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Seeking Self-Space Under Postmodern Media: A Review of Fang Ying's *Literary Spatial Criticism*

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Abstract: Professor Fang Ying's latest work, *Spatial Literary Criticism*, transcends mere literary analysis or academic inquiry for the author herself; it is, at its core, a profound interrogation of the human existential predicament and a philosophical exploration of life's meaning. The book's construction of literary critical theory disrupts monolithic narratives of spatial theory, examining power dynamics and existential dilemmas through a spatial lens, thereby defining the central research domain of spatial literary criticism. Against the backdrop of postmodern media, this approach not only charts a groundbreaking direction for literary studies but also serves as a navigational map for individuals seeking self-existence.

Keywords: Spatial Literary Criticism; postmodern media; power; existence

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题目：后现代传媒下找寻自我空间——评方英的《文学空间批评》

摘要：方英教授的新作《文学空间批评》对于作者本人而言超越了单纯的文学分析或学术研究，它本质上是对人类生存困境的深层叩问，是对生命意义的哲学探寻。该书对文

学批评理论的建构打破了对空间理论的单一叙述，并从空间维度审视权力关系与存在困境，构成了文学空间批评的核心研究领域。在后现代传媒的背景下，文学空间批评不仅为文学研究提供了全新的方向指导，还为人们找寻自我存在提供了地图。

关键词：文学空间批评；后现代传媒；权力；存在

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Introduction

As a leading scholar in literary spatial studies both in China and internationally, Professor Fang Ying has long been dedicated to exploring spatial approaches to literary research. Over the past few decades, spatial studies have developed rapidly, and against the postmodern backdrop of the “spatial turn” in the humanities and social sciences, spatial literary studies have gained increasing significance. In the context of postmodern society, the pervasive influence of electronic and digital media in postmodern communication has subjected literary production to the influences of social and aesthetic consciousness. The proliferation of postmodern media symbols has saturated society with entertainment and consumer culture, leading to what is often described as a “loss of meaning.” Postmodern media have ushered literary creation into a new existential space, while also presenting new challenges and dilemmas for literary research. As noted by McRobbie (2001, p. 39), “The term ‘postmodern’ has been particularly useful in mass communication studies, facilitating a shift from textual analysis to exploring the intrinsic connections among different media forms.” Confronting issues such as postmodern imagery, power, existence, and literature, Professor Fang Ying’s monograph *Spatial Literary Criticism* (China Social Sciences Press, 2024) offers a fresh perspective and direction for literary studies in the age of postmodern media.

In terms of content, the book is structured into four main chapters, in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. These chapters—“Literary Spatial Studies,” “Types of Space,” “Space and Power,” and “Space and Existence”—examine literary spatial studies as a cutting-edge theoretical framework within postmodern cultural discourse. Through concepts such as topophrenia, literary cartography, and geocriticism—corresponding to “perceiving, writing, and reading”—the work proposes strategies to address the challenges faced by literary studies in the context of postmodern media. In terms of scholarly significance, *Spatial Literary Criticism*, as a branch of literary spatial studies, is characterized by its spatial orientation, literary ontology, interdisciplinary nature, and innovative spirit. It provides readers with a unique research paradigm—a map, so to speak—guiding us toward a sense of direction and purpose in a postmodern society. In terms of theoretical logic, the chapters are closely interconnected and progressively build upon one another. The discussion of spatial development and typology lays the groundwork for the exploration of power and existence, comprehensively illustrating how individuals in today’s postmodern society can rediscover their own existence through literary space.

1. Literary Cartography: Navigating Literature in a Fragmented World

Following her overview of various literary spatial theories in Chapter One, Professor Fang Ying emphasizes that Robert Tally's concept of literary cartography, as a core idea in spatial literary studies, highlights the significance and value of narrative spatiality from methodological, epistemological, and ontological perspectives. Narrative, as both a means for humans to understand the world and an ancient medium, shapes the world by "mapping" to situate our own position—or, as Fang Ying (2024, p. 34) puts it, "to map the conditions of the subject's existence and establish the connection between the subject and the world." In today's society, why is it increasingly necessary to emphasize our own orientation in order to maintain our relationship with the world?

Martin Heidegger once observed: "In essence, the world picture does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as a picture... Where the world becomes picture, what is, in its entirety, is set up as that for which man is prepared" (2003, p. 91). Heidegger's concept of the "world picture," from an existentialist perspective, foreshadowed the evolution of media: the world has gradually been transformed into images. With advancements in technology and the development of postmodern capitalist society, modern media have shifted toward postmodern forms, leading people to rely increasingly on digital media to perceive the world—and, in the process, lose their sense of direction.

In response to the existential crisis of the subject in postmodern society, Robert Tally emphasizes in the preface of his work the need to place a certain "cartographic imperative" at the core of human existence. Through literary cartography, we can comprehend and situate ourselves within broader spatiotemporal contexts. As Fang Ying (2024, p. 4) notes, "Postmodern discourse particularly underscores the importance of space, geography, and mapping, for the turbulent condition of postmodernity requires individuals to constantly orient themselves through mapping." This approach extends beyond Bertrand Westphal's "geocriticism" placing greater emphasis on literary production and dissemination and examining the dynamic relationship between literature and space through cartographic practices within the world picture. Literary cartography reinterprets literature through spatial thinking, constructing coherence for a world system that is nearly unrepresentable in the era of globalization. It allows us to extricate ourselves from a postmodern society marked by a loss of meaning and transform our understanding of literary media, the world, and ourselves. By pursuing the significance of literature, this chapter also explores spatial narrative and spatial criticism, mapping the spatiality of literature from the perspectives of authorial creation and reader response. It delineates "spatial narrative" in both broad and narrow senses and outlines the scope and characteristics of "spatial literary criticism."

Under the pervasive influence of postmodern media technologies, the literary field is not only rapidly disseminated through print media but also repeatedly deconstructed by other media, often losing the meaning originally anchored by the subject. The internet, in particular, has dissolved temporal and spatial constraints, fragmented the world picture, and cast us adrift in a desert of information. Professor Fang Ying's exposition on literary spatial criticism not only aids subjects in navigating postmodern media discourse through narrative/mapping to regain their bearings but also promotes literary production and criticism in this era. In doing so, it enriches the significance of literary spatial studies following the "spatial turn."

2. Spatial Power: Literary Narrative in the Medium of Materiality

In his discussion of the Industrial Revolution and technological progress, Bertrand Westphal critically observes: “The river of time has welcomed a most unwelcome guest into its bed: decadent progress” (2023, p. 18). It can be argued that a major cause of social decadence lies in the expansion of power—whether political or capital—which exploits media to dominate social relations. Power relations are inextricably linked to space; the exercise of power relies on spatial representation. Before delving into textual analysis, Professor Fang Ying, in Chapter Two, examines diverse types of spaces in both literature and the real world, revealing the multiple ways space is represented in literary works and its impact on identity, power, and culture. This provides theoretical support for subsequent practices of literary spatial criticism.

Following this, Chapter Three explores the relationship between literary space and power, proposing that “power is spatial, and (social) space is also inherently power-laden” (Fang Ying, 2024, p. 171). Henri Lefebvre, who introduced the concept of the “production of space,” pointed out that the globalization of spatial production essentially serves the development of capitalism. This has led to the reproduction of global power structures during the process of capital globalization, placing discursive authority largely in the hands of capital and redistributing global power, thereby exacerbating worldwide inequalities. The author also introduces the concept of “border narrative,” examining borders as spatial practices within power fields, while suggesting that narrative offers opportunities to re-experience and rewrite such boundaries. Furthermore, taking Virginia Woolf’s *to the Lighthouse* as an example, the author specifically explores the relationship between gendered power and space, revealing how women resist gender inequality through spatial practices and reconstruct domestic and spiritual spaces in pursuit of gender harmony. Under the influence of postmodern media, feminist discourse has broken through traditional binary paradigms, creating opportunities for the emergence and development of feminist geography. The spatiality of power, as a crucial element in literary representation, continues to exert significant influence in postmodern society through the medium of literature.

To a certain extent, literature, as one of the oldest media, serves as an expression of ideological concepts and aesthetic consciousness. Its history is also a history of evolving media. Media, as channels for information dissemination, are vital tools through which power structures exert influence—particularly in this era of late capitalism. With the involvement of postmodern media technologies, literary production, research, and even literature itself have undergone disruptive transformations. Media have disrupted the normative status of literature and increasingly intervened in the construction of literary meaning and aesthetic orientation.

The evolution of literature has always been accompanied by the participation of technological media. Yet the “materiality” of media, while serving as an auxiliary element to literature, inherently entails a paradox: its role in facilitating literary production often comes at the cost of effacing certain essential characteristics of literature. Especially when this “materiality,” by virtue of its increasingly dominant position, evolves into a primary mechanism of literary generation, it inevitably triggers a profound reconfiguration of literature’s fundamental principles. In the postmodern context, new communication technologies, represented by electronic media, have not resolved this paradox but have instead intensified it, constructing a new paradigm of power within late capitalist society.

In postmodern society, capital operates as the essence, technological change as the appearance, and media development as the core, breaking through the linear transmission model of traditional media and bringing high culture face to face with popular culture. The discourse of power, once held by a minority, has gradually disintegrated under the influence of postmodern media, becoming an object of entertainment and consumption. As a result, people are confronted with a hyperreal world that lacks depth and a sense of identity: power is dissolved, yet omnipresent. By tracing the connection between literary space and power, and by employing spatial structures, spatial relations, and spatial technologies, Professor Fang Ying has paved the way to resist the postmodern dominance of “materiality.”

3. Spatial Being: Literary Reflection in the Condition of Simulacra

Following a detailed analysis of the relationship between space and power, Professor Fang Ying emphatically states in the book’s fourth chapter: “The ultimate aim of literary spatial studies is to contemplate the spatiality of being—or the relationship between existence and space” (Fang Ying, 2024, p. 239). Being possesses spatiality; the two interact and intertwine. The exploration of space and existence represents not only a convergence of philosophy and literature but also an integration of theory and practice.

To analyze lived experience, reflect on existential dilemmas, and pursue the meaning of being, Professor Fang Ying provides a profound examination of space and existence through close readings of literary texts, responding constructively to existential anxiety from a spatial perspective. First, through Angela Carter’s novel *The Magic Toyshop*, she explores the protagonist Melanie’s process of self-identity construction across different spaces. Next, she analyzes how the urban space of Dublin in Joyce’s *Ulysses* reflects the characteristics of modernity. Finally, she discusses the ethical tragedy and spatial representation in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, revealing the spatial anxiety and identity crisis faced by the protagonist Gregor Samsa after his transformation, and how these dilemmas are articulated through spatial constructs. Space constitutes a fundamental dimension of existence, and the spatial experience of the subject constitutes a vital mode of existence. Only by understanding one’s own spatial experience can one position oneself securely and avoid becoming disconnected from the world within the “hyperspace” created by postmodern media.

As postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard pointed out, the presence of a subject in media comes at the cost of the disappearance of the external other—and this vanished other is often the real world. It can be argued that under the influence of postmodern media, the world as people perceive it is a virtual reality constructed by power structures, leaving ordinary individuals disoriented within it. In this context, Baudrillard proposed the “theory of simulacra,” arguing that media have accelerated the decline into a postmodern society of simulacra. By disseminating representations of what does not exist, media blur the boundaries between illusion and reality, causing human coordinates in the world to vanish and undermining the very foundations of selfhood.

Professor Fang Ying contends that within the context of postmodern culture, human existence is intimately linked with space. Thus, through a spatial lens, we can more deeply analyze human lived experience, existential dilemmas, and the quest for meaning. In Baudrillard’s theory of postmodern media, subjects are

widely trapped in a series of cognitive dislocations: mistaking the virtual for the real, equating illusion with reality, perceiving simulacra as truth, and even regarding appearance as essence. This further exacerbates the neglect of self-being. “Where to go” is not only a question of existence but also a spatial one. Spatial literary criticism, from a literary standpoint, offers a means for individuals to locate themselves. As Professor Fang Ying concludes: “Spatial criticism is like exploring with various maps—constantly surveying new routes and drawing new maps in the process. Are not such surveying and drawing, in essence, a search for, a revelation of, and a creation of the meaning of existence?” (Fang Ying, 2024, p. 314)

Conclusion

The author demonstrates broad scholarly vision, solid theoretical grounding, and meticulous analysis throughout the work. On the one hand, themes such as literary cartography, space and power, and space and existence collectively establish the diversity, innovation, and professionalism of *Spatial Literary Criticism* in spatial studies. This constitutes an outstanding contribution to literary theory and criticism, opening new ways of understanding narrative, critique, and the world. On the other hand, as noted by Hjarvard Stig (2020, p. 36), “In the era of globalization, media not only serve as channels of communication between the state and the public but also establish networks across diverse geographical regions and participants. This development, in turn, has prompted broader cultural reflection.” Meanwhile, the focus on “space” in the context of postmodern media reflects what Westphal (2023, p. 3) describes as “speculation that transcends nature and a refraction of creation.” Although postmodern mass media theory reveals how media mechanisms exacerbate the alienation of the individual psyche, dismantle traditional social relations, fragment communal bonds, and induce physical and mental imbalance through desire stimulation—causing multifaceted harm at cultural, psychological, and social levels—Professor Fang Ying’s Spatial Literary Criticism serves as a detailed map, guiding literary scholars to reinterpret literary studies in the postmodern context and rediscover the meaning of self-existence.

In an era that often dismisses the humanities and reduces enrollments in liberal arts programs, *Spatial Literary Criticism* offers a new research path characterized by spatial orientation, literary textuality, interdisciplinary approaches, and a spirit of innovation. As Tally aptly observes: “Maps not only help us locate where we are but also enable us to go elsewhere—often meaning the discovery of places not yet on the map. And this, indeed, is the purpose of literature” (Fang Ying, 2024, p. 7).

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