

PLACES AND SPACES IN CULTURE

What's the difference between "space" and a "place"? How do places and literature inform one another? **Prof. Elżbieta Rybicka** from the Department of Anthropology of Literature and Cultural Studies at Jagiellonian University discusses this and other issues.

What exactly is space in the cultural sense?

ELŻBIETA RYBICKA: When we talk about space in the humanities and social sciences, we typically highlight how they differ fundamentally from the exact sciences. Recent decades have witnessed a "spatial turn" in this respect: in short, this means increased interest in space as a leading category in various disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies. Consequently, the understanding of space has changed, so it is worth rephrasing this question as: "How does space work?"

Space is not a neutral and transparent box or container, unlike what we earlier sometimes thought. Cur-

rently, emphasis is placed on such characteristics of space as its relationality, so it is more likely to be defined as a specific field of interaction between human and non-human factors. Space is produced by society and therefore reliant on historically and culturally changing conditions, on the practices we perform in it, on the meanings we ascribe to it. But it is also worth noting another side of this interaction process. Space, along with its openness, closedness, and boundaries, determines our actions and possible activities.

So in what ways are spaces different from places?



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As the humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has suggested, a place is a space seen from the perspective of experience. This means that we are not talking about a neutral location on a coordinate grid, a point isolated from a broader field. Human experience introduces an individual, subjective perspective into the definition of a place, thus opening it up to perception, psychosomatic sensations, meanings and emotions, recollections and imagination. However, this does not exclude the materiality of place. After all, these tangible aspects generate such intangible qualities of places as their atmosphere, their mood or *genius loci*, and their local distinctiveness. All these qualities, which

emerge in relations with places, enable the creation of the uniqueness of a particular location and individual and collective identities.

Does this mean that the differences between spaces and places are blurred?

It is more a matter of scale. When we talk about space, we are more likely to use different words, more abstract ones. We focus on general regularities, such concepts as horizontal and vertical axes, the differences between the top and the bottom, the back and the front, closedness and openness, the private and the public, the centers and the peripheries. Places, in

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turn, trigger the emotionally tinted language of proximity, sometimes even intimacy. That said, I must say straight away that we can talk about a wide variety of emotions, both topophilia, or a strong attachment to a place, even love, and topophobia, or feelings of a negative nature, fear or anxiety evoked by certain places.

In Polish, the difference between a space and a place becomes visible in the etymology of these two words. The historical semantics of the Polish language shows that the word *przestrzeń* (space) implies largeness. Samuel Bogumił Linde's dictionary from the early 19th century still notes the word *przestrzeństwo*, which denoted a wide, vast area. In turn, the etymology of the equivalents of the word

miejsce "place" in Slavic (and other) languages links it to residing, inhabiting.

How does this understanding differ depending on the culture and language?

When we think about the relationship between space on the one hand and culture and language on the other, we risk adopting a radical version of social constructivism. This approach assumes that objective observations of reality are impossible because we all see the world around us through the prism of our own culture. The starting point here is provided by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which holds that language shapes the perception of the world and the interpretive frameworks of specific communities. This has been a dominant view, one that is essentially impossible to refute. There is no denying the fact that Eastern vs. Western cultures perceive space differently, and so do Northern vs. Southern ones. However, for the sake of balance, questions are now being asked about how the tangible aspects of space influence cultures, shape the horizon of ideas, the linguistic image of the world. It is evident that every culture develops within certain territories. But it is equally obvious that certain landscapes and landforms, such as rivers and seas, have allowed civilizations to develop in specific ways. We are increasingly aware of climate factors, which either stimulated the development of local cultures in a given place or led to their degradation as a result of disasters. For reasons related to the possibility of these different approaches, we should consider both sides of this process and see them as shaping one another and as mutually causative: places inform cultures, and cultures inform places.

What does the discipline of geopoetics deal with? Can we say that it acts as a bridge between the literary fiction and the empirical reality?

Geopoetics as a research orientation focuses on the analysis of the interactions between space in the geographic sense and works of literature. However, it is worth specifying that it focuses its interests not only on literary texts, but also on cultural practices inspired by readings. Examples include travel inspired by books, city games inspired by literature, the creation of maps, routes, and literary guides, the introduction of various forms of literature into public spaces in cities. Unlike traditional literary research, which is intra-textual and focused on the fictional worlds depicted in texts, geopoetics also takes into account what goes beyond the text itself through writing, reading, and traveling. In this way, it allows us to see how literary texts influence the cognitive maps of specific places or imagined geographies, or cultural representations of space, and permeate into the empirical reality. Thus, geopoetics asks questions about what literature does with geographically understood places, how it trans-



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Elżbieta Rybicka, PhD, DSc

is an Associate Professor at the Jagiellonian University. She works in the Department of Anthropology of Literature and Cultural Studies, Jagiellonian University. Her research work deals with geopoetics, urban culture, and local and regional research. She has authored numerous books. She is a recipient of the Aleksander Brückner Award, granted to her by the Polish Academy of Sciences for her book *Geopoetyka – Przestrzeń i miejsce we współczesnych teoriach i praktykach literackich* [Geopoetics: Spaces and Places in Contemporary Literary Theories and Practices] (Kraków 2014).

elzbieta.rybicka@uj.edu.pl

forms them and translates them into its own specific language. It also reflects on how places can influence literary creativity.

How does geopoetics work in practice?

Let us take a topical example: the latest novel by Nobel-winning Polish author Olga Tokarczuk, *Empuzjon*, was published on 1 June 2022. It is set in 1913 in the German spa town of Görbersdorf, today's Sokołowsko outside Walbrzych. Several days after the book's launch, the media published the first accounts of expeditions inspired by *Empuzjon*. The novel allows its readers to discover the complicated history of Lower Silesia because we recognize traces of the past in space, as historians suggest.

There are many examples. Literature uncovers places, spaces, and landscapes for readers. Examples include La Mancha from Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, the Lake District, discovered by the English Romantic poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Walden Pond in America, known from the book *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* by Henry David Thoreau.

Obviously, the process of discovering does not just involve putting new locations on the map. The belief that literary texts contribute to the generation of the meaning of places in the broad cognitive and emotional sense is shared not only by literary or cultural scholars, but also by geographers. Literature awakens our desire to verify things with our own eyes, fosters geographic imagination, and sharpens perceptual sensitivity to places. In *Empuzjon*, Olga Tokarczuk writes about "viewing things penetratingly" (*patrzenie przezierne*), looking in a way that goes beyond focusing on pretty vistas and trying to see what is hidden under the surface layer of the image, or what has been repressed. Perhaps the readers of the novel will take cue from the author and look at Sokołowsko not only superficially, as a new tourist attraction, but also "penetratingly."

Other areas of research in geopoetics research include the bond-forming functions of literature. This involves stimulating the sense of belonging or emotional attachment to a specific place. Literature has taken on a role that involves creating foundational narratives from anonymous vernacular stories, folk legends about specific places, forests, rock formations, lakes, and rivers.

What are its related disciplines?

To answer this question, let us get back to the "spatial turn" that I mentioned at the beginning of our conversation. It has led to the emergence of new problem fields and even new orientations within individual disciplines. These fields and orientations include the psychology of place, the anthropology of place and space, the pedagogy of place (Maria Mendel's research



into the role of the place in the education process), memory studies focused on places and landscapes, geohistory, geohumanities, and geoculturology. This list is, of course, longer.

Obviously, all these fields differ in terms of the specific characteristics of their parent disciplines, their research languages, and their methodologies. What they have in common, however, is the awareness that spatial location plays a key role for both the topic being studied and the position of the researcher.

By definition, these fields are interdisciplinary. What difficulties does this approach pose?

Spaces, places, and landscapes rank among what are called travelling concepts. As Dutch cultural studies scholar Mieke Bal observes, they circulate between various disciplines and research environments, and their mobility depends on historical and geographical factors. Their meanings vary depending on the discipline. However, comparing the changing semantics of concepts in various areas can be revealing and stimulating, and can foster the scientific imagination. I see cultural geography as an extremely inspiring research trend. It reacts quickly to changes in socio-cultural reality, but it remains attached to the tangible aspects of spaces and places. So I would say that the difficulty lies in the absence of sensitivity to differences between languages and research traditions – when we attempt to transfer these differences to the field we study, we must translate them into the respective language.

A view of the ruins of the sanatorium and spa in Sokołowsko, which figure in the latest novel by Nobel-winning Polish author Olga Tokarczuk, *Empuzjon* (photo taken 18 September 2021)

INTERVIEW BY JUSTYNA ORŁOWSKA, PHD