

Space, time, and plane travel in Walter Kirn's novel *Up in the Air*

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Abstract

This article applies Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the literary chronotope to an analysis of the depiction of corporate air travel in Walter Kirn's novel *Up in the Air* (2001). The analysis shows how the novel positions itself in relation to the genre of road narratives, at the same time transforming it by exchanging the car and the road for airplanes and airports. It further examines how the "airworld" chronotope is characterized by a disjunction between space and time. This contributes to a critique of commercialization and reification of space and time in contemporary American society, and also serves to question ideals traditionally associated with the American road genre.

Introduction

The literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin borrowed the concept of chronotope—literally "timespace"—from Einstein's theory of relativity in order to describe the "intrinsic connectedness" of time and space in literary texts (Bakhtin 1981: 84). Literary chronotopes give concrete expression to a particular kind of space at a particular time, such as the nineteenth-century French salons depicted in Balzac's novels (Bakhtin 1981: 246-47). In "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," written in the 1930s, Bakhtin calls chronotopes the place "where the knots of narrative are tied and untied" (Bakhtin 1981: 250), pointing out, for example, that in Dostoevsky's novels pivotal events occur in threshold spaces such as doorways, staircases, and corridors (Bakhtin 1981: 248-49). Chronotopes act as prisms, refracting the contexts that have given rise to particular texts and the worldviews expressed in them. "All the novel's abstract elements—philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect," writes Bakhtin, "gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood" (Bakhtin 1981: 250). His conclusion, added in 1973, declares that "every entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope" (Bakhtin 1981: 258).

In his discussion of specific kinds of chronotopes, Bakhtin identifies the "chronotope of the road" as one of the most enduring in Western

literature (Bakhtin 1981: 244). In narratives containing the road chronotope, the protagonist undertakes a journey, in which the distance travelled typically stands in stable relation to the amount of time elapsed. The protagonist's travels are often paralleled by a metaphorical inner journey, where the "choice of a real itinerary equals the choice of 'the path of life'" (Bakhtin 1981: 120). Bakhtin exemplifies the road chronotope with Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, in which the protagonist Lucius is transformed into a donkey and wanders in search of a way back to his original state, acquiring new perspectives on Roman society along the way.

Many later examples of the road chronotope can be found in the American road genre. Here the open road represents adventure, discovery, escape, freedom, and rebellion, often drawing upon the myth of the West as a new frontier or promised land. Road narratives also typically offer a critique of the society from which their protagonists seek escape by taking to the road (Laderman 2002: 1). Influential examples of the American road genre include Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and Jack Kerouac's beat generation novel *On the Road* (1957), as well as the films *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Thelma and Louise* (1991).¹ Janis P. Stout attributes the prevalence of road narratives in American literature to the significant role played by various kinds of journeys throughout American history. "Spatial movement," she argues, "has been the characteristic expression of our sense of life" (Stout 1983: 4-5).

Walter Kirn's novel *Up in the Air* (2001)² explicitly evokes the road genre through intertextual references to other road narratives, such as Walt Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" (in the epigraph), *Huckleberry Finn* (Kirn 2001: 54; 219), and *On the Road* (Kirn 2001: 43). Like many road story protagonists, Kirn's narrator assumes a critical stance toward aspects of contemporary American society. *Up in the Air*

¹ For studies of the road genre in literature and film, see Laderman 2002, Mills 2006, and Stout 1983.

² The novel was first published in July 2001. It received positive reviews and sold well until the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. As Walter Kirn recounts, "After 9/11, *Up in the Air* stopped selling instantly—its eye-catching cover didn't help: a cartoon of flying businesspeople, one of them on fire and hurtling earthward." The novel received renewed attention several years later, when Jason Reitman's film adaptation was released in 2009 (Kirn 2009).

differs, however, from many other postwar American road narratives in that the primary mode of transportation is not the automobile, but the airplane.³ The chronotope of the road is thus refashioned into what I will call, adopting the narrator-protagonist's own term for the space he inhabits, the airworld chronotope. His perceptions of "Airworld" change over the course of the narrative, with space and time becoming increasingly disjointed. By juxtaposing the airworld chronotope with contrasting chronotopes of home and the open road, the novel provides a critique of the commercialization and reification of space and time in contemporary American society and also questions ideals traditionally associated with the American road genre.

Airworld

The novel's narrator and protagonist Ryan Bingham is a corporate business traveler who exists in a state of constant transit. Although flashbacks reveal that he has previously led a more rooted life, he is now divorced and lacks a permanent residence, dwelling exclusively in what he calls "Airworld," comprised of airplanes, airports, and surrounding hotel chains. He works as a consultant flown in by downsizing companies to give motivational talks to redundant employees, but having begun to question the ethics of his profession, he has submitted his resignation, effective at the end of the workweek depicted in the novel. In the intervening days, Ryan uses his corporate travel account to reach his goal of accumulating one million frequent flier miles by travelling throughout the American West and Midwest. He bases his choices of destination and means of transportation on the number of bonus miles he can earn. He thus flies not primarily for the sake of arriving, adventure, or the pleasure of travel itself, as is often the case in road stories, but in order to receive credit for miles logged. In addition to flights, he acquires these symbolic miles through car rentals, hotel stays, and credit card purchases. Over the course of his six-day odyssey, he meets with a

³ David Laderman observes, "While some very important road movies involve motorcycles, trains, busses, bicycles, or even walking, the most common and most generically privileged vehicle is the automobile" (Laderman 2002: 13). Jessica Enevold's term "narratives of mobility" expands the scope of the road genre to include "transportation by means of walking, hitchhiking, or going by train," as well as non-American narratives (Enevold 2003: 4).

coaching client, a management guru, and a publishing agent, and also visits the MythTech company, which he believes is secretly trying to recruit him. Ryan's attempts to pitch his business ideas recall earlier cultural representations of the figure of the traveling salesman, with the difference that Ryan is peddling abstract ideas, rather than concrete wares.⁴

The first pages of the novel draw the reader's attention to the spatial and temporal parameters of the plot through a detailed travel itinerary indicating flight numbers and times, as well as rental car and hotel reservations. Despite occasional deviations, the novel's plot is structured around this itinerary. The narrator adopts the shorthand of itinerary abbreviations in his speech: "BZN to SLC departs on time" (Kirn 2001: 212); "Along with Hartsfield and O'Hare, DIA is one of Airworld's three great capitals" (Kirn 2001: 278). The narrative is addressed in the second-person singular to a fellow passenger who has been randomly seated next to the narrator on an airplane. The narrative as a whole is thus conceived as arising out of a chance encounter determined by the airworld chronotope. By identifying with the narratee, the reader, too, becomes inscribed into the novel's imaginary world of corporate air travel.

"To know me you have to fly with me," declares Ryan in the novel's opening line (Kirn 2001: 1). He characterizes himself as a quintessential flyer, stating, "Planes and airports are where I feel at home" (Kirn 2001: 5), and "I'm in my element up here" (Kirn 2001: 6). He recalls his first flight (when as a teenager he was taken to the hospital by helicopter after an accident) as a pivotal experience because it accorded him an overview of the world:

The landscape looked whole in a way it never had before; I could see how it fit together. My parents had lied. They'd taught me we lived in the best place in the world, but I could see now that the world was really one place and that comparing its parts did not make sense or gain our town any advantage over others.

(Kirn 2001: 141)

Ryan recounts that his attachment to his small Minnesotan hometown subsequently weakened, leading him to adopt the lifestyle of a jet-setter,

⁴ For a study of the figure of the traveling salesman in American culture, see Spears 1995.

which accords him a feeling of omnipresence: “Don’t tell me we can’t be everywhere at once,” he declares (Kirn 2001: 141). As the analysis below will show, however, this illusion of a unified world is gradually undermined over the course of the narrative.

Airworld is depicted as a self-contained realm, existing parallel to the world on the ground. Ryan avers that “America’s airspace has its own geography” (Kirn 2001: 59), as well as its own time: “Every flight is a three-act play—takeoff, cruising, descent; past, present, future” (Kirn 2001: 60). It also has particular social codes and conventions, gender roles, and ethical standards, the latter of which Ryan initially believes are better than those on the ground: “In Airworld honesty carries no penalty and deception has no upside” (Kirn 2001: 82). Airworld is further described as “a nation within a nation, with its own language, architecture, mood, and even its own currency—the token economy of airline bonus miles” (Kirn 2001: 7). These abstract miles comprise a reification through which the experience of travel is reduced to a commodity. As Ryan’s interlocutor points out, “It’s just a number. It doesn’t mean a thing” (Kirn 2001: 10). But Ryan claims to value these symbolic miles more than money: “Inflation doesn’t degrade them. They’re not taxed. They’re private property in its purest form” (Kirn 2001: 7). He views them as intrinsic to his identity, as becomes clear from his reaction at the suggestion that he give some away: “The lines we draw that make us who we are are potent by virtue of being non-negotiable, and even, at some level, indefensible. [. . .] To apologize for your personal absolutes [. . .] means apologizing for your very existence” (Kirn 2001: 39). The abstraction of bonus miles can be seen as a result of the capitalist system. Henri Lefebvre views space as a social construction, arguing that different socio-historical conditions have given rise to different conceptions of space. In particular, “capitalism and neocapitalism have produced abstract space, which includes the ‘world of commodities,’ its ‘logic’ and its worldwide strategies” (Lefebvre 1991: 53). He notes that “the spatial practice of neocapitalism” includes air transport (Lefebvre 1991: 59).

Kirn’s depiction of Airworld recalls anthropologist Marc Augé’s concept of non-place. In *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Augé argues that an increased speed of travel has contributed to changing notions of time and space, giving rise to a variety of “non-places,” including airplanes and airports, which are not

tied to “a culture localized in time and space” (Augé 1995: 34). Although the non-place is inhabited, it “cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity” (Augé 1995: 77-78). In non-places, time seems to stand still, “as if space had been trapped by time, as if there were no history other than the last forty-eight hours of news, as if each individual history were drawing its motives, its words and images, from the inexhaustible stock of an unending history in the present” (Augé 1995: 104-105).

Kirn's *Airworld* is similarly devoid of historical perspective. On a flight to Ontario, California, Ryan wonders, “But where's Ontario? I don't really know. A secondary airport outside Los Angeles, a clearing in the suburbs and subdivisions. They call such places faceless, but it's not true. They're bodiless, just signs and streets and lights” (Kirn 2001: 107). He states that “the big-screen Panasonics in the club rooms broadcast all the news I need, with an emphasis on the markets and the weather” (Kirn 2001: 7). He calls the national dailies the *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* his “hometown papers” (Kirn 2001: 7), valuing the latter for its undemanding style (Kirn 2001: 215). Jean Baudrillard views this kind of “*universality of the news item [le fait divers]* in mass communication” as typical of consumer society, in which “political, historical, and cultural information is received in the same—at once anodyne and miraculous—form of the news item” (Baudrillard 1998: 33). The pervasiveness of such media is emphasized in a passage in which a journalist seated next to Ryan on a plane struggles to finish an article before deadline, unwittingly reproducing the text of a news story Ryan had read shortly before in *USA Today* (Kirn 2001: 108). Ryan is seen to suffer from a similar lack of originality; he believes he is writing a new self-help book—a “motivational fable” entitled “The Garage” (Kirn 2001: 28)—when in reality he inadvertently plagiarizes someone else's work.

Human relationships in *Airworld* are superficial, determined solely by physical proximity. Upon learning that a chance acquaintance from his travels has died, Ryan exclaims, “I adored that man.” When questioned, “On what basis? [. . .] Occasional proximity?”, Ryan counters, “As if there's anything else” (Kirn 2001: 214). Bakhtin argues that the chronotope of the road is often associated with the motif of encounters: “The road is a particularly good place for random encounters. [. . .] the spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people—representatives of all social classes, estates, religions,

nationalities, ages—intersect at one spatial and temporal point” (Bakhtin 1981: 243). Although the inhabitants of Airworld are less diverse, limited as they are to business class passengers and airline employees, the plot contains several chance encounters, as Ryan initiates conversations with strangers on each flight, which, he recounts, often lead to one-night stands. He remarks, “Chance is an erratic matchmaker. Now and then it seats me next to women I wouldn’t dream of approaching on my own” (Kirn 2001: 36). In its depiction of women as sexual objects, *Up in the Air* recalls earlier examples of the road genre, of which Brian Ireland argues, “When women do appear in this genre, usually they are portrayed in stereotypical, male chauvinist ways [. . .] the treatment of women in the road genre is one of its most troubling aspects” (Ireland 2003: 481); David Laderman similarly notes that road movies tend to “retain a traditional sexist hierarchy that privileges the white heterosexual male” (Laderman 2002: 20).⁵

The stereotypical and superficial character of Airworld comprises part of its appeal to Ryan, who claims, “launch yourself into Airworld, with all its services, and the higher mental functions become irrelevant” (Kirn 2001: 205). Just as the road represents an escape from society in many road narratives, Airworld frees Ryan from the obligations of life on the ground. In the words of Augé, “a person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants [. . .] he tastes for a while [. . .] the passive joys of identity-loss (Augé 1995: 103). Similarly, Pico Iyer, reflecting on how frequent travel influences perceptions of place, argues that “Airports can be vertiginous places because we have nothing to hold our identities in place there” (Iyer 2000: 62). Ryan, however, presents the idea of identity loss as a desirable state in his explanation of what makes a particular hotel chain successful:

⁵ Although Enevold also characterizes the road in American road narratives “as a primarily male territory in which the travel experience becomes a male identity project which engages in a culturally dependent spatial othering of women and minorities” (Enevold 2002: 158), she identifies an ongoing rearticulation of the genre, in which the protagonists of narratives of mobility are female, and which she believes “will lead to the formulation of new identity processes which will [. . .] make more room and road for the female mobile subject” (Enevold 2002: 169).

Every great corporation does one thing well, and in Marriott's case it's to help guests disappear. The indistinct architecture, the average service, the room-temperature, everything. You're gone, blended away by the stain-disguising carpet patterns, the art that soothes you even when your back's turned. And you don't even miss yourself. That's Marriott's great discovery. Invisibility, the ideal vacation. No more anxiety about your role, your place. Rest here, under our cloak. Don't fidget, it's just your face that we're removing. You won't be needing it until you leave, and here's a claim check. Don't worry if you lose it. (Kirn 2001: 214-15)

Ryan prefers franchises to independent restaurants for the same kind of uniformity: "Unless a dish can be made to taste as good no matter where it's prepared, LA or Little Rock, it doesn't entice me" (Kirn 2001: 75). Of airports, he comments, "By rotating its personnel, who pop up again and again in different cities, the airline creates a sense in flyers like me of running in place. I find this reassuring" (Kirn 2001: 56). At the same time, Airworld is described as a distillation of particular tendencies of the outer world into their purest, hyperreal form—a place in which "the passions and enthusiasms of the outlying society are concentrated" (Kirn 2001: 7). For Ryan, Airworld represents a refuge from life on the ground, but he also expresses ambivalence toward it. As the narrative progresses, Airworld becomes increasingly associated with the very aspects of American life—such as overcrowding and commercialization—which he seeks to escape. He views the airline's bonus program as a way to beat the commercialized system at its own game: "For years, Great West has been my boss, my sergeant, dictating where I went and if I went, deciding what I ate and if I ate. My mileage is my one chance to strike back, to snatch satisfaction from humiliation" (Kirn 2001: 38).

Unlike the road chronotope, in which there is a close correlation between time elapsed and distance covered, the airworld chronotope highlights a disjunction between time and space resulting from air travel. Spatio-temporal relationships appear unstable to Ryan. Air itself represents an abstract, undefined space, a quality highlighted by the idiom in the novel's title, designating a state of uncertainty.⁶ Ryan can be seen to be "up in the air" in two senses: literally, as he spends much of his time traveling in airplanes, and figuratively, in that his future is uncertain. The phenomenon of jet lag is repeatedly mentioned in the

⁶ *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms* states that this "metaphoric expression likens something floating in the air to an unsettled matter" (Ammer 1997: 449).

novel, as when passengers “reset their watches from Central time to Mountain. For some of them this means a longer day, for others it means eating supper before they’re hungry” (Kirn 2001: 1). Jet lag results in disorientation, leading Ryan to wonder, “It’s Wednesday down there, but what day is it up here?” (Kirn 2001: 173). Although he does not transverse more than three time zones as he flies over the American Midwest and West, he nevertheless uses the excuse of jet lag to justify ordering a drink in the morning.

The contrasting chronotopes of home and the road

A literary text may contain multiple chronotopes, which stand in various relations to one another. “Chronotopes are mutually inclusive,” writes Bakhtin, “they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships” (Bakhtin 1981: 252). Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson characterize interaction between chronotopes as dialogic, noting that “in society and in individual life, chronotopes also compete with each other. As senses of the world, they may implicitly dispute (or agree with) each other” (Morson and Emerson 1990: 369).⁷ As Barbara L. Pittman explains, “a novel is not finally reducible to a single chronotope but is a complex of major generic chronotopes and minor chronotopic motifs,” creating “a web of competing chronotopes in dialogue and a central chronotope that serves as a unifying ground” (Pittman 1995: 778). Jay Ladin observes that “from the reader’s point of view, chronotopes become ‘visible’ by comparison with other kinds of space-time” (Ladin 1999: 219).

The dominant chronotope in Kirn’s novel is that of *Airworld*, which is in turn highlighted by interaction with the contrasting chronotopes of home and the road. Ryan defines his lifestyle and identity in contrast to a domestic chronotope, claiming that unlike his colleagues, he has “never aspired to an office at world headquarters, close to hearth and home and

⁷ Later in the same chapter, Morson and Emerson write, “works often contain more than one chronotope. Some may be drawn from life, others from literary works of various genres; still others may be present as congealed events in specific chronotopic motifs. In life, too, particular institutions or activities combine and are constituted by diverse chronotopes” (Morson and Emerson 1990: 426).

skybox, with a desk overlooking the Front Range of the Rockies and access to the ninth-floor fitness center. I suppose I'm a sort of mutation, a new species, and though I keep an apartment for storage purposes [. . .] I live somewhere else, in the margins of my itineraries" (Kirn 2001: 7). The ideal of home is embodied in different ways by the female characters of Linda and Alex. The former flight attendant Linda urges Ryan to buy a house in her neighborhood, prompting him to declare, "Homeowning may not be in my makeup" and "A zip code is something I'd rather do without" (Kirn 2001: 25). Alex, who like Ryan travels on business, decorates her hotel rooms with objects from home. She observes, "I miss my own bedroom, my stuff. I think we all do," while Ryan explains, "I don't comment. I let her think I'm human too" (Kirn 2001: 99).

Ryan's relatives inhabit a domestic chronotope. This is especially true of female characters in the novel, such as his mother, whom he describes as possessing "a developed sense of place; her mental map of the country is zoned and shaded according to her ideas about each region's moral tenor and general demographics" (Kirn 2001: 86). In arranging a marriage and choosing a house for their younger sister Julie, Ryan's sister Kara strives to create the kind of historically and geographically rooted life that Ryan flees. He states, "Kara's goal is time travel, it seems: a marriage that will approximate our parents' and secure our family's future in its old county. Even the house [. . .] could double for the home place" (Kirn 2001: 32-33).

When Ryan takes a brief road trip with Julie, their differing perceptions of geographical space become apparent. In his description of their car trip, Ryan contrasts Julie's view of geographical space with his own mental map of the United States. While she "holds fundamentalist attitudes toward time and space and motion" (Kirn 2001: 201), Ryan conceives of the distance between two points as dependent on their proximity to airports:

As long as you're aimed at a city with an airport, you can get anywhere from anywhere and there's no such thing as a wrong turn. That's why I didn't consider myself off course last night while driving north in accordance with Julie's request to get her as close as I could to Minnesota before I flew back to Utah and then Nevada. It seemed to surprise her when I agreed to this, perhaps because she holds fundamentalist attitudes toward time and space and motion. [. . .] She failed to take into account my mental map. In Billings, Montana, I'd find a portal to Airworld, and I could be back in Salt Lake by 9 A.M. then off to Vegas by noon. (Kirn 2001: 201)

On the few occasions when Ryan travels by car, these trips either culminate at an airport, or turn out to be circular and disorienting.

The contrasting chronotopes of Airworld and home collide when, temporarily stranded in an airline lounge by a delayed flight, Ryan runs into his ex-wife's new husband Mark. He is a real estate agent who tries to sell Ryan a house in a new development. Because it raises the issue of a more settled life, this chance encounter is disconcerting to Ryan, who experiences it as "a jolt, collapsing time and space" (Kirn 2001: 160). Using arguments such as, "we all need a place to call our own. This is America. This is what we're promised" (Kirn 2001: 163), Mark peddles a commodified ideal of home which Ryan categorically rejects. His aversion is apparent elsewhere in the text, as well. Of home décor magazines, he remarks, "They intrigue me, these pictures, because the rooms they showcase strike me as buffed-up funeral parlors, basically, designed to display and preserve the upright dead" (Kirn 2001: 155). The homes Ryan visits in the course of the narrative are described as artificial and excessive. His sister Kara's house is located in "a suburb that might have been squeezed from a tube" (Kirn 2001: 32). His client Art Krusk's "palace in Mafia Moderne" is described as "offensive" for its "fresh sod lawn whose seams still show and a faux-marble fountain of dancing cupids" (Kirn 2001: 68), and the golf course adjacent to it is deemed an ecological "sin" (Kirn 2001: 67). Ryan justifies his own homelessness with his distaste for urban sprawl: "I look down on Denver, at its malls and parking lots, its chains of blue suburban swimming pools and rows of puck-like oil tanks, its freeways, and the notion of seeking shelter in the whole mess strikes me as a joke" (Kirn 2001: 25).

The narrative suggests, however, that Ryan's self-characterization as a jet-setter belies a longing for home. He comments, "My dream is to land a position in brand analysis, a benevolent field that involves less travel and can be done from home" (Kirn 2001: 15). Underlying this vague longing is a sense of loss—a motif which appears in various forms, both literal and metaphorical, throughout the narrative: Ryan mourns his father's death, as well as his own divorce. Significantly, he relates that he began flying regularly after his marriage began to falter (Kirn 2001: 27). Although Ryan initially appreciates travel for what Augé calls the "passive joys of identity-loss" (Augé 1995: 103), they are replaced in the novel by a growing suspicion that he has fallen victim to identity theft when mysterious charges appear on his credit card and

bonus miles disappear from his frequent flier account. The suggestion of financial identity theft can also be read metaphorically as a loss of Ryan's individuality. This is a loss from which American society also suffers, according to the critique expressed in passages such as this one:

in the course of certain American lives, way out in the flyover gloom between the coasts, it's possible to arrive—through loss of love, through the long, formless shock of watching parents age, through inadequacies of moral training, through money problems—at a stage or juncture or a passage—dismiss the buzzwords at your peril—when we find ourselves alone in a strange city where no one lives any longer than he must and all of our neighbors come from somewhere else. (Kirn 2001: 276)

Using flight as a metaphor for the idea of “the path of life,” this passage expresses a generalization about American life as characterized by loneliness and loss. Other forms of loss are represented by Ryan's memory lapses, when he is unable to remember having been in a particular city the previous week (Kirn 2001: 70; 150), and embodied by the redundant corporate employees to whom Ryan gives pep talks.

By opting out of a mainstream American notion of home in favor of Airworld—much as Huck Finn takes to the Mississippi River—the protagonist assumes an outsider's position from which he can literally look down upon and criticize the world. Ryan views his accumulation of frequent flier miles as a rebellion against the commercialized world, epitomized by the airline. His belief that Airworld offers an escape proves to be an illusion, however, as exemplified by his growing suspicion that his movements and purchases are being tracked for the purposes of manipulating consumer behavior. While air travel had previously appealed to Ryan because it gave him a sense of a unified perspective on the world, he now begins to believe that he is the one being watched.

The disjointedness of space and time

Despite Ryan's self-proclaimed allegiance to Airworld, he grows disillusioned with it as he closes in on his goal of one million bonus miles. At the same time, the temporal-spatial matrix of Airworld is depicted as increasingly disjointed. This is first suggested when Ryan feels “out of sorts, confused,” because his hotel room deviates from the standard layout of his favorite chain, whose name—Homestead Suites—

alludes ironically to the idea of the Western frontier (Kirn 2001: 85). He then sees a financial analyst he had met on a flight to Reno earlier the same day on a television program ostensibly set in New York. This leads Ryan to reflect on the illusory nature of place: "Though he must have taped it in Reno this afternoon, the set features a lit-up New York skyline. It's the little deceptions that no one catches that are going to dissolve it all someday. We'll look at clocks and we won't believe the hands" (Kirn 2001: 86). On his victorious final flight, Ryan, unable to pinpoint his exact location and thus the precise moment at which he has reached his goal of one million miles, reflects on the relative nature of time: "Factoring in leap years and cosmic wobble, our anniversaries aren't our anniversaries, our birthdays are someone else's and the Three Kings would ride right past Bethlehem if they left today and they steered by the old stars" (Kirn 2001: 296). This uncertainty with regard to the passage of time recalls Lefebvre's argument that as a result of capitalism, time has lost its connection to space: "It is recorded solely on measuring-instruments, on clocks, that are as isolated and functionally specialized as this time itself. Lived time loses its form and its social interest [. . .] Economic space subordinates time to itself" (Lefebvre 1991: 95). The passage of time is significant to Ryan only in relation to his progress toward the goal of accumulating one million bonus miles.

Ryan's spatio-temporal disorientation is further evidenced by his difficulty in distinguishing one city from another and by his memory lapses about where he has recently been. "The cities don't stick in my head the way they used to," he observes (Kirn 2001: 150). It is as if Ryan suffers from the effects of what Frederic Jameson calls "postmodern hyperspace," which he characterizes as "transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world" (Jameson 1984: 83). Ironically, while Ryan begins to lose his bearings in the physical world, he hopes for a new job at the MythTech company, which aims to create a "perfect comprehensive map" of commerce (Kirn 2001: 248).

Whereas the American road genre is typically characterized by open space and unlimited time, Kirn's protagonist perceives both time and space as contracting as the narrative progresses. The narrative timeframe is limited to six days and Ryan races against the clock to acquire the remaining miles before his corporate credit card is canceled. At the same

time, he begins to experience the physical space of Airworld as cramped and claustrophobic, as expressed in statements such as: “Sealed in a tube again, but going nowhere” (Kirn 2001: 167), and “There’s no room to move, to gesture” (Kirn 2001: 172). Passengers are described as physically compressed, “six inches shorter than they should be” (Kirn 2001: 181). Just as the air on the ground is described as polluted by smoke from forest fires, the recycled air inside planes is described as polluted by “superviruses [. . .] steeled by exposure to diverse immune systems and virtually injected into the lungs by high-efficiency ventilation systems” (Kirn 2001: 106). Ryan begins to feel an aversion to airports and no longer wants to fly (Kirn 2001: 180). Kirn’s depiction of contracting space and time recalls David Harvey’s concept of “time-space compression.” Harvey argues that capitalism’s emphasis on fast production has given rise to a change in conceptualization of time and space:

Strong currents of innovation have focused on speed-up and acceleration of turnover times. Time-horizons for decision making [. . .] have shortened and lifestyle fashions have changed rapidly. And all of this has been coupled with a radical reorganization of space relations, the further reduction of spatial barriers, and the emergence of a new geography of capitalist development. These events have generated a powerful sense of time-space compression. (Harvey 1990: 426)

Airworld turns out to be subject to the same time-space compression engendered by capitalism on the ground.

The novel also rejects the idea, prevalent in the American road genre, that travel brings discovery. Ryan both alludes to and discredits the myth of the West as a new frontier when he observes, “The West gave people so much trouble once, mostly because they couldn’t see over its ridges, but now we can, and it’s just another place” (Kirn 2001: 191). The linearity of travel is also rejected; when plotted on a map, Ryan’s traversal of the Western United States is zigzagging and circular, full of detours. Significantly, his last stop in the novel is Las Vegas—symbolizing a “dead end” in many American road movies (Ganser et al 2006: 13). Here he attends the “GoalQuest” business conference, the name of which plays ironically on the motif of a quest, common in the road genre (Ireland 2003: 479). While the quest narrative “suggests a movement *toward* something” (Laderman 2002: 20), Ryan’s only goal or quest consists of his pursuit of frequent flier miles. While American road

narratives typically depict movement from East to West—with the West “associated with images of the frontier and the idea of freedom” (Ireland 2003: 475), the final leg of Ryan’s journey completes a round trip, ending where his life began, in his home state of Minnesota.

On his final flight, Ryan questions the need to travel at all in the following passage, which recalls his feeling, during his very first flight, “that the world was really one place” (Kim 2001: 141):

The mist just keeps on lifting and soon I’ll be able to see all the way, as far as the earth’s curvature allows. It’s a blessing, that curvature, that hidden hemisphere—if we could take it all in at once, why move? and it may be the reason why one-ways cost the same as round-trips. They’re all round-trips, some are just diced up in smaller chunks. (Kim 2001: 295)

There are indications in the final chapter that Ryan has returned to the starting point of his life journey in a metaphorical sense, as well. Movement through space begins to seem pointless: “We move ‘over there,’ which feels like the same place and wasn’t, to my mind, worth the whole upheaval, emotional and physical, of getting to” (Kim 2001: 240). Despite an ongoing effort to expand his active vocabulary, he now observes, “I’m back the way I started; single syllables” (Kim 2001: 298). The circularity of Ryan’s inner journey is further represented by the closing scene, in which he dials his own phone number. Upon hearing his own, previously recorded voice declare, “You’re there,” he responds “We’re here” (Kim 2001: 303). Steven Connor holds, in his cultural history of ventriloquism, that there is an “inalienable association between voice and space. [. . .] the voice takes up space, in two senses. It inhabits and occupies space; and it also actively procures space for itself. The voice takes place in space, because the voice *is* space” (Connor 2000: 12). Ryan’s short conversation with his past self, in which he uses the spatial deictic pronouns “there” and “here,” can be seen to overcome the spatial distance between “there” and “here,” as well as the temporal distance between the moment of recording and the present. It also overcomes the disjunction between time and space by bringing together the temporal and spatial axes (there/here is connected to past/present), and it is at this point that Ryan finds himself in a metaphorical sense.

Dominant chronotopes within literary texts, Ladin argues, “define and limit the ways in which human character can exist in the narrative” (Ladin 1999: 223). At the end of his airplane odyssey, Ryan relinquishes

not only flying, but also his accumulated mileage, explaining that he no longer has any use for it. But he has identified himself with Airworld to such an extent that the reader is left to wonder if he can survive outside it. None of his future plans are realized: the management guru buys someone else's idea, Ryan's book manuscript turns out to be a plagiary, and MythTech headquarters have relocated to Canada. During his final flight, having passed the one-million-mile mark, he reveals that he suffers from increasingly frequent seizures, which he fears may be symptomatic of a serious illness (Kirn 2001: 302). He plans to drive to the Mayo Clinic alone, "in case it's not good news" (Kirn 2001: 302). While Sal Paradise in Kerouac's *On the Road* proclaims "the road is life" (Kerouac 1991: 211), Ryan's journey ends with the possibility of death.

Conclusion

Up in the Air suggests that travel is no longer linear and teleological; it results not—as in more traditional road narratives—in arrival, discovery, opportunity or escape, but merely in the accumulation of abstract miles. Early in the novel, Ryan, recalling a cross-country car trip with a Kerouac-reading girlfriend, makes the following metafictional comment on the road genre:

I wanted to show her something she hadn't seen. I failed. Nothing there. That America was finished. Too many movies had turned the deserts to sets. [. . .] And everywhere, from dustiest Nebraska to swampiest Louisiana, folks were expecting us, the road-trip pilgrims. They sold us Route 66 T-shirts, and they took credit cards. [. . .] The real America had left the ground and we'd spent the summer circling a ruin. Not even that. An imitation ruin. (Kirn 2001: 43)

This passage, which suggests that the trope of the open road has been exhausted, replaced by simulacra, is preceded by the assertion that the air "is the place to see America, not down there, where the show is almost over" (Kirn 2001: 42). By the end of the novel, however, Ryan has come to view air travel, as well, as incapable of offering anything new to the traveler. Although he initially sees the non-place of Airworld as a refuge, he grows disillusioned with it over the course of the narrative, concluding that it is subject to the same commercializing forces which have exploited space on the ground and made time a commodity.

The final chapter of *Up in the Air* alludes to the fable genre, used by Bakhtin to exemplify his concept of the road chronotope. In this passage, Ryan contemplates an imminent visit with his relatives and wonders, “Will we last a whole week together? We just might. Everyone’s exhausted. Exhaustion soothes. It’s a fable now, anyway. We’ve used up our real substance. In a fable, you find new resources, new powers. Pick an animal, then take its shape” (Kirn 2001: 302). In Kirn’s novel, it is above all the road chronotope which is transformed. “The road is always one that passes through *familiar territory*,” Bakhtin writes, “and not through some exotic *alien world* [. . .] it is the *sociohistorical heterogeneity* of one’s own country that is revealed and depicted” (Bakhtin 1981: 245). By depicting a world in which time and space lose their intrinsic connectedness, *Up in the Air* does the opposite, offering a bird’s eye view of the commercialization and reification of American society, where identities are lost and the experience of travel no longer carries meaning.

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