



'Chronotopes of Power'

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Source: *Moveable Type*, Vol. 14, 'Unfeeling' (2022)

DOI: 10.14324/111.1755-4527.142

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Moveable Type is a Graduate, Peer-Reviewed Journal based in the Department of English at UCL.

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## **Chronotopes of Power**

*Mike Piero*

The doctor should Zoom me any moment now, those offices of theirs now coldly empty and our homes full of the hustle and bustle of bureaucratic life: restless appointments, airtight schedules, business meetings, and compulsory self-care breaks. Today marks a year since I moved my therapy appointments with Dr. Evans online, a privilege the overlords of health insurance continue to support with open arms. In this shared atopia between our homes, we labor over the details of my suffering and crises.

I only had one question on my mind today for the good doctor, not the usual liturgy of complaints and insecurities about my work and colleagues, lovers and friends, anxieties and shame. No, today—and for the past week—I haven’t been able to escape this singular question about the space of our sessions.

“How does meeting online impact the content of our sessions, Dr. Evans, me in my tiny apartment and you in your house?” I blurted out.

It seemed a benign question posed out of mere curiosity, not unlike the pseudo-reasons that folks offer up to the gods of knowledge to explain the not-so-easily explainable: it must be the weather; there must be a conspiracy; birds no longer exist. My question didn’t, however, suddenly arise like a cat-like thought sidling up from the charnel house of my unconscious to my conscious mind. On the contrary, my question cut me deeply. What if this change of location—her location and mine, separate now in our respective worlds, replete with the comings and goings of lovers, children, non-humanimal companions—shaped the dynamic of our weekly discourse?

“That’s an interesting question, Devlin, an unexpected one,” Dr. Evans quipped, followed by a pause. Her dark-rimmed glasses looked particularly stoic today, a look that when combined

with her flawless application of concealer, eco-friendly copper earrings, and sharply-cut top and blazer made me wonder if she had just logged in from a dinner party.

Was this pause an all-too-common opening for me to respond, or just a Zoom delay to be navigated with the awkward stretching out of said pause to determine its legitimacy and purpose?

She broke the silence.

“We can see and hear each other, so I can’t see how Zoom would impact what we discuss in our sessions,” she explained in a tone whose intent was to end the question.

The only thing worse than feeling as though my ideas are misconstrued—such as those related to the circularity of time and history or the affective spaces in which knowledge resides—is to pay for the privilege of being misunderstood. How couldn’t such a game of exhibition and voyeurism be attuned, in however a nuanced way, to the time-spaces of our connection?

“Well, I’m not as much concerned about the medium of Zoom itself—since our discussions are always mediated by language, in the first instance, and also by various grand narratives, images, and tropes of society—but I must admit that I’ve been taken with this idea that where you and I reside, here and now, invoke certain discourses and effectively prohibit others.”

There’s another pause, this one a bit longer. I feel these silences acutely now, whereas I have hitherto had little problem with silence in face-to-face conversations. In all actuality, I have often taken great pride in my ability to abide silence and embrace impersonality.

“Concerned—that’s an interesting word,” she remarked, followed by another pause that was assuredly deliberate. This felt more like “normal”—the Möbius strip of our discourse that she helps guide, the call and response of our dialogue, the interpretive *jouissance* of the analyst’s acumen. Still, I can’t let this question go this week.

A move in a game, infinite language games played amongst one another.

“Well, ‘concerned’ may be a bit hyperbolic,” I lied. “Really, it’s more of a lingering thought, like the ones that occur to one in the midst of a particularly uneventful soccer match or during the funeral of someone one barely knew.”

“Go on,” she replied, writing some little note down in her notebook.

“Let’s say, Dr. Evans, that we are not *only* shaped by who we are on the inside—that is, by how we internalize our life experiences—but also externally by the objects, people, architecture, and so on around us. If this is true, how might my surrounding apartment and your surrounding house impact us, and therefore our dialogue, in a fundamentally different way than a shared chronotope like your professional office?”

She goes silent for a moment, considering how to respond.

“Devlin, you pose an interesting question, but I think this question might stem from the spring of intellectualizing feelings, that is, an avoidance mechanism whereby rigorous intellectual thought comes to be used as a substitute for feeling a particular feeling.”

She pauses but then continues.

“While not totally unproductive by any means—your musings on time and discourse would likely be right at home in some academic circles—I nevertheless am concerned that there’s a deeper issue here from which you may be retreating.”

Yes, perhaps, I’ve considered this myself. The tendency to escape into the theoretical and philosophical *parergons* of daily life have grown more alluring since this pandemic began, though to be fair, I have been interested in such ideas from a young age.

“I don’t doubt that you’re right,” I say in all genuineness, “though, still, you see my point, right?”

“I’m not sure I see how pertinent it is to your therapy, I must admit, no,” she strikes back. A typical move—and that’s precisely my interest, the moves! How do the moves change when she is without her office, her framed degrees on the perfectly unblemished walls, and the metonymic power of her books blanketing the shelves?

Dr. Evans doesn't write anything down but looks intently at me through the screen with piercing brown eyes that confer authority and ability, science and truth.

"Let me, if I may, try to explain myself more clearly. What if, just as an example, the lack of a secure and ethos-filled psychologist's office ushers in some insecurity regarding our therapeutic process. How might that change what we discuss and how? Or, perhaps the loss of a chronotope of power such as a doctor's office might cause a psychologist to overcompensate when working from home? What happens when my cat jumps in front of the screen, or your wife enters the room to collect some banal item from the cupboard? It's neither the fact of my cat, nor the fact of your wife, that matters here but how those slips—those little revelations—of our intimate spaces contribute to how we respond in a moment."

No pause this time. A quick response.

"I can tell that this concern is weighing on you, and while I think that the idea may be a mode of deterrence, let me pose a question on the terms of this game you have prepared for us, if I may," she states with a new tone, like when posing a difficult question to a panelist at a conference. A question to probe and expose. A new move for a new game. I nod in agreement.

"Okay, so if I hear you correctly, it sounds as though you have conceived of my office as a chronotope—I believe that was the word you used—a chronotope of power, one to which my home and your home are put in contrast, is that right?"

"Yes, in a manner of speaking, one of many chronotopes of power, of course," I reply.

"Yes, now if this is the case," Dr. Evans begins, twirling a pen in her fingers, getting into the role, "then each of our respective homes must also be spaces of power, charged with temporalities influenced by the comings and goings of those with whom we share our lives, yes?"

"Yes, though with inanimate objects too, since they also have agency in our lives," I add.

"Very well. My point is this: since the pandemic began, many of us have been relocated outside our places of business, leisure, and schooling, forced to recreate our safe, domestic spaces in light of various roles and responsibilities we each have. According to your theory,

wouldn't our homes themselves then come to resemble the power dynamics of the workplace—my office, for instance—or various other places we enact identities for ourselves?”

Damn—a good question, one that greets me with unexpected delight.

“Yes, I think that occurs, too—the home is changed. When my cat interrupts our sessions, I realize in that moment that this cat, at times, dominates me; he imposes his will upon my life. I submit to my cat's movements in ways that are private, but in our sessions they become revealed; they become publicly private.”

“Why does this bother you though, Devlin?” she asks. “Everything during these sessions is staunchly confidential.”

“It's not so much that it bothers—or concerns—me as much as I want to understand it. If we discuss, like last week, an argument that I had with my girlfriend, how is my own narrative shaped by either the presence or absence of my cat, Thomas? How do Thomas's actions towards me—especially his actions that seem indifferent or apathetic to me—come to bear upon how, in a given moment, I respond to you, how I frame myself, and how I write the narratives about who I am in relation to others?”

She begins writing a bit—oh, I wish I could see what:

“Genius?”

“Narcissist?”

“Too self-aware for his own good?”

Perhaps I should have mentioned Thomas's spike-studded, leather collar, that dominant, big ol' black cat. No matter. She begins responding as she continues to write.

“What I find interesting here is that we've talked in other sessions about avoidance, about internalizing perceived acceptance or rejection by others, and even about putting words to feelings given the alexithymia you've experience since childhood, but now you are shifting the interior narratives of struggle into exterior people, animals, and spaces. It is as though the

traumas you've endured are not located inside of you but rather in places, and in the movements of things and people in those spaces.”

I should have known better than to try to have this conversation. In another world before moving appointments online such questions of mine would be met with thoughtful consideration. In this setting, and under these conditions, my question is merely pathologized. While I recognize the once-again familiar moves in these language games, I am—as always—disheartened when one discourse comes to medicalize another discourse. This is my Achilles' heel in therapy: confusing it with a space of anything more than diagnosis and personal progress.

As I think about how to respond, Dr. Evans's wife sneaks by the outermost border of the camera's gaze. I don't know anything about her besides a few fleeting references Dr. Evans has made to her in our sessions for the sake of comparison. One minute she is there, and the next minute she is gone, all without a trace except the attempted muffled noise of a door being closed softly. I notice in Dr. Evans an uneasiness with the quiet intrusion. She would never admit to it.

She would never admit to pleasing her partner on the makeshift-business desk when the laptop is stashed away in a desk drawer. She would not admit to the arguments that occur just outside that door that shuts so softly, or the likely fact that these doors have been slammed and locked in moments of distress. She would not admit—or perhaps is not aware—of the possibility that these movements and relations impact a space; perhaps they even infect a space. The objects from past lovers and passed friends that adorn her shelves, calling out in a voice to be remembered, speak in the dull moments of our conversation. The movements in one's home add authenticity to the sessions: though does authenticity play a role in a therapy setting? Are we learning about ourselves or writing new versions of ourselves?

“Perhaps I think too much about these relations and connections, Doctor,” I concede, having become slightly exhausted but also having opened up some new questions.

“A thoughtful mind can be a great comfort, especially in difficult times,” she affirms for me, “just be sure not to let it become an obsession. Would you like to pick up from last week?”

“The conflict with my girlfriend is resolved,” I report back.

“You told me for the first time last week that you are bisexual.”

That’s right, I did tell her that. I’ve told so many people in my head, replaying how the conversations might go, that sometimes I forget that I haven’t actually had those conversations. The virtual space of meeting obscures time and memory, or so it would seem.

“Yes, thank you,” I respond, as I begin to share with the good doctor my most intimate feelings, ones I haven’t yet shared with many of those closest to me.

It is then that I notice that her camera, unbeknownst to her, has shifted downward, bringing her notebook into plain sight. I see a few words written in a legible, cursive handwriting, the immaculately composed letters one would expect to find in a love letter.

“obsessive thoughts – chronotopes”

“avoidance of bisexuality”

“INTJ – mastermind”

“unfeeling, unbelonging”

Like a punch to the gut, I find myself saddened by the revealed words, ones I should never have seen and that reverse our roles: me, here and now, the voyeuristic patient looking at the doctor’s exposed notes. The veil around our rigorous discussion falls, and I am left seeing what I always already knew. Whether in a doctor’s office or when meeting over Zoom, I am a subject of power, always translated by the other for the other. My initial question aside, one can feel the power as it circulates. Even over Zoom.