

Symbolic Materiality and Atmospheres of Space in Southeastern Europe

PhD Workshop, Department of History, University of Hamburg, September 19–20, 2019

Conference Report

The first session revolved around the spatial dimension of migration and specific, symbolically charged areas appearing on and around the borders. Maria ADAMOPOULOU (Florence) presented her research on the materiality and imagination included in border-crossing activity during the Greek migrants' return visits to Greece during the holidays season. Based on popular media from the period and oral histories, she showed how orchestrated efforts of celebrations with folklore elements organized by the authorities used the border for an emotionalized reinforcement of the patriotic sense of belonging.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with Italian-speaking communities in the Istria and Kvarner region, Aleksandar RANKOVIĆ (London/Berlin) talked about the questions of identity and belonging in the Northern Adriatic region. Instead of Tara Zahra's concept of indifference and imagined non-communities, he suggests that the borderland area is specific precisely because of deep awareness for the ‚national‘ differences and literacy of difference (ability to imitate the other groups), which can be appropriated and strategically employed.

The second panel had its focus on economic aspects of symbolic and atmospheric places in socialist and post-socialist societies: Ivana Mihaela ŽIMBREK (Budapest/Vienna) outlined political and symbolic implications of the Yugoslav self-service system during the 1960s. In analyzing the discourse of planning experts (architects, urbanists, politicians) she gives insight into the visions and strategies of those who were in the position to shape space – and in doing so to influence people in their routines according to a certain understanding of what is “cultured” or “modern”. The first Yugoslav department stores that were presented at Zagreb's fair in 1958 reveal space relations as power relations: Aiming at the education of the consumers through spatial and visual means these “show-cases” of the first retail shops were meant to function as didactic models and to spread their “cultivating” impact on urban environments.

With his talk on *Affective Micropolitics of Space in Postsocialist Experience Economy* Petar ODAK (Budapest/Vienna/Utrecht) opened the field towards present strategies of “trauma” or “memory industry”: A comparison of a wide range of places of nostalgic or “dark tourism” (e. g. the House of Terror in Budapest, the House of Leaves in Tirana or the Red Flat in Sofia) shows that these exhibition spaces are arranged around two dominant narratives: trauma and/or nostalgia. Apart from local differences the museums use the (economic and symbolic) capital of “authenticity” and show a high level of “instagramability”. To capture the impression of such spatial arrangements Odak works with concepts of micro-perception – of non-semiotic affects that are connected to bodily experience and can not be perceived when only focussing on explicit discourse.

Spatialization of change and absence was the focus of the third session. Christina MORARU (Iași) reflected on the derridean notions of “undecidable trace” and „moment of blindness“, an unavoidable shadow of absence in buildings and pieces of art. She applied the concept to the works of Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko. She showed how his „countermonuments“ — projections on built en-

vironment in public space — problematize and visualize silenced voices and uneasy political backgrounds.

Sonja DRAGOVIĆ (Lisbon/Podgorica) discussed the current life of the Spomen Dom, community center and antifascist monument erected in the 1960s in a small mountain town of Kolašin in Montenegro. She focused on the interplay of given spatial frame (spectacular architecture unusual for such a small town, technical faults that make maintenance difficult) and a plethora of current uses by the local community.

The final discussion showed a broad consent in the importance of stressing the focus on a phenomenon like “atmosphere” that is omnipresent, but often excluded from analytical frameworks as its non-verbal character makes its “translation” to written terms difficult. The participants underlined the benefit of interdisciplinary exchange based on the “common ground” offered by theoretical models offerlike Gernot Böhme’s essays on atmosphere, Elizabeth Keating’s understanding of space as discursive terrain or Martina Löw’s reading of spatial arrangements. The issue of specifically “Southeastern European” phenomena was one leitmotif of the workshop, as well as the question of the critical potential that lies in analyzing the atmospheric and symbolical charging of built environments.

The final visit to the exhibition *Neue Heimat (1950-1982): A social democratic utopia and its buildings* at the *Museum für Hamburgische Geschichte* offered the opportunity to link some of the workshop’s contents to an influential player of West German architecture and urbanism.

A publication of all conference contributions is going to be prepared: We were invited to edit a special issue of the journal *Südosteuropa* (<https://www.degruyter.com/view/j/soeu>).