

Doctoral School of the Hungarian University of Fine Arts

The City as Metaphor

DLA Dissertation Theses

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According to conceptual metaphor theory, the experience of space determines the way in which we conceive of time and other abstract topics difficult to grasp. My research is based on the supposition that, in a similar way, the city has an important role to play in our thought: it provides a pattern for abstract phenomena to take shape in our mind. I looked for verbal and visual metaphors that prove this supposition, metaphors that don't tell something about the city (like the space-representing metaphors, for example city as mosaic) but tell something through the images of the city.

When analysing these metaphors, we would see the city from a new point of view, thus I hope that we would come to know it not only as a metaphoric vehicle, but as the frame of everyday life too.

1.

First, it is worth emphasizing on the one hand that the urban space I am interested in is the lived-space described in the works of Martin Heidegger, O.F. Bollnow, Christian Norberg-Schulz and Gaston Bachelard. Since in this approach space is composed of subjectively experienced places, works of art are important sources of its exploration. On the other hand, the concept of metaphor used in the dissertation has been based mainly on the theories of Paul Ricoeur and Hans Blumenberg. I relay on them in assuming that:

a) the analysis of verbal and visual metaphors gives us new insight into topics that are otherwise well explored, such as memory, text, or the Other;

b) it is possible to point out the dominant influence of city metaphors on our thinking and imagination much in the same way as Hans Blumenberg pointed out the importance of terra incognita-metaphor in the thought of the Age of Discovery.

2.

Before starting to analyse some works of art in which memory is represented as a city, I refer to connections between space and memory which existed in the ancient art of memory and in Maurice Halbwachs' book on collective memory. Places are considered, in both cases, as locations of remembrance. But as Pierre Nora, among others, observed that during the last centuries our civilization had become more and more incapable of remembering, we are entitled to say that, due to the transformations of the society in the 19th century, and the traumas of the 20th century, places don't retain the past with us, but instead of us.

This experience seems to have provided the basis for W. G. Sebald's books. In his novel, *Austerlitz*, the built space isn't only the deposit of the remembrance; it doesn't only provoke recollection, but becomes the vehicle of the memory. To supply the background for my claim, I analyse the role which railway stations, forts, and especially the Brussels Palace of Justice play in the novel. In this way it can be observed, that these spatial metaphors emphasize that feature

of the memory which is responsible for the tragedy of Sebald's heroes; namely that human mind stores more things than we are conscious of, and these unknown parts ('closed rooms') of memory make their effects on our lives.

Related to this feature of Sebald's novel – and the photographs figuring in the book – the impression of timelessness is getting stronger in the process of reading. Instead of talking about the past or our attitude towards it, Austerlitz focuses on the reality surrounding us and existing here and now. This characteristic of the novel is inseparable from the particular way in which it represents built spaces.

3.

Next I address the question of how a text can be represented as a city. First I cite some phrases by Géza Ottlik, who speaks about novel as a city; the base of the metaphor is a common characteristic of texts and urban space, namely, that one can lose his way in them, and get back to the same point from different directions.

In the process of reading we reconstruct in our mind the space of the novel, as W. J. T. Mitchell says in his essay detailing the importance of spatial form in literature. We may add that when an author produces a text, she is moving in a mental space that, albeit constructed by herself, acquires some independence on its own. . Take the example of Virginia Woolf who, working on *Mrs. Dalloway*, noted in her diary that she intended to dig caves behind her characters, hoping that these caves would connect with each other.

In the next part of my dissertation I discuss a work of art that gave us the opportunity to walk not only in texts, but on texts: *Concrete* was an installation made of two cubic meters of concrete and eighteen cubic meters of discarded books by János Hübner and Nemere Kerezsi in 2008. The books bound in concrete were similar to a ruined city looked from above. It looked like an urban space whose components avoided devastation by turning into parts of a new whole. The process of sinking so many worthless books in concrete resulted a ground on which visitors could walk. The texts become illegible, but they made up a new structure in the same way, as remains coming from different ages make a whole whose different ingredients are not always identifiable in the organic tissue of a city.

4.

Cultural research has put up the value of the city as a space where strangers exchange not only goods, but ideas, knowledge, and ideologies too. But how can we speak about the Stranger, or the Other, through the image of the city?

The Other can be symbolized by an urban space for example as a built space handed down from preceding generations. When we accept or refuse this space, we enter into relation to our ancestors. Rounding off by Zsolt Keserue presents subjective ways of reforming homes in blocks

of flats built during the Communist era. Though the walls are never movable in these houses and they contain many other fixed elements that can't be upgraded either, the film suggests several inventive methods of making cosy flats that were originally planned for demands of another age. At the same time, using the metaphor of urban space, Keserue's work tells us how difficult it is to transform the seemingly fixed frame of our life, and how this depressing frame can open up new possibilities after a change of the viewpoint.

But the city can present the Other in the common use of space too. Every life-narrative is part of intertwined narrations, says Alisdair MacIntyre. This claim can be substantiated by the stories woven into an urban tissue in Mrs. Dalloway. Virginia Woolf let London elaborate the trains of thought she started but not ended in the text, about separation and connection, or about possibility or impossibility of reaching the Other.

In a similar way, Halves, Gusztáv Hámos' series of photos, which emphasize visual connections between the travelers of a tram and streets glimpsed over the window, constructs an analogy of the individual's relationships with the external world. The tram seems to be isolated from the city, but the photos make us notice some connections.

Then I go on to look for works of art inquiring about possibilities of reaching the Other in the city; for example Havanna str. 50/9 by Miklós Erhardt suggests that there can hardly be true and successful ways of getting into contact with the Other. The project, started as an attempt to enter into relations with people who live in a segregated district of Budapest, resulted only in a short film that detected the difficulties and mapped them theoretically. The Other as a city is related both to the chance of exploring something new, and the possibility of losing our way.

5.

Metaphors like memory as city, text as city, the Other as city suggest that the shocking experience of radical urbanization has made a great impact on our social mind since the 19th century.

In conclusion I compare some phrases of Honoré de Balzac and Gordon Matta-Clark's 'building cuts'. As one can't always go straight, one can't always think in the same way about the same thing – says Vautrin in *Father Goriot*. The place where we can't always walk straight, and where we can approach the same thing from different directions is the city – like Paris that often makes Balzac's characters change their way. From this point of view it seems obvious that there is a relation between the new phenomenon of a metropolis and the new claim to the liberty of opinion.

By piercing the walls and floors of buildings sentenced to demolition, Matta-Clark 'opened' spaces used in the same way for decades, and made them ready for a new kind of use. He didn't build any new, but he made people able to see their well-known world from a different direction.

Selected publications

City seen from above. About Three Books by Marc Augé (Város fentről és lentől. Marc Augé három könyve); Pannonhalmi Szemle 2013/4 (XXI)

Unknown Place. German Unity at Balaton – an European Story; cinematographical installation of Péter Forgács and Gusztáv Hámos (Ismeretlen hely. Német egység a Balatonnál – egy európai történet; Forgács Péter és Hámos Gusztáv kinematográfiai installációja; Balkon, 2011/9

Between Places. Two Streets in the Seventies of the Hungarian Photography (Helyek között. Két utca a hetvenes évek magyar fotóművészetéből); Café Babel 59. (Utca) 2009

Ottlik's Labyrinths – the Role of the Space in Géza Ottlik's Novels (Ottlik labirintusai); Pannonhalmi Szemle 2009/2 (XVII)

Archive of Deads and Alive. About the Linné-exhibition (Minden erdő minden fája. Az élők és a holtak archívuma – Linné emlékkiállítás a Centrális Galériában); Pannonhalmi Szemle 2008/2 (XVI)

Image Under Construction (Épülő kép) Türk Péter kiállítása a Kiscelli Múzeumban; Pannonhalmi Szemle 2006/4 (XIV)