

Symbolic Materiality and Atmospheres of Space in Southeastern Europe

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Deadline: May 31, 2019

Lea Horvat

Built environment is charged with immaterial, symbolic content. The fact that people experience a passage underground as „frightening“, a court building as „daunting“, a coffee place as „cozy“, one monument as „uplifting“, another as „depressing“, and a sunset at the harbour as „romantic“ shows that spaces are „tuned“ and that space has a potential to influence perceptions and feelings.

Scientists from different disciplines (urbanists, sociologists, historians, cultural anthropologists etc.) have offered questions and methods to carve out the symbolic charge of built environment. Interest in the unpalpable, symbolic quality of spaces and places, such as sublime and uncanny, was flourishing in the romantic period.

Furthermore, in the 1930s, Walter Benjamin introduced the concept of „aura“ as a way of thinking about the uniqueness of artworks and material artefacts (Benjamin, „The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction“). The concept of „atmosphere“ as spaceconstituting factor has been shaped by space sociologists like Martina Löw („Raumsoziologie“), following phenomenological traditions (e.g. Otto Friedrich Bollnow) to describe the „visible invisibility“ (Niklas Luhmann) and „surplus effect“ of affective elements in the emergence and development of space – understood as relational arrangement. Another „surplus“ that is inscribed into material spaces is their symbolic loading: Especially (but not only) public places and spaces are formed, presented and perceived as signals and symbols and are therefore communicating structures of meaning and stimulating adequate patterns of behaviour. More recent approaches have called attention to the emotional dimension of atmospheres.

Southeastern Europe and its cities, streets, cafés, villages, and bridges, when approached by travellers, scientists, and officials from outside, have, throughout history, regularly been described in terms of atmosphere and symbolism – be it mysterious, exotic, enchanting, or barbaric, warm, aggressive or lively. Since atmospheric categories work with the unpalpable and symbolic, they are also susceptible for transmission of racial, ethnic, and gender stereotypes.

We want to critically examine such constructs and put them into a historical perspective. Additionally, we want to encourage approaching the creation and reproduction of atmosphere from below. We are calling for contributions from different disciplines (history, anthropology, urban studies, visual culture studies etc.) that are focussing on Southeastern Europe and are researching atmospheric „tunes“/dispositions or analyzing the symbolic charge of places and spaces – either on a theoretical level or in case studies (households, streets, cemeteries, monuments...). Possible questions include, but are not limited to:

How is the atmosphere of a certain place socially produced? How has this changed over time?
How is meaning generated in a spatial context?
Who is in the position of power to place and shape atmospheric spaces?
How do atmospheres cloud power constellations?
What is the role of gender, class, ethnicity in creating, realising, transforming atmospheres?
How can the process of habitual „synthesizing“ (M. Löw) of space(s) be described?
What is the link between material and symbolic/atmospheric aspects of spatial arrangements?
What happens in the moment of being „retuned“ when entering another space?
What does the high atmospheric level of heterotopias (Foucault) tell about what a society regards as „normal“ and „special“?

The workshop will be held in English. PhD students interested in participating in the workshop are welcome to submit proposals of 300 words and a short CV to Lea Horvat and Magdalena Saiger: conf.atmospheres@gmail.com. Deadline is May 31st. We can offer up to €100 for travel expenses and accommodation.

Reference:

CFP: Symbolic Materiality and Atmospheres of Space in Southeastern Europe. In: ArtHist.net, Apr 19, 2019 (accessed Jul 6, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/20681>>.