p'arts, hum' Papers in Arts and Humanities

Vol. 3, No. 2, Dec. 2023
https://doi.org/10.52885/pah.v3i2

SPACE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

p'arts, hum' Papers in Arts and Humanities

Vol. 3, No. 2, Dec. 2023
https://doi.org/10.52885/pah.v3i2.146

Beyond the Grey Zone: The Production of Space in Eastern European Neo-Avantgarde

MĂDĂLINA BRAȘOVEANU
Affiliation: Faculty of Visual Arts
University of Oradea, Romania
Email: mada_brasoveanu@yahoo.com

Abstract

The spatial metaphor that dominates the historical overviews dedicated to neo-avantgarde art of Eastern Europe from the last decades of state socialism is the "grey zone"—a metaphor deeply rooted in the dichotomies of Cold War discourses, which understood the "socialist space" as being roughly split between an "official" and an "unofficial"/underground/hidden space of dissent. However, the grey zone metaphor fails to account for the diverse, complex, and nuanced ways in which unconventional art practices from the region engaged with a wide range of spaces, from the institutional (and official) ones to spaces of everyday life, delocalized spaces of a likeminded artistic community, and to the space of the image understood outside of the confined territory of traditional practices. By engaging a theoretical perspective drawn from the so-called "spatial turn" in the post-colonial discourse, I will try to argue that the "species of spaces" (Kemp-Welch) defining the neo-avantgarde art practices in the region were not conquering but were producing cultural and socially relevant spaces while blurring/widening the conventional boundaries of art's territory, and that this complexity cannot be understood by relying on the binary terminology of the geopolitical discourses of the Cold War.

Keywords: Eastern European neo-avantgarde, grey zone, heterotopy, socialist space, boundary, uncertain territories

Introduction: The Grey Zone and Its Lack of Shades

The art produced in Central and Eastern Europe in the last decades of state socialism is usually discussed in the recent tradition of art historiography—and within the curatorial discourses considering it—by appealing to one or several of the so-called *great dichotomies*

that generally dominated the (re)writing of the region's history.[1] *Official* versus *unofficial*, *state-approved* versus *state-sanctioned*, (publicly) *visible* versus *hidden*, (politically) *neutral* versus *dissident*, and others, have constituted the binary categories (ramified in a multitude of related subcategories) among which the art of this region was divided. Hierarchies derived then from here, the art production being appreciated as servile or complacent, or, on the contrary, heroic and benefiting a corresponding interest (or lack of) in contemporary art historiography. Not only art was seen through these divisive lenses, of course, but socialist societies in their entirety. The supposition was that, under socialist totalitarian political regimes, the very nature of societies presupposed, somehow axiomatically, the absence of a private sphere, as all the aspects and spaces of the social life were "officially" public, and the public sphere was itself monopolized by the state (Siegelbaum, 2006). Since everything bearing the label *official* was emitted by the regime, it was by default understood as being bad, immoral, repressive, and corrupt. As such, an extensive range of *negative categories* was called to define the spheres of social, political, and cultural life in their whole, a perspective that left no other choice but to exile all that was *normal*, or even *good*, to a series of counter-categories, of opposition with all which represented the *official*. This binary vision and all the dichotomies it generated have their origins in spaces outside socialist societies and/or in periods following the fall of the socialist regimes, in contexts dominated by anti- or post-socialist positions (Haraway, 1991).

Being especially vocal in the Western academic discourse during the Cold War, this binary vision reflected the geopolitical tensions of the time. As an *outsider's view*, this perspective inevitably triggers an incompatibility between the terms of the binary discourses and the everyday realities of socialist societies they were supposed to describe while reproducing, instead, the general coordinates of the (Western) anti-communist propaganda. Being imported or appropriated in post-communist cultural spaces, these binary models produce effects of self-colonization while at the same time generating distortions when it comes to understanding and retrieving the everyday realities, the functioning and dynamics of these societies, and their cultural scenes. In Romania too, as generally everywhere else in the region, this dichotomic understanding of the recent past not only persisted and dominated the mainstream cultural discourses long after the fall of the Berlin Wall, but it was taken for granted as representing the historical reality *as such*, and the only filter for attributing value (and making justice) inside the local culture, where it was put to work in its legitimizing powers.

[1] For an extensive discussion on the binary categories still marking the historical account of Soviet socialism, very relevant also for the Romanian case and other cases from the region, see: Yurchak (2005). *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*.

Filtered through this binary perspective upon the recent past, those cultural productions of the socialist era that did not reflect the prescriptions of the official political agenda are usually framed either in a more radical or softer version of the dichotomic discourse. The radical version understands all forms of art that were making use of non-traditional media and/or that were taking place in other places than the institutional ones (i.e., galleries or museums) as about some underground, hidden spaces—spaces that were hosting a subversive culture, cultivating an active opposition towards the regime.[2] The softer version of the same dichotomic perspective places all the forms of *non-aligned* art in a large and diffuse *grey zone*—a term whose meaning is utterly unclear, and which is supposed to indicate a form of compromise, or a middle position between the *regime* and the *opposition* (between *black* and *white*).[3] More often than not, the notion of *grey zone* even bears accents of moral sanction, even though the poles of its extremes cannot be clearly outlined, and that it is not obvious which of the two antipodes was more active in generating that *zone*. To what extent might it be possible to trace, especially in the art field, the direct action/influence of the regime, and from what point further might be possible to identify the dissent when, for example, all the exhibitions labeled as *alternative* that happened on the local art scene were transpiring with the support, and in the institutional spaces of the state (i.e., the *official* ones)? If it did exist a *grey zone*, which melted or weaved together the sphere of the regime with the one of its oppositions, what was the amplitude of their intersection, and which one of the two spheres was more active in generating and producing that conjunction? Was this grey zone more of a deliberate product of the *regime* (or tolerated by it), or was it the outcome of a passive opposition that managed to turn to its own advantage weaknesses or failures of the regime's desire to control the whole realm of the social?

[2] As far as Romania is concerned, I am thinking, especially of the art produced in the late 1970s and 1980s, which is explained mainly through this radical version of the dichotomic discourses, in the writings of Ileana Pintilie (2000), Adrian Guță (2001, 2008) and Magda Cârneci (1996, 2000), as well as in some recent contributions of Magda Predescu (2016) and Caterina Preda (2017).

[3] See, for example, Knudsen, & Frederiksen (Eds.) (2015) *Ethnographies of Grey Zones in Eastern Europe: Relations, Borders and Invisibilities*; Fehérváry (2013) *Politics in Color and Concrete: Socialist Materialities and the Middle Class in Hungary*; Šiklová, Poláčková-Henley & Turner (1990) The "gray zone" and the future of dissent in Czechoslovakia. There is yet no transnational genealogy of the term "grey zone," and various authors point to different sources: either towards ones that treat the socio-political question of the socialist block—as do Šiklová, Poláčková-Henley & Turner, who are citing a samizdat article from Czechoslovakia dated 1989; or towards sources external to this specific space-time frame, but which were also related to repressive political regimes—as, for example, the "grey zone" described by Primo Levi. However, the term did not benefit clarifications and critical insight. At Piotr Piotrowski, the "grey zone" is used mainly in relation to the intellectual and artistic environment of Czechoslovakia (Piotrowski, 2009), when it is not used to refer to Central and Eastern Europe as a whole, in the way the region is reflected from the perspective of the Western canon (Piotrowski, 1999). In the intellectual environment of Romania, the term "grey zone" started to circulate only in the last decade, in debates concerning recent art history, a situation explained by the fact that previous writings were especially considering the antipodes of the dichotomy, drawing a very contrasting black-and-white image of the "official" and the "unofficial" realms.

Was this grey zone emerging from the lenience, from the premeditation, or the incapacity of the regime? Moreover, how can such a theoretical instrument be functional to analyze a social context (along with its intellectual and art scene) where there did not exist a manifest and persistent dissidence, such as the one in Romania: from what could have the grey been formed here? However, the fact that there was no public opposition against the political regime and that the art practices did not programmatically manifest forms of dissent does not mean that the artistic field as a whole should be understood as a visual extension of the dominant ideology as such. In this respect, the *grey zone* is more than a restricting concept when confronted with an artistic context where different (or sometimes even divergent) art forms and ideas were functioning mainly in the frames of the official structures, as it happened on the art scene in Romania. It is an equivocal instrument for such a case.

"Species of Spaces" of Eastern European Neo-Avantgardes

Klara Kemp-Welch observed that theoretical perspectives as the ones which the notion of the *grey zone* also stems from are remnants of an understanding of space in terms of the Cold War. What all these perspectives share is a tendency to ignore the immediate spaces where the artists worked and to consider the physical space as a stenography of the geopolitical space (Kemp-Welch, 2015). What the author advances is that the question of space itself should become the instrument through which we are discussing the extremely diverse and fundamentally hybrid forms that are shaping the historical fields of experimental art in Eastern Europe during state socialism and in Latin America during military dictatorships. Kemp-Welch states that the artists in these regions "conquered" and were *operating in* what she calls, after George Perec, new *species of spaces*, which they were using for personal or collective investigations while generating, at the same time, "new forms of agency by repurposing and occupying new spaces" (Kemp-Welch, 2015, p. 1).

A brief list of cartographical landmarks of these new spaces, which can be also identified in the practice of artists who were active in Romania during the last decades of socialism, has to include—maybe in the first place—the spaces that substituted the artist's studio, either as a personal choice motivated by aesthetic explorations or as a compromise solution dictated by contextual constraints.

One of the most used of such studio-surrogate spaces was the artist's home, a place that hosted numerous creative activities, and sometimes even events, which became documented and were occasionally presented in exhibitions. In fact, *the artist working at home* might be certainly considered a *topos* of the art scenes of the former socialist countries, starting mainly from the 1960s. To remain only to a few scattered examples,

I would mention here: the apartment exhibition planned by Tamás Szentjóby and Gábor Altorjay in the middle of the '60s, a precursor of the first happening in Hungary, "The Lunch (In Memoriam Batu Khan)"; the exhibition "First Open Studio" Rudolf Sikora organized in 1970 in his house in Bratislava; the *apartment studios* of Július Koller, Jiři Kovanda or Mladen Stilinović; the "Artpool" archive founded in the '70s by Júlia Klaniczay and György Galántai in their home in Budapest; the situations and actions photographed by Decebal Scriba in his apartment, which he exhibited afterward in several exhibitions dedicated to photography in the second half of the '70[4]; the collective "house pARTy" events, from 1987 and 1988, held in the house of Nadina and Decebal Scriba in Bucharest; Ion Grigorescu documenting his various *domestic*, daily, and artistic actions, as did later on Károly Elekes in Târgu-Mureș, Károly Ferenczi, Rudolf Bone, László Ujvárossy and Dan Perjovschi in Oradea (among others). If, for the majority of the cases in the region of *artists working at home*, they opted for this alternative in its radical version—i.e., completely abandoning any involvement with the official cultural institutions and cultivating instead different para-/non-institutional models of artistic production, especially in Czechoslovakia and Hungary—however, in Romania very few of the similar examples can testify for such an exclusive engagement.[5] On the contrary, here the existing examples indicate that *the artist working at home* was a coextensive topos for *the artist working in the studio*, and both were pursued as complements of the artists' activity in the official institutional sphere, not as indifference towards it, because in most of the cases the results of the artists' work made at home were exhibited in the state-supported galleries. For example, I would cite one of the most vehiculated cases from Romania, the home-action "Red Apples for Lia," staged by Dan Perjovschi in his apartment in Oradea in 1988, which he exhibited in the same year, in the form of documentary photographs, at the National Youth Biennial "Atelier 35" in Baia-Mare.[6] The apartment installation was visited by some of Perjovschi's colleagues, artists from Oradea, but the event did not remain a closed-circuit one, did not pertain to an *underground*, *isolated*, or invisible artistic sphere, since it was presented, documented by photography, in a large-scale official national exhibition.

[4] A series of group exhibitions exploring the use of photography in the practice of visual artists was held in the second half of the 1970s at the "Friedrich Schiller" House for Culture in Bucharest.

[5] Among these are the *house pARTy* events and some of the actions carried by artists mentioned above. However, the reason for not displaying these events in exhibitions was that there existed no opportunities for doing it and not the artists' intention of articulating a critique of the institutional system by forging different models for art production and distribution.

[6] In this home-action, Perjovschi covered completely the walls and furniture of his apartment with white paper, on which he drew a multitude of synthetic and symbolic figures, along with textual messages, which referred to his love relationship with Lia Perjovschi. *Red Apples for Lia* is discussed, among very few other examples from Romania, in Bryzgel, A. (2017). *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*. Manchester University Press.

As such, Perjovschi's action "Red Apples for Lia" marked out an independent space—that of the artist's home, as a different space from the ones traditionally designated as belonging to the art's institutional system (the *proper* studio, the gallery, the museum)—that extended or substituted the studio as an exclusive and privileged space dedicated to the creation of art. At the same time, the artist working at home had, in this example, as in most examples from Romania, the function of consolidating a *continuity* between the profession and the daily, private life of the artist by erasing the lines that would presumably separate them. This function of assuring continuities was especially significant and active on that artistic scene, and it would be false to mistake it for the isolation of the creative work from an oppressive social and political context. The displacement of the work made in a domestic environment into the gallery space, even if this displacement was made by means of photographic documents, shows an effort to ensure a continuum between the private space of the artist as a potential source and host of artistic acts, and the institutional space, and not an effort of isolating and delimiting enclaves of artistic *freedom* out of the artist's private space.

Another category of space that substituted the artist's studio was the workplace of the artist, in its turn a sort of commonplace for Eastern Europe's art scenes. The majority of the artists were, at least in Romania, *workers in a worker's state*[7], being employed in full-time jobs in various institutions, factories, or the education system, in positions more or less compatible with their training, as useful citizens in a society that was centered, at least propagandistically, on production and efficiency. In the logic of that system, the creative endeavors of the artists were secondary activities to be pursued in their free time, the main context where the activity of the artist-citizen belonged to being in one of the state's institutions/factories/craft cooperatives. It is in one such cooperative that Miklós Onucsán staged his action "C'est ici que j'arrive tout le matins" in 1982 and, in the following year, the one titled "The Limit of the Working Area." In the same cooperative, Onucsán found some scrap materials that he would use in various works, such as "Hygiène de L'Art, Contre Culture" (1987)—where he stamped a former cover canvas for the printing table of the factory with the stamp of the French artist Hervé Fischer; or his work "Expression of the Human Body" (1986)—where he used plastic doll heads rejected, due to deformations, from the production process. In 1983–84, in a different workplace, a school for children with special needs, László Ujvárossy was initiating his experiment "Hand / Portrait," exhibiting its results in those years and debuting thus a multiple-stage artistic process which he would carry out over the following years.

[7] I'm using here the title of the renowned book of Haraszti, M. (1978). *A Worker in a Worker's State*.

Also, in the interval between 1978 and 1980, Károly Elekes carried several actions and happenings in his place of work, a craft cooperative in Târgu-Mureș, which he documented by photographs and later exhibited. As is the case for all the other artists cited above, both of Onucsán's actions were also made in plain sight, during working hours, in the courtyard of the cooperative, being photographed by one of his colleagues. By hanging a placard on his neck reading "C'est ici que j'arrive tout le matins," Onucsán posed for the camera, in an action by which he declared his status of an artist within the very daily context that seemed to disregard it, by considering him only as any other laboring man. Still, there is no self-victimization in his protest, but rather, strong signs of adaptation and negotiation as ongoing processes, and the phrase on his placard might be sub-textually continued as: "It's here where I arrive every morning, but this doesn't prevent me from consistently carrying out my creative work here as well." It is this very meaning of the inscription on Onucsán's placard that is confirmed in some of his later works, including his action from 1983, "The Limit of the Working Area." Here, he pursued several attempts to pose in a stance similar to that of the "Vitruvian Man" of Leonardo da Vinci, making use of a continuous ribbon, stretched by his hands and feet in a rectangular shape, on the background of an immense circle of an industrial wooden reel. The series of photos from this action show him attempting to enact the correct position while the wind was blowing away his ribbon, and he was failing to discipline his body in rendering the ideal prototype he was trying to mimic. But far from reflecting a critique of those imperfect, improvised, and un-ideal means he was working with, or the context he was working in, Onucsán's action was operating in elevating those means and that context to that of valid and fruitful ingredients for artistic practice, by formulating a *paragon* between what he had at hand, and a major reference of the canonical history of art. All of these actions were opening up intervals, instead of tracing delimiting lines, intervals that established continuities and ensured the mobility of ideas and negotiation of the rules, both in what regards the designated functions of the physical and abstract spaces they inhabited, as in the conventional territory of art. As his intervention shows, the *limit* in its title makes it an allegory of adaptation and circulation rather than one of isolation and separation, which is equally true for all the other examples of the artists making art in their non-artistic places of work from Romania, at least.

Besides their homes and places of work, the other spaces where artists were staging experiments and interventions may also be understood as extensions or substitutes of the studio and, at the same time, as cancellations of the studio's status as a privileged space that hosts and preconditions the artistic creation. The nomadism of the artistic practice benefited from a significant interest among artists in the region, and it spread in all the spaces of daily life, signaling the urgency the artists felt to integrate among ordinary people:

to become part of the crowds populating the streets, the parks and squares, thus bringing art closer to life in a direct, raw manner, unmediated by any of the official filters and, usually, without special labels or explanations that it was art happening there. The artists' interest to displace artmaking into the ordinary context of public places was so widespread—and took so many forms—that it is difficult to restrain the examples at only a few. I would still mention here, briefly, Gyula Konkoly's "Five Identical Persons Apply Here!" (1969–79), Miklós Erdely's "Two Persons Who Decisively Influenced My Life" (1972), and László Lakner's "Scenes from a Workman's Life" from Hungary; the actions-exhibitions organized by The Group of Six Artists on the streets of Zagreb in the second half of the '70s, and the public actions of Tomislav Gotovac, in the former Yugoslavia; Milan Knížák's series of street action from the 1960s, and Jiři Kovanda's *invisible* artistic actions in public spaces from the '70s, in the former Czechoslovakia; Decebal Scriba's urban actions, such as "The Gift" (1974), various happenings and public spaces interventions made by the group MAMŰ in Târgu-Mureș in late '70s and early '80s, in Romania.

Besides the populated, urban place, the artists in the region systematically engaged in working outdoors, in and with the natural environment. In Romania, in particular, we can find several such interventions since the end of the '60, in the practice of Paul Neagu, Horia Bernea, Mihai Olos, Ion Grigorescu, Geta Brătescu, Ana Lupaş or the Sigma Group in Timişoara, as well as in the activity of the group MAMŰ in Târgu-Mureș in late '70s and early '80s. In all of these examples, too, irrespective of the fact whether they were acknowledged as art by the passers-by or not, the artists sought to integrate more easily into the everyday, into the ordinary, and by this, they created new spaces that were culturally meaningful, that were opening up breaches for continuity, circulation, and mobility into areas that were usually seen as separated—i.e., that of unconventional art, and that of a public space confiscated by oppressive political regimes. Through their wanderings and creative interventions that happened in places of ordinary life or natural environments, the artists opened up new cultural territories and produced testimonies about experiences of the space in which they lived—a space they usually perceived as a continuous entity that was shaped by transitions, returns, and intermediations, the very same space that is completely obliterated when the metaphor of the *grey zone* is put to work.

Moreover, a different kind of spaces, but equally rich and fervent, were those of likeminded artistic communities: more often than not, communities that were dispersed in geographic parameters but which nonetheless maintained a vivid dialogue and joined efforts in organizing events and exhibitions, working as artists' networks that transgressed the physical and geopolitical confines. In some cases, these de-localized communities opened up a space of communication and exchange of ideas in the particular frames of mail art.

Finally, all of the spaces listed briefly and illustrated by very few examples here have to be understood as coalescent with the space of the image. In Romania, the space of the image had, in the decades of late socialism, a dominant consensual understanding confined to the conventional mediums of art, in their canonical traditions, an understanding that did not derive from the political ideology but was constituent to a predilection for the conservatism of the local culture. In this respect, this last space, that of the image, gathers a large variety of questions regarding representation and visuality, tradition and novelty, authority over the field of art, and others, and the debates that referred to the space of the image were the essential stake for all the activities the artists carried in all the other places.

The Creation of Space

If Kemp-Welch speaks of artists *conquering*, *occupying*, and *operating in* new spaces, I believe that it would be much more productive to discuss the artists *creating/producing* these new species of spaces, and the forms of mediation, negotiation, and circulation of the artists used in order to open up the diverse micro-spaces which are now configuring the cartography of experimental / neo-avant-garde art of the *former East*. A space that is (or might be) conquered—as Kemp-Welch understands it—is a passive, static space, one that stands there already made; it is a given. However, precisely such a comprehension of space was convincingly contested from an interdisciplinary perspective, along with what was called *the spatial turn* in postcolonial critical thinking (Warf & Arias, 2009; Teverson & Upstone, 2011; Withers, 2009).

With a genealogy indicating Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre as pioneers of this *spatial overturning* (Soja, 1999), the new thinking on and by means of space states, as its fundamental thesis, that space and place are not given, but *made*: they are created through the social production of lived spaces or as results of inter-relational actions. As such, space and place are in a constant process of re-creation, of practice and making, a process which assigns them a mobile and relational status (Massey, Allen & Sarre, 1999). The new way of looking at space meant a breakup from the dualism that used to dominate the geographical imagination—in other words, the binarity formed by the notion of the *perceived space* (or the material space, or the First Space, in Lefebvre's term), with the notion of the *conceived space* (or the space that is imagined or represented, the Second Space of Lefebvre) (Lefebvre, 1992).

Edward W. Soja coined a *thirdspace*, developed from Lefebvre's *trialectic of spatiality* and from Foucault's notion of heterotopy, a Thirdspace which he identified in what Lefebvre called the *lived space* (Soja, 1996). This *thirding* Soja advanced is not searching for

a middle position between the two extremes of the initial dichotomy but presents itself as an alternative that reconstitutes, develops and, at the same time, goes beyond the original binarity. The *thirdspace*, as a lived space, is a multifaceted and contradictory one, a space that is able to support multiple representations. It is a space that can be investigated through binary oppositions but, at the same time, it is also a space

> …where *il y a toujours l'Autre*, where there are always 'other' spaces, heterotopologies, paradoxical geographies to be explored. It is a meeting ground, a site of hybridity […] and moving beyond entrenched boundaries, a margin or edge where ties can be severed and also where new ties can be forged. It can be mapped but never captured in conventional cartographies; it can be creatively imagined but obtains meaning only when practiced and fully *lived*. (Soja, 1999, p. 276)

Through the lens of the *thirdspace*, all the *other* spaces that hosted collective or individual situations, events, happenings, and artistic interventions in the non-conventional art from Romania (and the region) were marking out a dislocation or an expansion of the traditionally designated territories for art's production and presentation (i.e., the studio, the gallery, the museum). As such, these spaces became as many intervals of mediation and negotiation, of displacement and return, generating new meanings and tensions. They largely reflect what Mieke Bal and Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro meant by the double metaphor of *migratory aesthetics*—a movement of transportation/instability, followed by a movement of productive tensions (Bal & Hernández-Navarro, 2011). The non-conventional spaces of the Eastern European art scenes were political spaces in the literal sense that Bal and Hernández-Navarro understand the *political character*, distinct from *politics*, as a preservation of the conflictual nature of the social life in general (Bal & Hernández-Navarro, 2011). They were political spaces precisely because they were spaces in which art was being made, spaces in which the antagonisms and the critical negotiable tensions were able to coexist, where meanings were able to be recalled, suggested, involved, and were able to function without necessarily being transmitted (Bal & Hernández-Navarro, 2011).

Even if Bal and Hernández-Navarro speak of migratory aesthetics as an attribute of the present global culture, I believe this metaphor of the circulation might also be revealing at a micro-scale and in relation to the experimental artistic production from socialist times because the two movements described above—that of transportation/instability, and that of productive tensions—can be identified as dynamic components and as agents that were activating all the species of spaces where art happened, turning them into *political* spaces. In this view, they shouldn't be understood as marginal spaces

in a hierarchical sense, whether we are talking about a political-cultural hierarchy, a geographical, or a geopolitical one. However, these spaces were margins, that is, hybrid and indefinite spaces, wilful chosen by the artists for the openness they offered.[8]

Even if the notion of *grey zone*, in its structural ambiguity, could have contained such a conceptual extension as the one drawn by the spatial *thirding* Soja proposed and could have well tolerated the status of a *place of manoeuvre* that hosts and facilitates the transportation and the productive tensions generated by the migratory aesthetics, it seems far more cautious to entirely abandon this notion, in order to stop perpetuating the conceptual distortion it carries with it. In fact, the only valence of the grey zone metaphor that must be preserved is precisely the spatial one because the problem of introducing the immediate, daily, *lived* space in the territory of art was a recurring idea in the majority of the nonconventional interventions made by the artists of the region. While this idea overlaps in surprising ways with the theory of *thirdspace*, it also fails to be contained in a binary conceptual model.

On the other hand, if we choose to regard the *regime* less as a monolithic and abstract structure infused by bureaucracy, ideology, and fixed rules, and we see it instead as a structure that was formed, mediated, and held together by people, at every social and institutional level, then the *regime* itself reveals its own *identity* of lived space. In Romania, at least, the immediate space where the artists lived and worked intersected with the *regime* as lived space, and these encounters did not, most of the times, have the impact and spectacular appearance of a clash of contraries, nor did they leave the impression of dissolution in a neutral and indiscernible grey. Quite the opposite, they had the air of some continuous and cautious groping, translation, transposition, and intermediation of a series of different (but not necessarily opposed) meanings, indicating mostly the conflictual nature of social life in general, towards the productive latent tensions it contains, and which art is capable and eager to capitalize.

The Space of the Boundary

The status of margins—of art's territory, foremost—of these *other spaces* of nonconventional art, and their migratory/motive functions meet in the notion of boundary—as it was theorized by Inge E. Boer—which is a specific state of the *thirdspace* (2006). First of all, for Boer, the boundary is the theoretical instrument that leaves aside the structures of thought founded on binary oppositions and thus makes visible rich, diverse, multifaceted,

[8] In Lefebvre's view, *the margin* appears as a place of passage, of encounter, and of negotiation, a place of hybridization. For Bell Hooks, the margin is a space of radical openness—the author highlights an essential difference between that marginality imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as a site of resistance, as a place of radical openness and possibility (Hooks, 1990).

and chaotic relations that compose the much larger spaces contained between the poles of any binarity. Considering binary oppositions to be reductive, Boer proposes to shift the theoretical perspective towards analyzing the ways in which a different interval is created: a space—rhetorical and equally cultural—where opposition leaves room for negotiation, a space situated *in between*, which functions as a relay, as a "contact zone where different beliefs about life and what it means meet or collide" (Boer, 2006, pp. 2–3).

To Boer, boundaries are not fixed and empty *lines* that install and support separations but are flexible and inhabited *spaces* where, by means of, and in the name of which processes of negotiations can take place. In her analysis, the boundaries lose their anonymity, along with the impersonal character and the truth value usually assigned to them—they start to exhibit, instead, the mechanisms and human activities that are constantly building them. As such, boundaries get to be analyzed not as much in *what* they are as in the *function* they fulfill—that of a place of negotiation (Boer, 2006).

Such a negotiation, as Boer explains, has a linguistic nature, language itself being at the same time a boundary and a space for negotiation, and *translation* standing as an example for producing boundaries as functional spaces. However, this function, the author states, becomes even more obvious when it is composed together with the visual equivalents of the linguistic expression. The human mediator involved in crossing the boundary is the very medium that transforms (translates) the message/codes he is carrying with him on one side and the other side of the border, and the *meeting* is the concept that makes it possible to analyze boundaries as spaces in which events and translations can take place (Boer, 2006).

Particularly complex intermediary zones, boundaries, are, in Boer's understanding, *uncertain territories*, flexible and temporary spaces that cannot be made to disappear but which can better fulfill their ordering roles if we accept their existence, along with their uncertain state. The spaces of boundaries may be material ones—a window, the desert, the fashion; as well as abstract ones—theories or ideas in their transcultural circulation; or invisible ones—the rules that govern any space inhabited by people. However, in any case, they do not pertain to a natural order but are *constructed* along processes from which a series of general rules can be discerned—rules that apply to any boundary space be it physical or immaterial. Precisely these processes of constructing the boundaries are then eluded and depersonalized for the boundary to appear afterwards as a given of a natural order. However, these same processes are also the ones that have to be questioned in order to reveal the boundary's status of *created space*, a space that separates worlds of difference but which is itself a world of difference (Boer, 2006).

Species of Spaces in Eastern European Neo-Avantgarde: The Production of Uncertain Territories

I believe that the essential and common function fulfilled by all those *other* spaces the artists created through their artistic production beyond the traditional frames of the art's territory was that of opening up some places for translation and negotiation of the codes and norms in the form of boundaries as *uncertain territories*. Also, the fact that those artistic *species of spaces* shared the status of functional and productive boundaries is obvious from the very impossibility of delimiting them by clear lines of separation—the same impossibility that initially pushed those spaces into the diffuse category of *grey zones*.

The boundaries may gain a graphic expression (lines) or a material one (barriers, fences, walls) only when two distinct entities of some sort meet but do not mix (or their mixture is prohibited). In the Romanian art scene of the last decades of socialism, there usually cannot be identified such pure contraries that existed without mixing, conditioning, or modifying each other. Quite the contrary: the large majority of examples of nonconventional art's practice and exhibiting reveals territories that host reciprocal conditioning and altering between the different (and not necessarily opposed) elements involved—those pertaining to the *official* realm and those that did not in any direct way. After the intricated and continuous processes of negotiation took place, each of the elements involved became more flexible and transformed. Those territories of the boundary may have belonged to any of the realms they had to separate, like Derrida's *parergon*, but they could also be formed by overlaps between various realms.

There are many boundaries, many crossings of those boundaries, many translations and returns, and many negotiations that can be traced on the local non-conventional art scene, the institutional (and non-institutional) frames being also constantly negotiated, along with the boundaries of art and with what was designated as its exteriority. And it is precisely because they were not born from a program of institutional critique (in its Western terms) that these *exits* the artists took to unconventional spaces have to be connected with the immediate places where they lived and worked and with their daily existence, for it was there their experiments and creative explorations were searching to be integrated, and accepted, in their social and institutional reality. Without programmatically aiming to implement some strategies of opposition towards cultural institutions (by questioning their legitimacy) or towards the political system (by questioning its authority), the wanderings the artists undertook in other spaces were exploring the productive tensions that sprung when their practice interacted with these spaces, irrespective of the fact that these wanderings were fuelled by an indifference towards the institutions and politics,

or by dissent, discontent, frustration, and discomfort. A similar strategy was functioning, in the majority of the cases, in the aesthetic field as well—in what I called the space of the image. Here, the fossilized conventional dimensions of art were the ones to be challenged by a constant questioning of their loopholes and a flexibilization of their rigid outlines in order to transform these dimensions into (more) open grounds for negotiations and translations. By tackling this area of the local art scene through the theoretical filter of the boundary, it is possible to identify continuities produced by the artists there, where the dichotomic perspectives showed only fractures/segregations. Continuities in the form of *uncertain territories* that are not limiting but are opening up, which are not smoothing down the contradictions nor canceling the oppositions, but are offering the human (and artistic) existence *the place* where to metabolize and experience them.

I believe that artistic life described by the unconventional practices of the local art scene has to be understood as a continuum that negotiates and conciliates the numerous contradictions and inadvertences it confronted and which, to a significant extent, formed it. In that continuum, the macro-scaled polarities of the geopolitical discourses may have had some representations in the artists' imaginary, vaguer, or clearer; however, they did not have the concreteness, the impact, and the urgency of the immediate reality where they had to practice and be accepted as artists, in their own terms. The immediate reality did not reflect directly, at the level of daily existence, the macropolitical polarities even if it reflected too many other contradictions that defined it and did not always result straight from the register of the official politics. The experience the artists had with those other spaces was a path breaker in the local visual culture. But it was, at the same time, one that happened in very loose frames: the artists always understood their activity outside the conventional spaces of making or exhibiting art as a complement to their activity in conventional institutional spaces. The boundaries the artists produced were the places where their negotiation with their daily present realities took place, the very spaces they were using to connect to and integrate into the context they lived in; places which did not ensure a separation of antagonistic ideas, territories, and entities, but guaranteed instead different forms of symbiosis that enabled distinctive elements to become mutually constitutive.

If the *grey zone*, and the binary terminology fuelling it, focused especially on the relations between the art practice and the status quo, the boundary (as *thirdspace*) is a theoretical instrument that encourages us to consider the relations art has with itself, and with its immediate context (be it a local, national, or transnational one), by recording the degrees and variations of scale and intensity with which the political factor interfered and was efficient

in the social field. The metaphor of *uncertain territory* preserves the spatial reference of the *grey zone* metaphor, without perpetuating the antagonistic patterns or the moral sanction note of the *compromise* the latter did. Even if it is not easier to define than the *grey zone*, the uncertain territory of the boundary increases the degree of unpredictability and lack of concreteness of the *space* in discussion and, at the same time, diversifies and enhances the unclear rules, the over turnings, and the surprises populating it. Yet, its efficiency as a theoretical instrument is significantly increased by the fact that, as Boer explained, the boundaries are not relevant for *what* they are, or for *where* they are situated, as they are for their analysis as functions. Space itself becoming the theoretical lens through which the diverse and fundamental hybrid forms of experimental art in Eastern Europe in the decades of state socialism are discussed is only possible if space is understood as a function, not as an object of study—as a generic, variable, and indefinite site, marked by different movements of passage, of transgressing, of transporting, and transformation. By putting the concept of boundary in use as an analytical instrument, we may study the functions that were activated in those *other* spaces by means of artistic interventions. The boundary may operate then as a conceptual filter able to analyze the very mechanisms through which diverse normative limits were imposed, identify their sources, and understand how they were eluded, adapted, and managed by the artists. This function of the boundary did not belong to a specific place but it could be activated anywhere. It generated, where it became operative, new spaces where norms gained concreteness, exhibited gaps, and uncovered their status of codes that could be translated.

If we accept Canclini's argument:

> art lost its space when it left the home of its language, which was the painting; when it questioned the institution that contained it, which was the museum; and when it shared with globalized cultures the experience that the national model is insufficient to encompass social imaginaries, (2011, p. 27)

then the experimentation and negotiation in such a drift, in the absence of a fixed own space (and in the refusal of one), is the very code through and for the sake of which the artists created the *species of spaces*, the uncertain territories that map a large amount of the local neo-avantgarde art of the late socialist era.

References

Bal, M., & Hernández-Navarro, M. Á. (2011). Introduction. In M. Bal, & M. Á. Hernández-Navarro (Eds.), *Art and visibility in migratory culture: Conflict, resistance, and agency* (p. 11). Editions Rodopi B. V.

Boer, I. E. (2006). *Uncertain territories. Boundaries in cultural analysis* (M. Bal, B. van Eekelen, & P. Spyer, Eds.). Editions Rodopi B. V.

Brenner, N., & Elden, S. (Eds.). (2009). *State, space, world. Selected essays*. University of Minnesota Press.

Bryzgel, A. (2017). *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*. Manchester University Press.

Canclini, N. G. (2011). Migrants: Workers of metaphors. In M. Bal, & M. Á. Hernández-Navarro (Eds.), *Art and visibility in migratory culture: Conflict, resistance, and agency* (pp. 23–35). Editions Rodopi B. V.

Cârneci, M. (1996). *Arta anilor '80: Texte despre Postmodernism* [Art of the 1980s in Eastern Europe. Texts on Postmodernism]. Editura Litera.

Cârneci, M. (2000). *Artele plastice în România 1945–1989* [Visual Arts in Romania 1945–1989]. Editura Meridiane.

Fehérváry, K. (2013). *Politics in color and concrete: Socialist materialities and the middle class in Hungary*. Indiana University Press.

Guță, A. (2001). *Texte despre generația '80* [Texts about the '80s generation]. Editura Paralela 45.

Guță, A. (2008). *Generația '80 în artele vizuale* [The '80s generation in the visual arts]. Editura Paralela 45.

Haraszti, M. (1978). *A worker in a worker's state*. Universe Books.

Hooks, B. (1990). Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics. South End Press.

Kemp-Welch, K. (2015). *Species of spaces in Eastern European and Latin American Experimental Art*. MOMA. https://www.moma.org/d/pdfs/W1siZiIsIjIwMTUvMTIvMDgvNmE5enJmNXlmMF9tcDAxOTA2M19ra3dfZmluYWxfMi5wZGYiXV0/mp019063_kkw_final_2.pdf?sha=e9b1b4d750988e5a

Knudsen, I.H., & Frederiksen, M. D (Eds.). (2015). *Ethnographies of Grey Zones in Eastern Europe: Relations, borders and invisibilities*. Anthem Press.

Lefebvre, H. (1992). *The production of space*. Blackwell.

Massey, D., Allen, J., & Sarre, P. (1999). Rethinking space and place: Introduction. In D. Massey, J. Allen, & P. Sarre (Eds.), *Human Geography today* (pp. 243–247). Polity Press.

Pintilie, I. (2000). *Acționismul în România în timpul comunismului* [Actionism in Romania during the Communist era]. Idea Design & Print.

Piotrowski, P. (1999). The Grey Zone of Europe. In B. Pejic and D. Elliott (Eds.), *After the wall: Art and Post-Communist Europe* (pp. 37–41). Moderna Museet.

Piotrowski, P. (2009). *In the shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe 1945–1989*. Reaktion Books.

Preda, C. (2017). *Art and politics under modern dictatorships: A comparison of Chile and Romania*. Springer International Publishing.

Predescu, M. (2016). Expoziția Medium–Moment de sinteză a neoavangardelor sub semnul postconceptualismului [Exhibition Medium-Moment of synthesis of neo avant-gardes under the sign of post-conceptualism]. In C. Dan, I. Király, A. Oroveanu, & M. Radu (Eds.), *Arta în România între anii 1945–2000. O analiză din perspectiva prezentului* [Art in Romania between 1945–2000. An analysis and a reassessment from a present-day] (pp. 130–142). Fundația Noua Europă / Colegiul Noua Europă, Editura UNArte, MNAC.

Siegelbaum, L. H. (Eds.). *Borders of socialism: Private spheres of Soviet Russia*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Šiklová, J., Poláčková-Henley, K., & Turner, G. (1990). The "Gray Zone" and the future of dissent in Czechoslovakia. *Social Research, 57*(2), 347–363. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970592

Soja, E. W. (1996). *Thirdspace. Journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places*. Blackwell Publishers.

Soja, E. W. (1999). Thirdspace: Expanding the scope of the geographical imagination. In D. Massey, J. Allen, & P. Sarre (Eds.), *Human geography today* (pp. 260–278). Polity Press.

Teverson, A., & Upstone, S. (Eds.). (2011). *Postcolonial spaces: The politics of space in contemporary culture*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Warf, B., & Arias, S. (Eds.). (2009). *The spatial turn: Interdisciplinary perspectives*. Routledge.

Withers, C. W. J. (2009). Place and the «spatial turn» in geography and in history. *Journal of the History of Ideas, 70*(4), 637–658.

Yurchak, A. (2005). *Everything was forever, until it was no more. The last Soviet generation*. Princeton University Press.

p'arts, hum' Papers in Arts and Humanities

Vol. 3, No. 2, Dec. 2023
https://doi.org/10.52885/pah.v3i2.148

Broken Spaces and Walled-off Realities

ZOLTÁN VERES
Affiliation: Eastern Mediterranean International School
Israel
Email: zoltan@em-is.org

Abstract

This paper proposes a closer view into how space is structured with one single purpose: to exercise power, both in physical and structural, or rather physical–structural form, bending and twisting human behavior around it. Separation walls embody frustration that stems from unresolved traumas of the past that perpetuate the impotence to solve or re-solve these traumas. Individuals living in the shadows of such walls have incorporated the pain of these traumas into their identities, a pain that leads to an external expression of the incorporation that is then directed towards the wall changing its purpose, turning it into a canvas of creative capitulation[1] in front of the power represented by it. The artifacts that start populating and decorating such walls function as a form of aesthetic domestication, shifting impotence into potency, offering a new semiotic field for the definition of the term "aesthetic resistance." The objects discussed in this paper include the Berlin Wall and the Israeli–Palestinian separation wall (as seen from Netiv HaAsara and Bethlehem). Walls are not specifically defined in this text. They can be metaphorical, and conventional (without material representation), they can be represented by differences that separate people, institutions, and political structures from each other. This text has not been written with the desire to offer a thorough academic introduction into "teichopolitics" (the politics of walls); instead, it provides a phenomenological "description" of a sort of different experiences regarding various ways of seeing, feeling, and understanding walls.

Keywords: teichopolitics, walls, separation, power, language, identity, ontology, Berlin Wall, Israel, Palestine, Derrida, otherness

[1] In the way Camus' Sisyphus embraces the absurdity of his own fate to transcend it into a joyous smile. A moral win, still in the presence of the rock, without which this moral win would not make sense. The walls conquered by artists, populated by murals and graffiti, are very similar to Sisyphus' smile in the excruciating presence of the wall, without which this form of aesthetic resistance would not make sense.

In his 1995 movie, *Ulysses' Gaze*, Angelopoulos depicts an epic voyage of a filmmaker to find the earliest moving pictures shot in the Balkans. The aim of this journey takes him through a troubled part of South-Eastern Europe with a stop in the besieged Sarajevo. While the celluloid is being uncovered and developed, the city is slowly surrounded by fog. The curator of the film archive claims:

> The fog, I sensed it. In this city, the fog is man's best friend. Does it sound strange? It's because it's the only time the city gets back to normal. Almost like it used to be. The snipers have zero visibility. Foggy days are festive days here, so let's celebrate. Besides, we have another cause for celebration. A film. A captive gaze, as you called it, from the early days of the century, set free at last at the end of the century. Isn't that an important event? Music. …Oh, yes. A youth orchestra. …. Boys. Serbs, Croats, Muslims. They come out when there's a ceasefire. They go from place to place and make music in the city. How about it? Shall we go out too? (Levy as cited in Harris, n.d.)

Shall we go out too? The fog not only reduces visibility to zero but erases boundaries and allows for a non-local sensory experience by muffling visual spatial orientation. What walls separate the fog reunites. The movie features fog as a beautiful metaphor for the dissolution of boundaries. When separation lines designed by snipers' guns are temporarily immaterialized, the captives, the citizens of Sarajevo emerge from their shelters and perform and receive art. Reading Aleksandra Bilić's (n.d.) paper on theater performances during the siege, one cannot fail to notice the intricate and poetic relationship between walls and their dissolution, between their deconstruction and protective rebuilding, between their harsh reality when we bump into them and their sheltering nature protecting our illusions of normality. Walls are dissolved and re-erected, and walls are destroyed and repurposed together with the space they shape. Seen. Unseen.

> Because the public were experiencing the same horrors as the performers and practitioners, theatre became an equal escape for both. However, actors felt that they had a duty to the public, to ensure that their hunger, fear, and the cold were forgotten during performances. (Bilić, n.d., p. 5)

What we call "aesthetic resistance" manages to help individuals survive inhuman conditions rehumanizing and reconquering the moral space that is held captive by fear and terror. Can one be deceived into normality by aesthetic experience amid horror and madness? Can this process still be called deception? Is the normality reinstated in the experience of art in such conditions indeed just an illusion?

Seen. Unseen.

Figure 1

Banksy: Window on the West Bank (2005)

Source: "Banksy in Palestine." A field guide to Banksy's graffiti on the Separation Wall. University of Oregon.

Walls have always been used to keep things inside or to keep them out, and the dynamic of the opposites is translating itself in various forms. One of them is the dialectics of war/madness and the recreated normality, like in the case of performances in the fog of the besieged city of Sarajevo. Other forms might involve something that we call 'structural power.' Therefore, walls are power structures to structure power, and however ambigramatic this short definition might sound, it is not a tautology. Staying with the classical definition of Susan Strange, structural power is "the power to decide how things shall be done, the power to shape frameworks within which states relate to one another, relate to people or relate to corporate enterprises" (Heywood, 2014). What is important in this definition is "how things shall be done" (Heywood, 2014) and shaping "frameworks within which states relate to one another, relate to people or relate to corporate enterprises" (Heywood, 2014). In our case, this might mean anything from crossing a border separating two states to crossing checkpoints, filing a tax report, or following the procedures designed to cast your vote. It can also include cultural frameworks, the language that you can use, the way you can express yourself, the vocabulary that you are allowed to use, or the space that you share with its specific sphere of intimacy proper to the culture in which you find and define yourself.

Frameworks, of course, can be helpful, as they give shape to your various actions, or they can be restrictive, as they might limit the area of your liberties. It is relatively easy to manipulate this form of power as even small changes can lead to measurable consequences (introducing or removing terms or required data from request forms or polls, ID cards, passports, etc.). Many countries in the European Union have abolished the request for religious identification when filling out different request forms handed to the local government to get residence status or identification documents. It is not the case for Israel, for instance, where it seems to be the most natural question that regards one's religious identity in various official forms. There is, however, no possibility to declare oneself as being without religion or at least to identify as agnostic. The list of words at one's disposal—officially selected, provided, and legitimized—define "how things shall be done" (Heywood, 2014) and how one's self-identification shall be done, that is. In this respect, the concept of structural power becomes reminiscent of Austin's (1962) ideas in *How to do things with words*. Indeed, the question is how to do walls with words. Sometimes an individual's entire official/legal perceptibility depends on the vocabulary that allows officials to capture their identity. Think about individuals with multiple religious or cultural identities or individuals who do not wish to identify along these lines. Think about the natural smoothness of one's own national and linguistic identity and think about the reaction you might receive if, using the language that accompanies one from your birth, you reject the idea or the obligation to identify as belonging to the culture defined by that language. A good example could be the short BBC Studios (2008) satirical *Do you speak English?* that depicts a foreigner in a country asking a passerby whether they speak English, and, elaborately and eloquently, they deny speaking English, in English. This example implies that the absurdity of denying our linguistic identity using our mother tongue shows how we can bump into the walls within which our cultural space is defined. What protects us can imprison us, too. The language we speak, which we so kindly call the "mother tongue," can alienate us, exclude, or imprison us—in other words, it may turn into impenetrable walls. What can one do when their own language becomes the language of the enemy when the language so dear speaks the words of an alienating power?

Our mother tongue is so naturally part of our identity that we think of it as our property, we own it, we speak through it, and we are what we are by owning it. The structures it offers, the ways we perform actions through it, and the linguistic walls that design the way we perform these actions are seen as ours, individually, and as a nation. These walls build our heritage, and we feel comfortable within these walls, as if, indeed, these walls were meant to protect us, create unity, and generate a shared "subject," the person of the nation.

Keeping in. Keeping out.

Derrida's (1996/1998) *Monolingualism of the Other* is based on an experience that he had as a child during the Vichy regime in Algeria, in El Biar. Because of his Jewish identity, the young Derrida was expelled from the school, and his French citizenship has been suspended for two years. The language so self-understandably belonging to him starts speaking the words of exclusion. His own mother tongue becomes the language of the enemy. There are two important elements in this short work: one of them is about the understanding that the language we speak—even if that is the only language that we know—is not ours, it is not our language; the other is about the nature of language that allows us to produce humorous situations, similar to the already mentioned little BBC Studios (2008) show.

> But above all, and this is the double edge of a sharp sword that I wished to confide to you almost without saying a word: I suffer and take pleasure in [jouis de] what I am telling you in our aforementioned common language: 'Yes, I only have one language, yet it is not mine.'…(this) sentence extirpates itself in a logical contradiction heightened by a performative or pragmatic contradiction. (Derrida, 1996/1998, p. 2–3)

This contradiction gives us an interesting perspective into understanding walls that are not physical, walls created by language, culture, or any tool that either expresses identity or helps us to express identities (not necessarily ours). If the only language I speak is not mine, is it possible that it belongs to somebody else? Or is it the case that this language does not belong to any of its speakers? If this is the case, then the ones who use the language to perform actions that affect one's identity ('You should never use this language, you are not worthy of it because you are….') are also not the owners of that language, and that means that the performative power of such linguistic actions (to devoid somebody of the right to speak their mother tongue using the very same tongue, or any other tongue for that matter) is zero. Therefore, whenever the language speaks the words of exclusion, the performative value of those actions is rather aesthetic; thus, the proper response to them should be aesthetic, too.

Keeping in. Keeping out.

What exactly is happening with performative or pragmatic contradiction when you utter the sentences 'Unicorns do not exist' and 'You (so and so person with undesirable lifestyle and/or value system, etc.) do not exist'? What we know in terms of coherence and meaning, signs and their objectual/ontological status, both sentences rely on negation of something that should not be. The sentence suggests the existence of the signifier, otherwise it makes no sense to deny existence from something that does not exist

(Parmenides has made this pretty clear already). But what would this denial of existence mean in the case of these two sentences? First of all, we have a gap (the opposite of a wall if you wish so, yet the function is pretty much the same): "You (It, that Thing) do (does) not exist" translates into "I (the one that tells you that you do not exist) exist" and that there is an ontological gap between "I" and "You" (or "It"). You are ontologically walled off. This is so if we disregard the performative contradiction of any such sentence. In other words, if we disregard the fact that none of the 'I's and 'You's possess the language, the language does not authorize any of its users to perform such actions (yet we always and often do so). Linguistic annihilation (the performative act of "I/You/It do(es) not exist") does not make sense when the object does not exist (physically, anyway), and it also does not make sense when the object does exist (physically, anyway). Not to mention what Derrida suggests, namely, that we are not owners of the language; therefore, we will, in fact, not perform what we think we want to perform. However, this regards only and only the relationship of the one that denies the existence of objects, subjects, or their properties to these objects, subjects, or their properties. Does the fact that we do not have the authority to perform such actions mean that we cannot efficiently inflict harm using or abusing the language that we have yet we do not own? We can, of course, imagine Derrida saying: 'I only have one language, yet it is not mine.' Now imagine the political authority representing the Vichy government saying: "You only have one language, yet it is not yours." The perspectives for an analysis are given by the personal pronouns. Young Derrida's sentence comes with a deep philosophical recognition: "I do have this language, but I do not own it, just like I have or will have many other things that I do or will not own (my friends, my children, my family, my culture, etc.) I use it, it defines me as much as I, as a member of the speaking community, define it." There is no ownership here. Whether there are other forms of ontological relationships than ownership, or the lack of it, is not so important in this case. Looking at the other sentence, that of the political authority behind the Vichy government: "[t]he language that you are using is my property, and I do not grant you usage anymore, you do not have the right to identify as a user of this language!" While the first sentence does not come with any form of "authority" (it establishes an "authority"-free relationship to and by the language), the second sentence is an act of power, ignorant of the ontological content of the first sentence, embodying a form of behavior that 'grants' and 'revokes' through the power vested in the speaker. Does the fact that this speaking authority abuses the language to perform something that they should not perform stop them from performing it? No. They break a space between a voice and a language, wall the voice off, and try to cancel it. Well, in this case, they suspended it, and by doing so,

they separate politics from the authentic ontological status of the objects to which they create a power relationship.[2] This separation is perhaps even more tragical than (and perhaps, it is the source of) the separation of politics from morality or ethics.

Now the question is what exactly is happening when the authority behaves this way? We established: (a) that power is ignorant of intricate ontological relationships and (b) that ignorance does not stop it from acting. Derrida is told that he is not a rightful owner of the French language, all this in a language, a French language of which the Vichy government is in fact not a rightful owner either. The gesture of revocation (or rightful ownership of language and citizenship) breaks the space between the voice and the language. Or does it? Will the voice stop speaking the language? Probably not. The broken space results in an emergent identity. In Derrida's case, that is the Franco-Maghrebian identity, a walled off identity in a broken space (Derrida, 1996/1998, p. 12). The voice keeps speaking the same language as before. The specific linguistic architecture proper to Maghrebian French becomes a form of linguistic resistance[3] to the French that speaks the words of exclusion. In a similar fashion to the French song by Rachid Taha in his *Voilà Voilà*.

It is no accident that walls are called artifacts. It requires skills, knowledge, understanding, and purpose to create them. They strangely have their special aesthetics, proper to the weight they carry both in a physical, political, or social sense. Therefore, it is an easily occurring question whether walls are social objects or rather political artefacts. One might wonder why this question is so relevant as there is an almost instantly arising answer that regards the status of the social as deeply political, offering a perspective from which the two (social and political) are virtually inseparable. However, when we place the question in the context of everyday experience, our common sense suggests that not all social objects are or should be considered political artifacts. Social objects (McDonald, n.d.) are objects that facilitate interpersonal contact and communication. They offer an external surface that catalyzes interaction: instead of a "talking to" (person-to-person direct communication), the social object generates a triangulation of the communicative space producing a "talking about." Political objects have a different purpose, and that is not the triangulation of communicative space or the facilitation of interpersonal interaction. This might be an effect of theirs, but not their purpose. Political artifacts are designed and built with the idea of embodying or representing political power, decision-making, and, quite often, execution of this decision. The political actions that are performed through concrete material structures and

[2] This comes with the assumption that political power relationships always, or most of the times, come with the intention of distorting the ontological status of these 'objects' (I intentionally use the word *object* here because power relationships necessarily objectify—yet another assumption about how political structures handle and manage power).

[3] Linguistic resistance can be seen as a form of aesthetic resistance.

artifacts describe the area of "teichopolitics" ("teichos," Greek for "wall"). Teichopolitics speaks the language of power in which the words build physical realities. The logic behind these structures is simple: some things should be kept inside while others should stay outside. The dialectics is a bit more complex, of course: in case of a prison, it is the outside world that it is protected and not the ones inside. In case of the walls of a fortress the situation is the opposite. It is also important to understand that walls have a practical purpose; however, that practical aspect is not free of moral considerations. Besides, what we mean by "practical" here goes back to the concept of Aristotelian "praxis" that is always linked to action to "prattein" ("to do")[4]. It is important to state that these artifacts do things, and that means that—although their physical existence (weight and other dimensions) is important when defining them, this physical existence does not necessarily define their ontological status as that can change. This sentence suggests an intentional element in defining these artifacts' ontological status, and indeed, this is the case. Think about the Wailing Wall or Western Wall (יִבְרָעַמַה לֶתוֹכַה) in Jerusalem. Ignoring the historical complexity behind the structure itself (how much of it actually was being built as a part of the Second Temple), one might say that as a part of the Temple, its purpose was to keep the sacred separate from the mundane or secular. Its external side did not have any sacrality to it. This aspect, as an intentional relation, was generated much later as the temple was destroyed and only the wall remained. This piece of wall as an artifact does not separate now; on the contrary, it embodies the sacred, and as such, it connects the believers to God—and this sacred property irradiates to the foregrounds of the structure welcoming hundreds or sometimes thousands of prayers to reinforce the intentional content that repurposed this bit wall from a supportive architectural fragment into a highly important religious topos. The intentional content matters. It can turn a political object into a social object, too.

Just like in the case of the Western Wall, even the proximity of the wall projects the aura of the wall. Borders usually have a strip that is patrolled and controlled by border police. Depends on the side of the wall. Also, the wall is often not one structure but rather a mechanism with a complexity of technology and human workforce applied. This is particularly true for border fences and prison walls. The wall is never an object, it is an action, it performs, and the main aim of the action is to break space. Breaking is a brutal way to articulate. Think about one of recent history's most notorious walls, the Berlin Wall. The photo from below will show the complexity behind the Wall's reality and how much it is not only disruptive but, by being so, how it shapes the phenomenology of everyday life on both sides in the spaces that it penetrates and breaks.

[4] See Note 1 to Book I (p. 196.) in C. D. C. Reeve's comments to Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. Indianapolis/Cambridge, 2014.

Figure 2

The Berlin Wall Mural

Note. Author: Thierry Noir. 1986.

I will not recall the history of the Wall, as it is not relevant here. What is relevant, however, is the structure itself. The Wall is not one wall. It closes in an intermediary space between the sides that it separates. The gravel, the dirt, the net fence, the next concrete wall on the other side, the soldiers patrolling, the workers building, arranging, bringing more dirt to the death strip are all part of the Wall. The Wall is an institution as much as it is the physical existence of its various parts. There is but one element of continuity in this picture and that is the sky. The same sky stretches over a broken space, or at least so it seems. In fact, even the sky was split and regulated according to the political structures that lied below. It is not difficult to guess which side is East, and which one is West. The western side is unguarded, unafraid of the proximity of the wall, it is an everyday reality that is walled off from the East. A man and his dog. There is something else to be seen here that is unseen from the Eastern side: it is the murals that ornate the Wall. Early works from Thierry Noir.

The murals are colorful, they cover the wall, and they do not only do that, but they also become a part of it. Noir has used the Wall as a canvas. As much as the Wall was political, Noir's action was political too.

> Noir's objective was to perform one real revolutionary act: To paint the Berlin wall, to transform it, to make it ridiculous, and to help destroy it prompting its ultimate fall in 1989. Noir covered the Berlin Wall, more than 3 meters high, with bright, vivid colors, aiming not to embellish the wall but to demystify it. (Noir, n.d., para. 1)

The murals on the photo are from 1986; it took some more years for the wall to fall, but its demise started already when it was erected. Noir's action was an act of aesthetic resistance of "demystifying," turning the object into something relatable, in a way humanizing it, domesticating it, visually populating it, turning it from a political artifact into a social object that facilitates interaction and communication, in other words, connection. Noir's work is deeply philosophical: by painting the murals on the Berlin Wall, Noir reduces it from the political to a part of an everyday phenomenology, offering it a proper ontological status. Now, there is something very specific about the Berlin Wall: one could see paintings, graffiti, and murals only on one side of it. The humanizing gesture was walled off, closed out, and unseen for the Eastern eyes. Walls have two political sides, and if both of its sides were visible to the people living in the spaces broken up by the wall, the wall would render itself useless and become politically transparent. Aesthetic resistance makes sense until the object resisted is still political.

Seen. Unseen.

When one crosses into the West Bank, into Bethlehem through the checkpoint coming from Jerusalem, the first thing one notices is a Banksy Hotel, The Walled Off Hotel, right next to the very tall concrete wall that cuts a part of the West Bank off. The hotel itself functions as a hotel, but also as something else. It is a very special space offering an artistically altered British colonial atmosphere, a bar serving coffee and other drinks, including excellent mocktails. There is a harsh contradiction between the soft and cozy atmosphere from inside the hotel and its surroundings, the messy and often busy road, the checkpoint just a few meters further up, the separation wall, and an observation tower. The inside design contains works by Banksy and hosts two exhibition spaces. On the ground floor there is a museum with a Palestinian narrative of the history of the wall. On an upper floor, one will see art, paintings of Palestinian artists that relate to the politically very specific phenomenology of everyday life in the West Bank. And then the murals outside on the wall. And the graffiti, too.

Figure 3

Betlehem Land

(Separation Wall, Betlehem)

Note. Photo taken by the author of the present paper.

Figure 4

Handala's Pietà

(Separation Wall, Betlehem)

Note. Photo taken by the author of the present paper.

This one I found particularly interesting. Bethlehem is a city with Christian significance and a somewhat solid, yet slowly declining, Christian population that stood at 16% in 2016. What you see is a very special Pietà. The Holy Mary is replaced by the Statue of Liberty and Christ is replaced by Handalah. On the left side, you can see two uninvited spectators, a black and a white dove. Handalah is a symbol of the Palestinian struggle. A boy whose face cannot be seen. Handalah is always depicted with his back to the viewer. He is supposed to reveal his face only when freedom is reached. Liberty cries over the dead body of Handalah. This mural is very strongly political. Does it make it less a part of an effort to domesticate the wall? Does it need to be seen by the other side as well? The mural speaks a language familiar to the people living on this side of the wall. Is this a message to the other side? Does it want to be a message to the other side? Hard to tell, but again, it speaks a language that embodies the political aspirations of the people living in the shadow of this wall, and that means that it is an act of domestication. Just like other purposes of the wall seen in the image from below.

Figure 5
Separation Wall at the Walled Off Hotel (Betlehem)

Note. Photo taken by the author of the present paper.

The wall becomes a screen for a projector. Now, this is a strong moment of apolitical domestication. Reconquering and repurposing a power structure and turning it into an object of everyday life is an act of humanizing.

Seen. Unseen.

Netiv HaAsara (the name means the Path of the Ten, commemorating ten fallen soldiers who lost their lives in the 1967 war) was a settlement built in the Sinai Peninsula during its occupation by Israel after the Six-Day War in 1967. The peninsula was returned to Egypt in 1982, which resulted in the eradication of Israeli settlements including Netiv HaAsara. It was removed and rebuilt in the northern Negev area with the same name. Netiv HaAsara is a settlement right on the border with the Gaza Strip. Whenever there is a conflict that escalates, it is immediately affected, just like many other similarly positioned settlements. The locals have built an education center and have an art project. The education center tells visitors about the history of the place and about the aspirations for peace in the shadow of the wall, a wall that, in this case, functions as a protection structure. Like in the case of the Berlin Wall, this is not a single wall. It has two layers with a significantly large strip between them. The first outer structure walls off a Palestinian village in the Gaza Strip. This has a Hamas outpost observation tower on the other side.

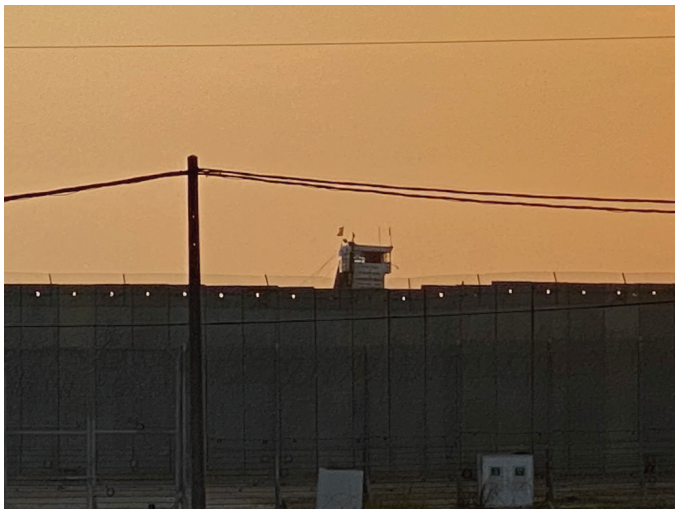

Figure 6

Hamas observation post (Netiv HaAsara)

Note. Photo taken by the author of the present paper.

The inner wall hosts the project that often attracts visitors to the settlement. This project is called Netiv LeShalom (נתיב לשלום—Path to Peace)[5] and, accordingly, the wall is called Path to Peace Wall. This project comes with a twist. The message on it, and anything placed on it, targets the other side. It is a message of peace to whoever sees it from the other side. Now, in the picture above, you can see the observation tower, an edifice of an official political eye. There is a viewer, and there is a receiver. As much as the eye is political, the message is political, too. The wall is also populated by tiny ceramic work, round little pieces with messages of peace turned towards Gaza and the people of it.

Figure 7

Path to Peace project (Netiv HaAsara)

Note. Photo taken by the author of the present paper.

[5] https://www.pathtopeacewall.com/pathtopeace-activities

But is the language the same? Is the language of peace the same? Is this an act of communication? Is the wall that protects the citizens of Netiv HaAsara domesticated by their project? Is this a form of aesthetic resistance? This wall is turned inside out.

Seen. Unseen

The last image that I will share here comes from Bethlehem. Interestingly enough, the name of the city in Arabic, although it sounds very similar to how it is pronounced in Hebrew, means "The House of Meat," in Hebrew, it is "The House of Bread"; in the end, both are related to food. This image is one of the innumerable painted or stenciled on the wall.

Figure 8
Dialog—wall art (Separation Wall, Betlehem)

Note. Photo taken by the author of the present paper.

It could be a wonderful message. Dialog. Written in three languages: Hebrew, Arabic, and English. It could be a message of translatable human desires to turn the wall into a social object that triangulates the space of communication and facilitates talks and interaction. If it were not for a piece of mistake: the Hebrew is written with a disregard to the correct order of writing from the right to the left. This way, what we get is "Golaid." Broken spaces, and broken languages. Does it matter after all? In theory, no Israeli is allowed to set foot beyond the checkpoint to see this mistake.

Seen. Unseen.[6]

[6] All images, except for the one of the Berlin Wall and Banksy's West Bank Mural, are taken by the author of this text.

Postscript

Today, on the 7th of October, 2023, is a day of religious celebrations called Simchat Torah. At 6:30 in the morning, 50 years after the Yom Kippur War, almost to the day, walls that separate Israel from Gaza have become permeable again, with disastrous, unspeakable consequences.

References

Aristotle (2014). *Nicomachean Ethics* (C.D.C. Reeve, Trans.). Hackett Publishing Company Inc.

Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words* (J. O. Urmson, & and M. Sbisà, Eds.). Clarendon Press.

BBC Studios (2008, December 20). *Do You Speak English?—Big Train—BBC comedy* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rxUm-2x-2dM

Bilić, A. (n.d.). *Theatre and Performance as a means of survival and resistance during the Siege of Sarajevo*. https://www.academia.edu/10869586/Theatre_and_Performance_as_a_means_of_survival_and_resistance_during_the_Siege_of_Sarajevo

Derrida, J. (1998). *The monolingualism of the other or, the prosthesis of origin* (P. Mensah, Trans.) Stanford University Press. (Original work published 1996)

Harris, J. (n.d.). Ulysses' gaze—Sarajevo, Ithaca, and the cyclical nature of the film. https://joel.vg/general/ulysses-gaze-sarajevo-ithaca-and-the-cyclical-nature-of-the-film/

Heywood, A. (2014). *Global politics*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

McDonald, I. (n.d.). *Social object theory: The secret ingredient for powering social influence marketing campaigns*. http://www.cbpp.uaa.alaska.edu/afef/social_object_theory.htm#:~:text=Engeström%20described%20social%20object%20theory,between%20two%20or%20more%20people.

Noir, T. (1986). Berline Wall Mural. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall#/media/File:Berlinermauer.jpg

Sferrazza Papa, E. C. (2018). What is a wall? Towards an ontology of political artefacts. *Rivista di estetica, 67*, 80–96. https://doi.org/10.4000/estetica.2645

University of Oregon. (n.d.). Window on the West Bank. Banksy in Palestine. A field guide to Banksy's graffiti on the separation Wall. (Original graffiti created in 2005). https://blogs.uoregon.edu/banksypalestine/in-the-moment/window-on-the-west-bank/

Thierry Noir Biography. https://thierrynoir.com/biography/

p'arts, hum' Papers in Arts and Humanities

Vol. 3, No. 2, Dec. 2023
https://doi.org/10.52885/pah.v3i2.150

Interior Space Design for Psychotherapy Sessions

IRINA-ANA DROBOT
Affiliation: Faculty of Engineering in Foreign Languages
Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest, Romania
Email: anadrobot@yahoo.com

Abstract

The purpose of the present paper is to analyze the elements that can bring a state of well-being to the client in the setting of psychotherapy sessions. Every element has its own effect on the client; according to Davies (2018), for example, windows that allow the passage of sunlight could bring about a state of calm and relaxation; plants, as they are a part of nature, can also contribute to mental well-being; the way therapist and client sit is also meant to improve their relationship, and establish it on equal and friendly terms; colors should also be chosen to suggest a soothing atmosphere, and, to this purpose, greens and blues are recommended. Psychological and cultural perceptions of the psychotherapy space design will be considered, together with the recommendations of psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud. By examining past and present trends and recommendations, we could draw general conclusions about the psychotherapeutic relationship and the way it can be facilitated by space design.

Keywords: transference, color psychology, psychoanalysis, couch, emotional well-being

Introduction

The success of a psychotherapy cure does not depend only on the relationship established between psychotherapist and patient, as a result of transference, which should be, ideally and mainly, one of trust for the patients to be able to complete their treatment. The clients should be comfortable in the presence of the psychotherapist, trust them well enough so that they can talk about their issues in a relaxed way, and confess their deepest fears, wishes, and thoughts without feeling uncomfortable or judged. The psychotherapist should be neutral and allow the client to express themselves freely. In this way, the client would not be prompted to hold anything back. Resistances are, however, inevitable, especially when the clients need to admit something to themselves, regardless of how trustworthy the therapist is.

Resistance may have to do with inhibitions related to the clients' education and some issues they can find sensitive. However, to be able to say that the patients have gone through an efficient treatment, they need to overcome the resistance to become healthy from a psychoanalytic point of view (Spotnitz, 1952, p. 3).

Another element that should make the client feel at ease within the therapeutic setting is interior design, a topic on which the present paper is going to focus. While we may tend to think that the setting of the analytic session may not be so important—since we often tend not to be aware of our surroundings, and since we have adapted sessions to the online medium, as well as psychotherapy to phone discussions—there is an effect of the environment on our state of mind, and we are unconsciously influenced by our surroundings. When we are in a new place, we tend to be highly aware of it. Otherwise, we tend to get used to our everyday surroundings, to the point where we no longer pay any attention to them. We may feel anxious in an unknown place, for example, in unfamiliar streets and cities. In such cases, tourists may need guides to make them feel comfortable. Some interior settings can also make us feel more comfortable than others. Usually, rooms with too many unordered objects can disturb our concentration and make us feel tired psychologically to the point where we are no longer productive if we need to work there. Well-being is generally associated with less cluttered homes, although it is all, eventually, a matter of subjectivity (Rogers & Hart, 2021).

According to environmental psychology (Moser & Uzzell, 2023, pp. 419–445), or space psychology, we always interact emotionally and mentally with our surroundings (Ittelson, 1974). We can interact within psychoanalytic therapy, with the psychoanalyst, as a patient, but we also, inevitably, react to the surrounding interior design. Our state of mind can be influenced by the kind attitude of the psychoanalyst, who is ready to listen to whatever we say. It can also be influenced by the way their office is decorated, how furniture is placed, the presence or absence of a couch, how the psychotherapist faces us or sits behind us, whether we lie down or sit on the couch, what each position suggests to us, as well as by the colors chosen for the room and the way we interact emotionally with every element.

We could claim that environmental psychology, related to the "influence of physical settings" on the "behavior and experience" of human beings (Proshansky, 1974, p. 541), begins with the observations of Carl Gustav Jung at the beginning of the 20th century, who drew attention to the fact that "our homes are a reflection of ourselves, our identity." Additionally, "How we construct this space is […] closely connected to our inner narrative and mental state of mind." As a matter of fact, "everything from how you arrange your sofa to how much sunlight filters through your rooms can have an impact on your emotional

and physical health, whether you're aware of it or not" (Molvar, 2021). These observations can be transferred from homes to offices, especially those of psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud, whose office was a room located in his own house.

Leaving psychological reactions to our environment aside, we could notice cultural influences over the interior design considered to be the most efficient in therapy. For example, one of the components of cultural identity manifestations, according to the grid devised by Baciu (2013, p. 45), is represented by values. For the Japanese, minimalism (Jantarangsee & Krairit, 2022, p. 55–56) could be considered the main value, which is visible in the way they leave, traditionally, empty spaces in their rooms, feeling much more comfortable, believing that having a decluttered interior can help them be more creative. Their homes, traditionally, are decluttered and with minimum furniture, unlike the houses and palaces in Western cultures. In Middle Eastern cultures, architectural elements are very elaborate and are completely opposed to the value of minimalism. Yet, such cultural specificities can, in turn, have consequences on the state of well-being of every person, regardless of the culture they belong to and the way they have been accustomed to such features of interior design.

When we step, as patients, into the office of a psychoanalyst, psychologist, and any psychotherapist, nothing in our interaction with these professionals is left to chance. The professionals have prepared everything, like for a show, with stage setting, objects, as well as attitude. They have likely thought of everything well before—the way they greet us, invite us inside their office and ask us to take a seat or lie down on the couch and place their furniture and various objects here and there to decorate the room. We could go as far as to claim that the way they prepare the analytic sessions room is part of the professionals' strategy to consolidate the positive transference relationship with their clients. We could view the analysts as friendly hosts, inviting the client into their personal space that should offer a relaxed atmosphere for the client to feel well enough to open up and confess freely within the therapeutic setting. While the discussion with the psychotherapist could look like a casual talk, it will be, at the same time, guided by the analyst in the direction that could be beneficial for the client's therapy.

Literature Review

If we visit the Sigmund Freud museums, originally his houses, in Vienna and then in London, we can get an idea of what Freud's office looked like for analytic sessions. While the London Museum contains his complete office, with the famous couch, in the Museum in Vienna, there is only a photograph of the couch. When Freud fled from Vienna with his family in 1938, as he was threatened by the Nazis, the couch was transported to his home in London.

Thus, we should visualize Freud's office in his London home as follows: the famous couch has "a Persian rug laid over it" (Nayeri, 2022), and behind it, we can see Freud's chair. At the same time, Freud was surrounded in his office by "books, antique vessels and statuettes" (Nayeri, 2022).

The couch is a central piece added by Sigmund Freud to the offices of psychotherapists who followed. His famous couch, seen as a symbolic element of his psychotherapeutic sessions, was a gift brought to him by one of his former patients, Madame Benvenisti, in 1890, who was grateful to him for having helped her (Stevens, 2015). Freud's was the first couch, and it was, in fact, "a Victorian day-bed" (Stevens, 2015) for Victorian ladies in poor health, such as Florence Nightingale and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, according to the curator of the Freud Museum in London, Ivan Ward. He adds a detail regarding how the patient reacted by offering Freud the couch as a gift: "The idea that a cured patient gave it to him was like his patient saying, 'I'm better, I don't need this anymore'" (Stevens, 2015). Freud also used to sit on a chair "behind the patient," says Stevens (2015), believing that "without making eye contact" the patient could express themselves freely. Generally, the psychoanalysts could get tired and not seem too enthusiastic about what they were hearing from the client, which could be considered bothersome by the patient. The body language or facial expressions could hinder the patients from wishing to communicate their ideas further, in this case. While the psychoanalysts should, ideally, remain neutral when listening to the patient, this is, realistically speaking, not humanly possible, as the psychoanalysts also have personal feelings and worries of their own. Therefore, this position of the analyst behind the patient could allow the latter to relax and be comfortable, not feel that they are boring or silly regarding the ideas coming to their mind. The analysts could then start asking questions when they feel that the patient should develop a certain incident, emotion, or any detail present in their speech if the analyst feels that some important detail lies there that can hinder the patients' emotional life. The couch is an element of the analytic setting that can "create an environment that was clinical yet intimate, allowing a patient to freely explore ideas that could build a picture for a psychoanalyst to work with" (Stevens, 2015).

Why did Freud use this position of standing behind the patient? According to Stevens (2015), he had an experience with a lady who tried "to seduce him" as she was "facing him" while lying down on the couch. At the same time, Freud believed it was too tiring for him "to be stared at" by his patients "for nine hours a day." Additionally, this position of the psychoanalyst, while avoiding direct eye contact with the patient, helped him "be in an almost meditative state," while maintaining neutrality, as the analyst "should not readily intervene" (Stevens, 2015).

We could notice some changes as the practice of psychotherapy has been modernizing. Therefore, according to Stevens (2015), less furniture is used by "psychiatrists working in hospital." The practice of psychoanalysis as therapy in a Freudian manner has been there until the time of the 1970s. Then, cognitive behavioral therapy was an example of a cheaper method. With these new methods, the couch no longer occupied center stage. What is more, with current psychotherapy methods, the focus is on the client and the way the client wants the session to occur. As an example, some clients may "wish to make eye contact," while others may not, and, as a rule, "desks are no longer between client and doctor in the consulting room."

We could also claim that each client can have their own particularities, of which they may not even be aware of themselves. For example, the Romanian Association for Psychoanalysis Promotion published, from 1998 to 2004, the psychoanalysis magazine *OMEN*, in which the members of this association mentioned cases from their clinical practice. One of them involved a young woman who had been abused, and the psychoanalyst felt, intuitively, not to ask her to lie down on the couch during therapy, which would have triggered in her a negative reaction towards the therapist, as all relationships in one's life can have consequences on the way one views one's relationship with one's therapist.

The staple couch in Freud's office is not the only one he had used, meaning the one given to him by Madame Benvenisti, according to 99percentinvisible.org (Heppermann, 2023). This well-known couch was, in fact, "a plain, beige, divan-style sofa—what some people might call a 'swooning couch'—which Freud covered in exotic, red Persian carpets and piled up with velvet pillows" (Heppermann, 2023). The patients in Freud's office, by lying down on the couch "on their backs," would "look up at the ceiling," which would force them "to look into themselves rather than, say out a window, or into the face of the analyst" (Heppermann, 2023). The central role of the couch in the analytic session led Imperial Leather Furniture Company from Queens, in New York, to sell lots of coaches "starting in the 1940s" (Heppermann, 2023). This Company had great success "in the 40s, 50s, and early 60s, which some have called the Golden Age of Psychoanalysis" (Heppermann, 2023). Changes came around "in the late 60s," which marked the moment when "Traditional psychoanalysis fell out of favor," since "[p]eople started to experiment with alternative therapies and the first generation of anti-depressants" (Heppermann, 2023). This led to a decline in "Analytic couch sales" (Heppermann, 2023). Meanwhile, when psychoanalytic therapy was still popular, inventions led to modifications of the couch design, such as the version patented by Irving Levy, which looked different from Freud's couch, with its "cozy pile of cushions," namely "These were sleek, low-to-the-ground, and free of buttons, cushions, and accessories that nervous patients could pick at" (Heppermann, 2023).

How did Freud come to the design of his analytic sessions? Schroeder (2020) writes about the way Freud designed his office in Vienna based on analogies with Egyptian tombs due to his office being an "enclosed space" (Schroeder 2020). This influence of the Egyptian tomb architecture on the interior design of Freud's office could be summed up as follows: according to the theories of "active room" (Danze, 2005) and "active container" (Quinodoz, 1992), "Freud's office and the ancient Egyptian tomb were active rooms—closed-off spaces that significantly contributed to the contained individual's psychic transformation" (Schroeder, 2020). Even the antiquities in his office were related to being "only objects found in a tomb" (Freud, 1909, p. 176, in Schroeder, 2020). About half of his antique objects were from ancient Egypt, from a total of 2000. What is more, exploring someone's memories and unconscious could be presented by analogy with exploring an ancient tomb: "In *Constructions in Analysis*, Freud related the resurfacing of intact memories in psychoanalysis to the excavation of King Tutankhamun's intact tomb" (Schroeder, 2020). Other similarities with the ancient Egyptian kings' tombs may consist of the following: the sofa can be seen as a symbol for the sarcophagus since "Freud's couch and the coffin denote boxes—active containers—that held and preserved the resting body as the inner being embarked on a psychic, spiritual journey into the afterlife," the rugs could be seen as the equivalent of mummy cloth, while the terracotta statues could be considered an equivalent of the spirit of the dead physical body (Schroeder, 2020).

To sum up, for Sigmund Freud, the physical space of the office, where the analytic sessions took place, was an "extension of the psyche" as well as a projection of it (Freud, 1938, p. 23). Thus, the office was, by analogy with the Egyptian tomb, a place of change that occurred during the sessions. The process of transformation during therapy could be regarded as an equivalent to "the mummy's rebirth and transition into the afterlife" (Schroeder, 2020). To draw another analogy with elements of analytic therapy, the unconscious could be seen as "ignorant of time, conserving its objects like an Egyptian tomb" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, p. 106).

Nothing was left to chance in the interior design of Freud's office. Following this line of thought, we should mention that, as shown by Schroeder (2020), the rugs contained "tactile elements," as they "stimulated the patient's senses and psyche" due to the fact that these elements "played an active role in opening the patient's unconscious mind." Regarding his antiquities, these were arranged, according to Schroeder (2020), "thematically in his case-like shelves and on his tables." What is more, Freud details his arrangement of these antique objects as follows:

> shortage of space in my study has often forced me to handle a number of pottery and stone antiquities (of which I have a small collection) in the most uncomfortable positions, so that onlookers have expressed anxiety that I should knock something down and break it. That however, has never happened. (Freud, 1901, p. 55)

Everything was orderly in Freud's office, despite the small space (Schroeder, 2020). One suggestion of the way the office in Freud's home was arranged was that of a safe, comfortable environment: "the position of the furniture … and the space between objects in the [active] room, establishes the sense of intimacy, familiarity, and safety" (Danze, 2005, p. 114). Another purpose of "furniture and object composition" in his office was for these to serve "as a means of orientation," to the point where "Perceptual lines and strategic object orientation defined Freud's and the Egyptian's architectural work," going as far as offering the following impression: "The perceptual axis lines generated by the positioning of Freud's consulting room couch and chair produced the motif of the double" (Schroeder, 2020). Freud's chair was considered the double of the patient's couch, for instance. At the same time, "If we draw a diagonal line through the central, open doorway across Freud's room, we may connect the couch to his desk" (Schroeder, 2020). Another aspect is the following: "[w]e may also connect Freud's consulting room chair to his anthropomorphic study chair" (Schroeder, 2020). The role of these doubles was to create a "sense of security, familiarity, and safety" (Schroeder, 2020).

However, the way Freud designed his office is not necessarily a template that should be taken over by absolutely all psychotherapists. This was just his approach to the setting, where he brought up a great sense of his personality and his own preoccupations. Psychoanalysis can be seen, according to Gerald (2019, p. 1), as "a private world" since "Psychoanalytic offices are spaces that generally have remained hidden from all but those who come for psychotherapeutic help." Moreover, these spaces "become home to practitioner and patient alike" (Gerald, 2019). Freud's office may have been more intimate and convincing as a home for him and his patients, as he was truly in his own home. This does not happen nowadays with some professionals. As we are, nowadays, more in the business world when it comes to psychotherapy offices, having large homes is rare. Most of us live in blocks of flats and have little space. We cannot have an office in our small flat and invite patients there as disclosing too much to the patient of the life of the therapist is not the topic of the analytic sessions. Some professionals nowadays may have inherited property from their parents or grandparents and use it as an office. Thus, the conditions in which professionals can have the opportunity to house their office should also be considered, and how their offices could and should be decorated accordingly.

Materials and Methods

Decorating the interior of a psychotherapist's office for analytic sessions should consider the historical times we live in, as well as the demands and expectations of the clients. As a general tendency nowadays, "focus has shifted from the exterior furnishing of houses to the interior due to the need for comfort, space, elegance, and personal privacy" (IvyPanda, 2022). Therefore, the need to focus on the interior design of the analytic space could be seen as requiring even more attention since people living during our times seek to find comfort more than in the past within the interior space. This could be because we have a more hectic life, with noise pollution, lots of traffic, as well as crowded streets, which can only lead to a sense of feeling tired and uncomfortable. While we are surrounded by masses of people every day on our way to and from work, we still feel isolated as our families are less and less numerous, we follow traditions less and less, and we do not genuinely communicate with people around us. Most of us move from one place to another due to increased mobility, and the result is that we find ourselves in unfamiliar places. We lose touch with our families and circles of friends. All these tendencies of the world nowadays could be due to the worldwide tendency of increased individualism (Santos et al., 2017), referring to the isolation of individuals as well as to the phenomenon of globalization, meaning the movement of individuals all over the world.

The very structure of our times may have to do with our need to start exploring ourselves in a therapeutic setting. This alienating world (Drămnescu, 2013), which is chaotic since there are no single, objective truths, as claimed by Modernist and Postmodernist thought, which are times when everything is questioned (Downing, 2006), could increase our need to be listened to sincerely by someone, even if that person is a professional and not a friend. We feel the need to confess and for our confession to be considered. Otherwise, as we see in contemporary novels, such as the ones by Graham Swift, the characters deliver their monologues only for the reader. Otherwise, the other characters do not listen and do not understand them. They can even be estranged from one another, with no possibility of reconciliation, as in the case of the father in *The Sweetshop Owner* with his wife and daughter, from whom he never gets the wanted affection.

The interior design of the therapist's office could be seen as a non-verbal communication means on the part of the therapist, trying to invite the clients to feel good, to feel welcome, in a warm and relaxing environment where they can feel safe enough and also listened to with the most attention. Naturally, therapy is more than simple socializing and friendly talk, yet the therapists do share some features with friends: they are empathetic and need to understand and show that they are understanding towards the emotions that the patient

expresses during therapy about a certain issue in their lives. The interior decoration of the office can be seen, to some extent, as the equivalent of the therapist's personal space of work, while the therapist also has the patients' reaction in mind and their well-being.

We could see Freud's interior decoration of his office as a starting point for further developments of therapists' offices. Therapists can choose to express their own personalities through how they decide to decorate their offices. As an example, we could look at the decisions of Ernest Jones, a British psychoanalyst (1879–1958), who took a different approach. Thus, "consulting rooms designed by Ernst Freud were free from visual clutter, abundant artwork, decorative figurines, and oriental rugs" (Welter, 2012). This "visual clarity" in Ernest Jones' consulting room was described by Pryns Hopkins, a psychoanalyst from Santa Barbara "in the mid-1920s," as "large, but unlike that of his mentor, Freud, it was nearly bare of furniture and gloomy" (Welter, 2012). Ernest Jones broke off with Freud's vision of the consulting room, as he favored "modern designs, delineating an interior that obviously aimed to impress itself as little as possible on the patient's mind" (Welter, 2012).

Ernest Jones' view of the interior design of the consulting room shows how he can differ from Freud and his ideas about how a consulting room should look. At the same time, both analysts can be understood as leaving their own personal mark on the design of the analytic sessions' office.

This practice of adapting the consulting room to the personality of the therapists and to the needs they perceive that the patients may have when they decorate the office is still going on today. The idea regarding the well-being that should be suggested to the patient when being inside the room still guides the understanding of decorating the office, as can be seen in the article by Davies (2018). Davies (2018) admits that psychotherapists can have their own approach regarding the interior decoration of the office, yet they all keep the psychological well-being of the patient in mind when they prepare the room, together with offering their patients a few details about their personalities so that the therapist could look like usual persons, and that patients can be relaxed in their presence. Yet, the personal details of the therapist's personality should undergo a rigorous process of selection as the patient should not be lost in details regarding the therapist's personal life, since the purpose of the therapy is to focus on the patient's needs. Yet, a few ideas about the therapists' lives and personalities could make them likable and, at the same time, trustworthy. Meanwhile, the therapists also suggest their availability to the patient, as the therapists could be interpreted as showing, for instance, artwork they like, as being a person that is sensitive towards art and willing to share this. However, the main feature therapists suggest is their emotional availability to have a kind attitude towards the patient.

The therapists can be interpreted as having disclosed something personal through the objects present in the room regarding their interests, and now, it is implied, that the client could feel safe enough to do the same.

One main element generally agreed upon in our contemporary times regarding the interior design of therapists' offices is related to color. We can resort to the domain of Color Psychology, which claims that we are always influenced emotionally by colors around us, even if we are not consciously aware of this (Haller, 2017; Mikellides, 2012). The therapists, when choosing a certain design for their office, will always have in mind colors that create a sensation of well-being for their clients. As an example, "light and soothing" colors are preferable, "such as shades of green or blue" (Pearson and Wilson, 2012, mentioned in Davies 2018).

In close relationship with colors is the use of lighting. This is because lighting offers colors with certain hues that may vary, which should also be considered regarding their effect on the client. If the lighting is adjustable (e.g. if the clients can use lamps and choose the amount of light, they find comfortable), they will feel that their needs are addressed, and can also express them (Davies, 2018).

Windows can also contribute to making colors more comfortable by letting, for instance, the "sunlight in" so that "space looks and feels bright, open, and warm" (Davies, 2018).

Placement of furniture is also significant: for instance, the way furniture is used for sitting by therapist and client should be "nonconfrontational and conducive to dialogue," while the chair for the client should be found "a spot where they can see the door to add to their sense of free will and safety" (Davies, 2018). Additionally, the furniture should be appropriate and comfortable for all ages that are considered for therapy. Moreover, "round tables may facilitate more interactive communication" (Davies, 2018).

The materials chosen also matter. Thus, the use of "soft furnishings and flooring materials (like rugs or carpets) provides a soothing feel to a room and creates a sense of comfort" (Davies, 2018). Natural materials are preferred: "people prefer natural-colored wood with a grain rather than surfaces without a grain." Wood is also considered to be more comfortable than "chrome or glass" (Davies, 2018). At the same time, floors and walls made of natural wood should not represent over 45% of a room's surface in order to maintain their properties of relieving stress (DeAngelis, 2017). As we consider natural elements, we should also mention that "components of nature" such as plants placed in the rooms, "views of serene landscapes," and "access to a courtyard or nearby garden" can be beneficial to clients' well-being (Davies, 2018). Plants placed in pots,

decorating the office of a therapist, could suggest, symbolically, "a sense of growth" (Zencare, 2023), which can be spiritual through gaining insight by going through therapy. It should be noted that Sigmund Freud's home in London did have a garden.

Following the line of trusting the analyst, clients should feel that they are not overheard when they talk about their problems (Davies, 2018).

Personalizing the therapist's office can be compared to the statuettes Freud had in his office and the books on his bookshelves. These show the interest he had in research and ancient cultures. Some diplomas of the therapist could be used so that the clients feel they are in the presence of a trustworthy professional. At the same time, "it is best to keep personalization to a minimum, to help the client feel 'at home' within the space, and not like a visitor" (Davies, 2018). Objects such as Freud's statuettes could be present in therapists' offices under the forms of "a piece of serene artwork, a soothing tabletop fountain, a calm spot away from the therapy space, or even comforting toys" that have the role of allowing the client to take a break "from discussing some emotionally uncomfortable topics" (Davies, 2018). Additionally, artwork placed in the therapist's office could offer the clients the feeling that they are getting to know their therapist more, as the very choice of a certain artwork could be interpreted as saying something about the therapist's personality (Zencare, 2023).

A piece of advice that combines the color symbolism and the colors' psychological effect on the clients, with the personalization of the therapist's office, consists of using "pops of colors" (Zencare, 2023). These "pops of colors" have the following role: they "keep the eye moving throughout the room." Thus, clients' attention can be pleasantly drawn. The "pops of color" can be found under the forms of "throw pillows, or artwork that breaks with the main color theme of the room." For instance, if some armchairs of deep blue are chosen, the clients are going to feel welcome and invited to take a seat.

Blue and yellow items, such as pillows, can, in turn, be inviting the client to sit on a couch. Abstract artwork using blue shades on a wall can also attract the client's attention immediately. Using yellow pillows and armchairs in the waiting room can suggest a sense of well-being since these can be associated with sunlight.

Similar advice to Davies (2018) regarding lighting, use of sunlight, natural elements, "positive distractions" to offer the client a break from uncomfortable and emotionally draining issues they had confessed about, using tables' shapes and chairs' positions and placement to promote communication, cooperation, and equality, while keeping the clients' state of well-being and needs first and foremost in mind, is given by DeAngelis (2017),

suggesting that, nowadays, we have reached a common agreement regarding the outlines of interior design of the analyst's office. These are just general lines, of course, and therapists can personalize their office as they wish. Some could even get more inspiration from Sigmund Freud's office by having bookshelves with old-style book' designs and statuettes from antique cultures. This is the case of Romanian psychologist Andreea Florentina Sodolescu, who has photographs of her office, showing a desk, statuettes, and bookshelves like those found in Sigmund Freud's office, on her blog, where she gives information about the services she offers, including personal development, hypnotherapy, experiential psychotherapy, as well as work and organizational psychology. In her case, we could interpret this interior design as her showing her passion for Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalytical theories. She confessed her affinity with the father of psychoanalysis, as well as her admiration for him on her Facebook social media account when she posted photographs from her visit to the Sigmund Freud Museum in London.

It is also true that some therapists may choose to hire professional interior design decorators to create a comforting environment for their clients. In Sigmund Freud's time, everything was more personal. As opposed to this, nowadays, interior design can be seen as part of a cold, business image that can be arranged by professional firms. This can make the task of the therapist even harder, namely, to gain their clients' trust, showing the latter that their interior design is a faithful reflection of the therapists' personalities and preferences.

Yet, do all patients feel something about the therapist's consulting room's setting? Or, better put, do they always focus on it? We focus on what is significant at a certain moment, and in the case of therapy, we can focus on the dialogue with the therapist, on what we talk about, or on what we are told by the therapist. The background can become blurred, just as in the case of online platforms, and the patient's focus can be on dialogue and monologue as well as on introspection. Once our surroundings are familiar, we tend to ignore them or blur them mentally and focus on activities and reflections. The question we need to ask in the case of the therapists' office design is related to how long it takes for the patients to neutralize the setting and focus on something else, as well as to rest their minds in between discussions. Patients' reactions to the surroundings could also be subjected to analysis. Through the setting, the analysts express indirectly parts of their personality and preoccupations, while patients may interpret these subjectively and form an image of the analysts that can be far away from reality. The question would then be, whose image are they projecting on the analyst? Their own? Their parents'? Their significant other's?

Results

The relationship of the patient with the analytic setting, which includes furniture and other interior decorations, could be analyzed based on the interaction that occurs with this environment, visible in the patient's emotions. The extent to which the patient is comfortable with the setting should be considered, as the therapist can change the classical setting of Sigmund Freud's office, even giving up the couch and even allowing a face-to-face discussion with the patient, with visual contact if that makes the patient more comfortable. The way the patient feels comfortable or not within the setting, and, especially, why yes or why not, could lead to understanding what traumas or other emotions due to experiences in the past have led to the respective perception. This is a process that could be understood in parallel with the idea of negative transference in the relationship of patient and therapist that is based on the patient's past experiences with parents, family, as well as other adults and peers throughout his life. The way the patient is influenced emotionally by the consulting room setting reflects the way the patient experiences the relationship with the analyst. If the patients are comfortable in the setting, though, at least to some extent, this should be enough to express themselves freely.

The consulting room can be a reflection of the communication process that should go on between analyst and patient, as well as of the way the patient's transformation process is progressing. The various objects and placement of furniture, choice of colors, and decorations such as artwork are all chosen as if based on stage directions. For theatre shows, the scene can be prepared similarly, with meaningful elements and wall decorations. Since the setting is quite static in the scenes in theatre plays, which rely on dialogue and communication among the characters, and not so much on movement as in films, the elements and their position in the setting should be given even more attention in the consulting room.

The very elements chosen for decorating the consulting room and furnishing it become part of the communication between analyst and patient. These elements, through their emotional influence, can be seen as an extension of the process of transference.

Discussion

While the general recommendation for the consulting room nowadays is for it to have a minimalist design and not to be cluttered, as well as for it not to be small and make the patient feel trapped, we could see examples of rooms of successful analysts that contradict these pieces of advice. The most visible example is the office of the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. However, the order that he maintained compensated for the small and cluttered space, and the same could be said about the harmony of all the objects

and furniture items, together with the geometrical lines' setup. While the analogy with the Egyptian tombs could suggest a feeling of being trapped to some patients nowadays, Freud believed that the focus was on the process of looking inward and spiritual transformation.

There are universal symbols in the choice of consulting room elements. For instance, what is generally agreed upon is the comforting effect of sunlight, which is transferred to the yellow color items. The color blue, suggesting the sky, is also considered comforting—as a splash of color, or an invitational item if armchairs have this color. Green is also considered a beneficial color, and, similarly to yellow or the sunlight, green, is present in nature, which could explain why these colors are comforting in interior design.

Conclusion

What matters is for both patient and analyst to have a compatible vision, taste, and appreciation of interior design, and that they should both be comfortable when talking. Some colors, such as red, could suggest aggression or even draw attention too much to the point of exhaustion. It could also give too much energy. Yet, the patient needs to be calm and focus on their inner resources to explore some uncomfortable areas of experience as well as some memories that could bring unpleasant feelings. The setting of the room could be used to calm patients down and offer comfortable conditions for the analyst to find enough resources to help several patients during the same day. Working with other people's emotions, understanding them, and helping them deal with them is also an emotionally consuming type of work for the analyst.

References

Baciu, S. (2013). *Culture: An awareness-raising approach*. Cavallioti Publishing House.

Danze, E. A. (2005). An architect's view of introspective space the analytic vessel. *Annu. Psychoanal. 33*, 109–124.

Davies, N. (2018, October 22). *Designing the therapeutic space: Using layout, color, and other elements to get patients in the right frame of mind*. Psychiatry Advisor. https://www.psychiatryadvisor.com/home/practice-management/designing-the-therapeutic-space-using-layout-color-and-other-elements-to-get-patients-in-the-right-frame-of-mind/

DeAngelis T. (2017). Healing by design. *Monitor on Psychology, 48*(3). https://www.apa.org/monitor/2017/03/healing-design

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (2004). *Anti-Oedipus*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Downing, C. (2006). *How postmodernism serves (my) faith: Questioning truth in language, philosophy and art*. InterVarsity Press.

Drămnescu, M. (2013). Postmodern society and individual alienation. *Journal of Experiential Psychotherapy, 16*(3).

Freud, S. (1901). *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud: Vol. 6. The psychopathology of everyday life* (J. Strachey, Ed. & Trans.). Hogarth Press.

Freud, S. (1909). Notes upon a case of obsessional neurosis. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud: Vol. 10. The cases of 'Little Hans' and the 'Rat Man'*. Hogarth Press.

Freud, S. (1938). Findings, ideas, problems. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud: Vol. 23. Moses and monotheism; An outline of psycho-analysis and other works*. Hogarth Press.

Gerald, M. (2019). *In the shadow of Freud's couch: Portraits of psychoanalysts in their offices*. Routledge.

Haller, K. (2017). Colour in interior design. In *Colour design* (pp. 317–348). Woodhead Publishing.

Heppermann, Ann. (2023). Freud's couch. (169) [Audio podcast episode]. https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/freuds-couch/

Ittelson, W. H., Proshansky, H. M., Rivlin, L. G., & Winkel, G. H. (1974). *An introduction to environmental psychology*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

IvyPanda. (2022, May 6). *Psychoanalysis and domestic interior architecture*. https://ivypanda.com/essays/psychoanalysis-and-domestic-interior-architecture/

Jantarangsee, A., & Krairit, T. (2022). Minimalist interior design and decoration: Class distinction in the adaptation of Japanese culture. วารสาร สังคมศาสตร์ และ มนุษยศาสตร์, *48*(1), 55–66.

Mikellides, B. (2012). Colour psychology: The emotional effects of colour perception. In *Colour design* (pp. 105–128). Woodhead Publishing.

Molvar, K. (2021). Can you decorate and clean your way to happiness? Science says yes. https://www.vogue.com/article/environmental-psychology-cleaning-decorating-happiness

Moser, G., & Uzzell, D. (2003). Environmental psychology. In *Comprehensive handbook of psychology: Volume 5. Personality and Social Psychology* (pp. 419–445). Wiley.

Nayeri, F. (2022). Reflecting on Sigmund Freud. In *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/31/arts/sigmund-freud-museum.html

Pearson, M., & Wilson, H. (2012). Soothing spaces and healing places: Is there an ideal counselling room design?. *Psychotherapy in Australia, 18*(3), 46–53.

Proshansky, H. M. (1974). Theoretical Issues in Environmental Psychology. *The School Review, 82*(4), 541–555. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1084002

Quinodoz, D. (1992). The psychoanalytic setting as the instrument of the container function. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 73*, 627–635.

Rogers, C. J., & Hart, R. (2021). Home and the extended-self: Exploring associations between clutter and wellbeing. *Journal of Environmental Psychology, 73*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2021.101553

Santos, H. C., Varnum, M. E., & Grossmann, I. (2017). Global increases in individualism. *Psychological Science, 28*(9), 1228–1239.

Schroeder, J. K. (2020). The active room: Freud's office and the Egyptian tomb. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01547

Spotnitz, H. (1952). A psychoanalytic view of resistance in groups. *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy, 2*(1), 3–9.

Stevens, S. (2015). How this couch changed everything. https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33079041

Welter, W. M. (2012). The Architecture of Psychoanalysis. *Cabinet Magazine*, issue 45. https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/45/welter.php

Zencare. (2023). 47 Therapist office decors we adore (2023 ed.). https://blog.zencare.co/therapist-office-decor-ideas/

p'arts, hum' Papers in Arts and Humanities

Vol. 3, No. 2, Dec. 2023
https://doi.org/10.52885/pah.v3i2.142

Historic(al) New York as Fictional Object

ALEXANDRU ORAVIȚAN
Affiliation: Faculty of Letters, History and Theology
West University of Timișoara, Romania
Email: alexandru.oravitan@e-uvt.ro

Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the portrayal of New York City in prominent American literary works, ranging from Washington Irving's (1809) *A History of New York* to contemporary post-9/11 novels through an analysis of how evolving depictions of the city have been transformed into potent and revealing fictional objects that enrich the literary works into which they have been integrated. By employing the classification of fictional objects into native, immigrant, and surrogate set forth by Terrence Parsons (1980) in his landmark work *Nonexistent Objects*, this applied study on New York posits that, within the larger literary framework of the novels under discussion, cities construed as fictional objects manage to stimulate an active reading of the text and prompt diverse interpretations of their broader cultural significance. Essentially, this paper illustrates how the historical identity of New York City has been continually reimagined in American literature and how these imaginative representations continue to influence our contemporary popular perception of the city.

Keywords: American literature, fictional object, historical fiction, literary representation, New York

Introduction

Ever since its establishment by the Dutch settlers in the 17th century, New York has been depicted in countless works of art. Its presence in the cultural sphere has multiplied exponentially with it growing into becoming the veritable *axis mundi* of the contemporary world. Literature, of course, has not been a foreign element to this ever-expanding paradigm, and it has encouraged, through the literary pieces housed under its umbrella, a dialogue between the sensibilities of the author and the numerous facets that this city has embraced throughout its history.

The aim of this paper is to investigate how the ever-changing images of the historic(al) New York City have been reflected in works of literature, ever since its depiction in Washington Irving's (1809) *A History of New York* to its postmodern incarnations in post 9/11 novels and to analyze how these images have been transformed into powerful and revealing fictional objects that enhance the texts that they are part of. Furthermore, this analysis will attempt to argue that these fictional objects promote an active reading of the text and invite multiple readings and interpretations of the text.

Readings of an Ever-changing City

Ever since New York became a permanent fixture on the global political, social, and cultural map at the end of the 19th century, many critical approaches to the multi-faceted nature of the city have been written both from the native perspective and the outsider. While predictably different in terms of focus, most analyses foreground the ever-shifting nature of the city, particularly when it comes to its architecture and cultural makeup. Upon returning from New York from one of his European travels at the dawn of the 20th century, Henry James (1994) remarked that he felt estranged within his own city, as he no longer recognized it behind the layer of apparently permanent renewal that the city was undergoing. This sense of estrangement has cohabitated with another intriguing approach: the artistic construal of an urban microcosm defined by its dynamic and ever-changing nature. It is perhaps this angle that has lingered the most in the cultural milieu of New York: "Across styles and mediums, New York artists addressed modern urban life. […]. They deemed New York the quintessential modern city, a microcosm of the contemporary world" (Scott & Rukoff, 1999, p. xvii).

It should come as no surprise that, in this context, the interest in representing New York in literature grew primarily as a means for showcasing renewal and "the whirlpool of modernity at the individual level" (Salmela & Ameel, 2022, p. 319). Through instilling an almost palpable dimension to modernity, the transformational nature of New York was made evident perhaps most significantly in Michel de Certeau's seminal *The Practice of Everyday Life*: "New York has never learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts. Its present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future" (Certeau, 1984, p. 91). Since then, the textual representation of New York has grown to exemplify a case-in-point as to the evolution of urban studies in both theoretical and literary writings; as far as the former is concerned, the definition of the city provided by Tambling (2022, p. vii) is entirely applicable to the analyses of New York as a socio-political and cultural topos:

"The city is the defining subject of modernity, occupying a first place in any discussion of it, or of globalization"; when it comes to the latter dimension, several seminal forays into the exploration of New York as a literary landmark have been put forward (Chapman Sharpe, 2008; Patell & Waterman, 2010; Lindner, 2015; Wilson, 2020; Fuchs-Abrams, 2020); all of these critical readings emphasize the richness of themes and stylistic modulations encountered in the fictional writings featuring New York as either foreground or background.

Framework

In his 1980 book *Nonexistent Objects*, contemporary philosopher Terence Parsons (1980, pp. 49–60) classifies fictional objects by dividing them into three broad categories. Native objects are those "created" by the story, which cannot exist as such outside of the world of the story—represented by fictional cities, such as the Emerald City in L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* or Stephen King's Castle Rock, Maine, which appears in a number of his novels. Immigrant objects are those "imported" from reality or other texts; here, Parsons (1980, p. 51) gives the example of London as it appears in Arthur Conan Doyle's series featuring Sherlock Holmes, thus demonstrating how a city that exists in reality is used to provide the backdrop for fictional happenings. To further emphasize the distinction between this type of object and the aforementioned native ones, he lists Sherlock Holmes himself, as he is native to Conan Doyle, but he has made numerous appearances as an immigrant in works by many other authors. In this way, one can extend Parsons' example to create a paradigm that may encompass all the cities stemming from reality that appear in fictional worlds, becoming a shared element that both the reader and the characters may have access to. The third type is that of surrogate objects, which may prove problematic, as Parsons (1980, pp. 57–58) himself argues that the distinction between immigrant and surrogate objects is rather difficult to establish. A surrogate object is understood to be that which stems from the real world but is enhanced by the creator of the fictional work with certain traits that make it unique and distinguish it from its real counterpart. Therefore, the object becomes accessible to the reader only by means of the text and cannot be experienced as such in concrete reality. London, as it appears in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, may be perceived as such an object, as it contains both elements from the real world and enhancements devised by the mind of the character. However, in the case of other novels, where these differences are not quite so clear cut, one must take into account the textual markers that suggest the faithfulness of the representation of the city or other object in question and the limits to which mimesis can be stretched (Parsons, 1980, pp. 57–58).

As this analysis will show, Parsons's classification might prove problematic if the boundary between fictional and non-fictional is blurred; nevertheless, it proves a useful tool for analyzing how a real city such as New York is depicted in the works taken into discussion. Specifically, the main advantage of employing Parsons' approach to fictional objects lies primarily in its adaptability to any close reading venture. Thus, in the case of this analysis, new insights about New York fiction can be derived through the lens of this theory, particularly when it comes to the semantic undertones connected to perceiving the city as synonymous with perpetuating modernity in the context of its ever-shifting nature.

Moreover, one must also note that Parsons' approach to fictional objects has been challenged over time; most notably, Motoarca (2014) significantly expands upon Parsons' surrogate objects by noting that one must not simply approach them as "self-evident truisms," but rather seeing the contextual employment of names in fiction as fictional surrogates to real objects as integral towards solving potential problems regarding the reference-continuity view. Voltolini (2020) takes the argument forward by establishing a distinction between continuism (the view that names in fiction refer directly to their real referents) and exceptionalism (which presumes a shift in semantic value, sometimes without ontological involvement, largely dependent upon the context at hand); he stresses that Parsons' approach functions as an argument for uniformity, which largely informs the present approach.

The Knickerbocker Case

In late 1809, readers could find in the New York-based *Evening Post* some missing person adverts that asked for information regarding the whereabouts of Diedrich Knickerbocker, a historian of Dutch origin who had gone missing from his hotel room. The adverts also listed an announcement from the hotel manager warning that if the historian failed to return and pay his room rate, he would publish a manuscript that the historian had left behind. The case stirred the attention of audiences and authorities were seriously considering offering a ransom for any information on the historian (Jones, 2008, pp. 118–127). Very soon, readers would reencounter the name of Diedrich Knickerbocker on the cover of the volume *A History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty*, supposedly the published manuscript that remained unclaimed in the historan's hotel room. Little did they know then that behind the guise of Knickerbocker was the one who would become the first American writer to achieve transatlantic success—Washington Irving. This fascinating sequence of events, which now strikes as one of the most creative marketing campaigns *avant la lettre*, has been elevated over time to a legendary status, and Knickerbocker gave name not only to an entire group of writers, but it has become a common vernacular for Manhattan residents in general (High, 1986, p. 30).

The volume is an interesting blend of fiction and non-fiction, spanning a number of genres in the process. It mixes historical narrative with humorous anecdotes and events invented by Irving, thus becoming a pseudo-history of New York, which "works to poke fun at Irving's contemporaries" (Zuba, 2005, pp. 41–42). This style is evident throughout the work, as is the moment when the English conquest of New Amsterdam seems evident:

> While all these struggles and dissentions were prevailing in the unhappy city of New Amsterdam, […] the English commanders did not remain idle. They had agents secretly employed to foment the fears and clamors of the populace; […] They promised that every man who voluntarily submitted to the authority of his British Majesty should retain peaceful possession of his house, his vrouw, and his cabbage-garden. […]. That every man should be allowed quietly to inherit his father's hat, coat, shoe-buckles, pipe, and every other personal appendage; and that no man should be obliged to conform to any improvements, inventions, or any other modern innovations; but, on the contrary, should be permitted to build his house, follow his trade, manage his farm, rear his hogs, and educate his children, precisely as his ancestors had done before him from time immemorial. (Irving, 2004, Ch. 9)

The historical event that will seal the history of the city forever is depicted here in a style that goes far beyond that of a standard historical narrative. The employment of adjectives such as "unhappy" and "peaceful" or adverbs such as "quietly" demonstrates narrative involvement at the textual level and marks the inclusion of the text in the fictional domain. Therefore, one must consider New Amsterdam as it is presented here as an immigrant object, representing a backdrop for the events depicted in the text, adapted from their historical counterparts.

"High Destinies"

In Peter B. High's (1986, p. 91) assessment of Henry James's impact on American literature, one encounters the consideration that James was a realist rather than a naturalist. While naturalists like Howells focused on business, politics, and societal conditions, James's interests lay elsewhere. He primarily observed and delved into the intricacies of the human mind rather than simply documenting the contemporary era. Although this assessment can be deemed accurate in broad terms, one cannot feel that James's descriptions of New York are something much more than just realistic settings that mirror the personality of the characters that inhabit them. When faced with such descriptions, the reader may indeed feel that Henry James was also a recorder of 19th-century urban life and its unique atmosphere. This is due to the vibrant and sophisticated tones

in which he depicts New York. In *Washington Square* (1881), like in other of James's works, the immigrant object of New York, when used to designate the hometown of one of the characters, automatically implies that the character in question is part of an upper-class society (Haralson & Johnson, 2009, p. 421), and is a sign of the high aspirations that the character has:

> The ideal of quiet and of genteel retirement, in 1835, was found in Washington Square, where the doctor built himself a handsome, wide-fronted house, with a big balcony before the drawing-room windows, and a flight of white marble steps ascending to a portal which was also faced with white marble. […] round the corner was the more august precinct of the Fifth Avenue, taking its origin at this point with a spacious and confident air which already marked it for high destinies. […] this portion of New York appears to many people the most delectable. It has a kind of established repose which is not of frequent occurrence in other quarters of the long shrill city; it has a riper, richer, more honourable look […]—the look of having had something of a social history. (James, 2012, pp. 13–14)

James does not fail to highlight here, in the context of the 19th century, the existence of one of the most renowned traits of New York to the present day: its contrasting nature, the striking differences that exist from one neighborhood to another, both in terms of architectural aesthetics, and also in terms established within the highbrow-lowbrow dichotomy.

However, the most important contribution that James makes in this analysis is concerned may be found in "Crapy Cornelia" (1909), as the depictions of New York present in his works become increasingly gloomier. In the case of this particular literary piece, New York takes on personal nuances that stem from the part of the character. Thus, when the character distinguishes between two distinct versions of New York, the city is elevated to the status of a surrogate object, a literary device that can be considered truly innovative and unique at this point in literary history: "He could have lived on in his New York, that is in the sentimental, the spiritual, the more or less romantic visitation of it; but had it been positive for him that he could live on in hers?" (James, quoted in Haralson & Johnson, 2009, p. 421).

The "Feel" of New York

In 1924, one of the cornerstones of 20th-century American literature was set by H. L. Mencken, who described post-war New York as fertile ground for the basis of new literature. This new literature would exploit all the up-to-then hidden facets of the city, especially the commotion surrounding life in Manhattan, described as a "spectacle, lush and barbaric in its every detail, [which] offers the material for a great imaginative literature" (Mencken, as cited in Berman, 2001, p. 81). In due course, *The Great Gatsby* (1925)

would concentrate and deliver in the form of a kernel of the experience of New York as it was during the Roaring Twenties. Indeed, as literary critics argue (Berman, 2001, p. 81), Fitzgerald's novel is as much about New York as it is about Jay Gatsby or Nick Carraway. In this way, it can be argued that the fictional object of New York climbs up in rank to the status of a character equal to the novel's protagonists, a mark of true literary innovation. The city is even described as another character, as a living body:

> I began to like New York, the racy, adventurous feel of it at night and the satisfaction that the constant flicker of men and women and machines gives to the restless eye. […]. At the enchanted metropolitan twilight I felt a haunting loneliness sometimes, and felt it in others—poor young clerks who loitered in front of windows waiting until it was time for a solitary restaurant dinner—young clerks in the dusk, wasting the most poignant moments of night and life. (Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 63)

In tone with Nick's position ("within and without") in the novel, the passages depicting New York contain ambivalent elements ("the racy, adventurous feel" versus "a haunting loneliness"). Moreover, the approach towards the city changes from one point of the novel to another, ranging from the enthusiasm with which it is infused at the beginning, where it can be read as a fascinating world that has just been revealed, to the gloomy atmosphere which prevails after Gatsby's death, when New York and the East become "haunted" for Nick (Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 183). This change in attitude towards the city blurs even further the line between New York as an immigrant object and New York as a surrogate object in the case of *The Great Gatsby*. While for the vast majority of the novel New York is the vivid backdrop onto which the events unfold, in which case it can be regarded as an immigrant object in the purest sense of the word—when the city moves from the background into the foreground, it might be stated that the nature of the object in turn shifts from immigrant to surrogate, thus mirroring both narrative construction and the trajectory that the city marks in Nick's consciousness.

Auster(e) Alienation

The alienation that Nick Carraway began to feel towards New York explodes to heightened proportions in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* (1987) after postmodernism has firmly established itself on the literary stage. By the 1980s, New York had become an entire universe itself, producing reactions as diverse as the mentalities of the people that inhabit them. One needs only to compare the romanticized view of New York as depicted in Woody Allen's films and the blunt and rugged image painted of the city in the films of Martin Scorsese. Literature has not made an exception to this cultural trend concerning New York.

Out of Auster's *Trilogy*, the first part, *City of Glass* (1985), seems to contain *in nuce* the feeling that the metropolis of New York seems to exert on the characters who find themselves in conflict with the city, as they strive for individuality and to exist outside of the larger crowd (Martin, 2008, p. 146). *City of Glass* contains two approaches towards New York, which at first seem to be divergent, but in the end prove to be two sides of the same coin, as one dimension effortlessly contains the other. The protagonist, Quinn, is struck by the sheer size of New York, and he constructs an image of the city in the form of a Borgesian labyrinth:

> New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, and no matter how far he walked, no matter how well he came to know its neighborhoods and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well. […] New York was the nowhere he had built around himself, and he realized that he had no intention of ever leaving it again. (Auster, 2006, p. 4)

The metamorphosis from immigrant object to surrogate object becomes recurrent in postmodernist fiction, as seen in the fragment above. Investing a part of oneself into the city marks a unique relationship between character and setting, as the two become indistinguishable from the other; thus, it becomes impossible to talk about one without talking of the other as well.

This immensity of the city allows each individual to construct their version of New York, which produces an inexorable sense of alienation because the notion is no longer shared at a collective level. This is what connects Quinn's view of the city to that of Peter Stillman, but the latter's version of New York is automatically contained within the first one. In this way, it is also paradoxically devoid of individuality: "I have come to New York because it is the most forlorn of places, the most abject. The brokenness is everywhere, the disarray is universal" (Auster, 2006, p. 77). This almost oxymoronic connection between alienation and lack of individuality, which can be encountered within these two versions of New York and in the fictional surrogate object contained in *City of Glass*, is the element that brings Auster's originality to the surface.

Fictionalizing 9/11 or: How the Fictional Object Learned to Stop Worrying and Heal Its Scars

For over a decade, the literary responses to one of the most pivotal events in contemporary history have continuously reinvented New York, painting it in myriad colors. In an attempt to find a common direction to the works that can be grouped under the common umbrella

of "9/11 fiction," Benjamin Bird (2007, p. 561) considers that these novels address "the consequences and etiology of the attacks in oblique and suggestive ways that are more often arresting than the more ponderous assertions of social scientists" and New York provides both the background and the foreground for these examinations at the fictional level, twisting yet again the borderline between immigrant and surrogate object.

Don DeLillo's (2011) *Cosmopolis* takes place one year before 9/11, but the atmosphere in New York seems to already be in tune with the events that will occur one year later. The fictional anti-capitalist riot described in the novel seems to foreshadow the prevalence of fear that will make the transition into reality onto the streets of New York after the fall of the Twin Towers. Times Square seems to be an almost native object that DeLillo has created instead of a fictionalized version of its real counterpart, as, in the context of this fictional version of New York, it has become a veritable battlefield:

> The rain came washing down on the emptying breadth of Times Square with the billboards ghost-lighted now and the tire barricades nearly cleared dead ahead, leaving 47th Street open to the west. […] the credible threat was the thing that moved and quickened him. (DeLillo, 2011, pp. 106–107)

In *Falling Man*, DeLillo (2008) turns the event of 9/11 itself into an immigrant object and uses it to open the novel by expanding the powerful battlefield image of Times Square in *Cosmopolis* to the entire area of Lower Manhattan and, indeed, to the entire world itself:

> It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night. […] Smoke and ash came rolling down streets and turning corners, busting around corners, seismic tides of smoke, with office paper flashing past, standard sheets with cutting edge, skimming, whipping past, otherworldly things in the morning pall. (DeLillo, 2008, p. 3)

In the aftermath of 9/11 and the paranoia that more attacks might follow, Joseph O'Neill's (2008) *Netherland* contains a version of Times Square not wholly different from the one conveyed by Don DeLillo (2011) in *Cosmopolis*, only the focus is changed from street level to the underground:

> She had fears of her own, in particular the feeling in her bones that Times Square, where the offices of her law firm were situated, would be the site of the next attack. The Times Square subway station was a special ordeal for her. Every time I set foot in that makeshift cement underworld […] I tasted her anxiety. Throngs endlessly climbed and descended the passages and walkways like Escher's tramping figures. (O'Neill, 2008, Ch. 5)

What surprises the reader is the extent to which the details of the disaster are, in Bird's words, obliquely suggested. The power of suggestion, therefore, serves to emphasize the depth that this event has had on the characters' consciousness. Hans van der Broek, the protagonist of *Netherland*, cannot even mention 9/11 as such, and the references he makes to it when he explains his decision to leave New York are highly elliptical:

> Now that I, too, have left that city, I find it hard to rid myself of the feeling that life carries a taint of aftermath. This last-mentioned word, somebody once told me, refers literally to a second mowing of grass in the same season. You might say, if you're the type prone to general observations, that New York City insists on memory's repetitive mower—on the sort of purposeful postmortem that has the effect, so one is told and forlornly hopes, of cutting the grassy past to manageable proportions. For it keeps growing back, of course. (O'Neill, 2008, Ch. 1)

Thus, the surrogate object is invested here with traits that might prove to be the catalyst that will trigger the process of healing and regeneration. In this way, it is suggested that the state induced by 9/11, as is the case with all past tragedies that have left deep imprints on the present, can be overcome, although its traces will linger in collective memory.

Conclusions

What this analysis has essentially foregrounded is the fact that the evolution of the fictional object, in its three incarnations, parallels the history of the real counterpart on which it is constructed. Thus, significant developments in the literary representation of New York can be traced, which parallel ensuing cultural and/or historical phenomena, such as the move away from ostentatious industrialization and rapid modernization to more romantic and adventurous vistas and ultimately to post-traumatic sites of memorialization following the events of 9/11.

However, this evolution does not stop with the mere employment of New York as a surrogate object. As highlighted by the examples provided above, the surrogate object, in turn, has subsequent layers of meaning added to it, which enhance both the way the New York setting is conveyed, but, in turn, amplifies the effect that the novels at hand have on the reader. This addition of layers can be read as an aesthetic expansion of the dimensions inscribed within the literary works at hand. Thus, valuable contributions have been made to the complexity and intricateness of the novel as an art form, which invites the reader to dig deeper beyond the surface of the text and to engage it critically, promoting active reading and individual readings of both the fictional objects and the texts themselves.

References

Auster, P. (2006). *The New York trilogy*. Penguin Books.
Berman, R. (2001). *The Great Gatsby* and the twenties. In R. Prigozy (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald* (pp. 79–94). Cambridge University Press.
Bird, B. (2007). History, emotion, and the body: Mourning in Post-9/11 fiction. *In Literature Compass, 4*(3), 561–575. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2007.00437.x
Chapman Sharpe, W. (2008). *New York nocturne. The city after dark in literature, painting, and photography, 1850–1950*. Princeton University Press.
DeLillo, D. (2011). *Cosmopolis*. Picador.
DeLillo, D. (2008). *Falling man*. Scribner.
Fitzgerald, F. S. (1994). *The Great Gatsby*. Penguin Popular Classics.
Fuchs-Abrams, S. (2020). *The literature of New York*. Cambridge Scholars.
Haralson, E., & Johnson, K. (2009). *Critical companion to Henry James*. Infobase Publishing.
High, P. B. (1986). *An outline of American literature*. Longman.
Irving, W. (2004). *Knickerbocker's history of New York*. Project Gutenberg. http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13042/13042-h/13042-h.htm#KNICKERBOCKERS
Lindner, C. (2015). *Imagining New York City. Literature, urbanism, and the visual arts, 1890–1940.* Oxford University Press.
James, H. (1994). *The American scene*. Penguin Books.
James, H. (2012). *Washington Square*. Penguin Books.
Jones, B. J. (2008). *Washington Irving: An American original*. Arcade Publishing.
Martin, B. (2008). *Paul Auster's postmodernity*. Routledge.
Motoarca, I.-R. (2014). Fictional surrogates. In *Philosophia*, 42, 1033–1053. https://www.doi.org/10.1007/s11406-014-9522-1
O'Neill, J. (2008). *Netherland*. Pantheon Books. Kindle Edition.
Parsons, T. (1980). *Nonexistent objects*. Yale University Press.
Patell, C., & Waterman, B. (2010). *The Cambridge companion to the literature of New York*. Cambridge University Press.
Salmela, M., & Ameel, L. (2022). New York fiction. In J. Tambling (Ed.) *The Palgrave handbook of literature and the city* (pp. 317–332). Palgrave Macmillan.
Scott, W. B., & Rukoff, P. M. (1999). *New York Modern: The Arts and the City*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
Tambling, J. (2022). Volume editor's introduction and acknowledgements. In J. Tambling (Ed.) *The Palgrave handbook of literature and the city* (pp. vii–xi). Palgrave Macmillan.
Voltolini, A. (2020). Real individuals in fictions, fictional surrogates in stories. In *Philosophia, 48*(2), 803–820. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-019-00137-w
Wilson, R. (2020). *New York: A literary history*. Cambridge University Press.
Zuba, J. (2005). *Bloom's literary places: New York*. Chelsea House Publishers.

p'arts, hum' Papers in Arts and Humanities

Vol. 3, No. 2, Dec. 2023
https://doi.org/10.52885/pah.v3i2.145

The Elasticity of Space in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*

MILOŠ BLAHÚT
Affiliation: Faculty of Arts
Prešov University in Prešov, Slovakia
Email: milos.blahut@unipo.sk

Abstract

Karen Tei Yamashita's novel *Tropic of Orange* is a study of space shaped by history, urbanism, globalisation, and ecology. Yamashita explores the social injustice, urban, and environmental changes happening in postmodern and futuristic Los Angeles through seven characters and their respective storylines, narrated by various narrators with different styles. Most characters experience spatial and temporal distortions in their everyday lives, allowing them to try to understand the events unfolding around them. Yamashita depicts space as an organic, changeable, and elastic unity. I argue that by viewing space more holistically, Yamashita offers solutions to some of the overarching problems California has been facing for a long time, namely racism, displacement, class differences, transformation of urban space, violence, and the threat of ecological catastrophe. The convergence of space and time in the narrative, mixed with magic realist tropes, enables Yamashita to interrogate and critique the contemporary socio-economic conditions of the Latin American community in Los Angeles.

Keywords: environment, space, postmodernism, time, gentrification

Introduction

The notion of space is a well-developed concept in several fields, ranging from geography, philosophy, cultural geography, literary theory, narratology, and urban geography. In the first half of the 20th century, space was viewed as an inseparable concept from time. Bakhtin stressed the interdependence between space and time as early as the 1930s when he devised the term *chronotope*[1] and applied it to literary texts. An important shift,

[1] The essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel. Notes toward a Historical Poetics" was "originally written in the 1930s but published only in 1975, the year of Bakhtin's death, and was not translated into English until 1981" (Biemong at al., 2010, iii.).

known as the *spatial turn*, occurred in humanities in the 1960s: scholars such as Foucault, Lefebvre, Jameson, and others reevaluate space, place, landscape, and other similar concepts with the aid of disciplines and methodologies such as structuralism, linguistics, urban theory, Marxist criticism, postcolonial theory, or postmodern theories.

Of particular interest are the notions of space and spatiality related to social sciences developed by urban geographers and philosophers (Michel Foucault, Mike Davis, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau) and postmodern/Marxist geographers (Edward Soja, David Harvey), as these served as a springboard for further investigations of space as a phenomenon applied in literary scholarship. Henri Lefebvre treated space as a social product, and famously distinguished between a lived, a perceived and a conceived space. He states that "[s]pace is permeated with social relations: it is not only supported by social relations but is also producing and produced by social relations" (1991, p. 286). Marxist and postmodern geographer David Harvey elaborated upon Lefebvre's triad of spaces and the concept of spatial justice, and explored the relationship between urbanisation and capitalism. In his later work, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (published in 1989), Harvey claimed that "Space and time are basic categories of human existence" (p. 201). He further argued:

> Since capitalism has been (and continues to be) a revolutionary mode of production in which the material practices and processes of social reproduction are always changing, it follows that the objective qualities as well as the meanings of space and time also change. (Harvey, 1989 p. 204)

Various changes in society (progress in particular) automatically link to "the conquest of space, the tearing down of all spatial barriers, and the ultimate 'annihilation of space through time.'" (p. 204). His (and others') theoretical discussions about space are crucial in praxis, and he adds that "How we represent space and time in theory matters, because it affects how we and others interpret and then act with respect to the world" (p. 205). Yamashita's novel addresses the concepts of space and time as interlinked with the social activity of the characters, so Harvey's study might seem fruitful in this analysis. Edward Soja's investigation of Los Angeles in his *Postmodern Geographies* (1989), in which he claims that "the particular experiences of urban development and change occurring elsewhere in the world are […] duplicated in Los Angeles, the place where it all seems to 'come together'" (1989, p. 221), is useful due to his inclusion and interdependence of what he observes as "the fundamental spatiality of social life, the adhesive relations between society and space, history and geography, the splendidly idiographic and the enticingly generalizable features of a postmodern urban geography" (p. 223).

The development of world literatures after World War II, in general, and American literature, in particular, was marked by the emergence of postmodern novels and poetry whose writers employed bold stylistic techniques to describe the settings (storyworlds, fictional worlds) and their interdependence with the form of the literary work. The authors aimed to address the contemporary problems faced by the rapidly expanding societies in particularly capitalist Western countries (overpopulation, climate change, gender issues, spatial injustice) and negotiate those new facets of the world to question various metanarratives (reason, religion, science, humanity). Some of the notable authors exploring the multiculturalism and multiperspectivism of American cities are Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace, Octavia Butler, and Karen Tei Yamashita. The last-mentioned author will be explored in this paper with reference to the representation of space in her 1997 novel *Tropic of Orange*.

Several theoretical concepts, such as urban geography and spatial criticism, have been applied to Yamashita's novel to explore space, place, landscape, and their relationships. Scholars such as Ryan (2003), or Gladwin (2018), took interdisciplinary approaches to space and often provided new interpretations and perspectives of history, culture, ethnicity, identity, and ecology. Some of the most recent authors applied a postmodern approach (Hsu, 2018), incorporated the subjects of spatial injustice and the critique of ethnicity (Mermann-Jozwiak, 2011) or read the novel through a feminist lens (Frank, 2019).

As far as the notion of space is concerned (or spatial representation in literature), Löbbermann states that:

> The transnational imagination of *Tropic of Cancer* [sic] has been discussed in various excellent articles […]. Yet so far, a reading of *Tropic of Orange* in the light of postmodern geography and the work of Edward W. Soja has only been hinted at. (2008, p. 264)

Numerous scholars drew their attention to spatial representation in Yamashita's novel (Gamber, 2012; Crawford, 2013; Thompson, 2017; Maucione, 2013).

In this paper, I aim to analyse how Yamashita interrogates the contemporary socio-economic conditions concerning the United States–Mexico border area through the exploration of the spatiotemporal setting. Through the characters' idiosyncratic vision of spaces, as well as their approach to urban planning and historical events of the studied area, Yamashita points at social, spatial, and environmental inequalities.

Mapping the Space of Los Angeles

The novel consists of 49 chapters, providing seven different character perspectives that serve as voices in parallel stories occurring within seven days a week. Some of the characters are eccentric in their own distinct ways. For instance, Manzanar is a former surgeon

and currently homeless conductor, who spends his days on the Los Angeles overpass conducting an imaginary orchestra. Buzzworm, an African American Vietnam War veteran, spends his free time roaming the streets of the metropolis, a social worker. The two characters have a common trait: although their vision of space is unique, each of them is sensitive to the changes and particularities of their neighbourhoods. Yamashita provides her analysis of space in Los Angeles through the characters' direct engagement with people and their different perspectives (Manzanar takes the vantage point from above the city and listens to its "series of concerts and symphonies").

Manzanar's vision may be perceived as an idyllic one, as his observation of the traffic is described with the vocabulary evoking to readers the natural scenery full of pastoral images: "It was as if his very heart tilted forward, his arms offering and yet containing this heart, opening and closing as the wings of a great bird, coaxing the notes tenderly to brief life, conducting sound into symphony" (Yamashita, 1997, p. 33).

Being a conductor, Manzanar feel and hears the rhythms, pulsations, and sounds of the bustling city. Buzzworm's ideas, in contrast, stem from his direct involvement with the people on the streets, especially the homeless, street peddlers, drug addicts, and workers. Like a detective, Buzzworm tries to understand the sudden deaths among the Los Angeles street residents caused by drug-infused oranges illegally imported from Mexico. He has a pivotal role in the plot, since he disseminates most of the themes through his interest in local affairs and helping those in need: in one of the final and most poignant situations, he becomes "a hero" of the streets. The novel finishes with a big traffic jam and chaos on the streets: Emi, a Japanese American journalist who chases stories, is shot dead, and Buzzworm is ready to console her before she dies: "Buzzworm looked around […] her [Emi's] death would be unforgivable. Emi's enraged media would see to that. A thousand homeless could die, but no one would forget her ultimate sacrifice" (Yamashita, 1997, p. 216).

Buzzworm represents the character who has a holistic approach to space as lived, as was rightly elaborated upon by Lefevbre, a fact demonstrated by his close observation of his neighbourhood. For instance, he is impressed by the palm trees in the city, considering details such as their nature, role, function, and position in the space. The narrator's poetic language emphasizes the trees, which "were like the eyes of his neighbourhood, watching the rest of the city, watching it sleep and eat and play and die" (Yamashita, 1997, p. 31). The neighbours treat the trees as trivial and ineffective because they do not seem to serve any purpose—"poor people don't get to have no shade. That's what porches are for" (p. 31). Buzzworm is aware of the fact that the trees serve a specific purpose, to "make out the place where he lived," and that the beauty of these trees could only be perceived

"if you were far away" (p. 31). Moreover, the palms serve a symbolic purpose in the novel; they mark the identity of people, their belonging to the place, and those grid patterns, lived and experienced, which are not shown on maps.

Studying the map (of Los Angeles in 1972), Buzzworm asks a question:

> Buzzworm studied the map. Balboa'd torn it out of a book for him to study. *Quartz City*[2] or some such title […] whose territory was it anyway? Might as well show which police departments covered which beats; which local, state federal politicians claimed which constituents; which kind of colored people (brown, black, yellow) lived where. […] If someone could put down all the layers of the real map, maybe he could get the real picture. (pp. 72–73)

Buzzworm's rumination shows his feelings about the dispossessed and displaced low-income residents and ethnic minorities of the city, who were forcefully pushed to the outskirts of the city and left without help from local authorities and the state. However, maps used by cartographers and geographers do not record the space and place on a spatio-temporal level. Rodriguez confirms: "Buzzworm and Manzanar occupy spaces profoundly different from the representations of space they know from maps, master plans, and even non-natives of the city" (2017, p. 109). He further reads the novel as an urban study, drawing attention to David Harvey and his influential publication on city planning and spatiality *Social Justice and the City* (1973). Harvey's analysis of space stemmed from Henri Lefebvre's insistence on the residents' "right to the city," which Harvey further explored in his essay, adding that "The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city" (2008). Buzzworm is community-conscious, has his own vision, and even plans to tackle the social injustice in the city, which he calls "gente-fication" (Yamashita, 1997, p. 72). The narrator explains Buzzworms' idea:

> Buzzworm had a plan. Called it gentrification.[3] Not the sort brings in poor artists. Sort where people living there become their own gentry. Self-gentrification by a self-made set of standards and respectability. Do-it-yourself gentrification. Latinos had this word, *gente*. Something translated like *us*. Like *folks*. That sort of gente-fication. Restore the neighborhood. Clean up the streets. Take care of the people. Trim and water the palm trees. Some laughed at Buzzworm's plan. (p. 72)

[2] The name Quartz City refers to a famous book by Mike Davis, titled *The City of Quarts*, a sociological study of the late twentieth century Los Angeles, its history, future, and economy.

[3] The term *gentrification* refers to the refurbishment of neglected areas, which involves the displacement of those who are poor or homeless.

Maucione states that:

> Buzzworm's plan for neighborhood restoration—what some of his fellow residents mockingly refer to as "This Old Hood"—exemplifies, then, the kind of anticapitalist, post-humanist ecological project that may begin to be effective in dismantling the mythologized rhetorical power and sociopolitical and environmental destruction inherent in global capitalism's misuses of humans and habitat. (2013, p. 94)

Buzzworm's plan is an idealised version of the lived space, which could be perceived as a critique of urban development. Buzzworm distinguishes between the areas in the city that are safe and which are dangerous, especially for people of different races. "When he came home, he realized he was considered the enemy. If he stepped over the invisible front line, he could get implicated, arrested, jailed, killed. If he stepped back, he'd just be invisible. Either way he was dead" (Yamashita, 1997, p. 186). In one scene, Buzzworm remembers how the city residents got easily fooled and were displaced by city bureaucrats:

> Some woman just like grandma stood up and wanted to know what the master plan was. How'd she know it wasn't gonna be more than just widen the freeway? Bureaucrats […] made the palm trees look decorative. This was the plan. Just a little freeway widening. Wasn't gonna affect her house. Her house was her house. Wasn't gonna affect her […]. By the time the freeway could be widened, people forget what they got promised. (1997, p. 73)

Through a masterplan prepared by the bureaucrats, which entailed the construction of freeways, the residents were deprived of their space, and lost their right to the city. Consequently, the space was used by gangs and prostitutes. Lee shows that "Los Angeles, through Buzzworm's eyes, is a den of social injustice and economic iniquity" (2007, p. 509).

Buzzworm's activism stems from his near-scientific observation of non-human nature in the city, namely palm trees. When he explains the differences between various species of the trees, the residents are perplexed by his explanations and retort: "You like these damn palm trees, dig 'em out and haul 'em away. Be our guest" (Yamashita, 1997, p. 30). Buzzworm shows his appreciation of trees in the city by teaching the residents the importance of trees:

> I just want to let you know the age of these fine specimens. Been standin' here a long time and will continue to long after you and I are gone. These trees're like my watches here, markin' time. Palm tree's smart, knows the time for everything. (1997, p. 30)

Space as Layers

The characters in Karen Tei Yamashita's novel *Tropic of Orange* are very sensitive concerning the space they occupy. They reflect on the distribution of wealth in the neighbourhoods, ecology, urban planning, or any changes happening in near-future Los Angeles. Manzanar Murakami[4] is a Japanese-American conductor, living in the streets of Los Angeles, and observing the city from the overpass.

> *There are maps and there are maps and there are maps*. The uncanny thing was that he could see all of them at once, filter some, pick them out like transparent windows and place them even delicately and consecutively in a complex grid of pattern, spatial discernment, body politic. (Yamashita, 1997, p. 52)

Manzanar views the maps as layers, beginning within "geology" and "artesian rivers" and moving through man-made constructions, such as:

> […] civil utilities: South California pipelines of natural gas, the unnatural waterways of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, and the great dank tunnels of sewage, the cascades of poisonous effluents surging from rain-washed streets into the Santa Monica Bay. (Yamashita, 1997, p. 52)

His vision of space resembles Buzzworm's; however, Manzanar's observations are more symbolic and prophetic. His vision is enhanced by sound patterns of the city streets and maintenance. The artificial constructions in Los Angeles are viewed as "an organic unity," and he, being a musician, perceives them as "audible layers […] to create a great mind of music" (p. 52).

Furthermore, Manzanar appropriates the whole network of roads, pipelines, and geological formations to animal sounds: "noise that sounded like a mix of an elephant and the wail of a whale, concentrating until it moaned through the downtown canyons, shuddered past the on-ramps and echoed up and down the one-ten" (Yamashita, 1997, p. 104). Manzanar's vision of Los Angeles, the system of freeways as "a great root system, an organic living entity" (1997, p. 35), is compared both to a symphony and ecosystem. Mermann-Jozowiak also contends that "While Manzanar's cartography is primarily phenomenological, it is simultaneously historical, political, and ecological" (2011, p. 14). The pattern Manzanar sees is dynamic, poetic, and even temporal, which, at least from the very beginning of the novel, represents Lefebvre's notion of "conceived space"—the space

[4] Manzanar was one of the camps where several thousands of Japanese Americans were incarcerated during World War II.

mapped by architects or urban planners. However, Manzanar records the residents traffic jams and experiences during the day and likens them to the rhythm of the music he conducts, which resembles the "lived space."

> After all, this was L.A. There was a schedule of sorts, a program, an appropriate series of concerts and symphonies in accordance with the seasons and the climate of the city. As noted by many others, climatic change in L.A. was different from other places. It had less perhaps to do with weather and more to do with disaster. For example, when the city rioted or when the city was on fire or when the city shook, the program was particularly apt, controversial, hair-raising, horrific, intense—apocalyptic, if you will. (Yamashita, 1997, p. 34)

Readers are provided with Manzanar's subjective experience of space—or the "lived space," which Lefebvre called "representational space," and which is "linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art" (1991, p. 33). The narrative is filled with metaphorical expressions and symbols.

Near the end of the novel, Arcangel,[5] a mysterious figure, arrives in Los Angeles as a messenger, Manzanar conducts from an overpass and senses the changes in the pattern (grid) of the city: "[…] the movement of traffic had almost altogether stopped, not only in the freeway valley below but virtually everywhere. The tenor of this music was a very different sort, at times a kind of choral babel" (Yamashita, 1997, p. 204). His orchestra includes homeless who take up the baton, but also people of different origins, metonymically represented through musical instruments: "lutes and lyres, harmonicas, accordions, sitars, hand organs, nose flutes, gamelons, congas, berimbaus, and cuícas" (1997, p. 204). Lee calls Manzanar's vision as "romantic universalism" (2007, p. 517). Indeed, Manzanar's perception is idyllic and pastoral, in contrast to Arcangel's legacy or Buzzworm's ideas. The chaos that ensues, the police raids, and the violence in the streets signify the oppression of those who were socially excluded, marginalised, or deprived of their natural rights. Manzanar's conflation of living organism and manmade artificial constructions (maintenance or freeway infrastructures) represents the merging of human and nonhuman. I find Parker's explanation of the conflation as the destabilization of "the epistemological and ontological boundaries between the real/imagined, past/future, North/South, and human/nonhuman" (2022, p. 279) as not very convincing.

[5] Arcangel has other names, for example, Mojado. Sanchez explains that "'Mojado' and 'wetback' are two popular variants used in Mexico and the United States, respectively, to refer to people who cross without documents" (2014, p. 163).

Manzanar has a unique vision or wild imagination and sees the "contemporary urban landscape of *Tropic of Orange* […] [as] one of madness and alienation" (Ammons, 2010, p. 151). I would rather adopt Sexton's argument about the overlapping of spatial and temporal settings:

> *Tropic of Orange* envisions Los Angeles as a site of interconnectivity between natural and social worlds, where magical events function as extreme versions of the conditions humans will confront in an Anthropocene world. The distortion of L.A.'s environment and climate, a result of the orange and the Tropic of Cancer traveling towards the city, anticipates a world reshaped by humans. This reshaped L.A. is not the infinitely malleable city of postmodern fantasy, but a site where the many social, environmental, and historical maps of a changing world most obviously overlap. (2017, p. 16)

Manzanar lives in contemporary reality, and Yamashita uses his vision to explain and interrogate some of the forces affecting the dynamics of space of Los Angeles, such as migration of Mexicans into the United States, drug and organ trafficking, or historical events. Ammons succinctly adds that "He [Manzanar] was not crazy. L.A. was the crazy one" (2010, p. 153). This transgression, violation, blurring, or subversion of the boundaries, which is a typical feature of postmodern poetics, as proven by Brian McHale in his *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), is to be represented in the episodes/chapters by other characters, such as Rafaela Cortes or Arcangel.

Elasticity of the Spatiotemporal Setting

In Yamashita's novel *Tropic of Orange*, history plays a crucial part. Some of the seven main characters reflect (and one even represents and personifies) history, the phenomenon itself encapsulating the notion of time. The characters view the space they occupy in the context of history, which is recorded as maps superimposed on each other. If Buzzworm imagines all maps to be placed one upon the other, he conflates space and history. Some characters in the novel view spatiotemporal landscapes in quite an unrealistic, if not magical way. These episodes are, however, more fantastic than real. As stated above, the most precise generic term for such a narrative would be magic realism.

At the beginning of the novel, Rafaela Cortes[6] is a Mexican woman who works and lives in Mexico with her son, Sol. One day she is captivated by one orange growing on the tree

[6] The names of the characters are often very symbolic: the surname of Rafaela Cortéz refers to a 15th-century Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés; Hernando—a drug and organ smuggler, who chases and rapes Rafaela, refers to Cortés, too. Gabriel Balboa suggests another Spanish conquistador Vasco Núñez de Balboa.

in the area marking the Tropic of Cancer. Ultimately the orange is taken by Arcangel. As Rafaela overhears her neighbour's son, Hernando, talking on the phone about his illegal organ trafficking, she is in great danger and sits on the bus with Sol and Arcangel, pursued by Hernando. Rafaela flees to the United States of America. Changes ensue in a dramatic and fantastic chain of events, just as space and time begin to move, curve, and stretch. At least, this is what the characters can feel, sense, and visualise.

Rafaela senses, observes, and even experiences changes around her. Sitting on the bus with her son and Arcangel, heading north, and being chased by Hernando, the man involved in illegal trade with body organs, Rafaela magically touches the imaginative line—Tropic of Cancer,[7] but this time it is "protruding innocently from the suitcase" (Yamashita, 1997, pp. 132–133).

Moving northern latitude, from Mexico to a farther north, Arcangel also carries history with him, which is a metaphor for long-term immigration from South America to North America, but which allegorically represents historical movement of labour northwards and the trade between Mexico and the United States of America, both legal (fruits, i.e. the trade between the U.S. and Mexico) and illegal (represented in the novel through immigration, drug trafficking and illegal organ trafficking involving children). Arcangel, the only mystical character, a poet and performer, represents both a history of the colonised of the past and the cultural and economic condition of the dispossessed of the present (he pretends to be one of the people). Sexton sums up: "*Tropic of Orange* follows seven characters through seven days of surreal, unnatural disasters, as the transportation of oranges and organs across the U.S.–Mexico border literally warps time and space, smashing Mexico and Los Angeles together" (2017, p. 14).

This movement of the oranges from Mexico has also other implications. The fruit is poisoned as it was injected with drugs and illegally imported from Mexico to the United States of America. Buzzworm recollects: "All oranges were suspect. And deemed highly toxic. Waste companies hauled the rotting stuff by the tons to landfills. Environmental experts declared them toxic waste. Sniff the chalky fungus and you could be dead fast" (Yamashita, 1997, p. 122). Readers learn that the oranges symbolically epitomise migration, as Rafaela Cortes' son, Sol, travels north with Arcangel, and also the trade between Mexico and America—both legal and illegal.

[7] Tropic of Cancer is an imaginary line running across the globe from east to west, which "marks the most northerly latitude at which the sun can appear directly overhead at noon. This event occurs at the June solstice, when the northern hemisphere is tilted towards the sun to its maximum extent." ("Tropic of Cancer", 2021).

Later on, Rafaela Cortes is chased and raped by Hernando, as she moves north to the United States of America. In an intensely dramatic scenario, Rafaela symbolically and magically transforms into a snake and subdues Hernando, who for a moment represents jaguar. The realistic depiction of the events overlaps with magic or fantastic.

> Her writhing twisted her body into a muscular serpent—sinuous and suddenly powerful. She thrashed at him with vicious fangs—ripping his ears, gouging his neck, drawing blood […]. And there was the passage of five thousand women of Cochabamba resisting with tin guns an entire army of Spaniards, the passage of a virgin consecrated to the sun-god buried alive with her lover, of La Malinche abandoning her children and La Llorona howling after, of cangaceira Maria Bonita riddled with led by machine guns […]. (Yamashita, 1997, p. 188)

Her transformation into a serpent and the battle against Hernando allegorically represents the Mexicans' struggle against the Spanish conquerors in the past. The realistic mode of writing changes into a mythical and fantastic one, as filtered both through the imagination of the omniscient narrator and Rafaela. However, the macabre event becomes even more puzzling for the reader when Rafaela wakes up (apparently, she lost consciousness when Hernando had beaten and raped her). The narrator portrays the real human-like Rafaela, who takes out from her mouth "a chunk of something fibrous between her teeth with her tongue" and is "horrified to see a wad of black fur emerge and shift along the dirt like scattering feathers" (1997, p. 189). Ultimately, the diegetic space of the novel and the symbolic representation merge.

The novel, however, does not only conflate two narrative spaces; Yamashita also lets her space be seen as "timeless," which is acceptable with the rendering of the space-time continuum at the diegetic level, and within the experimental (postmodern) novel. Moreover, such perception of space and time is within the domain of the character (Rafaela) and her senses described via free indirect discourse:

> Sol with his salted cob wandering in and out of the corn, wandering as if in some timeless space, at every moment farther and farther. Her heaving breath pummeled in her ears. How long would it take to run such a distance? Breathless, she stretched her arms reaching toward Sol. To everything there seemed to be an eerie liquid elasticity. How far must she race? How far must she reach to touch her Sol? (Yamashita, 1997, p. 103)

Rafaela and other characters (for example, Manzanar) sense "an eerie liquid elasticity" and "This elasticity of the land and of time" (1997, p. 129) speaks about Rafaela's confusion over the changes happening in Mexico—economic factors, such as immigration, or environmental issues, like global warming.

Manzanar, looking south, also has visions similar to Rafaela's:

> For the first time, […] an uncanny sense of the elasticity of the moment, of time and space, forced his hands and arms to continue. He was facing south on his overpass podium, and he knew the entire event was being moved, stretched. (Yamashita, 1997, p. 107)

In *Postmodern Geographies*, Edward Soja provides an interesting exploration of the spatio-temporal dimension of Los Angeles from the postmodern and Marxist perspective:

> Los Angeles […] is exceedingly tough-to-track, peculiarly resistant to conventional description. It is difficult to grasp persuasively in a temporal narrative for it generates too many conflicting images, confounding historicization, always seeming to stretch laterally instead of unfolding sequentially. (1989, p. 222)

Manzanar views Los Angeles and its infrastructure as dynamic, changeable, important. L.A.'s infrastructure could signify a regenerative aspect of the city, as the freeways enable the mobility of goods and people, often by illegal means.

The elasticity of space and time foreshadows dramatic and often negative changes in the characters' lives (Rafaela is raped, and violence commences in the streets of Los Angeles as Manzanar "conducts" an orchestra from an overpass). The troubles begin once Arcangel becomes present among the common people in Los Angeles. He brings the only orange from Mazatlán, while "several thousand oranges [are] rotting in toxic landfills" (Yamashita, 1989, p. 183). On his way north, Arcangel meets a character called Rodriguez. The conversation between them illustrates the point:

> "I have been travelling a long time."
> "How long?"
> "Five hundred years."
> "Impossible." Rodriguez laughed at the joke.
> "Perhaps. I have seen more than a man may ever wish to see." He closed his eyes for a long moment. […] He could see Haitian farmers burning and slashing cane workers stirring molasses into white gold. Guatemalans loading trucks with crates of bananas and corn Indians who mined tin […]. (Yamashita, 1997, p. 125)

Arcangel is simultaneously a real person, a wrestler, and, symbolically, a manifestation of the oppressed people from South America, encompassing all nations in the history of colonisation. When Arcangel arrives at the U.S.–Mexican border and speaks to the officials, the historical present merges with the historical time as he recites his poetry about the immigrants he represents and those who are being detained at the border:

> Then came the kids selling Kleenex and Chiclets
> the women pressing rubber soles into tennis shoes,
> the men welding fenders to station wagons and
> all the people who do the work of machines:
> […]
> 25 million dead Indians,
> […]
> Then came the rain forests, El Niño, African bees, panthers, sloths, llamas, monkeys, and pythons.
> Everything and everybody got in lines—citizens and aliens—
> The great undocumented foment,
> The Third World War,
> The gliding wings of a dream. (Yamashita, 1997, p. 172)

Arcangel/Mojado is both a rem(a)inder of the past, and a contemporary representation of the clash between traditional and rural Mexicans and modern Los Angeles, with all the economic and cultural negative impacts associated with it. Mojado represents the world of magic, folklore, and also politics. By moving across the borders, Mojado blurs the distinction between the geographic borders (between Mexico and the United Sates of America) but also represents the history, cultures, and social practices of the peoples of Latin America. Thompson points out that "Arcangel/El Gran Mojado, who, like Manzanar, is not bound to realism (especially not human-defined timelines). However, his travels and visions are quite real and correspond to real, historical events" (2017, p. 99). As Arcangel arrives at the U.S.–Mexican border, his memories in narrative past and written in the form of a poem stylistically merge with the present, which is represented by the communication between him and custom officers in a free direct speech. The humorous exchange of information provides an immediate access to the past of the events represented by Arcangel, as he is simultaneously a "Post-Colombian," an ordinary traveller and messenger, a former Harvard Student, and a wrestler.

In her novel, Yamashita depicts space and time as changeable, dynamic, and transformative phenomena. Her novel may be viewed as an allegory of historical events of several nations, namely Mexicans and North Americans. The events happening in time and in space merge within the narrative, and provide readers with critique of cultural, historical, economic, political and ecological aspects of California and of the U.S.–Mexican relations. Rody remarks that "Yamashita's literary imagination in every way resists artificial division; when geography itself starts moving across national borders, *Tropic of Orange* becomes an allegory of the transnationalization of the U.S. novel" (2004, p. 134).

The novel finishes with a traffic jam, during which the homeless start to occupy empty cars, and the chaos in the streets ensues. Yamashita's novel traces the impact of human behaviour on social life from a historical perspective and highlights the political and ideological implications caused by the people's decisions in urban planning. Yamashita observes the effects of urban planning on the natural habitat in Los Angeles. Apart from urban planning, globalisation takes its toll on the ecology of the metropolis.

Conclusion

Karen Tei Yamashita's novel *Tropic of Orange* addresses the issues of the postmodern Los Angeles, affected by globalisation and free trade, as well as social injustice, factors which have had a negative impact on nature and urbanisation. In mapping the city, the characters in the novel view these changes in their perspectives, some in a prophetic way, such as the mystical Arcangel, while others, like Manzanar Murakami, perceive space and time holistically and as an organic unity, connecting human and non-human aspects of life. Other characters, for instance, like Buzzworm and Rafaela Cortes, experience the elasticity and the curves of space and objects around them, which mark the changes in the city dynamics, such as the migration of people from Mexico, import and export of goods (both legal and illegal), changes in social space (namely gentrification, displacement of marginalised groups, urban planning) and ecological issues.

Contemporary Los Angeles is a city in which social and spatial injustice is clearly visible. Several geographers have studied this phenomenon, such as Edward Soja and David Harvey and are included in the theoretical framework of the present study. Buzzworm, a street activist, who is obsessed with palm trees and interested in maps, records the injustice done to those marginalised groups on the outskirts of the metropolis, such as the homeless or old-age pensioners. He suggests steps to improve the conditions of those groups that have been subjected to exploitation and even racial oppression for a long time. The novel can be read as a fictionalised urban study of space and place transformations in the neoliberal American environment. Arcangel represents the temporal and spatial crossings in the form of the character who can "travel" in history and time. He is the past, the present, and the future of the Mexican population: he symbolises the oppression but also the potential of the Latin American residents in their struggle for identity, place, and individual rights.

The characters in the novel visualise the city maps as no cartographer or urban planner has done so before, viewing the city as a continuous flux. They focus on places with trees that give L.A.'s residents identity and comfort. The dystopian world presented in the novel

is a mixture of fantasy and reality, and, in many instances, everyday situations are populated with the mysterious supernatural character Arcangel, whom the common residents treat as "one of them," inviting metaphorical reading. The characters in Yamashita's novel, *Tropic of Orange*, provide the readers with a message and hope, if not clues on how people might reevaluate their approach to urban planning and nature in the Anthropogenic era.

References

Ammons, E. (2010). *Brave new words: How literature will save the planet*. University of Iowa Press.

Bemong, N., & Borghart, P. (2010). Bakhtin's theory of the literary chronotope: Reflections, applications, perspectives. In N. Bemong, P. Borghart, M. De Dobbeleer, K. Demoen, K. De Temmerman, & B. Keunen (Eds.), *Bakhtin's theory of the literary chronotope: Reflections, applications, perspectives* (pp. 3–16). Academia Press.

Crawford, C. (2013). From desert dust to city soot: Environmental justice and Japanese American internment in Karen Tei Yamashita's "Tropic of Orange". *MELUS, 38*(3), 86–106.

Davis, M. (1990). *City of quartz: Excavating the future in Los Angeles*. Verso.

Frank, N. D. (2019). How Karen Tei Yamashita literalizes feminist subversion: Extreme domesticity, space-off reversals, and virtual resistances in "Tropic of Orange". *Humanities, 8*(1), 28. https://doi.org/10.3390/h8010028

Gamber, J. B. (2012). *Positive pollutions and cultural toxins: Waste and contamination in contemporary U.S. ethnic literatures*. University of Nebraska Press.

Gladwin, D. (2018). *Ecological exile: Spatial injustice and environmental humanities*. Routledge.

Harvey, D. (1973). *Social justice and the city*. The University of Georgia Press.

Harvey, D. (1989). *The condition of postmodernity*. Blackwell.

Harvey, D. (2008). The right to the city. *New Left Review, II*(53), 23–40. https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii53/articles/david-harvey-the-right-to-the-city

Hsu, R. Y. (2018). The cartography of justice and truthful refractions found in Karen Tei Yamashita's "Tropic of Orange". In S. G.-L. Lim, et al. (Eds.), *Transnational Asian American literature: Sites and transits* (pp. 75–99). Temple University Press.

Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Duke University Press.

Jansen, A. M. Y. (2017). (Dis)integrating borders: Crossing literal/literary boundaries in "Tropic of Orange" and "The People of Paper". *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S., 42*(3), 102–128. Oxford University Press.

Lee S. (2007). We are not the world: Global village, universalism, and Karen Tei Yamashita's "Tropic of Orange". *MFS Modern Fiction Studies, 53*(3), 501–527.

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Blackwell.

Löbbermann, D. (2008). Mapping transculturation: Spatial metaphor in Karen Tei Yamashita's "Tropic of Orange". In W. Raussert & R. Isensee (Eds.), *Transcultural visions of identities in images and text: Transatlantic American studies/Festschrift in Honor of Günter H. Lenz* (pp. 263–279). Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter.

Maucione, J. (2013). Literary ecology and the city: Re-placing Los Angeles in Karen Tei Yamashita's "The Tropic of Orange". In K. E. Waldron & R. F. Lanham (Eds.), *Toward a literary ecology: places and spaces in American literature*. The Scarecrow Press.

McHale, B. (1987). *Postmodernist fiction*. Methuen.

Mermann-Jozwiak, E. (2011). Yamashita's post-national spaces: "It All Comes Together in Los Angeles." *Canadian Review of American Studies, 41*(1), 1–24.

Pooch, M. (2016). Karen Tei Yamashita's Los Angeles,"Tropic of Orange". In *DiverCity–Global cities as a literary phenomenon: Toronto, New York, and Los Angeles in a globalizing age* (pp. 165–204). Transcript Verlag.

Rodriguez, C. M. (2017). Relentless geography: Los Angeles' imagined cartographies in Karen Tei Yamashita's "Tropic of Orange". *Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies 8*, 104–130.

Rody, C. (2004). The transnational imagination: Karen Tei Yamashita's "Tropic of Orange". In E. R. Ty, & D. C. Goellnicht (Eds.), *Asian North American identities beyond the hyphen* (pp. 130–148). Indiana University Press.

Ryan, M. (2003). Cognitive maps and the construction of narrative space. In D. Herman (Ed.), *Narrative theory and the cognitive sciences* (pp. 214–242). CSLI Publications.

Sexton, M. (2017). "Tropic of Orange", Los Angeles, and the anthropocene imagination. *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies 43*(1), 13–32.

Soja, E. (1989). *Postmodern geographies: The reassertion of space in critical social theory*. Verso.

Thompson, K. (2017). Traffic stops, stopping traffic: Race and climate change in the age of automobility. *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment, 24*(1), 92–112.

Pacific Islands Ocean Observing System (PacIOOS) (January 25, 2016). *Tropic of Cancer*. Pacific Islands Ocean Observing System (PacIOOS). https://www.pacioos.hawaii.edu/metadata/world_tropic_of_cancer.html?format=fgdc

Vint, S. (2012). Orange County: Global networks in "Tropic of Orange". *Science Fiction Studies, 39*(3), 401–414.

Yamashita, K. T. (1997). *Tropic of Orange*. Coffee House.

p'arts, hum' Papers in Arts and Humanities

Vol. 3, No. 2, Dec. 2023
https://doi.org/10.52885/pah.v3i2.137

Silent Sites of Memory in Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*

FLORENTINA ROȘCA
Affiliation: Independent Scholar
Romania
Email: rosca.florentina@gmail.com

Abstract

As the title of the book suggests, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969) is place-focused; it is indeed a narrative of place and its people. The main fictional setting is a fictive Caribbean island, which acts as an essential locale in the protagonists' act of (re)memory and (com)memoration. An emotionally charged place, this apparently insignificant island acquires a majestic stature in the book; it is space and place, home and exile, paradise and purgatory, past and present, remembrance and forgetfulness. This paper focuses on specific sites which are emblematic of the island community, given the complex role they play in the restoration of memory and identity. Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* will be used here with an understanding that, in a Caribbean setting, places record the monumentality of loss caused by colonialism and its aftermath. The cane field and Sugar's bar are places where the past lives, bearing constant proof of terrifying colonial abuse. Other locales, however, mainly dwellings and gardens, will be identified and examined as a solution to the protagonists' exile. The paper aims to demonstrate that all these locales are the essence of the island or, to paraphrase Derek Walcott, they are the genuine fresco, map-less, history-less yet quintessential for the 'persistence of memory.'

Keywords: Paule Marshall, island, lieux de mémoire, memory, identity

> The *lieu de mémoire* is double: a site of excess closed upon itself, concentrated in its own name, but also forever open to the full range of its possible significations.
>
> —Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History*

> Here is where a real fresco should be painted, one without importance,
> but one with real faith, mapless, Historyless.
>
> —Derek Walcott, *The Antilles*

In this highly acclaimed novel, Marshall depicts the troubled consciousness of the West Indian condition in a post-colonial environment suffused by the memory of the Middle Passage and slavery. The book covers a plethora of important topics, including the divisions existing in post-colonial culture, the American melting pot, the Black diaspora and the Jewish diaspora, hybridity and cultural schizophrenia, community and resistance, as well as the struggle to remember or forget. More importantly, as its title suggests, the book is a narrative of place and its people. This paper will analyze several sites—realms of memory—which, despite being shrouded in silence, play a fundamental role in the restoration of individual and collective memory and identity.

The novel is a third-person narrative that takes place on the fictive Bourne Island, located in the Caribbean. The story unfolds over four chapters or books, each bearing a suggestive title for the development of the plot. Book I "Heirs and Descendants" serves as the novel's exposition in which the *place* and its *people* receive meticulous and lengthy descriptions. Two of the most important protagonists, Merle Kimbona and her native island, more precisely the region Bournehills, are concomitantly introduced from the onset of the novel. Four other main characters arrive on the island by plane: Vere, the native who comes back home after three years spent in the US on the farm labor scheme, and two American anthropologists—Allen Fuso, who is returning to the island accompanied by a reputed Stanford professor, Saul Amron, and Saul's wife, Harriet. Along with a succinct biography of the characters, the exposition also presents the political, social, and economic climate on the island.

In Book II, entitled "Bournehills," the action occurs exclusively in the poor region of the island and deals with the efforts made by the two anthropologists to understand the place and its community. Book III "Carnival" serves as the climactic point of the story in which the carnival and its aftermath upturn situations and unleash all tensions and energies of the plot. To briefly sketch a very intricate intrigue, the anthropologists' research project almost fails, a love affair begins between Saul and Merle, while Harriet eventually grasps the meaning of her artificial by-the-book existence, and later commits suicide. Allen realizes his misfit status with regard to his sexual orientation and Vere settles the conflicts of his life but dies shortly after in a car accident. In Book IV "Withsun," numerous decisions are made toward the novel's elusive ending, which resounds of reconciliatory overtones projected on the background of the monumental setting of the island.

To begin with, memory and its perception as time-bound should probably be re-defined when it comes to such strong places as the island. "Topical History: Places Remember Events" is one of James Joyce's notes for *Ulysses* which Edward Casey (1993) uses

to underline the localism of memory, that is to say, the link between places and memory: "the active agent is the place and not historical events, the former actively remembering the latter" (p. 277). As Casey notes, a place is not only a stage on which a role is played; each place has a story and a history, and this is what Marshall's novel engages in depicting. In *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison poignantly evokes the same pivotal role of certain places as sites where memory thrives:

> I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. *Places*, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the *place* where it happened. (p. 46)

Morrison underlines here the crucial importance that places play in the act of remembering and anchoring memories. Most places do live in people's memories or dare we say that people's memories live in places? By safeguarding memories, certain places become consecrated; they become maps of the past, as a matter of fact, sites of memory.

In this context, the present paper relies on the interpretation which Pierre Nora (1989) gives to the concept of *lieux de mémoire*, understood as sites "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (p. 7). Any entity, material or not, claims Nora, can become a *lieu de mémoire* with the passing of time and as a result of repeated symbolic practices. Due to their functions, such places appear as pure sign, as *templum*, and therefore are endowed with sacred qualities: "the most fundamental purpose of the *lieu de mémoire* is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial" (p. 19). These *loci memoriae* are in his opinion quintessential repositories of collective memory and ultimate embodiments of a commemorative consciousness, this definition being large enough to comprise places, objects, or concepts, all products of the interaction between memory and history. However, in this study, Nora's concept is narrowed down to address geographical places that pertain to individual but mostly to collective memory.

Moreover, memory belongs to a tripartite relationship with people and place and is its constitutive element. Dwelling, orientation, and movement are several essential actions that people perform in place and, of course, in time. Consequently, memories associated with these acts actualize the places themselves, according to Paul Ricœur (2004):

"the 'things' remembered are intrinsically associated with places. And it is not by chance that we say of what has occurred that it took place" (p. 41). Ricœur's reading of Nora's *lieux de mémoire* is meaningful for the present analysis since it emphasizes the unavoidable association of place and time in the act of documenting the past:

> These memory places function for the most part after the manner of reminders, offering in turn a support for failing memory, a struggle in the war against forgetting, even the silent plea of dead memory. These places 'remain' as inscriptions, monuments, potentially as documents, whereas memories transmitted only along the oral path fly away as do the words themselves. (2004, p. 41)

There are numerous sites of memory in Marshall's novel, especially since the act of remembering is fundamental in the structure of the narrative. Silent for the most part, such places only exist in Bournehills, all other *lieux de mémoire* of slavery have been eradicated or converted (for example, Sugar's bar, or the elite beaches). The need to remember implies a struggle against forgetting, and these landmarks of compressed personal or collective history serve as material support in the act of tacit remembering. They locate and document the unspeakable memory of slavery and colonialism, therefore preventing forgetting for the Bournehills community and acting against cultural amnesia displayed by the rest of the island.[1]

Challenging the image of the Caribbean setting as paradise *per se*, the depiction of the postcolonial island in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* carries upsetting derogatory connotations at all times. With categorizations such as "green wen" (Marshall, 1969, p. 19), "tiny green blemish" (p. 95), and "green speck" (p. 205), suspicion is cast upon what could have been the picturesque scenery of the full green ripened crop blending in with the mild green of the newly planted canes on a remote island in the Caribbean. Bourne Island, however, presents numerous places that help to historically locate the community: former or present exploitative sites become significant *lieux de mémoire*. DeLamotte (1998) argues that Marshall's novel employs a series of such embedded places linked to oppression and silence, a category in which she includes the cane field, the sugar mill, Merle's house, and Sugar's nightclub. They appear as "a double-exposed picture of a psychological compulsion to silence as well as a violent imperialistic assault that creates silence" (DeLamotte, 1998, p. 233) and will be analyzed in detail here as silent sites of memory, yet with a strong message to convey.

[1] The western part of the island is reminded of communal history once a year, during the carnival.

An emotionally charged place, Bournehills—the insignificant eastern part of the island—appears as a *dramatis persona*, a fusion of geography, community, and history. It acquires a majestic stature in the novel and becomes a point of contact, the "epicenter of every journey" (Casey, 1993, p. 284). It also provides permanence and plays an active role in the act of commemoration. The region, however, does not lend itself to easy discovery. Under the "good strong Bournehills sun" (Marshall, 1969, p. 65), the entire landscape "waver[s] and lose[s] shape before the eye" (p. 99). It flickers and changes appearance like a *fata morgana* mirage. "It looked strangely familiar to Saul" (p. 99), for whom the region becomes *everyplace* or a heterotopia since it assumes valences of other places that are connected to other moments in time.

Bournehills, stubborn and resistant to changes, can be read as a cleidoic place. Cut away not only from the rest of the island but also from the rest of the world, it is a self-contained and womb-like environment. It is the place where memory is re-actualized, where the past lives, bearing constant proof of terrifying colonial abuse. It resembles a postcolonial apocalyptic landscape, ravaged by overuse and then discarded: a perfect image of a dystopia. The arid hills and the ridge seal Bournehills off and leave no possibility of reconnection with the western(ized) part of the island. "We're still there everybody" (Marshall, 1969, p. 68), proudly declares Merle, reminding the rich clique that the Bournehills people will not change and that they will not be moved either. What could be at first misunderstood as stasis or even cultural paralysis is in fact resilience, "life persisting amid […] nameless and irrevocable loss" (p. 5), as Merle asserts. It is an act of survival, resistance, and struggle against forgetting. People's timelessness is a very active state here "because [they] never forget" (p. 102). The Bournehills community may appear "ensnarled in the trap of memory" (p. 212) but it forms a "world of the past" (p. 217) that has the power of summoning other times past for visitors and locals alike. The condition of timelessness must and does validate history and remembrance.

Two essential sites of memory emerge from the onset of the novel: the cane field and the sugar factory. A perennial and rhizomatic plant, sugar cane was the sole purpose and commodity of colonialism on the island and significantly regulates its existence even in the post-colonial era. New Bristol, the village one could see before the plane's descent is "buried like a bird's nest" (Marshall, 1969, p. 22) in the omnipresent cane fields. The entire island, except for Bournehills, seems swallowed up by canes. The small Bournehills community alone displays a profound attachment to the land despite the scarce crop it yields. The canes, the only sustenance for this part of the island, become privileged members of the community. They participate in people's everyday life "running their long fingers over the wall whenever there was a breeze" (p. 26), playing an important role in

a tripartite bond that is created among the people, the land, and their past. The past is revealed in the despoiled land and is reflected on the faces "eaten by time" of those who are toiling the land, under the burning sun, aging in the space of a day, cutting canes.

Saul, the anthropologist, is the one to record people's daily work on the steep slopes, in the overwhelming heat. Ordeal, claims the omniscient voice, "this was the only word for him that came close to describing what he witnessed in those fields" (Marshall, 1969, p. 160). The cane field becomes a battleground where the daily fight for survival takes place. The powerful tropical sun, a temporal indicator, permeates the entire harvesting scene and endows it with a primeval characteristic. A day of laboring in the fields becomes the concentrated image of man's journey through life; people grow inexplicably old and silent in the space of several hours. The Bournehills local, Stinger, with whom Saul developed a strong friendship, is presented as fighting with an army of canes in which "the entire world might have been planted" (p. 95):

> Stinger's essentially slight, small-built body, which was further reduced by the canes towering above him, appeared to be gradually shrinking, becoming smaller and painfully bent, old. By early afternoon all that was left to him it appeared were the shriveled bones and muscles within the drawn sac of skin and the one arm failing away with a mind and will of its own. (Marshall, 1969, p. 162)

Stinger's pregnant wife Gwen hauls the big bales of cane down the steep slope and this ruthless workplace will metamorphose her too. People's stubbornness and resilience are reiterated as every slope of the fields appears to be "the same slope" (Marshall, 1969, p. 216), a never-ending Sisyphean trial. Their daily encounter with this oppressive place reduces them to the almost spectral condition of the 'ancestor group': "They had had the same slightly turned up, fixed, flat stare that you find upon drawing back the lids of someone asleep or dead […] aged beyond recognition" (p. 163).

Another exploitative and ambiguous place, an extension of the cane fields is the sugar factory. A dramatic image of colonialism, this locale echoes a slave ship and a potentially manageable place by Sir John, the now-absentee lord. The place is shaped by historical silence and by the imagery of the "dark hold of a ship set on some interminable voyage" (Marshall, 1969, p. 221). An overt and poignant allusion to the Middle Passage, this coercive place entraps in its entrails the workers who resemble ghosts, devoid of any human presence. As in all other *lieux de mémoire* in Bournehills, silence prevails here as well and is illustrative of the unspeakable effects of exploitative labor. The workers contribute almost voluntarily to the memory of places, their entire attitude denoting a dutiful rehearsal of times past.

The same narrativized distance is employed in relation to the workers in the old factory as well as those who work the land or the 'ancestor group'; they are "silent, impassive […] caught in that stillness which at times, made them resemble statues" (Marshall, 1969, p. 385). Even the talkative Ferguson, his "eyes filled with memory" stands in front of Sir John like "a thing of stone, a dumb effigy" (p. 385), unable to utter the slightest complaint about the decaying state of the factory. When the factory eventually breaks down, an entire mute and helpless community stands in front of the mill, now silent and empty. Overpowering the place is this strange silence "so absolute it seemed no amount of noise could ever fill it again" (p. 388). The silence of the people might mean helplessness in front of the brutal exploitation, yet it does not denote in any way surrendering. On the contrary, it is their century-deep resilience.

Before the narration moves entirely to the "chosen place," the first book of the novel scrutinizes the western part of the island with its pervasive falseness. Suggestively, the exposition of the novel closes climactically, with the presentation of what could be called the pinnacle of irony: Sugar's place in the town of New Bristol. Bearing the name of what the entire island stood and still stands for—cane sugar—, Sugar's is a very popular nightclub and a site of passage, as Merle puts it: "You people aren't officially on the island until you've met Sugar and he's passed on you" (Marshall, 1969, p. 78). The bar is a perpetual feast where, in the space of one evening, many details about the island are unveiled or, surprisingly, obscured. The place stores the traces of previous customers and tourists from all parts of the world. Items left behind, scribblings on the tables, letters, and photographs, as well as many other trinkets, testify that this nightclub is a place of passing, endowed with a temporal quality.

A curious mixture of the public and the private, Sugar's is a place of encounter[2] that allows people of different social classes to intersect, cross boundaries, and even exchange places in a supposedly neutral environment, without breaking the social barriers that continue to exist outside. However, Sugar's place is thoroughly misunderstood. Everybody, including inhabitants like Merle or the barrister Lyle, considers it as a genuinely egalitarian institution[3] on the island. Beyond the sarcastic hint of this claim, to call a nightclub an institution seems like an exaggeration, even if the place is thought to have a social role in regulating tensions and actions. Rather, the bar seems to be part of the larger mystification that pervades the microcosm of the island, especially its western part.

[2] The upcoming carnival is the extended form of this socially ambiguous way station that is Sugar's nightclub.

[3] Paradoxically, it is the only place on the island where anybody can go irrespective of color, class, and gender.

At a closer look, it appears as a place of silence which, by its deceptive reconciliatory atmosphere, obscures the oppressive past. Sugar's place is probably the last relic of slavery brought to life or a re-enactment of slavery.

The bar was actually the place where slaves were held in confinement, one of the most famous barracoons in the West Indies. Its stonewalls are all impregnated by the smell of crude sugars, muscovado, and the history of slavery, carrying a "fainter exhalation of dark flesh, its essence distilled over the centuries" (Marshall, 1969, p. 316). Symbolically, the place is situated at the end of Whitehall Lane, the point of confluence for all the roads of the small town. Cheap rum shops, sailors' clubs, and whore houses, as well as other ambiguous and transitory places, are to be found in this street. The ignorance with regards to a new form of colonialism in which all customers dwell, intentionally or not, is suggested only once, "the patrons' unsuspecting heads" (p. 82).

Sugar himself is the image of the neo-master,[4] this time the one who "can arrange anything" (Marshall, 1969, p. 84) provided the right price is paid. Strangely enough, Merle, whose judgment readers have come to trust, is very fond of him. He is very silent, almost unnoticeable if it were not for a sporadic white cone of light that is cast in the room. Barricaded behind "a large, old-fashioned cash register" (p. 83), Sugar is presented as a gnome, "pitifully small" (p. 83) with abbreviated limbs. Nobody knows anything about this American who arrived one day on the island with a poster of Sugar Ray Robinson, the famous black boxer of the 50s. People nicknamed him Sugar, not just because of the poster or because "he himself is so *sweet* and *understanding*" (p. 85) but also because sugar symbolizes the essence of the island "that runs in our veins" (p. 85), according to Merle. In her endless verbal tirade, most certainly accidentally, the main character pinpoints: "I'm a damn diabetic and so is everybody else in the place. A 'nation of diabetics'" (p. 85). What Sugar's provides for the island is indeed its essence—the rum made of sugar cane juice—but in excessive quantities. More than an 'overdose of sugar,' diabetes here signifies forced and blind dependence, or "the developed world's abuse on Bourne Island" (DeLamotte, 1998, p. 231), maintained with the help of the indigenous sugar-based alcoholic beverage—the rum.

In the web of *might have been*s and *as if*s that Marshall weaves, Sugar's appears to be a great dupery. Gluttonously silent, all he requires is money "like a croupier's stick, rake[ing] the dollar bills and coins" (Marshall, 1969, p. 84). "With his ageless featureless face of

[4] Sugar appears as the new master, a representative of the North American neocolonial influence in the Caribbean. Less concerned with the exploitation in the cane fields, this new master trades the staple product of that labor—the rum— and, like a croupier, amasses the new currency—the dollar.

indeterminate beige color, in which all colors have been canceled" (p. 83), Sugar remains passive and unperturbed, towering over the debauchery and the apocalyptic atmosphere from the height of his high stool. All this madness is dominated by the shadow of the stuffed bald eagle—the American symbol—cast over the entire room and "its *great* hooked beak gleaming blood-red" (p. 82). Dark underage girls and boys dance almost naked among the tables, offering themselves "for the trade," entertaining the customers, that is, "the wealthy expatriates from England, Canada, and the United States" (p. 76).

Sugar's bar may be regarded as a heterotopia. Recreated in a scrap of space, it brings together slices of time, contained by all the items or traces the customers left behind in what resembles a junk store or the "dumping ground of the world" (Marshall, 1969, p. 82). It is meant to be a more or less egalitarian melting pot. Too small for the large number of patrons, the place forces them to merge "into a single undifferentiated mass […] one body, the inseparable parts of a whole" (p. 81). Nevertheless, the place is bound to remain heterogeneous. As the end of the show-carnival confirms, harmony cannot be acquired. Conversely, the hysterical dance-union finishes off as a "violent combat" with the room, that by now has expanded to the size of the world, evocatively divided "between great areas of shadow and light" (p. 92). This locale is indeed a paradigm for the entire Caribbean space, contested by different imperial powers during its tumultuous history.

On the other hand, the dwelling places in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* are an outgrowth of the island and faithfully mirror the traits of character of the people inhabiting them. For example, the barrister Lyle's imposing white house stands on its private rise and oversees the rest of the small town. It indicates to what extent the barrister has adopted the mask of the white conqueror. The house is also Lyle's anthropomorphic portrait. Lavish and unattractive, it has neither taste nor style and, in trying to blend elements from the past and present, ends up as an architectural failure.

Lyle's character appears as a Caliban figure, presiding over the island's legal, political, and economic systems with a conservative restrained British pose and exaggerated mannerisms. Consciously or not, he imitates the language and the actions of the master. Furthermore, he is the paradigm of Caliban who will consummate a reversed version of the native's rape of the white woman that Shakespeare's *The Tempest* portrays. There is only one place on the island where Lyle is refused access because of his color and this is the all-white elite Crown Beach Colony. An indicator of his racial exclusion is also the location of his luxurious beach house at the lower end of this select beach and separated from it by a rocky ledge.

On the other side of the island, however, the Bournehills dwellings are collections of personal family histories and memorabilia, that is, spatial encapsulations of times past. For instance, the house inherited by Merle from her master father suggests the trap of isolation in a womb-like environment that frustrates positive growth and discourages fecundity. The figure of the compartmentalized house is a microcosm that represents the divided island: a fragmented space once managed by the colonizer(s). Built by the planter Duncan Vaughan, "some riffraff out of the gutters of Bristol or Liverpool […] [who] tried to populate the entire island his one" (Marshall, 1969, p. 107), Merle's place appears to be "several houses […] haphazardly thrown together" (p. 107). Time has materialized in the house with each of the following Vaughan generations (including Merle's father, Ashton Vaughan) who all put their mark, adding to the initial construction. This is a palimpsest house that, by its presence alone, elicits the memory of the ancestors—generations of white masters; it is a landmark that retraces slavery and colonialism.

In some of its parts, however, it is more a replica of a monastery playing the function of a temple or a sacred place. The wing of the house assigned to Saul and Harriet is described in detail. In contrast with the rest of the building, there is a note of simplicity and peace here, of "contemplation and repose" (Marshall, 1969, p. 110). The omniscient voice speculates that the rooms "might have been cells in a monastery, places for meditation and penance" (p. 111) precisely what the characters need. Labyrinthine, dim echoing stone passageways lead ever inward where even the light and air seem "left from another time" (p. 110). Not at all surprisingly, there is, at the end of the corridor, a "maternal figure" (the housekeeper Carrington), who might have been one of the many "massed shadows" from her cavernous kitchen.

The rest of the house, the "old place" where Merle lives is inhabited by "duppies [...] ghosts" (Marshall, 1969, p. 111), the omnipresent Bournehills companions, the "deep shadows" (p. 401). It is in this part of the house that Merle's catatonia unfolds, her way of helplessly reacting to the societal situation on the island. A condition related often to schizophrenia, her catatonic states are characterized by stasis and seclusion. At the antipode of her usual incessant talking, she becomes the composite image of all the other silences of her community. In the "numb center" (p. 399) that her room becomes, she lies inert, "more dead than alive" (p. 398). Her face, presented as the container "in ever-shifting and elusive forms [of] all the faces in Bournehills" (p. 388) is once more silenced.

Merle's room is the place in which "the psychological and the political are one" (DeLamotte, 1998, p. 234). It is as much communal as it is personal and private, traits that are two inseparable parts of a whole. The room is in its main attributes a miniature Bournehills,

a museum of times past. As Saul senses it, an accurate understanding of the region goes through Merle, who is "somehow Bournehills" (Marshall, 1969, p. 118), or "in the old Biblical sense, the way" (p. 260). Moreover, her portrait is sharpened by the image of her room, thus understanding Bournehills is conferred through adjacent places, in particular her habitat.

As a private place, Merle's room is also a mirror of her inner world. It is a confused clutter to which she half-heartedly tried to instill a vague order. Unarranged and unsorted furniture, scattered West Indian history books, heaps of cloth, and other effects bespeak the indecision and chaos she is confronting. Large half-unpacked steamer trunks invoke expectancy, instability, and an unsettling image of arrival or departure. As the omniscient voice explains, the room "expressed her: the struggle for coherence, the hope and desire for reconciliation of her conflicting parts… the chambers of her mind" (Marshall, 1969, p. 402).

Merle's place is also a site of collective memory; it is covered with prints and drawings, faded chronotopes, portraying the planters' leisure time activities "in places like Bournehills" (Marshall, 1969, p. 400). The silencing of history emerges as all these pastimes were made possible by the slaves' work. Other prints portraying happy slaves working in "deceptively pleasant" (p. 400) fields contribute to the larger falsification of colonial history. However, a number of prints render justice to the harsh slave-work, by presenting the slaves carrying canes on their backs, "bending them double" (p. 400) or "bound to the millwheel along with the oxen" (p. 401). The direct portrayal of slave labor culminates with the poignant evocation of the Middle Passage presented by the detailed drawing of a "three-masted Bristol slave ship" (p. 401) towering over all the other prints. The entire history of colonialism is encapsulated and stored in the room of Merle—"the historian" (p. 206)—as much as it is contained by the entire Bournehills region.

Significantly, there is only one other dwelling that acquires visibility in the narration as a silent repository of an oppressive past. Its owner, Leesy, one of the oldest inhabitants of Bournehills, is the most vivid live relic, a reminder of times past. The small board house where she lives alone after her husband's death is now inhabited by shadows. A windowless front wall blocks all connection with the exterior suggesting claustration and solitude. The personified canes and the shadows are the old woman's life companions; members of the family, they are the only living entities in and around her house, among "all that still-life clutter" (Marshall, 1969, p. 26). Everything else conveys immobility and temporal paralysis. These mausoleum-like features are reinforced inside by the presence of a neatly polished collection of "silver plated plaques inscribed with the names and dates of the family dead" (p. 28). "Frail and insubstantial" (p. 135), Leesy has become part of them. In her nightgown that resembles more a burial garment, she is presented preparing for the night,

as a "figure carved upon a catafalque […] an effigy of someone already dead" (p. 142). As is visible throughout the entire Bournehills, "time was brought to a standstill" (p. 34) in this dwelling place as well, yet the place continues to tell of the region's tormented history.

The last category of *lieux de mémoire* examined in this paper are particular sites that may either appear as a solution to the protagonists' exile or may play a redemptive role when the risk of dispersion in too many locales acquires menacing proportions. Bournehills influences and changes the visitors from the very beginning of their stay. Two scientists, inclined to approach their research project with the help of graphs and statistics are instantly drawn into the close-knit microcosm of the Bournehills community. The usual containers of space and time, Allen's charts and figures are not sufficient to encompass "the whole formless bewildering sprawl of life" (Marshall, 1969, p. 380) they encounter in the region. Allen's overriding concern for the exact measurement of time is symbolized here by his desperate need for a watch and his obsession with mental representations. The sophisticated watch, an integral part of his life, is useless in a place where the most accurate temporal indicator is the sun's passage in the sky. Conversely, Saul, the least organized and disciplined of the two, involuntarily gives up "wearing his watch and began telling time by the sun like everyone else" (p. 153).

For Allen, the return to Bournehills symbolizes in some way an acquittal: "[h]e has been granted a reprieve" (Marshall, 1969, p. 113). His deep attachment to the region and its people is connoted by the kitchen garden that he started from scratch during his first visit, as a favor to Merle. The garden on a small patch of stony land is a statement of endurance and faith, which justifies and rewards his return. During his absence, Merle carefully tended the garden proving that she faithfully awaited his return. More than a catalyst of Allen's friendship with Merle, the garden is a temporal suppressant, abolishing the time he spent away: "the last year might not have happened" (p. 112), as he contends.

The garden is a heterotopia as it juxtaposes several past times linked to other places. These are not just the memories of the place but also the memories of other places and experiences for Allen. A fleeting memory, mere detail even, may trigger other memories and events from one's past may reveal themselves in a domino-like fashion, not unlike a Proustian madeleine. Such is Allen's memory of his room in his parents' house, where he still keeps a photo of his best friend, Jerry. The memory of the photograph on the dresser brings forth another memory about Jerry's death when Allen was in college. In its turn, this image leads him further back in time, to a high school memory, this time regarding his unsuccessful relationships with girls. Numerous other memories related to his family members erupt in the context of this heterotopic garden.

Allen's days inevitably start with a visit to the garden, where he witnesses the break of day. These daily revelations (brought forth by the genesis of a new day) connect him with "the best in himself" (Marshall, 1969, p. 149). The race to seize the present comes to an end, the instants miraculously dilate and Allen, bent over his tiny growing plants, experiences a liberation that becomes visible on all levels of his being. Despite the intruding spatial and temporal distance(s), the garden reconnects Allen with his past and with his self. Presented as atrophied at the moment of his arrival on Bourne Island, he slowly recovers, "his hazel eyes [...] came warmly alive" (p. 149). The small plants coming out of the barren soil are indicative of his psychological growth and self-actualization. As a childhood memory elicited by the garden, the imagery of a warm ripe tomato pulsing like a heart in his hand is emblematic of his inner rebirth.

Displaced, in a secular post-modern age, both Saul and Allen lack a sense of spatial stability and community. The place of departure (or home) is viewed more as a place of exile, thus a return is very much undesirable. "I'm beginning to feel so at home here in Bournehills" (Marshall, 1969, p. 183), declares Saul, while Allen "absolutely refuses to go home for some reason" (p. 67). Allen actually manages to address his dysphoria by choosing to remain on the island. It is doubtful that Saul, a professional wanderer, will ever resolve such restlessness and "delusory topomania" (Casey, 1993, p. 309) ethnically inscribed in him. The ambiguous denouement of the novel is far from elucidating this point. He was used to placing and re-placing himself in different places; to his *vagabondage*, the peace he finds on the island is punctual, salutary, yet ultimately, redemptive.

The region of Bournehills, itself a mausoleum of times past, abounds in *lieux de mémoire* which are places where time and geography meet. It would probably be more appropriate to assert that these are places where history and geography *once met*. On the one hand, the canefield, the sugar factory, and Sugar's bar, all related to the object of oppression—sugar—are nodes between place and collective history. On the other hand, the dwellings and the restorative places discussed above are representative of their close association with personal memory. It is not surprising that a text like *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* presents such a panoply of sites that exist as *lieux de mémoire* simply because the memory of places is fundamental for the existence of the island community as a whole. In this context, remembrance may be voice-less or silent, as long as the past is materialized in the place itself, its persistence thus ensured.

References

Bartell, B. (2020). The material imperialism of the home in Paule Marshall's The Chosen Place, The Timeless People. *Journal of Literary Studies, 36*(1), 25–42. https://doi.org/10.1080/02564718.2020.1738713

Casey, E. S. (1993). *Getting back into place: Toward a renewed understanding of the place-world*. Indiana University Press.

Christian, B. T. (1983). Ritualistic process and the structure of Paule Marshall's: Praisesong for The Widow. *Callaloo, 18*, 74–84.

Coser, S. (1994). *Bridging the Americas: The literature of Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Gayl Jones*. Temple University Press.

DeLamotte, E. (1993). Women, silence, and history in The Chosen Place, The Timeless People. *Callaloo, 16*(1), 227–242.

DeLamotte, E. (1998). *Places of silence, journeys of freedom: The fiction of Paule Marshall*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Denniston, D. H. (1995). *The fiction of Paule Marshall: Reconstructions of history, culture, and gender*. University of Tennessee Press.

Hawthorne, E. (2000). The critical difference: Paule Marshall's personal and literary legacy. *The Black Scholar, 30*(2), 2–6.

Houlden, K. (2010). Nostalgia for the past as guide to the future: Paule Marshall's The Chosen Place, The Timeless People. *Memory Studies, 3*(3), 253–261. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698010364817

Japtok, M. (2017). Sugarcane as history in Paule Marshall's To Da-Duh, in Memoriam. *African American Review, 50*(4), 1025–1032.

Kulkarni, H. (1993). Paule Marshall: A Bibliography. *Callaloo, 16*, 243–243.

Marshall, P. (1969). *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*. Vintage.

Meyer, A. (1995). Memory and identity for black, white, and jew in Paule Marshall's The Chosen Place, the Timeless People. *MELUS, 20*(3), 99–120. https://doi.org/10.2307/467745

Morrison, T. (2004). *Beloved*. 1987. Vintage.

Nora, P. (1989). Between memory and history: Les lieux de mémoire. *Representations, 26*, 7–24. https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520

Nosova, H. (2021). Pierre Nora's concept of contrasting memory and history. *International Journal of Philosophy, 9*(4).

Olmsted, J. (1997). The pull to memory and the language of place in Paule Marshall's The Chosen Place, the Timeless People and Praisesong for the Widow. *African American Review, 31*(2), 249–267. https://doi.org/10.2307/3042463

Pettis, J. O. (1995). *Toward wholeness in Paule Marshall's fiction*. University of Virginia Press.

Ricoeur, P. (2004). *Memory, history, forgetting*. University of Chicago Press.

Rogers, S. (2000). Embodying cultural memory in Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow. *African American Review, 34*(1), 77–93. https://doi.org/10.2307/2901185

Schenck, M. J. (1994). Ceremonies of reconciliation: Paule Marshall's The Chosen Place, the Timeless People. *MELUS, 19*(4), 49–60. https://doi.org/10.2307/468202

Skerrett, J. T. (1983). Paule Marshall and the crisis of middle years: The Chosen Place, the Timeless People. *Callaloo, 18*, 68–73.

Storhoff, G. (1998). Yesterday comes like today: Communitas in Paule Marshall's The Chosen Place, the Timeless People. *MELUS, 23*(2), 49–64. https://doi.org/10.2307/468011

Stulov, Y. (2018). Finding home: Paule Marshall's The Chosen Place, the Timeless People. *Respectus Philologicus, 34*(39), 73–82. https://doi.org/10.15388/RESPECTUS.2018.34.39.06

p'arts, hum' Papers in Arts and Humanities

Vol. 3, No. 2, Dec. 2023
https://doi.org/10.52885/pah.v3i2.128

Moving Homes, Moving Histories: Displacement and Refuge in Remi Weekes' *His House*

PRIYANJANA DAS
Affiliation: Phd Student
University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom
Email: P.Das-6@sms.ed.ac.uk

Abstract

The past few decades have witnessed a dramatic increase in the mass movements of people across borders owing to political turmoil(s) and uprising(s). Such displacements, especially towards continents like Europe and North America, have given rise to narrative and cultural productions introducing a crucial intersection of existing socio-cultural and historical debates around the larger rubric of refugee community and culture. One such instance of South Sudan, experiencing a recent civil unrest and administrative change, leading to forced migration, has been explored through the visual and visceral cinematic experience encapsulated by Remi Weekes' independent Netflix film 'His House.' The film tells an evocatively poignant story of two Sudanese refugees, seeking home and refuge, who are given asylum in Britain under various oppressive conditions. The film is, quite literally, perched on the binaries of culture, tradition and memory that go on to become the foundation of certain necessarily imaginative ideas of home and livelihood the couple builds across borders, away from their homeland.

My paper would discuss the desire for 'home' in an asylum seekers' life highlighting journeys and (re)production of narratives as an essential part of their trans-cultural lives. My arguments attempt to discuss the re-construction of (cross)cultural topologies and re-configuration of space/borders. Finally, my research seeks to incorporate larger debates on myth and memory-making by negotiating space and imagination within the corporeal reality of 'home.'

Keywords: migrants, displacement, refuge, histories, myth and memory making

Migratory movements have been quite a popular phenomenon throughout history; People have moved between countries and continents seeking better opportunities and livelihoods. Owing to such forms of cross-cultural dislocations, there has been a constant attempt to establish oneself across borders creating global spaces of existence which were effectively theorised in William Safran's (1991) 'characteristics of diaspora,' and James Clifford's (1997) exploration of the distinctive racial and cultural differences in the context of travel and migration[1] to name a few. However, alongside the idea of a fluid and coherent landscape that promotes cross-cultural linkages, issues of representation, gender, race, class and culture propelled considerable debates in diasporic theory, literature and culture. While Homi Bhabha's (2004) 'Third Space,' formed as a result of cultural hybridity and constant interaction between cultures focusses on the idea of forming a unifying body of diasporic identities, Avtar Brah's (1996) examination of historicised 'power structures' (gender, race, class), 'journeys' (socio-economic, political and cultural trajectories) and 'confluence of narratives' (memory and re-memory) infiltrate the composite structure of the term 'diaspora.' Therefore, broadly speaking, 'diaspora' locates itself within a network of grand narratives of nation, culture and ethnicity that are consistently reconfigured by metanarratives of race, gender, culture and identity creation.

Refugee communities, beyond the relentless struggle, violence, war and pregnant chaos that went into their formation, have recently begun to incorporate a space where they attempt to revolutionise diasporic multicultural exchange and global dialogue. The last few decades have witnessed a dramatic increase in the mass movements of people from various parts of the world like Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and North Africa towards Europe. Migration and forced displacement have not only been consistent but have also been interspersed with certain political turmoil and uprising(s) that opened doors for international engagement and rescue missions across borders, consequently allowing a rapid change in the political situation of the world at large.

A crucial idea that emerges in the context of migratory movements is the isolated existence of home. In fact, Avtar Brah (1996) in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, locates 'diaspora' as a concept that "places the discourse of 'home' and 'dispersion' in creative tension, inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins" (Brah, 1996). As men and women sought a place to live

[1] In his study on the formation of alternative cultures in the postcolonial condition Clifford argues that "travelers move about under strong cultural, political and economic compulsions [...] movements in specific colonial, neocolonial and postcolonial circuits, different diasporas, borderlands, exiles, detours and returns. [...] an experience including deportation, uprooting, marronage, transplantation, and revival has resulted in a range of interconnected black cultures: African American, Afro-Caribbean, British and South American." (1997)

in an entirely different nation, their hopes and expectations hinged on their ability to identify with the culture they were intermingling with— as individuals and as a community.

Additionally, it is the sense of loss associated with home which becomes an important trope explored both critically and creatively in films and visual media. For instance, in the introduction to *Refugees and Migrants in Contemporary Film, Art and Media*, Robert Burgoyne and Deniz Bayrakdar (2022) discuss the aspects of displacement and finding a home stating,

> The phenomenon of mass displacement, however, also brings into view a striking new mode of human existence: as one writer says, the journey is now shaping a different class of human being, "people whose idea of 'home' now incorporates an open road" or, at the other extreme, people whose mobility is blocked, who have become […] "permanently temporary" (Salopek, 2019). Viewed through a guardedly positive lens, the refugee and the migrant, as Giorgio Agamben (1998) further suggests, may represent "the paradigm of a new historical consciousness," pointing towards a future beyond the binary order of the nation state, defined as it is by the concepts of citizenship and exclusion. (Burgoyne and Bayrakdar, 2022, p. 11)

Evidently, Burgoyne and Bayrakdar explore the impermanence of borders that movements and migrations promote which, while eschewing the frontiers of the nation-state, have given rise to dislocated and hyphenated identities. In fact, the contestations of home arise as deeply fissured diasporic identities oscillate between the cultural roots of the homeland and the acceptance of the host-land and film and media become the retainers and propagators of such voices. For instance, Dudley Andrew (2022), in the essay, "Moving People and Motion Pictures: Migration in Film and Other Media," rightly argues, "migration is the most controversial international issue of the 21st century, and therefore an opportunity as well as an inevitability for cinema everywhere" (Burgoyn and Bayrakdar, 2022). Dudley takes an example of the efflorescence of films and visual media after the mass migrations due to the partition of India and Pakistan and explores the indelible imprint of the burgeoning culture of India which was popularised through it. He asserts:

> In hits such as Shree 420 (Raj Kapoor, 1955), his character, an itinerant, impoverished dreamer, bumbles his way to Bombay, playing to the anxieties of displacement that come up in film after film. Even India's parallel cinema, working in explicit opposition to Bombay entertainment, followed suit. Beginning in 1955 with Pather Panchali, Sajyajit Ray's The Apu Trilogy (1955–1959) chronicled the painful uprooting of the rural poor. (Dudley, 2022)

Further, commenting on the narratives of displacement, Wendy W. Walters (2005), in *At Home in Diaspora: Black International Writing*, argues that "displacement creates a distance that allows writers to encode critiques of their homelands, to construct new homelands, and to envision new communities" (p. 9), and diasporic identities are not only embedded in the narrative process but also, "made, unmade, contested, and reinforced." (Walters, 2005) Apparently, narratives around the development of postcolonial societies, explored in visual media, art and literature, encompass the larger issues of displacement and the turbulent foundation of postcolonial nations and cultures in the aftermath of colonisation.

My paper discusses the desire for home in an asylum seeker's life highlighting the visual and visceral cinematic experience encapsulated by the Netflix film *His House*. Remi Weekes' (2020) film, *His House* is an evocatively poignant story of a family of two Sudanese refugees seeking asylum in Britain. On their journey to establish themselves as good citizens in the host-land, they are tormented within themselves by Nyagak, a fellow passenger child's death, and inside their rundown living quarters by unexplained instances and visions of apparitions thriving inside the very walls of their accommodation. The film is quite literally perched on the binaries of culture, tradition and memory that go on to become the foundation of the imaginative ideas of home and its spatial recognitions that the couple tries to build across borders, away from their homeland.

The social and political unrest, sheer violence and the collective movement towards a more decisively democratic governance led to unrelented migrations from South Sudan to Europe. Remi Weekes' film is able to capture minute details of civil unrest in the society and bring out the intricacies of displacement and the dissipating roots of home. Weekes' narrative develops through Bol, who envisions a home across borders, and Rial, who reconfigures and stabilises the idea of home-making. The film begins with quickened footsteps, a direct sign of movement that lays the foundations of displacement and migration in postcolonial societies and their tumultuous socio-political formations. Bol and Rial transgress borders on various modes of transport and their determination to forge a new beginning is consistent all through the disparity of their situation.

Writers and theorists have examined the very act of leaving the homeland, a sense of being uprooted from one's place of birth, as a rather violent act in a metaphysical sense. For instance in *Step Across This Line*, Salman Rushdie (2010) argues that "migrant, *severed* from his roots, often transplanted into a new language, always obliged to learn the ways of the new community, is forced to face the great questions of change and adaptation." This position of the migrant is embodied by Bol who looks forward to

the other side of his struggle as an asylum seeker and navigates a sense of 'rootedness' that consistently escapes him. Further, Bol, in Rushdie's words, is the 'running man,' who is as much beyond borders as he is within them: "The running man leaps into confinement" (Rushdie, 2010). David Farrier (2011), in his book *Postcolonial Asylum: Seeking Sanctuary Before The Law,* discusses the archetype of Rushdie's running man in association with the problematic figure of the asylum seeker who is constantly identified and valued in terms of his displacement within the postcolonial narrative and is "posited as introducing crisis into the territorial concepts of belonging" (Farrier, 2011).

Bol's desire to find a place in the land that he is struggling to refer to as home creates a heart-warming narrative of loss. For instance, in the scene where Rial asks for directions, she is established as a migrant across both national and linguistic borders as her dialect and accent is misunderstood and mocked by the citizens of the country. Importantly, while Rial constantly seeks homeliness and the familiarity of the people of colour who she asks for help reinstates the feeling of abandonment and loss, Bol sits at the corner of a pub and sings the Peter Crouch song in the need to feel included and accepted. In fact both Bol and Rial develop contrasting sentiments about the Peter Crouch song and, consequently, about the routes of their migration and the marks of their past. Bol attempts to move towards a new beginning and Rial explores a new birth in terms of harking back to the past and revisiting her family ties quite literally by making a necklace out of Nyagak's doll (Weekes, 2020, 10:30–11:00).

Spine-tingling or soul-stirring, Weekes highlights pain through the eerie and grotesque visualisations of crumbling walls, broken windows and rotten food. In addition to their living conditions, the necessity to appear 'good' in the eyes of the British hosts, the duty to remain an example of an assimilated foreigner, is a constant reminder of their position as an outsider. Foraging for an anchor through an alternative culture, both Bol and Rial 'settle,' excruciatingly, at the brink of acceptance. However, as Bol struggles to build a new identity and acquiesce his cultural loction, to the extent that he uses an advertisement of a clothing store as his idea of fitting in, Rial thrives in the contrasting journey of her homeland. Her relentless attempt to return to her land in imagined and fantasised narratives recognises her cultural affiliations and intensifies the fissures of her migrant identity.

Migrant histories and the process of their narration have been explored in personalised experiences of dispersal. Avtar Brah (1996) emphasizes the image of a 'journey away from home,'

> Diasporas, in the sense of distinctive historical experiences, are often composite formations made up of many journeys to different parts of the globe, each with its own history, its own particularities. Each such diaspora is an interweaving of multiple travelling; a text of many distinctive perhaps even disparate narratives. […] This means that their multiple journeys may configure into one journey via the confluence of narratives as it is lived and relived, produced, reproduced and transformed through individual as well as collective memory and re-memory. (Brah, 1996, p. 180)

This journey and the production of narratives become an essential part of the transcultural lives of migrants. Importantly, gender, race and culture are crucial intersections in the narrative process, production and preservation of culture. For instance, Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989), in *Women, Native Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, identifies three kinds of intersections—woman writer, writer of colour and woman of colour—which are often at odds with the actual process of writing. Minh-ha argues that "The original notion of 'I' as a real subject is counter-imposed by the relations of race and gender so as to alienate the 'writer' from her position of power within the act of writing itself" (Minh-ha, 1989). This figure of the woman writer is extensively explored in Rial's character as she continues to inhabit a desire to establish herself across borders but is unable to excavate her own process of narration. Interestingly, over the years of belligerent tribal relations, Rial's body becomes the scribe on which warring generations carved their identities. At a doctor's appointment she narrates the historical influence of her 'scars'—the ones she engraved on herself enveloping both the disputing tribes as a motif of her unbelonging and the ones that she got as a memory of Nyagak and her impending homelessness. Rial carries the stories of her homeland at heart, reaches out to the women left behind in her dreams and occasionally attends to a guilt that she harbours.

Inflictions of pain and the retention of harrowing memories through scars are crucial to Weekes' storytelling and the dilapidated house stand as a testament to it. The wallpaper coming apart leaving the walls bare and Bol's curiosity encroaching the marginalised and distressed voices that it holds within itself, led the house to disintegrate, so much so that, in a powerful scene, Bol was seen moving past it to confront his fears. While Bol is repulsed by the horrors of his past and fearful of the circumstances, Rial faces the truth of her identity by accepting the migrant identities in her abode. Therefore, the borders Rial crosses are beyond the realms of her reality and she is rooted to the idea of home through the cultural and traditional connections that keep calling out to her. Importantly, Rial holds on to the Dinka cultural symbol of an Apeth and associates her life with the close-knit circle of her home left behind.

An Apeth or Night Witch is a figure from the Dinka culture. Rial begins with a story that her mother used to tell, that of a good man who wanted his own house so desperately that he began to steal from other people. Eventually, he stole from an old man who turned out to be an Apeth. She asserts that "When he built his home the Apeth lived there too and would whisper spells and would never stop until the man repaid his debt" (Weekes, 2020, 34:18–34:31), believing that Nyagak's death has given rise to an Apeth from the sea who asks for their debt to be repaid. Weekes creates the terror from within, the apeth, here played by a formidable creature that terrorises Bol and Rial, whispering to them through mouldy holes in the walls, conjuring visions of what they so desperately want to forget—bodies in the water, ropes dripping with seaweed. But there is a world beyond that they fear, too. Weekes recreates the United Kingdom's hostility towards immigrants and locates it in the small neighbourhood where Bol and Rial discover and evade the stares, glares and hurtful comments like "go back to Africa" (Weekes, 2020, 27:29–27:33). Further, a woman in the window next door strokes her cat, her cheeks caved in so she looks like one of the tropes of the horrors beyond their house. While Rial hones and houses these narratives, Bol tries to burn Nyagak's doll and other mundane things that they had brought along with them—believing that erasing their past is the only way to move forward. Tormented by spirits in his house he breaks the walls exclaiming "this is my house!" (Weekes, 2020, 50:08). The Apeth tells Bol, "No matter where you go, I will follow. You are mine now." (Weekes, 2020, 1:02:02–1:02:15) and says that he must exchange his life for Nyagak.

Rial finds herself living within traumatic memories. When asked for her husband's flesh, Rial adheres to the ways of the Dinka culture, which is an act of acceptance of herself through her culture. Rial, therefore, believes in the home she has left behind and her desire to keep the small aspects of her culture alive in the process of storytelling. In fact, Weekes naming the film *His House* presents an almost patriarchal transaction of the idea of home, the territorial limits of which were stabilised both by Bol's masculine assertion and the Apeth's demands. However, the manifestation and materialisation of home was strengthened by Rial's belief and her interaction with all the migrants lost in the process of border-crossing. Additionally, the female figure that exists as an embodiment of Rial's interaction is Nyagak's doll, which becomes the paraphernalia that presents Rial with the interconnections of an increasing yet disappearing communal harmony and cultural history.

Further, homes have often been associated with women and their bodies have been represented as the carriers of tradition and culture across generations. For instance, Rial, believing in the existence of the Apeth that inhabits the walls and haunt the rooms,

casts her into a forbearing image of her Dinka culture. The spirits in the walls manifest into Nyagak, wearing a grotesque face mask, more tangible, often wielding a knife and able to switch lights on and off. But the house is also filled with spirits of others who had drowned while trying to escape across the ocean, the ghosts of Nyagak's dead mother and the ghosts of the women who were massacred in the village in Sudan, and by the end, any number of other ghostly images from the couple's past.

Containing the story within the crude walls of the house elevates this dreadful experience. Ultimately, it is not the night witch on its own that torments Rial and Bol, but the unfairness of their fate, as well as the trauma they have to cope with. Importantly, what Rial and Bol's narrative attempts to defy is process of differentiating the 'other' that is often central to the countries in the West where migrants seek asylum in difficult conditions. In fact, when Rial speaks about the ghosts of her culture in front of the two British government officials that visit them, the inversion of the figure of the other is prominent. Rial lets them feel stronger and contrasts the image of the weakened outsider seeking aid. The walls of the house are held together by Rial's deep and inexplicable scars that grow terrified of Bol's denial and disregard for his cultural roots. The migrant bodies and voices that reach out to Rial are safe in her rootedness and challenge the defiance of Bol's search for a life in the United Kingdom. More than a space that provides Bol's and Rial's life with structure, stability and hope, home is a reminder of the traumatic events that made them what they are, that their identities are not essentially skin-deep but had been entrenched in their bodies as markers of their culture.

Although the emergence of the 'Third World'[2] happened under a constant process of defining and implementing power relations within the post-colonial context of literature, film and its further criticism, it also arose from a sense of connectivity and shared experience of colonial rule and paved its way as a constant counter-narrative to the previously established colonial rule. It has not only emerged as an all-encompassing field of research but also branched into various aspects of social, political and academic understanding of the centre[3] and the periphery[4]. Emanating as a term strictly used to denote a historical period in the 1970's, it has evolved into a constantly debated and contested

[2] An umbrella term used to denote the lesser developed nations as compared to the 'West.' Generic term used to establish a binary.

[3] In this paper, the British Empire.

[4] Bill Ashcroft, Garreth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin's (2013) examination of the aspect of the 'Centre/Margin' is explored as "one of the most contentious ideas in postcolonial discourse, and yet it is at the heart of any attempt at defining what occurred in the representation and relationship of peoples as a result of the colonial period. Colonialism could only exist at all by postulating that there existed a binary opposition into which the world was divided. The gradual establishment of an empire depended upon a stable hierarchical relationship in which the colonized existed as the other of the colonizing culture." (Ashcroft et al., 2013)

term that encapsulates broad ideas of 'first world,' 'third world,' 'imperialism,' 'decolonization' and the current aspect of 'neo-colonialism' within it (Lazarus, 2011). Additionally, postcolonial criticism raised issues of belonging, identity, and creative expression with renewed force, asking new questions about the location of production and consumption as well as the position from which interpretations and classifications arise—within the residual ideologies of colonialism and their impact on present society, and between art and its socio-political context (Lazarus, 2004). Sushiela Nasta (2000) quotes Karim Barber (1995) from an article on "African Language, Literature and Postcolonial Criticism":

> The postcolonial criticism of 1980's and 90's has promoted a binarized, generalized model of the world. […] This model has preceded an impoverished and distorted picture of 'the colonial experience' and the place of language in that experience. It has maintained a centre-periphery polarity which both exaggerates and simplifies the effects of the colonial imposition of European languages. It turns the colonizing countries into unchanging monoliths and the colonized subject into a homogenized token. (Nasta, 2000)

Finally, emerging from a space outside of mainstream dominant epistemologies, Bol and Rial's narratives develop as an exhaustive display of modern immigration. Displaced and dislocated from their origin story, their homeland, the couple is plunged into an unknown cross-cultural display of spatial recognition and resistance. Occupying and owning a space are two imperatively distinct forms of ownership that the couple experiences in their respective ways. While Bol tries to 'occupy' and develop a connection with men, different from him, bonding over football at a local recreational spot and continues to remain at the fringes of their dialogue, Rial attempts to reiterate and almost own the narrative of the past within herself. Challenging both, the rundown house that they seek asylum in seeks them in the most horrifying sense, dislocating them even further. Benaouda Lebdai (2015) argues that the process of displacement accompanies with it a traumatic and horrific experience:

> Migrant writers of the 20th and 21st century are all haunted by their past, the crossings of frontiers, revealing here again a trauma, as defined by the critic Cathy Caruth, who explains how such signs become significant in the sense that "there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, or behaviours stemming from the event along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal (and avoidance) to stimuli recalling the events." (p. 152)

In Remi Weekes' (2020) *His House* this trauma takes up the physical shape of the house that Bol and Rial reside in. Their behaviours, responses and fears arise from the unknown capability of their past to dismantle the 'future' that they wish for themselves. The film takes its viewers on a journey through the postcolonial migrant mind and its disrupted sense of space and identity. However, as a counter-narrative to colonial precursors of the nation-state that ameliorated by marking up spaces with borders, dismantling national and cultural identity in colonised lands, and promoting a stirring sense of nationalism based on the stronger assertions of national borders, Weekes' (2020) *His House* reclaims the migrant identity on the host's national space. The storytelling rehashes the threads connecting both mythic and cultural traditions and modern immigrant affiliations, so much so that the home as a space for refuge oscillates between the two creating an eerie trans-locational experience of loss. Postcolonial migrant artists and visionaries continue to study such critical forms of spatial (dis)locations and revive a sense of community across cultures, races, genders and nations.

References

Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2013). *Postcolonial studies: The key concepts/ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin* (3rd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/978023777855

Bayrakdar, D., & Burgoyne, R. (Eds.). (2022). *Refugees and migrants in contemporary film, art and media* (Media, culture and communication in migrant societies). Amsterdam University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9789048554584

Bhabha, H. K. (2004). *The location of culture* (New edition). Routledge.

Brah, A. (1996). *Cartographies of diaspora: Contesting identities* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203974919

Clifford, J. (1997). *Routes: travel and translation in the late twentieth century*. Harvard University Press.

Dudley, A. (2022). Moving peoples and motion pictures: Migration in film and other media. In D. Bayrakdar & R. Burgoyne (Eds.), *Refugees and migrants in contemporary film, art and media* (Media, culture and communication in migrant societies, pp. 27–50). Amsterdam University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9789048554584.002

Farrier, D. (2012). *Postcolonial Asylum: Seeking sanctuary before the law*. Liverpool University Press.

Gentles, M. & King, E. (Producer), & Weekes, R., (Director). (2020) *His House* [Motion Picture]. BBC Films, New Regency Pictures

Lazarus, N. (2004). *The Cambridge companion to postcolonial literary studies*. Cambridge University Press.

Lazarus, N. (2011). *The postcolonial unconscious*. Cambridge University Press.

Lebdai, B. (2015). The "I" in the deconstruction of frontiers through memory: Postcolonial diasporas. *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée 42*(1), 57–68. https://doi.org/10.1353/crc.2015.0009

Minh-ha, T. T. (1989). *Woman, native, other: Writing postcoloniality and feminism*. Indiana University Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt16xwccc

Nasta, S. (2000). *Reading the "new" literatures in a postcolonial era*/edited by Susheila Nasta for the English Association. D.S. Brewer.

Rushdie, S. (2003). *Step across this line*. Vintage.

Safran, W. (1991). Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return. *Diaspora: A journal of transnational studies 1*(1), 83–99. https://doi.org/10.1353/dsp.1991.0004

Walters, W. W. (2005). *At home in diaspora: Black international writing* (NED-New edition). University of Minnesota Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttsqvt

p'arts, hum' Papers in Arts and Humanities

Vol. 3, No. 2, Dec. 2023
https://doi.org/10.52885/pah.v3i2.152

Book Review. *Art in Urban Space: Reflections on City Culture in Europe and North-America*, edited by Tamás Juhász

KRISZTINA KITTI TÓTH
Affiliation: Institute of Art and Design Theory
Budapest Metropolitan University, Hungary
Email: toth.k.kitti@gmail.com

The concept of space as a social construction shaped by human actions has prompted the spatial turn in social sciences and humanities. Scholars now delve into spatial practices, place-making processes, and spatial representations within different cultural and historical contexts. This recognition has enriched our comprehension of various aspects of our life, including cultural practices, social processes, and historical sources. Centred around spatial perspectives, the anthology *Art in Urban Space: Reflections on City Culture in Europe and North-America* (2021) stands as a notable contribution to the Collection Károli series. Edited by Tamás Juhász and published by L'Harmattan, the collection of papers offers a broad view of the interaction between artistic endeavours and urban spaces. The volume encapsulates the recognition that space is far from being a passive backdrop, but rather an active and influential force that shapes and is shaped by human activities, artistic or otherwise. Through its eleven essays, it provides a lens into the complex relationship between art, the city, and the multifaceted nature of space. The contributors acknowledge that artistic expression and engagement with urban environments go beyond mere aesthetics. Instead, art becomes a vehicle for social commentary, cultural exploration, and an avenue to challenge existing norms and power dynamics within urban spaces. By exploring the manifold dimensions of space and the representations of space, the articles aptly acknowledge the agency of artists, artworks, and the audience in shaping the urban environment and exerting influence on our lived experience. The authors examine how artists actively engage with the city, responding to its unique characteristics, history, and socio-political factors. In doing so, the papers uncover the ways in which art can foster dialogue, challenge social inequalities, and contribute

to the formation of inclusive and vibrant urban communities. Moreover, the anthology emphasises that the relationship between art and the city extends beyond physical spaces. It discusses the intangible aspects of space, such as the emotional, psychological, and symbolic dimensions that art can evoke and provoke through its depiction of urban environments.

The volume is structured into three main sections, each focusing on specific aspects of art and its impact on society and urban spaces. Following the editor's introduction, the first section, "Public Art Considerations", features a collection of papers that share several similarities in their examination of different dimensions of site-specific artistic endeavours. The authors explore how art installations and projects are intricately crafted to interact with and respond to specific locations. This deliberate approach facilitates a connection between the artwork and its surrounding environment. Holly Lynn Baumgartner's analysis of Tyree Guyton's art installation project in Detroit, Gizela Horváth's exploration of street art, and Adrienne Gálosi's examination of public art all touch upon the significance of site-specificity in creating meaningful and impactful artistic experiences. The examined artworks exemplify their contribution to fostering dialogue within communities and engaging the broader public. The anthology's second section, "War, Travel, and Resistance", studies the complex evolution of societal dynamics within urban spaces. Ágnes Zsófia Kovács and Michael Collins discuss the historical and cultural legacies embedded within urban environments and the impact of external factors such as architecture, history, and war. Further contributing to the exploration of societal dynamics, Teodóra Dömötör and Jasamin Kashanipour scrutinise the power strutures and manipulations inherent in society. Their examinations traverse various dimensions, encompassing the perception of gender roles, the dominance of consumer culture, and the delicate balance between individual autonomy and external control. The anthology encompasses a wide range of urban phenomena from the 20th and 21st centuries, yet it also delves into the historical city cultures, particularly focusing on the city of London. In the closing section titled "London: Word, Action, and Image", the authors adopt a historical lens to scrutinise urban spaces throughout different time periods. Whether it is the examination of Queen Elizabeth's coronation entry into London during the 16th century, the exploration of London's cultural landscape in the 18th century, or the analysis of the industrial revolution's impact on the city during the Victorian era, these papers illuminate the socio-political and cultural forces that shaped urban environments in various historical contexts. Erzsébet Stróbl's analysis of a royal procession, Dóra Csikós Janczer's interpretation of William Hogarth's prints, and Éva Péteri's exploration of Ford Madox Brown's painting map out the visual elements and the connections between art and society.

A significant aspect of these papers is their utilisation of visual analysis to unravel the symbolic and allegorical meanings that are embedded in artistic expressions found within urban environments, both in their physical manifestations and depictions. While distinct in its approach, Sarah Butler's paper similarly highlights the complexities of urban life and further expands upon it by scrutinising the notion of home and sense of belonging as presented in her own writings.

The initial analysis presented gives an examination of Tyree Guyton's site-specific art installation, *The Heidelberg Project* in Detroit. Holly Lynn Baumgartner's investigation uncovers the social, political, aesthetic, and narrative dimensions inherent in Guyton's community-led artwork. The study unveils Guyton's ability to metamorphose his childhood neighbourhood into a dynamically evolving, immersive art museum that seamlessly merges indoor and outdoor spaces. The analysis elucidates how *The Heidelberg Project* serves as a catalyst force, drawing attention to the pressing challenges faced by marginalised and forgotten neighbourhoods of Detroit. Furthermore, as Baumgarten argues, the project itself stimulates a much-needed discourse on the themes of public engagement, education, urban regeneration, and community building. Having blossomed into a community-led art village, the project functions now as a vital hub for arts education and fostering social dialogue. Baumgarten highlights the transformative power exhibited by this alternative historical narrative stands as a testament to its enduring impact on the fabric of society. The project holds the potential to resonate most profoundly within the future generations, as it actively engages them. Through this influence the project will shape their perceptions, values, and aspirations, ultimately contributing to their cultural and critical development.

The site-specificity and ephemeral nature of art is also reflected in the following analysis. In her exploration of street art, Gizela Horváth undertakes an investigation, aiming to discern whether this artistic form truly accomplishes the revival of art. By referencing Banksy, Horváth brings to light the concept of a "battle for visibility" (p. 44), which paradoxically emerges within the domain of street artists in the new millennium, who adamantly advocate for anonymity. Furthermore, Horváth undertakes an examination of Dan Perjovschi's artistic projects and Gabriel Miloia's *Muian project* recognising their shared attributes of being timely, critical, and popular. Perjovschi's works, renowned for their social and political commentary, resonate deeply with contemporary issues and garner widespread recognition. Similarly, Miloia's *Muian project* captivates audiences with its relevance and critical insights. Both artists effectively utilise their platforms—the public walls of streets—to engage with societal concerns and to foster meaningful dialogue that resonates with a wide audience.

In "Normal City with Normal Art", Adrienne Gálosi conducts an analysis of public art, encompassing its historical context, interpretive dimensions, and impact on both communities and urban development. By exploring the ramifications of the decline of traditional industries and the advent of globalization, Gálosi highlights the transformative effects that ultimately gave rise to the discourse surrounding creative cities. Within the context of gentrification, Gálosi's critical inquiry offers valuable insights into its multifaceted manifestations. With a keen focus on the interplay between commercialization, popular culture, and the art world, Gálosi exposes the underlying processes that contribute to the "aesthetisation" of cities. This phenomenon, characterised by the prioritization of visual allure and the infusion of artistic elements, often comes at the expense of other vital urban considerations. To support her arguments, Gálosi presents compelling case studies, notably Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* and John Ahearn's *44th Police Precinct* in Bronx. These site-specific public art installations faced removal due to their disruptive and disquieting nature, failing to align with the intended goal of normalising the urban environment. Like Baumgartner and Horváth, Gálosi underscores the capacity of street art and public art to engender significant dialogues, stimulate critical perspectives, and leave a lasting impact on urban environments. The research conducted on endeavours of this nature holds immense significance, as it has the potential to provide valuable insights into the transformative capacities of street art and public art. By exploring these artistic interventions, the papers in this section not only address significant societal issues but also have the ability to stimulate contemplation and active engagement among readers. They tackle the crucial role of public engagement in the creation and appreciation of art.

Next, Ágnes Zsófia Kovács researches Edith Wharton's intriguing travel writings focusing on Italy and France. Kovács unravels Wharton's keen observations of visual culture, architectural spaces, and the historical and cultural legacy embedded within them. Within the analysis, the exploration extends to the influence of John Ruskin's architectural methodology on Wharton's travelogues, with particular emphasis on her deep connection to the emotional and ornamental Baroque forms. The interwoven threads of visual culture, architecture, and the artistic continuum are underscored throughout the article. Wharton's profound engagement with the interconnections within art history resonates strongly with Virginia Woolf's own contemplation of literary continuity expressed in her seminal work *A Room of One's Own* (1929) as well as with T. S. Eliot's insights in his essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919). As Kovács notes, "Wharton argues that artistic modes and styles evolve organically from one another and should not be solely judged in isolation" (p. 88). This comprehension contributes to Wharton's investigation

of the relationship between the Renaissance and Baroque stylistic elements within the realm of garden art, as well as the inherent interconnectedness of garden compositions with classical Italian garden art. By means of Kovács' comparative analysis, readers are invited to engage deeply in Wharton's and Ruskin's notions regarding the significance of perception, architectural observation, and the intrinsic relationship between architecture, its surroundings, and its inhabitants.

Teodóra Dömötör presents an analysis of Ernest Hemingway's short story, *A Very Short Story* (1925), specifically examining its narrative depiction of New York as a personified city with a notable feminizing influence. By undertaking this examination, Dömötör unveils the interactions between urban spaces and gender, unravelling the ways in which the city—and its dwellers—shape the notion of masculinity. Going beyond the boundaries of Hemingway's literary work, Dömötör incorporates insights from the author's biographical background to provide a contextual analysis. This approach offers a nuanced perspective on the relationship between Hemingway's personal experiences and the narrative representation of urban spaces. Through the examination of these diverse examples, the author identifies recurring themes that involve controlling and dominating maternal figures, as well as the struggles surrounding male power within Hemingway's oeuvre. Dömötör scrutinises the profound impact of 1920s New York's social history on Hemingway's work, emphasising its role in the gradual erosion of masculine constructs after World War I. The author sheds light on the relationship between urban spaces, social dynamics, and the ever-changing concept of masculinity, contributing to a deeper understanding of this complex evolution.

Michael Collins's contribution presents a thought-provoking exploration of cities during wartime, highlighting the interconnections between seemingly disparate urban centres such as Berlin, Paris, London, La Havre, Port of Spain, and Saigon (known today as Ho Chi Minh City). With a focus on the historical, political, social and economic dimensions of these cities during World War II, Collins investigates their transformation into anti-cities that deviate from peacetime cities characterised by vibrant intellectual life. Collins takes a fascinating approach by centring his argumentation around the experiences and perspectives of influential intellectuals. By drawing upon the insights of prominent figures such as Walter Benjamin, Albert Einstein, Jean-Paul Sartre, V.S. Naipaul, Bernardine Evaristo, Yusef Komunyakaa, Eric Williams, and Derek Walcott, Collins uncovers the narratives woven into the fabric of the urban spaces. These intellectuals' personal encounters, life tragedies, and reflections contribute to a multi-dimensional understanding of the cities' metamorphosis into anti-cities. Collins's paper stands out as an associative and imaginative piece of

writing, painting a picture of the creative freedom fostered by intellectual cross-fertilisation. Through his engaging approach and broad perspective, Collins provides valuable insights into the interconnections between urban spaces, the psychological conditions imposed by wartime circumstances, and the enduring and vital role of open-minded creative synergies.

Jasamin Kashanipour's scholarly work appears as a natural progression of Collins's concluding thoughts, as in her opening thoughts she delves into an exploration of the diverse benefits that urban inhabitants derive from their urban surroundings. Central to her analysis is the concept of "ratification", which Kashanipour draws primarily from the works of Finnish scholars such as Levanto, Naukkarinen, and Vihma. These scholars posit that "ratification" manifests when non-artistic entities or phenomena are influenced by artistic processes, without necessarily undergoing a transformation into conventional art forms as traditionally understood. Adopting an anthropological perspective, Kashanipour employs an ethnographic approach inspired by the work of Clifford Geertz. Within this framework, she engages in an examination of two individuals referred to by the pseudonyms Toni and Doris. Her ethnographic approach captures the narratives of the two individuals who actively resist dominant cultural forces. She discusses the lived experiences of Toni and Doris who consciously reject to lead a life dictated by commodity culture and "faceless and unrecognizable" (183) neoliberal systems. By examining the repressive aspects of Metternich's regime alongside the contemporary consumer society, Kashanipour provides a reading of the continuities and transformations in power structures, revealing how mechanisms of control persist and evolve over time. Kashanipour's analysis of both Metternich's repressive regime of the nineteenth-century and contemporary consumer society denotes the enduring—and evolving—nature of power structures. Ultimately, the paper departs from its initial focus on "ratification", yet it continues to provide a thought-provoking exploration of the manipulations inherent in the capitalist system. However, in contrast to many critics of the capitalist system, the paper presents compelling alternatives through real-life examples and case studies. In this way, the study offers pathways for reclaiming our autonomous self and pursuing lives free from the confines imposed by unyielding economic growth.

The third section of this anthology is dedicated to the vibrant urban space of London, offering intriguing cultural and historical insights and perspectives. Erzsébet Stróbl's paper focuses on Queen Elizabeth's notable coronation entry into London in 1559. Stróbl analyses this unique public procession, shedding light on its symbolic and allegorical meanings. Through an examination of contemporary documents and written accounts, Stróbl demonstrates how London transformed into an open-air stage for performances,

music, and theatrical spectacles during the event. The paper vividly portrays the communal effort behind organising such a grand procession and emphasises the collaborative nature of the undertaking. Stróbl's attention to detail is commendable as she provides a description of the pageant, including the scenic design, ephemeral music, captivating sounds, and the pivotal roles played by actors and the audience. By exploring the artistic expressions within this event, encompassing both pre-designed and improvisational elements, the paper successfully bridges the realms of performance and public art. Furthermore, Stróbl hints at the Queen's strategic self-representation through the analysed procession. This final note adds an intriguing layer to the exploration of the performative nature of royal authority, as well as the political implications embedded within urban spaces.

In the subsequent article titled "The Bad Taste of the Town" by Janczer Csikós Dóra, the focus shifts to the mid-eighteenth-century London and its reputation as an uncontrollable "monster" metropolis. Janczer contextualises the debates around contemporary theatre within the broader socio-cultural and aesthetic shifts, thereby offering insights into the connections between art, society, and national identity during the period. The author begins by delving into the works of William Hogarth, primarily examining *The Bad Taste of the Town* also known as *Masquerade and Operas* from 1724 and later expanding the analysis to include *The South Sea Scheme* from 1721. Through careful analysis, Janczer Csikós argues that Hogarth's satirical depictions serve as a cultural topography of the city rather than a direct portrayal of criminality and moral poverty. The two prints, according to the author's interpretation, presents a visual narrative of the theatre-going and culture-consuming public, shedding light on the changing social activities and cultural practices of the time. The Italian opera's supposedly corrupting effects is subjected to detailed analysis, exploring its perceived influence on the religious, social, and moral aspects of its viewers. The examination looks into the material details and design of the opera and masquerade performances, while also considering the contextual factors that contribute to the comprehension of the depicted cultural practices. With an inter-art approach, Janczer Csikós presents the connections between artistic expressions, societal values, and material manifestations. By branching out from the initial focus of *The Bad Taste of the Town* to encompass a broader sociocultural context, Janczer Csikós offers a novel perspective on London's cultural dynamics during this transformative period in the city's history.

Éva Péteri's analysis, akin to Janczer's approach, embarks on a multidimensional exploration by commencing with a visual artwork: Ford Madox Brown's Victorian painting, *Work* (1852–65). Péteri's interpretation explores the social layers of contemporary society.

By drawing inspiration from Hogarth's series of plates titled *Industry and Idleness* (1747), she establishes a framework centred around the contrasting concepts of industry and idleness. In her analysis, Péteri discusses the thoughts of Carlyle, who highlights the virtues of diligence and ascribes sacredness and ennobling power to work. An intriguing parallel emerges between Carlyle's belief in the transformative potential of work and its capacity to ennoble the individual, and Jasamin Kashanipour's scrutiny of neoliberal ideologies that prioritise economic growth at the expense of other aspects of human well-being. In Péteri's research we can discern the traces of such attitudes in the context of the industrial revolution, where the seeds of the work-centric mindset were sown. To strengthen her argument, Péteri turns to Ford Maddox Hueffer, the grandson of the painter, better known as Ford Madox Ford. This interconnection between historical context, artistic interpretation, and critical commentary deepens the understanding of the complexities inherent in Brown's *Work* and its relevance to the wider socio-economic landscape of the Victorian era. With a detailed analysis of the different dog breeds depicted in the painting, Péteri alludes to the diverse social hierarchies and roles within contemporary society and the importance of class distinctions prevalent during the period. The dogs, like their human counterparts, exhibit varying degrees of obedience, assertiveness, and control. Their actions mirror the power dynamics that govern human relationships and social interactions. In this way, the painting becomes a microcosm of society, encapsulating the class hierarchies and power imbalances that governed the era. By recognising the interconnectedness of individuals and their social positions within the painting, Péteri contemplates the lasting impact of class divisions in society at large. Through the visual narrative presented in *Work*, we are not only confronted with the stark realities of the Victorian era but also called upon to engage in a broader dialogue about social justice.

Sarah Butler's final paper weaves together extracts from her novels *Ten Things I've Learnt About Love*, *Before Fire*, and *Jack and Bet* with theoretical considerations on the concept of home and the city. With this approach, Butler presents the reciprocal relationship between fiction and theory and sheds light on the multifaced nature of forming and being formed by the urban environment. In her theoretical discussion, the author goes beyond conventional notions of home as a private space, contrasting it with the public realm outside. Instead, she embraces a comprehension of home as a complex and fluid concept, drawing on insights from sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and literary studies. By mentioning the contradictions and paradoxes inherent in our relationship with the city, as it both nurtures and challenges us, embraces and isolates us, liberates and constrains us, Butler highlights the enduring power of the city to transform our sense of belonging.

Drawing on an extensive theoretical background that appears to have deeply influenced her fictional writings, Butler offers a unique approach by presenting extracts from her own works alongside insightful analyses. This creative fusion of fiction and analysis encourages introspection and self-reflection. It allows readers to connect with the characters and their stories on a personal level while simultaneously considering the wider societal and cultural significance of the urban environment.

Focusing on the various connections and links between art, literature, and urban space, the volume takes stock of the many points of contact between art and the city, from site-specific installations to literary and visual representations, through analyses of performative practices and community engagement initiatives. Through the various examinations, the anthology reveals how art influences not just the physical landscape, social structure, and cultural identity of the city, but also our personal experiences, memories, and emotions. The reader is consistently confronted with the reiteration of the importance attributed to artistic agency in influencing our perceptions, interactions, and engagements within the complex urban milieu. The subtle yet recurring emphasis placed on this notion serves to reinforce the critical understanding that artists hold the inherent power to actively shape and reshape our experiences of the urban environment.

The book's interdisciplinary approach and its comprehensive exploration of the intersections between art, artistic practices, and urban environments make it a valuable resource for scholars, students, and practitioners alike in fields such as art history, literature, urban cultures, cultural geography, urban studies, and contemporary art practice.

References

Juhász, T. (eds) (2021) *Art in urban space: Reflections on city culture in Europe and North-America*. Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary, L'Harmattan.

p'arts, hum' Papers in Arts and Humanities

Vol. 3, No. 2, Dec. 2023
https://doi.org/10.52885/pah.v3i2.160

Book Review: Elizabeth Strout's *Lucy by the Sea*

ANCA PEIU
Affiliation: Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures
University of Bucharest, Romania
Email: ancapeiu@lls.unibuc.ro

Elizabeth Strout is a successful and highly acclaimed contemporary American novelist: she is a Pulitzer prize winner and author of numerous novels, among which: *My Name Is Lucy Barton; Anything Is Possible; Oh, William!*. She has also been nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Booker Prize. As such, her most recent best seller, *Lucy by the Sea* (Penguin Random House, 2022), commands particular attention.

This is a most unusual novel-reading experience, as if *in the making*, since it tells a story of our own world's *here and now*: the realistic *self-reflexive* story of an American lady novelist, in the days (and years) of the Coronavirus-19 pandemic. Lucy Barton works as a possible alter-ego of the writer herself. Hence the apparently easy-going, intimate tone of this book, as if it were (no more than) a memoir. And yet.

This volume asserts itself as an ambitious piece of today's American fiction, if we only consider the chances and challenges of classic *realism* now. It offers its readership an exquisite sample of *poetry of reality* in *prose of the mind*—if one may say so. It speaks (apparently) so directly about the dilemmas (and delights) of ageing, without forgetting its horrors (painful old memories included). As a *poem of reality* in *prose of the mind*, this is achieved as a candid *confessional* text, devoid of sensational sentimentalism, often likely to remind us of Sylvia Plath's haunting metaphorical voicing.

Lucy by the Sea represents today's version of a Bildungsroman, pursuing some growing-up itineraries, with close-up instances of family background from several generations of a (typical?) American family. This means: vivid literary characters standing for various kinds of social status (from sheer poverty to academic upper middle-class), national origin (from old Anglo-American stock to a former German Second World War prisoner of war), or level of education (from illiterate to university professor). Written from a first person narrative point of view, following Strout's novel *My Name Is Lucy Barton*, as if it were

a second volume of a traditional family *saga*, (which it is not), focused on and developed around this fictive woman writer, who is herself professionally engaged in rendering the multilayered narratives of this non-*clan*, Lucy's story brings these portraits all together: from Lucy's own mother and father, her sister and brother, to her first husband and then her second one, then her own mature daughters, Chrissy and Becka, their own husbands, their (never born) babies.

Lucy by the Sea may also represent a melancholy meditation upon a contemporary version of some "Roaring Twenties" in our own 21st century. The Covid pandemic is by no means the only trauma rendered here: complex political issues (George Floyd's death in May, 2020, and then the January 6, 2021 attack on US Capitol in Washington, D.C.) are being dealt with carefully, with great insight, as if to suggest that both sides of the story need to be considered. And yet, the fact that these (other) renderings of such recent upheaval become part of Lucy's story is tale-telling enough.

(The same) universal crucial questions are being asked here again, between the lines, such questions as: the *fear of eventually losing one's mind*; the frightening acute sense of *loneliness*; the chances of *believing in God*, in a world like ours, at a time like this; last but not least, ancient questions about *love* and its infinite (im)possibilities: from awkwardly expressed parental affection to offspring's desperate need for it; from "true" love to love betrayal, in a married couple; love failure, delusion; the ancient never quenching dream of love. This intricate psychological novel responds to the invisible reader's mind, or rather *corresponds* to it, since there can be neither an honest answer, nor a logical solution to such timeless dilemmas. This suggestion of empathy plays a strange game of *mise en abyme*, involving the anonymous reader, too, in the first person narrator's quest for the ever more blurred meaning of human existence. At least that, since Lucy's lucidity prevents her from any definition of happiness.

But then, *mise en abyme* is the main strategy within this metafictional novel: *motherhood* is reflected in infinite mirrors. From the duality of Lucy's mother: on the one hand, her actual mother, harsh and rarely (if ever) able to show tenderness with all her three kids; on the other hand, Lucy's "invented mother", the "nice mother" at the back of her mind, always supportive and ready to encourage her writing daughter. (This "invented mother" may some-how remind readers of Isabel Allende's book title, *My Invented Country*, likewise a book at the border between memoir and fiction. But then also of elegiac instances of mourning motherhood in Allende's works.) Then we have to contemplate Lucy's own career as a mother of two daughters, always affectionate and responsive to their problems. Further on, Lucy's first born daughter's, Chrissy's, pregnancy losses

several times, as another representation of *failed motherhood*. My point here is that Strout's novel can win over her feminine reader also by its talking about this life experience of motherhood as about something never to be taken for granted. A frank serious writer would/could never approach *motherhood* conventionally, and, obviously, Elizabeth Strout is one such writer.

In a chapter on the sublimely concise poetry of Emily Dickinson, Harold Bloom quotes a quip by Ludwig Wittgenstein: "Love is not a feeling. Love, unlike pain, is put to the test. One does not say: That was not a true pain because it passed away so quickly" (Bloom, 1995, p. 281). This can also apply here, to the numerous life stories crossing Lucy's mind in Elizabeth Strout's novel. Lucy meets many other literary characters, beside those of her family. Whether as friends or merely as random acquaintances, they leave a mark on her mind, claiming their episodic roles in this American panorama of the Coronavirus pandemic. Lucy is always just as witty as her own maker, the novelist. "It is a gift in this life"—Lucy says once—"that we do not know what awaits us" (Strout, 2022, p. 223). Yet a couple of chapters before, in a dialogue with William, her first husband, they confess to each other they share the suspicion that "everything has already happened", and that "there is no past, present or future". This return to the ancient (puritan) notion of predestination may be rather disquieting, yet it belongs to the book's *conversational* pattern. The Coronavirus-19 lockdown works as a good pretext for *conversational fiction*, in a well nuanced kaleidoscope mingling dialogue and soliloquy. This unprecedented lockdown experience becomes a multiple metaphor: we get to see lockdown as a trap, as confinement, as a weird time-out. At a certain point in the novel, Lucy realizes that somehow her entire childhood had been like a lockdown.

Whether as a desolate rural landscape (such as Amgash, Illinois, Lucy's birthplace), or as a seaside provincial one (such as Maine, Lucy's lockdown shelter), or as the super-metropolis of Manhattan, NYC (i.e. Lucy most beloved place under the sun), these all are colorfully evoked as so much more than suitable landscapes for powerful literary settings. And then *the sea itself*, as in some other grand 20th century books by certain lady writers with a deep philosophical bent: Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*; Iris Murdoch's novel *The Sea, the Sea*.

Lucy spends this time of crisis, the Covid lockdown, together with William, her first husband, in a rented house in Maine, "by the sea." William claims he wants to save her life. Their reconsidered togetherness, after divorce and loss of further life-partners, is in itself a strange story of mature friendship, "after all has been said and done." As a classic realistic novel, Strout's book also renders—without melodrama, just with a well-tempered

lyricism—Lucy's and William's unusual relationship with each one's siblings. This opens another generous horizon of possible interpretations. Somewhere between sweet dream and nightmare, all of Lucy's symbolical brothers and sisters, (her own invisible readers included), have had to face the same lockdown challenge; each one of them responds differently, and their fragments of dialogue, whether uttered or not, testify to their deep sense of insecurity.

As a unique book about "love in the time of the Coronavirus" (if one may paraphrase the title of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's world-famous novel about giving a second chance by the dusk of life, to a first love story, marked by the crisis of a deadly catching disease)—*Lucy by the Sea* has already asserted itself as a best-seller in the US. It is to be expected that Elizabeth Strout's novel will be rewarded by an ever larger readership, provided it is translated by gifted keen professionals, too.

References

Bloom, H. (1995) *The western canon: The books and schools of the ages*. Riverhead Books.
Strout, E. (2022) *Lucy by the sea.* Penguin Random House.