame is a fictional place, the actual or potential surrounding of fictional characters, objects and places.” Different frames describe, “places and locations which provide a topological determination to events and states in a story”,¹⁹ and smaller and larger frames are nested within one another. Any frame can be surrounded by a larger frame: the frame of a room by the frame of a house, the house within the frame of a city, etc.²⁰ In contrast to the more distant frames, Ronen uses setting to refer to the place where the actual action happens in the story: “a setting is the zero point where the actual story-events and story-states are localised.” Distinctions between different frames are based on the imagined distance that they have from the current setting: “frames differ according to their position in the overall organisation of the fictional universe. A setting is distinguished from frames in general in being formed by a set of fictional

¹⁷ Fludernik (2010, 53). Cf. Buchholz/Jahn (2005, 553).

¹⁸ The process of fictionalisation generates (spatial and other) objects that refer both to the real lifeworld as well as the fictional textual world, and which thus hover as “immigrant objects” (Pavel, 1986, 29) between the textual world and the real world. See also Haller (1986, 57–93), Reicher (2014), and Kirstein (2015b). On the problem of reference in fictional worlds and real geography, cf. Maatje (1975), Piatti (2009, 32–3 and 131–47), Nünning (2013, 635), and Skempis/Ziogas (2014b, 3–4).

¹⁹ Ronen (1986, 423).

²⁰ Cf. Buchholz/Jahn (2005, 552).

places which are the topological focus of the story.”²¹ In the tempest described in the first book of the *Aeneid*, the setting is thus the stormy sea, while Aeneas’ desire to have died heroically by Diomedes’ hand in the fight for Troy instead of having to die at sea (Verg. Aen. 1.94–101) generates an extra-scenic space.²² In general, the modelling of literary spaces using frames is particularly useful in describing the functions and relationships between spatial objects that are not directly involved in the setting’s action, but rather play a role as distant frames.²³

Haupt (2004) has suggested a spatial narratological model with philosophical origins that has found acceptance in the literary sciences.²⁴ According to this model, space can be divided into three modalities (‘Akzentuierungsmöglichkeiten’) that correspond to the three different types of conscious perception: tuned space, action space, and viewed space:

- (1) In tuned space (TS) the focus lies on the atmospheric shading of the space. Buildings with highly semantic potentials such as churches, for instance, can generate completely different atmospheres depending on the occasion – be it a wedding or funeral. From the perspective of consciousness, the tuned space is correlated with the feeling and experiencing subject.
- (2) The action space (AS), on the other hand, is focused on the actions in the narrative, and highlights the interplay between the acting subject and space. Elements such as movement in space and the creation of specific spatial structures through the movement of figures in the narrative are included in the action space.²⁵
- (3) Finally, the viewed space (VS) exclusively deals with the question of how the subject sees the space (visual perception) and how the space presents itself to the perceiving subject (seeing and being-seen).

These three types of spaces are not conceived of as divided from one another or as mutually exclusive, but rather as layers that can be laid on top of one another.²⁶

²¹ Ronen (1986, 423).

²² Cf. Ronen (1986, 423 n. 3): “to elucidate the distinction between *frames* and a *setting*, one may refer to concepts borrowed from theatrical space. Theatrical space is divided into *scenic space*, a space immediately presented and *extrascenic space* presented verbally by the characters.” On storm scenes as a structural element of ancient epic, cf. Biggs/Blum in this volume.

²³ Cf. Ronen (1986, 427). For a discussion and further elaboration of Ronen’s model, cf. Ryan (2017).

²⁴ Cf. Ströker (1965), Hoffmann (1978), and Schroer (2016).

²⁵ Piatti (2009, 19) uses the concept of action space as well, but more generally and in association with events and figures, as one of the three “Konstituenten der fiktionalen, im engeren Sinne epischen und dramatischen Welt”; cf. Piatti (2009, 23 and 126–30).

²⁶ Cf. Haupt (2004, 71).

They exist in an incalculable variety of imaginable combinations with one another in the narrative text.

The spatial turn has also given new life to concepts such as Genette's focalisation. De Jong, for instance, has highlighted the fact that discussions about Genette's concept of focalisation (and related questions about the subjective filtering of perception) have pushed questions about the spatial standpoint into the background.²⁷ Combining aspects of focalisation with the concept of the spatial standpoint results in a two-part model that first (1) distinguishes the focalising instance that presents the spatial representation; normally either an (authorial) narrator, an anonymous lexicalised instance of one/man, or a character in the narrative itself. In the second step (2), the spatial viewpoint is described more specifically using the binary parameters of panoramic-scenic and fixed-shifting:²⁸

- (1) Focalisation, implicit or explicit
 - narrator as focaliser
 - anonymous as focaliser
 - character as focaliser (e.g. looking through a window, entering a room, walking through a city)
- (2) Spatial viewpoint (standpoint)
 - panoramic viewpoint
 - by narrator (narratorial panoramic standpoint)
 - by character (actorial panoramic standpoint)
 - scenic viewpoint, fixed or shifting
 - by narrator (narratorial scenic viewpoint)
 - by character (actorial scenic viewpoint)

Fig. 1: Model according to de Jong (2012c, 8–13) and de Jong (2014, 60–5)

The scene in the first book of the *Aeneid* in which Aeneas climbs a rock to look for other survivors of the tempest (Verg. Aen. 1.180–1a *Aeneas scopulum interea conscendit, et omnem / prospectum late pelago petit*) can be categorised as a panoramic viewpoint by character. The semanticisation of the space (and the

²⁷ Cf. de Jong/Nünlist (2004, 63). See also Hoffmann (1978, 445–86), de Jong/Nünlist (2004), de Jong (2012c, 8–13), and de Jong (2014, 60–5). De Jong (²2004, 64–73) also provides a systematic overview of the various spatial viewpoints in Homer. On spatial narratology and aspects of focalisation, cf. Buchholz/Jahn (2005, 552), Bridgeman (2007, 62), and Bal (³2009, 134).

²⁸ It is important to note that de Jong (²2004), de Jong (2014), and Bal (³2009) recognise the primary narrator as a focalising instance, while Genette (³2010, 121) does not. Genette understands the concept of focalisation only as it applies to the perception of instances within the narrative world.

characterisation of the figures generated by it) becomes particularly clear only a few verses later, when the text illustrates another panoramic viewpoint by character as Jupiter climbs to the top of Mount Olympus.

The spatial turn in the literary sciences also allows for a more precise definition of the relationship between narrative and description (in contrast to the more general use of the term, see above). In particular, models that do not conceive of settings and other spatial objects as static platforms and motionless decorations, but rather as dynamic and functional elements of the narrative world that are closely connected to the characters and action have challenged the traditionally sharp distinction between narrative and description, have shown that narrative texts ‘narrativise’ descriptions in many different ways, and have demonstrated that such descriptions do not necessarily lead to a standstill in the narrative action.²⁹

The *deixis* of space is different than that of time. When it comes to time, sequentiality is the norm, and does not need to be directly indicated on its own because the reader expects it according to a principle of minimal departure.³⁰ Because it deviates from the norm, however, simultaneity requires an appropriate form of *deixis* (for instance, with words such as “during”). The situation is reversed when it comes to space: movement from one location to another must be described by the text.³¹ Spatial *deixis* tends to be less clearly defined in authorial narratives (aperspectivism) than other narrative situations.³²

The analysis of space has numerous points of contact with other areas of research, for instance with gender analyses, with character and story analysis, with the analysis of events, or with studies on aetiology.³³ Liminality (in the sense of Lotman’s spatial semiotics) as well as the more general processes of “transforming the geographic to a symbolic space”³⁴ are also critically important within the tradition of ancient epic poetry, which is closely connected with the highly semantic cultural-political discourse. Spaces and borders also play a role in questions of intermediality and the crossing of medial borders, for example between image and text in structures such as *ekphrasis*.³⁵ Finally, spatial analyses reveal important

²⁹ Cf. de Jong (2012c, 5–8, esp. n. 18 and 22) with reference to Smith (2003), Kroon (2007), de Jong (2014, 112–16), and Koopman (2014); see also Bal (1981) and Dennerlein (2009, 136 n. 155); on *ekphrasis* in Vergil, cf., e.g., Barchiesi (1997); on description and narrative, cf. Grethlein (2013, 66).

³⁰ Cf. Ryan (1992, 54–7) and Ryan (2005b, 447).

³¹ Cf. Fludernik (³2010, 54–5).

³² Cf. Fludernik (³2010, 111). For more on spatial *deixis*, see above.

³³ Cf. Keith (1999), Keith (2000, 36–64), Schmitz (²2006, 200), Günzel (2010, 162–76), Herman et al. (2012, 92), and Klooster (2014). On aetiology and genealogy, see Walter in volume I.

³⁴ Nöth (²2000, 285).

³⁵ Cf. Robert (2014, 7–29). See also Harrison in volume I.

prospects for interdisciplinary research, including digital humanities and cognitive sciences.³⁶ They form an important building block in the project of creating a diachronic theory of narratology, both as it relates to a history of ancient epic poetry and its textual structures ('Bauformen') in antiquity, as well as with respect to comparative approaches that seek to position ancient literature within the broad horizon of earlier and later forms of literature.³⁷

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³⁶ Cf., e.g., Ryan (2003), Bachmann-Medick (2010, 305), Coffee/Bernstein (2016), and Herman (2017).

³⁷ Hardie (1993) provides a diachronic approach to space and time in Augustan poetry; see esp. Hardie (1993, 3): "in spatial terms the Virgilian and post-Virgilian epic attempts to construct a comprehensive and orderly model of the world, but it turns out that such models are inherently unstable. The instability of the Virgilian world is an open-ended invitation for succeeding epic poets to revise and redefine"; cf. also Andersson (1976), Schwindt (2005, 12–13), and Keith (2014, 372).

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