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The power of narratives about ambiances in the construction of territorialities and identities

Images of the Jewish life in Bashev Singer's work

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Abstract. *The aim of the current study is to reason about the capacity of ambiances to build symbolic cultural identity territories. The study is illustrated by literary texts about Jewish ambiances and has the aim to show that, by evoking the wanders about sensitive ambiances, it is possible seeing the emergence of a sense of cultural identification through empathy.*

Keywords: *ambiance, space and place, Jewish identity*

Introduction

The experience of living in a globalised world often provides the feeling of being immerse in an accelerated 'cultural homogenisation' process. The standardising influences reach not just the social life, but they are progressively focusing on the lived and built spaces. Hotel, food and cinema chains, among others, proliferate around the globe and they end up culturally nearing the continents, fact that makes us experience a sense of commonplace wherever we go to.

However, a more careful sight will show the existence of a 'cultural resistance'¹ that locally neutralises the globalising influences; and it enriches the experiences lived in each place, as well as creates territories that go beyond the physical limits.

We believe that such cultural identities reflect on the ambiances where these groups live in. The literature is full of examples of it. Many times, when we read the description of an ambiance in a novel, we are immediately imaginarily transported to it, and we feel surrounded by an atmosphere that gives us the exact feeling of living in a specific place, of cultural identification with a certain group in contrast with the current 'globalised' places.

The aim of the current article is to reason about these cultural identities through the description of ambiances in literary texts. We bring up the case study of ambiances from the Jewish culture through the reading of excerpts from Bashev Singer's work. As far as we understand, the author is able to take us back in time, to a moment when the identity, not just the Jewish identity, was set according to strict bases, and

1. Resistance is herein understood as the act of keeping latent a cultural identity that is necessary to differentiate the individual or to identify him/her with a bigger "community". See HALL, Stuart, 1996

it consolidates a central core that will remain throughout time within the Jewish culture imaginary.

Background

Understanding Space, Place and Territory

According to Tuan (1983), what we understand as a space without definition may end up becoming the Place, as long as it is acknowledged as so by us, and as we give values and meanings to it. The process of giving a meaning and identifying the spaces takes place through individual and intuitive experiences², so that the subject and the space have a symbiotic relation.

Castells (1999) presents space in the Sociology as 'a material support for time sharing social practices' (1999, p.500), which makes social life and space inseparable. However, if we look at the concept through the urban geography, Milton Santos (1988) talks about a relational space, which is constituted by 'an inseparable set, on the one hand, by certain arrangement of geographic objects, natural objects and social objects; and, on the other hand, by the life that fulfils and boosts them, when society is in movement' (1988, p.10). Accordingly, we understand that Santos set his concept of space by gathering the experimental perspective and the social theory highlighted by the aforementioned authors. Space, according to Santos, is constituted by the individual vs. space relations, as well as by the individual vs. individual relations. This is our way to understand space, which is, at the same time, sensible, relational, and intermediated by the objects found in it.

Therefore, if we understand the Place as a space that gains meaning through the lived experiences, as well as through the social actions found in it, the territories will be constituted by the cultural values in these sites. Thus, the space fractions reflect and create a cultural order.

Regarding the herein studies about 'Jewish territory', we are interested in the imaginary dimension that breaks the physical barriers, crosses continents and raises the sense of belonging to a common cultural territoriality in small fractions of territories spread on the globe.

The power of Ambiances

As we have seen above, the places and territories are constituted and characterised by the meanings attributed to them. These meanings may be intuitively or intentionally set³. If we accept that such meanings are set based on the subjectivities of each cultural group, we can understand that each one of these groups will have its own 'identification place' or we can understand what this 'belonging place' is. According to Stock (2006), the identification places are set based on the 'practice of

2. We herein refer to the sensitive intuition defined by Kant "Sensitive is the intuition of every finite thinking being the object is given to: it is, therefore, passivity, affection" (apud Abbagnano, 1998). Intuition "can be attributed to man and experience can be considered as the knowledge of an object, being, in this sense, perception." (1998 p.582)

3. As intentional, we herein refer to meanings mediated by culture, wherein we understand culture as approached by White (2009), to whom the ability to "simbologize" involves the ability to create, assign, and understand meanings.

the places'⁴. Each individual (or group of individuals) based on his/her own experiences, culture, rituals and daily actions acts in places in a specific way, and creates links with these fractions of territory, as well as builds them as 'identification places'. We believe that this site is where one finds the importance and power of the ambiances in the construction of these territories and identities.

If ambiances are constituted by the complex look over the space that searches for the sensible and dynamic dimensions of the ambiances themselves, they also embody the dynamics of individuals; we believe that the 'practices of places' are incorporated to the ambiances. If, according to Stock, the 'practice of places' creates links and built identification places, we state that the ambiances involving these places and their practices reinforce and set these links. Thus, ambiances are actually set as a connector between the individual and the identification place. They are built based on these practices of place and, at the same time, are the essential support to them. We believe that we cannot talk about the 'practices of place' without understanding the ambiance that builds them or that is built by them and, thus, we are sure that ambiances, more than the actions in their spatial supports, will play a fundamental role in the construction of identities, identification places and territories.

The Jewish identity and its identification places

The understanding of the 'Jewish identity' underwent changes throughout time and presented many facets. We made the option to understand the current concept of Jewish identity in our research as a mediated crossed identity constituted by fragments. According to Sorj (2004 p.5), modernity has pluralised Judaism. However, in the present article, we will pursue the representation of the Jewish identity in traditional communities that present themselves from a central core, which tends to last in the construction of a Jewish culture imaginary throughout time.

Accordingly, the aim in the current article is not to present the representative-ambiance that builds the Jewish territory or reinforces the Jewish identity. We search the features that last in the 'Jewish place' imaginary though these representations based on its symbolism, thus building an immaterial territory that connects individuals around the globe throughout time.

Narratives about cultural ambiances and a sensible reading

The literature scholar Gumbrecht (2014) advocates that literary texts must be read based on a sensorial experience _ 'reading through Stigmung'. According to him, the process of reading through this principle has the capacity to take the reader to the ambiance of another place.

Our article is supported by this sense of sensible reading; thus, it is through the reading of excerpts from Bashev Singer's work that we are thrown to the sensorial ambiance, whose spatial experience will be imagined rather than actually lived. According to Tuan, in order to experience a place, 'A story, a descriptive excerpt or the picture of a book is enough.' (Tuan, 1983. p.204)

4. We use the French term used by Stock, "pratiques des lieux", which refers to the uses and ways of using the spaces. See: STOCK, Mathis (2006).

Thus, our readings assume an imaginary experience of ambiances that trigger in the reader the understanding about the Jewish experiences in other places, the understanding about what these identification places of the Jewish individual are; these practices and meanings create a strong symbolic territory that brings up the Jewish people's sense of cohesion.

Pictures of the Jewish life

Bashev Singer is a Polish Jewish writer who lived most of his childhood in a Hassidic community⁵ in Warsaw. Years later, already as a writer, he migrated to the United States and kept on writing in Yiddish⁶. Shtetl⁷ is often the scenario of his tales, which are full of references to the Jewish folklore. It is possible living in a place where we breathe Judaism through Bashev Singer's tales. We will cite three excerpts in which the symbolism found in the Jewish life in the pre-war Europe delimits the symbolic Jewish territory that remains acknowledged. We will see through these excerpts that the rituals – be them current or eventual – are influenced by the temporality, the spatiality and the sensorial memory. In other words: the ambiances meet the Jewish practices in the places.

The first excerpt is a sensorial reference to a place of affection:

'The snow was so high that we could hardly see the edge of the hoofs, it was as if the whole village was immersed in white. The sky, which was low and cloudy all day long, was now getting clear. The full moon was watching the world through the clouds, shining an almost daylight over the clouds. On the west, the clouds were still waiting for a sparkle of sunset. The stars in this Friday seemed bigger and clearer, and some miracle made it look like Lapschitz had joined the sky. The Shmul-Leibele cottage, which was located not far from the synagogue, was now hung in the space [...]. He cleaned his feet on the doorway to take off the snow, then, he opened the door and saw Shoshe. The living room made him think of haven. The oven had just been painted, the candles on the brass candlesticks spread a Sabbath glare. The smells coming from the sealed oven mixed with the smell of the Sabbath dinner...' (Singer, 2004 pp.232-233).

We see, in this excerpt, the ambiance built within an atmosphere of haven and dream. The surroundings are involved in white in a way to gather the sky and the earth. The night light of the moon and the stars brings the mystic air that makes the reader agree with the preciseness of the word 'miracle'. Within this almost surreal atmosphere, there is also human life and heat, which are represented by the oven and by the lighted candles on the candlesticks. The situation in the cottage close to the synagogue leads to the sense of divine protection, which is crowned by sacred dinner smells.

5. The Hassidic Judaism is an orthodox Jewish movement that popularized the Jewish mysticism as the main aspect of Judaism.

6. Dialect spoken and written by Ashkenazic Jewish in Eastern Europe.

7. Yiddish word to denote little villages holding a mostly Jewish population in Eastern Europe.

Accordingly, he goes on in the second excerpt:

'The nights were warm, the sky was clear, although the Feast of Tabernacles was already over. The stars seem extraordinarily big. Even the birds were awake and sung as if it was midsummer. The Krakow's stranger had rented the best room in the inn, and his dinner was grilled duck, marzipan and braided bread. A certain night, after dinner, the doctor from Krakow entered the great public hall where the most inquisitorial citizens used to gather some nights...' (Singer, 2004 p.33)

We herein see that the reference to a specific ceremony, the 'Feast of the Tabernacle', works as a time orientation that marks a certain time of the year. It is associated with sound and luminosity sensations. We can also smell the bread and the marzipan, as well as feel the heat of the summer night.

As for the third excerpt, we see that the specificity is built within the Jewish territory from daily rituals, or from places of ritual practices.

'From the window, Abba could see the whole town down the hill and a considerable distance beyond it, up to the road to Bilgoray and the pine forest. She observed the groups of matrons who used to gather in the butcher cottages every morning and the boys and vagabonds who would come and go through the patio in the synagogue; the girls used to go to the pump to get water to the tea, and the women would run in the evening to the bath ritual.' (Singer, 2004 p.60).

Within this excerpt, the ordinary and daily actions feature a noisy and dynamic ambience, which is composed of people who live their lives. Thus, while the matrons trade with the vendors, the boys go the synagogue service, or at least they are in the community place and the women rush in order not to lose the bath ritual. This movement marks the Jewish spaces in a very specific way. We find out that in that patio space there are butchers and tents, boys in their move through the patio, or that the bath ritual place is somehow away from the women who rush around.

Final considerations

We saw that the literary excerpts can depict the Jewish practices in the places through the description of ambiances and through their sensible, cultural and memorial features. Thus, the literature takes the representation of a symbolic, imagined and featured territory, which was featured by the Jewish culture to the reader.

We also saw that the Jewish territory is marked by a temporality, a spatiality and by a sensoriality characteristic that we believe are found in the contemporary symbolic Jewish territory, even when the community lives under a little stable and fragmented identity. According to Amos Oz (2015), in order to draw a Jewish continuum, 'it is not necessary to be an observant Jew. It is not necessary to be a Jew. Or, with this regard, to be anti-Semitic. One just has to be a reader.' (2015, p.16).

Thus, we understand that the cultural territoriality and identity can be understood – and even felt – from the ambiances described by the literature.

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