

## **‘I especially loved the little Nana dancing on the balcony’: The emergence, formation, and circulation of chronotopes in mass-mediated communication**

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### A B S T R A C T

In this article I focus on the formation and evaluation of chronotopes in social media. More specifically, I analyze the case of a ‘chronotope of the balcony performance’ that emerged in Italy in 2020 during the Covid-19 lockdown. The corpus of the study is constituted by 125 top postings resulting from a Twitter search based on the words *Italy*, *lockdown*, and *balcony*. In line with other scholars (see Goebel 2020), I argue that chronotopes in mass-mediated environments are formed through repetition and recycling of the same or similar semiotic material. I show how in social media expanded participation and the use of trans-semiotic and trans-medial resources ensure wide circulation of images and texts. I also point to the central role of stance taking by users in the constitution of the chronotope as a cultural object, particularly through generalizations and upscaling. (Chronotopes, Covid-19, discourse circulation, stance, scales)\*

### I N T R O D U C T I O N

The concept of chronotope expressing the connectedness of time and space relations in discourse introduced by Bakhtin (1981) in connection with literary works has recently experienced a surge in interest. As we see in our discussion below, the construct has proven extremely useful as a tool of analysis to understand ways in which identities are projected and performed and a variety of social practices are framed. Overall, it has helped refine sociolinguistic understandings of context (Blommaert 2020; De Fina 2020). However, less attention has been devoted to the ways in which chronotopes emerge in discourse, become recognized, and are evaluated. This kind of investigation can now be more readily conducted because of the possibilities that digital technologies have opened to scholars in terms of access to emerging phenomena. The emergence of chronotopes in digital media, which is the focus of this article, has more recently been investigated in connection with the construction of collective identities (see, for example, Procházka 2018) and with the setting of boundaries and rules for social media practices (Lyons & Tagg 2019). However,

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there is still little research on the role of digital media in the dissemination and sanctioning of chronotopes. Hence, my aim in this article is to analyze the emergence, evaluation, and stabilization of chronotopes via social media. In order to illustrate these processes, I use the case of Twitter posts on what I call the ‘chronotope of the balcony performance’ that was born and developed in Italy during the Coronavirus crisis of Spring 2020. The advantage of analyzing this chronotope is that we can trace exactly the moment of its birth and therefore follow its development and circulation in a much clearer way than for other similar chronotopes. The research questions that I am addressing in this article are the following:

- (i) How are chronotopes created and circulated in social media environments?
- (ii) How are their defining elements solidified?
- (iii) What role does evaluation play in the formation and recognition of chronotopes as cultural objects in these environments?

My article is organized as follows: in the first part, I present some theoretical constructs and premises that underlie my work. In particular, I discuss how recent theorizations about the chronotope have been embedded within a rethinking of context as emergent, always evolving and entirely defined by the social, discursive, and semiotic practices that constitute it and shape the way identities are understood. I then talk about how understanding the creation and circulation of chronotopes in mass-mediated environments such as social media requires a view of semiotic activity as happening across times and spaces. Thus, in that section I refer to the work of scholars who have stressed the importance of analyzing ways in which communicative events are linked in time and space, and scholars who have theorized the role of mass-mediatization processes in the circulation and social fixation of meanings. I then briefly introduce the concepts of stance and scale, which I use in the analysis of evaluations of the chronotope of the balcony performance. In the next section, I present my project and data and an analysis of the ways in which the chronotope has been circulated and constructed over a period covering March 13 to April 30 in a corpus of 125 Twitter top postings. In the last part, I discuss how stance taking contributes to transforming the chronotopic practices evaluated into a recognizable cultural object through stance taking acts (Du Bois 2007) involving generalizations and upscaling. I end the article with some conclusions and implications.

## THE CHRONOTOPE

The construct of the chronotope was introduced by Bakhtin in connection with his analysis of different genres of the novel, and particularly in relation to three ancient literary genres: the adventure novel of ordeal, the adventure novel of everyday life, and the biographical/autobiographical novel. He defined the chronotope as follows:

We will give the name chronotope (literally, ‘time space’) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. ... What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space). (Bakhtin 1981:84)

This construct allowed Bakhtin to capture how the specificity of the connections established between times and spaces defines novelistic genres, but also marks historical situatedness through the reproduction, via these chronotopes, of ideologies widespread at the time of their creation, thus firmly establishing the links between artistic products and social forms of organization and thought.

The idea of the chronotope has been an object of attention for anthropologists and linguists since the 1990s because of its important implications for the study of contexts, semiotic practices, and identities. In particular, scholars have used chronotopes to explain and describe different kinds of ideological frames of understanding of reality and human relations by linking identities, times, and places to social norms and values. Scholars have shown that chronotopes, as spatiotemporal frames, can be used to define modernities (see Dick 2010; Creese & Blackledge 2020) or ideological values that speakers associate with languages (Woolard 2013; Karimzad & Cathedral 2017); they can be exploited to organize social relationships in specific ways (Perrino 2007; Agha 2015) and to identify, convey, and negotiate social personae (Agha 2007a; Koven & Simões Marques 2017; Blommaert & De Fina 2017; Procházka 2018; papers in Kroon & Swanenberg 2020; De Fina, Paternostro, & Amoruso 2020; De Fina & Perrino 2020). The most important role of the construct of the chronotope, however, has been its ability to impose a reflection on sociolinguistic conceptions about contexts. This argument has been developed in different publications by Blommaert (2019, 2020). Blommaert highlights three factors that explain why the notion of chronotope constitutes an important development in the ways in which sociolinguists conceive of context. First, the chronotope, rather than isolating ad hoc elements or aspects of context, attempts to capture specific ways in which time, space, and identity configurations are used to frame social practices. For example, Wang & Kroon (2020) show how an image constituted by figures dressed in traditional clothes against the background of the natural landscape of a small village in China appearing on posters designed for tourists is used to frame a local set of social practices as displays of heritage and authenticity. Similarly, Koven & Simões Marques (2017) illustrate how Portuguese migrants to France convey their belonging to an imagined Portuguese community by enacting a moment-by-moment return-to-home chronotope on Facebook. Second, the chronotope is able to account for the historical dimension that characterizes every context by linking behavior to processes of sedimentation and habitus (Bourdieu 1990:54) and therefore to the recognizability of meanings and cultural concepts as ‘orienting frameworks’ (Bauman 2004:2), while at the same time leaving open the potential for continuous reinterpretations and reconfigurations. For example, in his study of kinship formulations, Agha (2015:404) illustrates how ‘socially regular chronotopic formulations of time, place, and personhood inform the interpersonal conduct of specific social groups, and mobilize their members into cohesive value projects and group-centric aspirational trajectories’. Third, the chronotope allows for an appreciation of how everyday contexts are imbued with ideological meanings through social practices,

as the behaviors enabled by specific chronotopes are always associated with value judgements that focus on the acceptability, adequacy, and morality of the practices and identities enacted through them. For example, Blommaert & De Fina (2017) illustrate how teachers in an inner-city school in Sicily evaluate the use of dialect in interactions within a classroom chronotope as displays of a ‘bad student persona’.

In sum, chronotopes capture the multi-dimensionality of contexts, overcoming simple oppositions between macro and micro and allowing for multiple relations between present practices and times and places at different scales. Finally, the advantage of chronotopes as tools for analyzing contexts is that they offer a way of producing fine-grained analyses of interaction and communication capable of accounting for how very minimal changes in time/space arrangements can produce completely different behaviors and interpretations.

In this article, I adopt a definition of the chronotope as ‘a semiotic representation of time and place peopled by certain social types’ (Agha 2007a:321), and I analyze how a ‘chronotope of the balcony performance’ emerges in social media through the circulation of meanings produced by a variety of agents including individuals and organizations and how it is evaluated on Twitter. In the next section I turn to how the study of communication across times and spaces has created the basis for a reflection on discourse circulation.

#### DISCOURSE CIRCULATION, MEDIATIZATION, AND THE CHRONOTOPE

With the advent of the technological revolution in the late 1900s (Castells 1996) and of the post-digital society since the 2000s (Davies 2011), scholars have started to pay more and more attention to discourse and discourse events across time and space (see Rymes 2014; Agha 2015; Wortham & Reyes 2015 on this point), and therefore also to reflect on the links between mediatization and the creation and circulation of meanings. Access to the internet and to mediated experience has complicated the relationship between interaction and place, and has also created a high level of mobility and interconnectivity both in the ways communication takes place and in the ways meanings are circulated. A great deal of communication nowadays happens within semiotic practices that involve large-scale processes (see Agha 2007a on this point) and that do not depend on coeval times and spaces. It is also to be noted that before the generalized advent of digital communication, many mass-mediated events were characterized by participation frameworks—that is, arrangements of relationships between authors and recipients (see Goffman 1981)—in which organizations such as newspapers or television were the sole producers of content that was addressed in top-down fashion to wide audiences. Nowadays, digital technologies have profoundly changed communication-mediating structures in such a way that semiotic practices involve a variety of actors who are both producers and receivers of semiotic activity and who intervene

both in top-down fashion, that is, through the strategic action of institutions and organizations, and from the bottom-up, that is, as individuals or groups acting on their own and without official affiliation. All of these actors participate in the creation and negotiation of meanings by sharing information, ideas, and images (see Jenkins 2006). These actors, particularly in the case of social media such as Twitter, also include non-humans and automated technological processes whose influence and importance is becoming more and more apparent (Bucher & Helmond 2018). The significance and pervasiveness of these large-scale communication processes has put to the forefront the importance of studying circulation in order to understand the specific ways in which meanings are created, negotiated, and modified in different mass-mediated events. Agha has been one of the most forceful advocates of the investigation of discourse circulation. Indeed, he states that ‘all cultural signs are subject to social transmission... through semiotic chain processes’ (Agha 2007a:79) and underlines the need to study how semiotic regularities are ‘transmitted across social populations’ (2007a:64), arguing that these processes are basic to understand innovations and their fixation. Agha notes that it is through circulation that both innovation and social regularity emerge. Indeed, we need to understand how innovation leads to recognition, stabilization, and also to enregisterment, ‘whereby performable signs become recognized (and regrouped) as belonging to distinct, differentially valorized semiotic registers by a population’ (Agha 2007a:81).

These processes are central to the establishment of chronotopes since, as we see below, these constructs are important vehicles for the stabilization of social meanings. Nonetheless, there has not been enough work on how chronotopes are formed and circulated since much of the research in sociolinguistics and anthropology has been devoted to describing the make-up and function of specific and to some extent already established chronotopes.

Notable exceptions are constituted by the work of Goebel (2020) and Agha (2007a,b). Both authors focus on the process through which chronotopes emerge. Agha invites us to analyze the ‘forms of discursive semiosis through which our ethnographic object is made and remade before our eyes’ (2007b:5). Goebel (2020) in turn focuses on the emergence of a specific chronotope, the figure of the civil servant in the Indonesian press during a year in the 2000s to illustrate how it is formed and consolidated.

Both authors see the creation of chronotopes as a process that happens through mass-mediated circulation, as communicative events that involve a great number of participants, ensure that semiotic material is widely circulated, recycled, reprised, and manipulated in different forms leading therefore to typification of practices and identities. Goebel in particular explains that chronotopes emerge and lead to the typification of personae through repetition of patterns and ideas and through ‘iconization’, which, following Irvine & Gal (2000), he defines as ‘the process whereby signs that have situation, person, and activity specific indexical inter-relationships are transformed to be understood as an essential and enduring

feature of groups, rather than of an individual involved in a specific interaction' (Goebel 2020:69–70). He points, for example, to the role of deictics in iconization by showing how articles in the press progressively increased their use of 'generic' deictic expressions such as 'any' and 'every' to refer to bureaucrats even when the general focus was on local people and institutions. Goebel's analysis shows the importance of repetition and recycling of stories in communication cycles dominated by top-down processes, in the sense that the stories that led to the formation of the chronotope of the bureaucrat were based on the repeated circulation in the press of materials initially published in documents produced and authorized by powerful organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

In this article I focus on a different kind of mass-mediated environment, that of the social media platform Twitter, in order to study how chronotopes emerge through common representations of social practices and social actors in such environment. I argue that two processes are at the center of the formation and stabilization of chronotopes in social media: one is the wide circulation of semiotic materials from a variety of sources that ensures the repetition and recycling of texts, images, and ideas related to the chronotope. The second is the evaluation of the chronotope and its constituents. Through wide circulation, the time/space/identity coordinates that define the chronotope become established, and through evaluation chronotopes are turned into recognizable cultural objects as users produce meta-semiotic comments on the characteristics that distinguish them, the actors that are involved in them, and their social significance. Circulation of semiotic material in social media is not limited to repetitions of textual fragments such as descriptions or stories (as in the case examined by Goebel), but rests on the combination of text with other semiotic resources and trans-medial resources. Thus, in social media, multi-semioticity—that is, the use of visual and other semiotic resources besides language (see Leppänen & Kytölä 2016)—has a central role in the formation and circulation of the chronotope since images accompanying texts are not only similar in many ways but also make the chronotope more vivid and tangible. Concurrently, given that users share materials from a variety of platforms through trans-medial links or through embedding of texts and images coming from different platforms, they contribute to a wide circulation of semiotic materials.

At the same time as stable representations of the basic components of chronotopes (that is, the actions, times, spaces, and agents involved) emerge through textual and visual resources, stable interpretations of their meanings also emerge through the use of various forms of generalization, which, much like iconization, are based on the abstraction from specific contexts of occurrence of the qualities and characteristics of the people and actions involved in the chronotope. These generalizations for example widen the geographical scope of descriptions contained in names such as 'neighbors' or 'residents' and/or transform the activities that people perform within the chronotope into symbols of qualities that define those actions as having a greater impact with respect to the one they can have in specific circumstances.

A powerful and central discursive tool to evaluate the chronotope—that is, to produce meta-semiotic commentary and to create these generalizations—is stance taking. By taking stances towards them, participants constitute chronotopic practices as recognizable cultural objects. As Agha (2007b:405) underlines, in order to understand how a semiotic object is constituted and recognized, we need to analyze both the object signs—that is, the elements that are used to construct the chronotope—and the meta-signs that is the commentary through which the chronotope is evaluated. As we see below, stance taking is the vehicle for such meta-comments on the chronotope. For the analysis of stance in this article I refer to Du Bois (2007:168), who defines it as

a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field.

I discuss stance more in detail when I come to the analysis of the tweets evaluating the chronotope. However, here I briefly explain in what ways stance taking contributes to the stabilization of the chronotope as a cultural object. While many of the stances that individual users take refer to specific instances of performing on balconies in Italy, many other stance-taking acts help constitute the chronotope as a concrete cultural object by evaluating its significance beyond those concrete contexts. Indeed, stances often involve generalizations that transform specific stance objects into symbols of qualities or characteristics that transcend those local contexts through upscaling processes. Scales are parameters on which evaluation of objects, activities, and people rests (Carr & Lempert 2016). When such parameters, which may involve size, time, location, social significance, and so forth are used, inherent comparisons and value judgements are made (see Pritzker & Perrino 2021). Thus, upscaling or downscaling are central to evaluation since, by scaling semiotic objects, people also inevitably place them on hierarchies as they compare them with other semiotic objects. Carr & Lempert (2016:4) note that ‘the scales that social actors rely upon to organize, interpret, orient, and act in their worlds are not given but made... people use language to scale the world around them’. I show here that Twitter users often enhance their appreciation of the chronotopic practice of performing on balconies by ‘jumping scales’ (see Blommaert 2007), for example, from the individual to the collective, from the local to the translocal, from the present to a general time frame. In the next section I discuss how the balcony events started emerging in Italy and how they first came to be reported.

#### THE EMERGENCE OF BALCONY PERFORMANCES AND THEIR REPORTING IN THE MEDIA

I became aware of the balcony performances thanks to a series of e-mails that were sent to me by colleagues and to descriptions by my relatives in Italy. I got interested in these events because they seemed to be a phenomenon unique to Italy and also

tightly linked with the Covid-19 crisis. The date in which the first balcony performances were acknowledged on traditional and social media was March 13, 2020 and indeed I could not find news or tweets on the topic that had an earlier date. The starting of the balcony events closely followed the lockdown decree published by the Italian Government on March 9. The news of the Government Decree was published by the daily *La Repubblica* (2020), in an article on March 10, announcing its enforcement starting from March 9 and its duration until April 3. The article provides the details of the lockdown. Basically, the government of Italy banned all public events and meetings including sports and cultural manifestations, prohibited personal displacement, except if required ‘for documented work needs, emergencies, or health reasons’, closed most non-essential businesses, and enforced social distancing for businesses that were still open. From that moment the country came to a standstill as people were forced to stay in their houses.

News of the balcony events started surfacing on social media on March 13. For example, journalist Gaia Barcellona (2020) wrote an article titled ‘Coronavirus, l’Italia sul balcone: Canzoni contro la paura’ (‘Coronavirus, Italy on the balcony: Songs against fear’) again published in *La Repubblica*, in which she documented the spread of such phenomenon. The subtitle read: ‘Da Nord a Sud tutti alla finestra per cantare. Non solo lenzuoli e bandiere: In tempi di #iorestoacasa gli italiani intonano la ricetta per reagire all’emergenza che li ha messi in quarantena. Tutti assieme, ma ciascuno a casa propria’ (‘From north to south everybody at the window to sing. Not only sheets and flags: In times of #Istayhome Italians sing the recipe to react to the emergency that put them in quarantine. All together but each of them in their own house’). The article continued with a description of how Italians went to their balconies to sing or play as a ‘therapy against fear’ and presented a series of linked videos to different performance all over Italy. The article also mentioned that these events were called ‘flash mobs’, but could rather be seen as ‘improvisations’ as they were multiplying throughout the country and involved different instruments and types of songs.

In fact, in many cases flash mob calls were indeed responsible for the spread of these balcony events among many Italians through Whatsapp or Facebook that disseminated them all over Italy. For example, on March 13 a Facebook event called ‘Flashmob Sonoro Contest’<sup>1</sup> invited all Italians to get out on their balconies between 6:00 and 8:30 pm. The organizers invited people to participate in the contest by getting on their balconies with musical instruments, or by singing or by grabbing painting brushes, all of this to express their creativity.

#### METHODOLOGY AND CATEGORIES OF ANALYSIS

I had been observing some of these events online for a while and on June 12, 2020, I performed a search on Twitter looking for tweets containing all of the following words: *Italy*, *lockdown*, and *balcony*. I restricted my search to tweets posted



between March 11 and April 30, 2020 and to tweets in English. I performed the search using my own Twitter account. The reasons for restricting the search to the time interval chosen was that after April 30 the phenomenon seemed to lose momentum. I chose tweets in English because I wanted to try to capture posts from different parts of the world in order to have a sense of how a phenomenon that happened in Italy was represented in other countries. The search returned 125 top items.

The data set comprises posts by individual users and organizations. Exact data on the demographics of participants are not available on Twitter, but open references to different countries or areas of the world confirm that users come from a variety of countries including the UK, India, Australia, Morocco, Germany, and Italy. Indeed, the users include Italians who wrote in English, possibly because they have connections outside of Italy. The same search on Google returned 3,790,000 items, which shows the popularity of the phenomenon. The sample I worked on is small, therefore I am not claiming that it can be fully representative of the entire circulation process. The circulation of chronotopes such as the one examined here involves off-line as well as digital events of distinct nature, and it is mediated by structures and platforms that include the press, television, instant messaging apps, and social media. It would be impossible to capture this process of cycling and recycling in its entirety. Nonetheless, given the fact that Twitter postings present trans-medial connections and allow everyone with an account to post and access information, this kind of small data set does present a window for an in-depth analysis of the ways in which semiosis happens, and new phenomena are represented and circulated in a mass-mediated environment.

As mentioned above, the search returned 125 top posts, of which 110 were relevant to the issue of the balcony performances. Twitter posts were extracted and copied onto an Excel sheet. Personal identifying information for users was eliminated from the transcribed tweets. My classification of the postings was aimed at understanding the sources for the circulation of news about the balcony events and the resources used to circulate, comment, and react to the news. For this reason, I classified the tweets according to whether they appeared to have been posted by individual users or organizations and according to the kinds of semiotic resources employed. I classified as organizations news corporations such as BBC, CBS, and the like, interest groups, and professional associations—in brief, Twitter accounts that reflected the activities of organized groups. I classified as individuals all other accounts that seemed to belong to single users. In terms of semiotic resources, I put into separate categories postings that used only graphic signs such as characters and hashtags and postings that, in addition to those, also used other resources such as the embedding of photos, videos, or of links to videos, and the embedding of links to articles in the press. Emojis were present in all categories of tweets. I further distinguished tweets that embedded videos of events that the person posting appeared to have been witnessing directly. The results of this first analysis are summarized in [Table 1](#).

TABLE 1. *Authors of the tweets and resources used.*

Category A	Category B	Category C	Category D	Category E	Total
Tweets by individuals expressing verbal comments	Tweets by individuals posting photos or videos of neighborhood events	Tweets by individuals posting and sharing photos, videos, or links to articles on the balcony events	Tweets by organizations posting and sharing photos, videos, or links to articles on the balcony events	Loosely related tweets	
22	9	57	22	15	125

Table 1 shows that individuals published three times more tweets than organizations. The most common resource used by both were videos. Videos from a variety of sources (such as Instagram, YouTube, other Twitter users, the websites of media corporations, and so forth) were embedded in the tweets such that they were visible together with the written portion of the messages, or were connected to the tweet through links provided. For example, the following tweet appears as a kind of introduction to a video embedded in it.

- (1) Some magical stories made in Italy being lockdown! I love 📌 this spirit ❤️! I especially loved the little Nana dancing on the balcony. Meanwhile, over here, we are beating each other half to death over a pack of toilet paper!

In this example the text used the emoji of the finger pointing down to indicate that the spirit loved is the one represented in the embedded video that shows a middle-aged woman and man dancing to the music of a traditional Italian song of the 1970s on a balcony while some smiling neighbors watch. After this part, the video continues with a series of other video fragments in which people sing, play, and/or dance on balconies. The reference to ‘here’ as a place where an inclusive ‘we’ is the subject of ‘fighting’ and ‘beating each other’ indexes the fact that the user is not in Italy and is not witnessing the event.

In other cases, links to videos follow the tweet, like in example (2) below where a user posts a link to a series of videos published on the same platform by other Twitter users, presenting again different balconies in Italian neighborhoods in which people dance, play instruments such as saxophones or drums, and sing the national anthem.

- (2) A Thread of Italians responding in a positive way to the complete lockdown due to the Coronavirus.  
Starting with a DJ set on a balcony  
#Italy #Coronavirus

As mentioned, some of the videos were posted by users who seemed to be or have been witnesses to the events shown. The fact that they were the authors of the videos seem implicit in the insertion of deictics pointing to specific places, times, and people such as ‘from my balcony’ in the following example.

- (3) From my balcony in Turin, Italy. Free concert performed by fellow balcony dwellers. Watch with the sound on to also hear the thunderous applause from all the neighbors. #coronavirus #Covid\_19 #lockdown [+ video]

In the category of tweets including photos, five out of the nine instances had embedded pictures of individuals playing instruments on their balcony, while the other four published pictures that refer to their balconies or themselves on their balconies during the quarantine but were unrelated to the performances. Tweets containing links to articles usually present the title of the article and a link below with or without a comment by the user sharing the piece, as shown in (4).

- (4) Something uplifting...  
Balcony singing in solidarity spreads across Italy during lockdown | Coronavirus outbreak | The Guardian [+ link to article]

Like tweets in the other categories, postings that do not contain visual elements other than emojis present a variety of opinions, reactions, and jokes about the balcony events, but they do not focus on sharing anything else than their own thoughts, reactions, or opinions on the matter, as in (5) below.

- (5) oh to be on lockdown in Italy singing macarena on my balcony

The author here is simply conveying a wish to be in Italy participating in a balcony event but is not sharing any materials with other users.

As seen in [Table 1](#), both organizations and individuals contribute to authoring, sharing, and therefore circulating ideas, news, and images about those events, although in this data, individuals contribute twice as many posts as organizations. Of the 125 tweets analyzed here, only fifteen made no direct references to the performances happening on balconies in Italy but were captured in the search items. For example, the post below is published by the BBC news organization.

- (6) Verona, the city of Romeo and Juliet in Italy has been in #lockdown since February, but Paola and Michele still managed to fall in love. And their love story also involves a balcony... [+ link to article]

The news is about a couple who fell in love during the pandemic, but has nothing to do with the performances. It is to note that unlike most of the postings that were published in a period immediately after March 13, the example in (6) is from April 23, when the balcony events were no longer news.

CIRCULATION AND RECYCLING OF THE  
IMAGES AND TEXTS THAT FORM THE  
CHRONOTOPE

The examples discussed bring to the fore the significance of multi-semioticity and trans-mediality in these tweets. In terms of multi-semioticity (Leppänen & Kytölä 2016), the construction of meanings is attained through the combination of words, hashtags, emojis, photo images, and video. At the same time, trans-medial links and embedded videos take users to different platforms and media, from YouTube to Instagram to articles that, in turn, contain new links. This process of semiosis explains the wide circulation and recycling of meanings. Such recycling is basic to the formation of chronotopes as repetition and recycling allow for the establishment of basic features in terms of space, time, and persona that distinguish a particular chronotope from others. In the case under analysis, visual representations seem to play an important part as videos are the most shared resource in the data. Indeed, recent research on social media (Zappavigna 2016) underscores the central role that images play in communication on social media platforms. At the same time, work on news media (Dahl & Fløttum 2017) shows that images often support and strengthen meanings conveyed by texts. In addition, specialists in marketing argue that video and images increase involvement by audiences (Solomon 2019).

Indeed, the essential time/place/identity connections embodied in the chronope as it emerges in these series of top tweets here are crystallized in the images and the visuals as found in the videos. All images have in common the time when the events take place, which of course is the lockdown during the Covid-19 crisis, but also the place: all images are taken on balconies, usually typical balconies on Italian multi-floor buildings, and the camera often captures other buildings with more balconies around the focal action. The people that appear on the balconies are usually either alone or in couples and they are executing or witnessing a musical performance of some sort. Although singing has a certain centrality in titles and comments, in fact what most people are seen doing is playing an instrument that is usually a traditional one (for example, a trumpet, a harmonica, a guitar), but can also be an improvised one (for example, the lids of a pot). Sometimes they are singing (usually opera, but also the national anthem or popular songs in Italian or in local dialects such as Sicilian or Neapolitan), and in rare cases they are dancing or playing music with DJ equipment. Often, especially in videos, neighbors are shown listening, or coming out on their balconies, cheering and applauding. Thus, the identities enabled by the chronotope are those of performers, audiences, and neighbors. People are presented in the act of singing or making music in such a way that they can be seen or heard by others outside their homes. What is evident is that the representations of the 'chronotope of the balcony performance' exhibit stable time/space/identity constellations. Such stability is the basis of recognizability, possibly the most important characteristic of the chronotope. Recycling of similar images and, more in general, of similar semiotic material, strengthens recognizability. This is the

case, for example, with several videos that are retweeted by different users. The most notable case here is the recycling of an article published by *The Guardian* which is shared twenty-one times, representing about 18% of the total postings. This widely shared article, published on the webpage of *The Guardian* for the first time on March 14, 2020, presents the following title (always reproduced in the tweets that share it): ‘Balcony singing in solidarity spreads across Italy during lockdown’. Below the title is a still image from a video of a boy playing the saxophone on a balcony. The image caption reads ‘Neighbours play instruments from balconies as Italy stays under coronavirus lockdown – video’.

Counts of word rank and frequency also confirm the significance of recycling for the fixation of some of the central elements of the chronotope. I created a file with all of the texts contained in the Twitter posts and ran a search for the highest ranked words in the corpus through the software Antconc. The results show *singing* at rank 8, *solidarity* at rank 15, *music* at 27, and *morale* at 28. Other high ranked words include *residents* and *play*. The high ranking of the work *solidarity* points to the fact that the most recycled semiotic materials influence not only the way chronotopic practices are described but also the way they are interpreted. In this case, as the article by *The Guardian* was so widely retweeted, the interpretation of the balcony performance as an act of solidarity also was widely circulated. In order to analyze evaluations of the chronotope more in detail I now turn to the analysis of stance in the tweets.

#### STANCE AND THE GENERALIZATION OF MEANINGS

Stance has been investigated by a variety of scholars in sociolinguistics and anthropology as one of the most important discourse tools for people to evaluate events, other people, and objects (see, for example, Ochs 1992; Jaffe 2009). The study of stance and stance taking has been recently gathering steam in research on digital media. Studies of stance in Twitter have come especially from communication scholars interested in opinion mining (Mohammad, Sobhani, & Kiritcenko 2017), while work from a sociolinguistic perspective has focused on ways in which Twitter users participate in collective expression of emotions (Giaxoglou & Spilioti 2020) or display intimacy (Pritzker & Perrino 2021). Within this latter tradition, stance is seen an interactional accomplishment that is realized within specific semiotic practices. Du Bois (2007:168) defines stance as,

a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field.

Indeed, Du Bois argues that the expression of stance always implies a stance-taking subject, an object, and someone to whom the stance taker is responding to. This is mostly the case in social media as well, even though it could also be said that a

participant individual or organization may take up the role of initiator of the stance-taking cycle by simply conveying a stance towards an object. In social media it is also hard to trace who the stance taker is. Particularly in an environment such as Twitter, where participants may have a variety of accounts and accounts may be created by organizations, stances may not be easily attributed to specific subjects. In any case, one important point that Du Bois makes is that the attempt to classify stances by relating them to certain linguistic or semiotic items is futile, in that stances may be expressed through a variety of means and may also be accumulated within the same utterance, turn, and so forth. In addition, as he notes, stances always need to be interpreted. In fact, one can never create a complete taxonomy because the interpretation of stance is context dependent, and it can only be made in relation to specific contexts and as embedded into dialogic and interpersonal relationships. Indeed, participants in a communicative event can take up a stance through the use of linguistic tools such as markers of epistemic or deontic modality, words or expressions denoting mental states and or emotional reactions, and ironic utterances, but also through multimodal tools including the use of emojis, memes, photos, and so forth, often in combination with words. Stance can also be constructed collectively, and this is a significant issue in social media as people participating in threads may align with each other in taking similar or compatible stances that form collective reactions to events or issues. Du Bois (2007:159) makes this point when he argues that:

In the dialogic realization of stance, the subjective orientation to a stance object may be shared among more than one participant. Indeed, this object-orientation may extend across multiple stance acts by different speakers. This gives rise to what I call the shared stance object.

As we discuss below, this is the case with the construction of stances through mediated interactions. Given the space constraints of this article, I center my analysis only on stance as positioning and do not analyze alignment since my focus is on how, by expressing their evaluation of chronotopic practices and their protagonists, Twitter users constitute such practices as recognizable cultural objects.

I chose to analyze stance on the tweets that explicitly or implicitly focused on balcony events, thus I eliminated fifteen postings that did not refer to them. The stance objects evaluated in the tweets were the chronotope as a whole (that is the singing/playing music on balconies by neighbors in Italy), the performance aspect of the chronotope (how good the musical spectacle or the music was), or the protagonists of the chronotope (Italians or Italy as a metonymy for Italians). As we see here, stances towards those objects were expressed by participants explicitly through open evaluative adjectives such as ‘beautiful’, ‘heart-warming’, and ‘kick ass’; adages such as ‘music brings people together’; and expressions of desires and wishes, among other linguistic and semiotic means. They were also expressed more implicitly through the use of emojis and hashtags, or through exhortations to continue with some action and invitations to watch videos and pictures of

people performing. Below I present examples of some ways in which these stances were conveyed (with explicit stance expressions shown in italics).

- (7) Expressions of intentional stances conveying wishes and wants:  
 Feel like pure shit just *wanna* be in Italy on that lockdown balcony rave

Here the stance is expressed through the explicit wish to be in Italy and through the use of the word ‘rave’ in the description of the balcony event that depicts it as a slightly wild situation where one can have fun. Being in Italy is put in a positive light through a contrast with an implied ‘being here’ which involves feeling ‘like pure shit’, which represents the individual’s present state in a different place.

- (8) Comparisons between events/actions in Italy and other places:  
 Was thinking yesterday about Italy Vs UK lockdown.  
 Italy: *Arias from the balcony*. UK: *Booming Base and fighting families*. (Well, that’s what it was like here yesterday.)

The stance object in (8) is reactions to the lockdown in Italy and in the UK. As in the previous example, the comparison is used to implicitly highlight the superiority of reactions in Italy. Reference to the balcony events is summarized in the expression ‘arias from balconies’, where singing is again elevated to a characteristic feature. Singing ‘arias’ is then contrasted with ‘booming bases’ and ‘fighting families’ with both references suggesting unpleasant sounds and loudness. By virtue of the contrast with ‘arias’ the latter acquire a negative connotation.

- (9) Evaluation of performances and performers:  
*This made my day* Italy Lockdown: Italian man plays trumpet from his balcony during the Coronavirus [+ video]

In (9) the expression ‘this’ refers cataphorically to the Italian man’s trumpet playing from his balcony, which is presented in a video. The expression ‘made my day’ indicates a high degree of satisfaction on the part of the user at hearing the music.

- (10) Expressions of emotions/feelings towards Italy or Italians:  
 We are singing on the balcony and i’m crying so much  
*Italy i love u*  
 #italystaystrong #italylockdown [+ two memes representing people crying]

In (10) positive stance is expressed through the expression of affection (love) and the use of hashtags. Indeed, the exhortation contained in the hashtag #Italystaystrong implies, through the use of the verb ‘stay’, that Italy (or Italians) showed strength by singing on balconies and needs to continue to do so.

- (11) Evaluation of the social/moral significance of performances:  
*Music will save us all*.  
 Balcony singing in solidarity spreads across Italy during lockdown [+ link to article published by *The Guardian*]

In (11) the positive effect of the balcony events is conveyed in the prediction expressed by the adagio ‘music will save us’, prefacing the article by *The Guardian* (discussed above).

In other instances, stance is expressed indirectly. Such is the case with (12) below.

- (12) Exhortations to continue with an action:  
 Italy may be on lockdown entering its 2nd week of quarantine.  
 but it’s just turned 6pm and my brother has sent me a video of the ‘balcony concert’  
 which occurs daily.  
*Keep the morale up!* [+ accompanying video]

In (12), like in the hashtag in example (10), the stance is expressed in the exhortation to continue doing ‘balcony concerts’ seen as boosting morale.

Another way of indirectly conveying stance was through invitations to watch videos through phrases such as ‘must watch’ or ‘check it out’, as shown in (13).

- (13) One Italian metalhead took to his balcony to play Slayer’s ‘Raining Blood’ during lockdown. *Check it out:* [+ link to video]

In (13) the invitation to check the performance captured on video implicitly conveys the idea that watching is worthwhile.

These examples illustrate how meta-semiotic commentary—that is, comments on the value, meanings of the performances, and on their protagonists—was addressed to different aspects of the chronotopic practice, often pointing to specific places, people, and performances. However, in many of these postings the emergence of generalizations about the activities and the people based on different kinds of abstractions from specific contexts involved in the chronotope can also be appreciated. In other terms, we see how qualities that are attributed to specific events, activities, or people are generalized by elevating their value or significance on different scales, including social prestige, scope, and space, and thus how the practice of performing on balconies acquires symbolic characteristics that abstract it from its concrete instantiations in different parts of Italy and typifies it at belonging to some more general category. Some of the examples discussed above already show these tendencies.

Let us look for instance at the posting in example (11), whose author appears to be an organization related to a choir. The user retweets the title of the article by *The Guardian* with a link to it and frames that text with the phrase ‘Music will save us all’. Here we see two interesting phenomena: first, by using the description ‘balcony singing’, the title already typifies a series of activities that include singing, dancing, DJing, and playing a variety of instruments. By doing so, the text qualifies all those practices as characterizing the same chronotopic practice, that is, a specific ‘type’ of practice. Second, the author of the comment upscales the significance of that same practice by presenting it as a tool for the salvation of an ‘us’ (will save us all) that can be interpreted as referring to humans in general. This way, balcony



performances are abstracted from their original context and become instances of behavior that qualifies as generally positive for humans in that it will allow for their salvation.

A parallel case of upscaling can be seen in (8) above. As we saw in the analysis of the previous post in (13), the author of the tweet in (8) summarizes the balcony practices by characterizing them as ‘singing arias’. The user describes the music that was being sung as ‘arias’, which are regarded as a higher genre of music on a hierarchy of social prestige as they belong to the classical end, as opposed to the booming bases that symbolize popular music. Thus, the Twitter user is upscaling people’s musical performance in Italy when qualifying them as a classical type of music and erasing the many instances in which neighbors in Italy actually also played and listened to disco music. A second way of upscaling these events is to present them as an essential feature of the ‘lockdown in Italy’, which is contrasted to fighting within families and playing loud music as an essential characteristic of the lockdown in Britain, although the author is careful to insert a reference to time and place (‘at least that is the way it was here’) that introduces the potentiality that these activities do not represent a permanent feature of the British lockdown. In any case, we see generalization and abstraction at work here as in (11), thanks to the upscaling of descriptions of the music on a parameter of cultural value and through the generalization of phenomena from the local (specific places in Italy or Britain) to the national significance, which is also an upscaling in terms of geographical scope.

In (14) below, a Twitter user prefaces an embedded video with the following text.

- (14) Lockdown in Italy, and residents head to the balcony and start singing *Horses* by Aussie icon Darryl Braithwaite.  
Human spirit knows no bounds [+ video]

The video shows a series of balconies on a building and people singing on them. There are no specifications of place or time in the video. In the text, the author anchors the events to Italy, but does not specify the city. People who are singing ‘Horses’ are identified with the generic term ‘residents’, which widens the scope of the noun from those residing in the city or cities shown in the video to those residing in Italy. In the closing part of the tweet, the whole activity is described as symbolically representing the ‘freedom’ of the human spirit. Again, something that originally has specific time, space, and identity coordinates (residents of a neighborhood in Italy during the lockdown) is attributed a meaning that transcends those coordinates but becomes relevant to humans in general through upscaling its relevance to subjects beyond the more local scale (Italians demonstrating freedom), to the more general scale of humans.

In (15) below, a Twitter user retweets a video from another user in which people are shown singing the famous Italian song ‘Volare’ on their balcony.

- (15) Confined to their homes, neighbors in #Italy 🇮🇹 sing together to boost morale during #Coronavirus #COVID19 quarantine

Volare, oh oh  
 [flying away]  
 Cantare, oh oh oh  
 [singing]  
 Let's fly way up to the clouds  
 Away from the maddening crowds  
 Where lovers enjoy peace of mind [+ video]

The author of the text introduces a number of devices that generalize elements of the chronotope. First, the author does not specify that the neighbors involved in the video were singing in Rome (as was specified in the video), but like the user in (11) upscales the geographical location to neighbors 'in Italy'. Second, the many possible objectives of singing that different people may have had are subsumed (and therefore generalized) under the common aim of boosting morale. The tweet also presents an interesting form of 'upscaling' in terms of style. Indeed, the author takes the beginning of the Italian song (flying, singing) to construct a new text in poetic form in which the act of flying away symbolizes a kind of elevation from the 'madness of the crowd', that is, presumably from worries and stress. Again, the chronotope's evaluation is based on the decontextualization of some of its elements and the upscaling of its significance through the elevation of the style of the text itself.

#### CONCLUSIONS

In this article I analyzed how posts circulated on Twitter during the lockdown in Italy contribute to the emergence and creation of the 'chronotope of the balcony performance' in a number of ways. First, by coming from a variety of agents and by including a multiplicity of trans-medial links and connections, these posts are part of and ensure a wide circulation of ideas and images. Second, by recycling and repeating the same or similar time/space/persona elements through a variety of semiotic resources (still images, videos, words, emojis, and hashtags) they contribute to stabilizing the characteristics of the chronotope. Third, by expressing and sharing stances users also contribute to constituting the chronotope as a cultural object. They do so through two main discursive strategies: generalization, which implies abstraction of elements of the chronotope from concrete contexts, and upscaling, which implies elevating the significance of the actions performed within the chronotope and the social actors involved at different levels. In the case of this chronotope, there is also a surprising convergence of positive stances. Although some users expressed ironic or ambiguous stances, the majority of Twitter users praised Italy and Italians and showed their admiration for specific performances or for the balcony performances in general. Out of the 110 relevant tweets that I analyzed a total of 97 tweets expressed explicitly or implicitly positive stances, eleven expressed a variety of stances that were neither entirely positive or negative (such as ironic, amused, or ambiguous), and only two cases

expressed openly negative stance about the performances by judging them as too noisy or as non-serious.

The chronotope was in general associated with positive actions such as lifting spirits and morale by entertaining neighbors, helping fight the isolation or fear related to the Coronavirus, creating beautiful music, demonstrating artistry, and so forth. Italians (metonymically referred to through the noun Italy) were then also presented in a positive light because they were seen as reacting in the right way to the social disaster of the pandemic, that is, by fighting it while stressing sociality as a value. The homogeneity of people's stances in this case is very likely due to the contrast between the preponderance of negative events like deaths and illness in the news and the reporting of events in which people appeared to be smiling, clapping, singing, and having a good time. Stances towards other chronotopic practices may differ much more dramatically, but the analysis presented here shows how important stance taking is in stabilizing the chronotope as a recognizable cultural object through generalizations and upscaling.

The analysis thus also points to the potential role of chronotopes in shaping public perceptions about the social value of communicative practices and in strengthening ideological stances and stereotypes.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>see <https://www.facebook.com/events/roma/flash-mob-sonoro-contest/492664348069016/>; accessed April 2, 2020.

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