

Spatial Experiences

Feeling and Transgressing Cities, Borders, and Homes

Review of Ágnes Györke and Imola Bülgözdi (eds.), *Geographies of Affect in Contemporary Literature and Visual Culture: Central Europe and the West* (Leiden and Boston: Brill-Rodopi, 2021)

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Cultural geographer Doreen Massey famously argued throughout most of her academic career that spaces are never to be interpreted as static, non-changing entities that somehow surround and encapsulate us without entering into interactions with us. Instead, she envisioned spaces as processes that are “constantly disconnected by new arrivals, constantly waiting to be determined (and therefore always undetermined) by the construction of new relations” (*For Space* 107). Elsewhere, she also urged readers to conceive of spaces as dynamic, to imagine them as “articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings” (*Space, Place, and Gender* 154). What Massey taps into here is, of course, on the one hand, the long tradition of the spatial turn in the humanities and social sciences, paved by Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau among many others. On the other hand, by emphasising the significance of “new arrivals” and “networks” of human and possibly non-human connections, she also, rather pre-emptively, references newer directions in the humanities, namely, the mobilities turn, as conceptualised by John Urry and Mimi Sheller, and the affective turn, first discussed by Silvan Tomkins. The reason for this rather theoretical introduction, perhaps

uncharacteristic in a scholarly review, is that Massey seems to be uniquely positioned to help us reflect on the main concerns at the core of the volume *Geographies of Affect in Contemporary Literature and Visual Culture*.

This collection of twelve essays, which are in turn arranged into five separate parts, offers a rare combination of literary and cultural analyses of novels, films, a theatre performance, and a graphic novel. By focusing on both the spatiality and the affective dimension apparent in these different cultural products, the volume does not only showcase the myriad ways in which spaces can function but also discusses the emotions that are incited as we exist and move about in these spaces. Since mobility is a key consideration in the volume, the various chapters are able to offer global—but notably not globalising—perspectives, tackling Central Europe, the general West, and to a lesser extent, the Global South. As the editors of the volume, Ágnes Györke and Imola Bülgözdi, explain in their “Introduction,” which serves as a short theoretical treatise on the role of space and affect in what may be broadly defined as diaspora studies, they opted for the term “translocality” as preferable to “transnationalism” since the latter fails to account for the resurgence of nationalistic sentiment in the twenty-first century. This already showcases the topicality and timeliness of the volume, which, other than a collection of individually intriguing treatments of various cultural products, might also serve as a semi-theoretical intervention into contemporary discussions of space, affect, and mobility.

From a theoretical-methodological point of view, this psycho-geographical approach is something that serves as an undercurrent in all the chapters, uniting them into a complex whole despite the varied subject matters of the individual chapters. It is notable that most, if not all, authors also focus on transgression in one way or another, whether it is border-crossing, breaching gender norms, or diverging from expected or normalised paths in urban settings, and that this transgression, in turn, is embedded in spatiality. As the editors also note, what all contributions are essentially interested in are “performative spatialities” that are created through an affective engagement with diverse geographies (10).

The first part, “Edgy Feelings: Translocality, Trauma, and Disengagement,” features three chapters, all focused on the ways in which trauma can be intertwined with spatial awareness and unanticipated, often uncomfortable feelings. Pieter Vermeulen reads two recent New York novels (Teju Cole’s *Open City* and Ben Lerner’s *10:04*) together and shows that beyond its mimetic potential of representing emotions, literature can also generate affect in surprising, and in the case of these two novels,

unexpectedly frustrating ways. Space and affect are drawn together as Vermeulen discusses the tension between fixity and flow, arguing that it is precisely in this porousness that new kinds of connections may be formed—in urban spaces or elsewhere. The same permeability is also reflected in Katalin Pálincás’s excellent contribution, which takes on Lisa Robertson’s *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*. Like Vermeulen, Pálincás also focuses on what is malleable, transient, and affectively potent in the city—such as surfaces, rather than monumental buildings—and shows how Robertson acts as both a Baudelairean *flâneur* and a Benjaminian archivist in the city of Vancouver. Perhaps the most surprising contribution in this part on edgy feelings is Miklós Takács’s treatment of the theatre performance *Sea Lavender, or the Euphoria of Being*, published in the volume in Zsófia O. Réti’s translation. Unlike literature and film, a theatre performance is ephemeral (all the more so since the irreplaceable main performer, Holocaust survival Éva Fahidi died in September 2023); thus, we may argue that recording an affect-focused interpretation of such a performance is a crucial gesture. Weaving together considerations on the genre of testimony and the peculiarities of a dance performance, Takács argues that it is precisely in the porous, in-between affective space of a theatre performance that uneasy—i.e. edgy—feelings can arise.

The second part, “East-Central Europe as a Translocal Space: Gendering a ‘Periphery,’” opts for a more unified geographic and thematic focus, and addresses questions of masculinity, femininity, and queerness in a Central-European (Hungarian) setting. The three chapters in this segment align with one another neatly so that the reader is given quite a comprehensive glimpse into the functioning of both socialist and post-socialist treatments of gender roles and expectations in film. What binds György Kalmár’s treatment of on-screen masculinities, Zsolt Györi’s engagement with socialist conceptualisations of motherhood in film, and Fanni Feldmann’s focus on queer urban spaces in Hungarian cinema together is perhaps the ritualistic nature of the spaces tackled in all three chapters. Kalmár focuses on “return films” (72) in post-1989 Eastern European cinema, narrowing the scope to what he labels as “retreat films” (73), where the male protagonists embark on “regressive journeys” (73) both in a spatial and a gendered sense. It is these physical returns with clear spatial trajectories that become ritualistic retreats when they acquire an affective dimension in the patriarchal (Hungarian) setting of the films. Similarly, Györi’s focus on one of the quintessential spatial-architectural symbols of state socialism—the high-rise block of flats—also highlights

the symbolic, ritualistic nature of these spaces: these flats were meant to function as idealised homes and great achievements of the socialist state. What Györi shows in his analysis of pre-1989 Hungarian films is that through ritualised and spatialised family practices and (unfulfilled) affective investment in these flats, it is the young mothers of the families who end up feeling circumscribed and who are eventually forced to retreat into a neurotic state. Interestingly, the last chapter in this part chooses to move out of small houses, apartments, and rooms to engage with more public spaces instead, while the author retains a similar interplay between ritual and retreat, adding a different affective dimension—belonging—as well. Feldmann contrasts mainstream Hungarian films that depict queer urban spaces as primarily places of hiding, where the dominant emotion is shame and where real connection is inhibited, with queer historiographic documentaries that highlight alternative subcultures, where real belonging becomes possible.

Parts 3–5 take a noticeable turn towards a more overt engagement with urban studies, treating the city as fertile ground for the formation of new urban subjectivities. The city, in its many forms, has been the object of non-ceasing fascination in literature and culture, and this is precisely the sentiment that Imola Bülgözdi’s chapter in part 3, “Translocality, Border Thinking, and Restlessness,” engages with. Reading Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*, a story of black Americans moving from the South to Harlem in the 1920s to immerse themselves in the captivating world of music and a bustling neighbourhood, Bülgözdi argues that the feeling of fascination is what primarily orders the lived experience of the new black urban translocal subject. This text is paired with Márta Kőrösi’s chapter on border thinking in Marjane Satrapi’s graphic novel *Persepolis*—an interpretation steeped in Walter Dignolo’s decolonial theory that advocates for alternative epistemologies through rethinking the fixity of borders. Kőrösi argues particularly convincingly that the graphic novel with its unique layout is especially apt to re-interrogate assumptions about knowledge and perception while engaging with spatiality in ways a literary text is not able to. In Kőrösi’s reading, a “border epistemology” (141–145) emerges in the gutter, the space between panels, and this epistemology can serve as a double critique of patriarchy in both of Marji’s homes, Tehran and Vienna. Part three of the volume, then, focuses on migratory, translocal subjects in the city, on the cusp of two cultures and two different affective dimensions, attempting to establish new ways of being and knowing.

The next part, “Translocality and Transgression,” combines readings of *Alice in Wonderland* and Nigerian-American author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*, both focusing on the affective psycho-geographies of their respective urban or urban-inspired locations. Through Carroll’s original tale and China Miéville’s urban fantasy adaptation, Anna Kérchy argues that space becomes an epistemologically and metaphysically important signifier, one that helps the protagonists of the novels discover new ways of emotionally relating to their surroundings. What is at the core of this chapter is the myriad ways in which aimless wandering (*dérive* in the Debordian sense), nomadic subjects (Braidotti), and new, unexpected becomings (Deleuze) can contribute to the dynamic, forever unfinished nature of space (Massey). Pairing this chapter with Jennifer Leetsch’s essay on urban topographies of love in Adichie’s *Americanah* is an interesting choice, but one that makes sense if we consider that this chapter similarly seems to tackle translocality and transgressing or even abandoning set paths—albeit in a lot less fantasy-like environment. Leetsch focuses on migrants and further complicates the notion of transnationalism—addressed by the editors in their “Introduction” as well—arguing that it is affect, specifically the love story at the heart of the novel, that facilitates the constant renegotiations of space. Much like Alice in Miéville’s adaptation, Marji in Satrapi’s graphic novel and Toni Morrison’s characters in *Jazz*, Ifemelu and Obinze also produce what Leetsch refers to as an “affective rewriting/re-inhabiting” (189) of their respective cities.

Part 5, similarly to part 2 on East-Central European gendered translocal spaces, is a thematically arranged block, focusing on crime fiction. “Criminal Affects: Crime and the City” includes two chapters on contemporary variations of the crime novel—closely linked since its conception to urban settings—with unusual and unexpected detectives, whose affective relation to the city space is anything but genre-conforming. Tamás Bényei reads Patrick Neate’s *City of Tiny Lights* as a post-9/11 noir where the multicultural and multi-ethnic city’s cartography disintegrates as it is slowly transformed into a war zone. This cityscape is dominated by fear, and Bényei argues that this crucial affect is testimony to much more than just the inevitable failure of the noir plot: it would seem that certain strategies of mapping urban spaces will simply prove inadequate in our post-9/11 reality. Just like (urban) crime, fear, and terror, these changes in apprehending and experiencing the city cannot be contained. Coupled with this chapter is Brigitta Hudácskó’s treatment of Katalin Baráth’s Hungarian middlebrow detective fiction where the figure

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of the detective is swapped from gritty masculine hero to Female Gentlemen, fashioned after Agatha Christie's Miss Marple. The similarly eccentric Veron Dávid undertakes numerous (urban) journeys all over the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy to map out and eventually to transgress social norms that would circumscribe her position and limit her ability to act as a detective. Although not spelled out explicitly in the chapter, Baráth's novels also tackle the affective and topographical experience of urban migrants, much like earlier chapters on Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and Adichie's *Americanah*.

Rather than being bound by mere thematic affinity, the editors opted to unveil more subtle connections between the individual chapters by arranging them into creatively envisioned larger blocks. These, in turn, reveal highly original engagements with space and affect, responding to humanities' need to make sense of current issues and debates happening around mobility and migrancy. This volume will be a treasure trove for academics, post- and undergraduate students on the prowl for cutting-edge considerations of the affective potentials of space and place as represented in cultural products. On another level, the volume also contributes to area studies in a significant way: researchers working on the cultural constructions of East-Central Europe should be able to find ample material discussing pre- and post-1989 Hungarian cultural products, interpretations of which are scantily available in English. Finally, to reiterate my initial enthusiasm, the volume may also be read as a collection of semi-theoretical engagements with space, affect, and mobility—and in this sense, a unique intervention into contemporary cultural discourses.

WORKS CITED

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