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The Spaces of *The Fall of the House of Usher*: from Poe's Short Story to Švankmajer's Short Film

SYNOPSIS: *The aim of this work is to follow the transposition of space from literary to the video medium – from Poe's story to the Švankmajer's film – especially because in both cases, the space plays an essential role in creating the identity of characters and in exteriorization of their inner selves, but also because Švankmajer uses Poe's story to make explicit his own poetic principles.*

KEYWORDS: *space, transposition, literature and film, protagonist, narrator, Edgar Allan Poe, Jan Švankmajer, psychoanalysis, radicalization of space*

KLJUČNE BESEDE: *prostor, transpozicija, literatura in film, protagonist, pripovedovalec, Edgar Allan Poe, Jan Švankmajer, psihoanaliza, radikalizacija prostora*

POVZETEK: *Prvi del članka zajema kratko analizo uporabe prostora v kratki zgodbi Edgarja Allana Poeja "Propad hiše Usher". Romantično pripovedništvo (kamor spada tudi Poe) prostor uporablja kot upodobitev in hkrati simbol dialektike med notranjostjo (duša, jaz) in zunanostjo (narava). Obravnavane bodo najbolj vplivne interpretacije tega problema; predvsem psihoanalitične, vključno s Freudom, Marie Bonaparte, Leom Spitzerjem, Renato R. Mautner Wasserman in drugimi, relevantnimi tudi za interpretacijo istoimenskega črno-belega kratkega filma iz leta 1982 izpod rok češkega režiserja Jana Švankmajerja. Namen članka je slediti transpoziciji prostora iz literarnega v filmski medij, saj v obeh primerih prostor igra ključno vlogo pri ustvarjanju identitete likov skozi 'pozunanjenost' njihovih notranjih jazov, pomembno pa je tudi dejstvo, da Švankmajer Poejevo zgodbo uporabi za prikaz lastnih poetičnih principov. Podrobna analiza omenjenega filma bo pokazala, kako dobesedni navedki Poejeve zgodbe dobijo nove pomene v procesu vizualizacije, saj Švankmajer popolnoma radikalizira uporabo prostora: najprej eliminira protagoniste kot fizično prisotna bitja ter jih reducira na njihov odnos s prostorom, s katerim so povezani, ohrani pa le glas pripovedovalca Poejeve zgodbe. Tako aktualizira potencial prej omenjenih interpretacij, ki so revitalizirale pomen tako Madeline kot hiše Usher same ter poudarile njuno pomembnost. Hkrati pa film pokaže tudi to, kako prostor v literaturi, če je uporabljen na določen način (v povezavi s Švan-*

kmajerjevo tehniko) in v določenem kontekstu (komunistična Češkoslovaška v 80-ih letih dvajsetega stoletja) lahko postane družbeno učinkovit. Drugi cilj pričujočega članka je torej pokazati, kako literatura v prostoru lahko pridobi subverzivni potencial.

When speaking of Edgar Allan Poe, one must at the same time speak of the space. Just like German romantic writers or writers of gothic fiction, Poe focuses on the dialectics between inside and outside: the self (or soul) widens through the whole outside world and the space in turn represents its structural forming. Moreover, there is no other way for it to be fully symbolized or represented. Poe is undoubtedly widely famous for the specificity of his own use of space but, as Leo Spitzer remarks, "we cannot understand the achievement of Poe unless we place his concept of 'atmosphere' within the framework of ideas concerning *milieu* and *ambiance* which were being formulated at his time" (*n. pag.*). For this author, as Spitzer properly claims, "the atmosphere is a sensuously (optically) perceptible manifestation of the sum total of the physical, mental and moral features of a particular environment and of the interaction between these features" (*n. pag.*). Spitzer goes as far as to claim that one of the most famous and possibly the most typical Poe's short story, "The Fall of the House of Usher", actually appears to us as "a poetic expression of sociological-deterministic ideas which were in the air in 1839, the date when Poe wrote this story" (*n. pag.*).

On the other hand, when interpreting the problems of space in Poe's stories, Gerhard Hoffmann insists on the importance of the Christian heritage modified by the special spiritual conditions in New England, detecting at the same time the process of secularization which was happening in the middle of the 19th century and which manifested itself in such a way that stress was no longer placed on analogies between God and nature, but on those between nature and man instead (Hoffmann 2). Hoffmann claims that in Poe's stories "inner conflicts are transferred to space and objects, become embodied within them; at the same time, these conflicts in turn are determined by these spaces" (*ibid.* 2). What is important is that it is never a one-sided causal dependence. According to that, this author speaks of a mood-invested space, "which is experienced through the mutual relationship of space and observer, a space with the atmospheric qualities of the unexpected, the inexplicable, the *uncanny*" (*ibid.* 3, emphasis added).

The concept of the uncanny or of *Das Unheimliche*, as formulated by Sigmund Freud, is an undoubtedly an efficient way of deconstructing the construction of space in romantic fiction and, in the first place, of the effects which that space produces. According to Schelling, "Uncanny is what one calls everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open" (Freud 132). When he himself speaks of *Das Unheimliche*, Freud gives an example which is rather interesting and important for

the interpretation of "The Fall of the House of Usher":

- The Zecks (a family name, authors' comment) are all heimlich.
- Heimlich? What do you mean by heimlich?
- Well, I have the same impression with them as I have with a buried spring or a dried-up pond. You can't walk over them without constantly feeling that water might reappear.
- We call that unheimlich, you call it heimlich. So, what makes you think there is something hidden and unreliable about the family? (Freud 129)

If we now, on the one side, accept the Freud's concept of *Das Unheimliche* and, on the other side, remember the famous Walter Benjamin's claim that "it is through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis" (Benjamin 37), it becomes clear that one of the most interesting and the most efficient ways of interpreting Poe's short stories is a comparative analysis of them and their ecranisations. It's one of the reasons for which it is worth to focus on the Jan Švankmajer's adaptation of "The Fall of the House of Usher", the story which is, as we earlier said, often considered the most representative Poe's short story⁵⁰ and which has been the object of numerous and often totally contrary interpretations so far.

In his adaptation of this story the famous Czech director Jan Švankmajer emphasizes some of the aspects of the story, primarily (but not only) those highlighted by the supporters of the psychoanalytical approach. As Spitzer suggests, for a long time this story has been read only as "a story of Roderick Usher" but, far from being only that, it is, "as the title indicates, that of the house of Usher" (*n. pag.*). According to that, the role of Madeline Usher, Roderick's sister, becomes much more important. In other words: "although Roderick is portrayed as the principal actor in the story and Madeline as a shadow, glimpsed passing with 'retreating steps' only once before her death, Madeline is still a deuteragonist in her own peculiar right, on the same level with her brother" (Spitzer *n. pag.*). Švankmajer undoubtedly recognizes and emphasizes the importance of Madeline Usher. His adaptation makes many psychoanalytical interpretations of a brother's and sister's incestuous relationship rather plausible and adequate, even the most radical ones such as John L. Marsh's, who claims that Roderick actually rapes Madeline's dead body (8-9).

However, these interpretative possibilities are not the most important or the most interesting aspect of the Švankmajer's adaptation. This direc-

⁵⁰ See for instance: "'The Fall of the House of Usher'" suggests itself as the subject of the following investigation, for it is a 'typical' Poe short story in which the most important characteristic of his tales, the combination of extreme intellectual and spiritual conditions with a suggestively mood-invested space, is especially clear and pronounced" (Hoffmann 3).

tor at the same time uses the Poe's story to make his own poetic principles explicit and understandable. Just like Roderick Usher, the protagonist of the story, Švankmajer also believes in "the sentience of all vegetable things" (Poe 15). Even E. A. Poe himself, as Hoffmann properly notices, in his later work "sets down the theory of his cosmological concept of the unity of a universe which involves no qualitative distinction between animate and inanimate" (3). Poe thought that the most important means of illustrating that idea was the specific tone, but Švankmajer found maybe even more efficient means, the animation – in Terrence Rafferty's words "literally breathing life into the lifeless" (White, Emmet Winn *n. pag.*).

Švankmajer, more precisely, believes that things which are usually considered dead are actually more alive than the people who sometimes even create them: they absorb events which they witness and carry memories of them within themselves. In this belief we can find an echo of a famous thought of Freud that non-organic comes before organic and that all things long to go back to their natural state, i.e. that the aim of every life is death. Besides that, one could also call to mind the Husserl's appeal to "return to the things themselves"; it is also interesting to notice that the surrealist poetics used by Švankmajer is close to phenomenology: both of them consider the critics of rationalism and the investigation of prereflexive experience (Motycka Weston 3).

Švankmajer is radical in his attempt to let the things speak for themselves, so his film does not include the actors as typical representatives of characters: all that is left in the film are objects themselves and bare space, and the whole dramatization is up to them. Objects are embodiments of the people, which is the way by which Švankmajer suggests their similitude and likeness – it is possible for the objects to represent, i. e. to stand for and instead of people, only because people can be seen as mere objects. The only living, that is „normally“ living creature in the film is a raven, which appears only at its very beginning and its very end. The raven is an obvious allusion to Poe's most famous – or at least in the popular culture most mentioned – poem of the same name, in which the line NEVERMORE is constantly repeated. At the end of the film, one must acknowledge that this refrainical anticipation of the disaster from *The Raven* has been completely realized. Also, some kind of the „remains of the human“, so to call it, can be seen during the frames of the stylization of the clay, when the song *Haunted Palace* is heard – these are, namely, Švankmajer's own hands. And again, only the traces of the hands – and not the hands themselves – can be spotted; only the consequences of the delicate and detailed work of these hands are given in the film, but not the material presence of the hands. In Derridean terms, we are dealing here only with (deconstructing) traces and not with the (logocentric) sources.

There is in the film, however, something else which could be designated as „human, all too human“ – it is, of course, the voice of the narrator. Although in most interpretations of Švankmajer's film, it is the importance of the tactility which is usually emphasized³¹, the situation here, we think, is more complex than this, precisely because of this presence of the narrator's voice. We could actually invert the mainstream thesis of the film's interpretations and assert, insisting not upon the materiality of the space but on the spirituality of its (filmic) emergence, that it is, on the contrary, this unembodied-but-all-present voice which can be seen as the creator of the film's world. This could be named as „the creating according to voice“, just as it is represented in its most famous version, namely, in the *Gospel of John*, which begins with an even more famous passage: In the beginning was the Word. Or, in Švankmajer's ecranization: In the beginning was the Word of the narrator. The spatial, material world emerges just as it has been named, it shows up after it has been summoned by the Word. Of course, this is not to claim that Švankmajer was a Christian believer or that he affirmed something *per se* Christian in this film, which we find of no importance at all; we just think of this biblical example as a possible counter-post to the aforementioned interpretations. Continuing on this line of thought, the significance of the narrator can also be acknowledged if we consider his influence on the total atmosphere of the story. It is precisely the tone of his voice which brings the recipients deeper into the film's atmosphere of the *Das Unheimliche* and of its fear and horror. It should be noted here that Švankmajer used only those passages from the Poe's story – in which the narrator speaks of his first, usually terrifying impressions – and left out the ones in which this frightening experience has been rationalized and explained in some type of essayistic discourse. The narrator's position in the film is not so marginal as it may seem on the first hand.

The main function of the narrator is, as Spitzer pointed out, mediation, „not that of interpreting Roderick to us, of making us 'take him seriously as a real human being', but of serving to objectify the fears harboured by Roderick“ (*n. pag.*). He is the sole connection between the house of Usher and the rest of the world, and he is the connection which fails in the end because he does not manage to bring closer the Ushers and world. These assertions were made by Renata Meutner Wasserman, who gave a very inspiring and illuminating reading of the story which was based on the considerations of the diverse spatial relations. Švankmajer's film could even better validate her interpretation. Namely, she understands the death and the destruction in Poe's narrative as a consequence of the Ushers' inability to enter into a true relationship with the Other, whoever and whatever that Other may be:

³¹ See for instance: Motycka Weston; White and Emmet Winn.

“By refusing to enter into relations of exchange and reciprocity with the world of others (or by being incapable of such exchange), by engaging only in pseudo-exchange with mirror-images the Ushers have attempted to escape the process of resolution of the opposition between self and others: they have interrupted the chain of obligations that binds men among themselves and transgressed the rule that defines them as human and, incidentally, guarantees their survival. The end result is not, as Usher thinks, a humanization of nature, but the destruction of culture” (35).

There are many examples. Roderick Usher is surrounded only by the pseudo-others, who are just his mirror images. The house of Usher is completely isolated and hardly accessible. The tarn surrounds the house; the tarn is, it must be emphasized, the type of the static water which has no relations with other waters: “a small mountain lake, having no significant tributaries, that is, a body of water that does not participate in the exchange of waters and keeps itself to itself” (Mautner Wasserman 34). Roderick’s art is hermetical and hard to understand for anyone but him: it is as if this art serves only to its creators purposes, without any possible communication to the others. In this variously represented and manifested isolation, the incest comes as a logical stage. By referring to Claude Levi-Strauss, Renata Mautner Wasserman reminds us that the incest-taboo is at the very centre of the emergence of culture, because this taboo is in fact the interdict of the self-isolation. The Ushers are, from this point of view, some kind of a pre-cultural beings, and so are actually in a deeper and closer relationship with the nature – which destroys them as it destroys (but also recreates) itself all the time – than with the other people. Švankmajer makes explicitly clear that the house starts to destroy itself by the act of throwing out one stone into its mirror reflection in the tarn. The last scene stands as a peculiar parallel to this one, especially in regard to its structure, only this time it is about Roderick who hugs Madeline, his mirror reflection, just before both of them die. „The absolute refusal to enter into relations with the Other is death” (Mautner Wasserman 33).

In fact, it can be said that Madeline has a deeper relationship with space than Roderick, even though he is often regarded as a main character of the story. Moreover, as we already said, rarely is Madeline’s role in the plot seen as anything more than superfluous and in the foreground are usually the narrator, Roderick or the house itself. Nevertheless, we would like to follow Spitzer and emphasize her importance in the development of the narrative, which can and should be, above all, considered in regard to spatial relations. Madeline dies somewhere at the half of the course of the story, but after her death, Švankmajer deliberately makes her even more living than before: in the film, she continues to live in the very walls of the house and in its surrounding nature. Her skull shows up in one moment on

the wall – which results in its slow destroying – and the nature inscribes her name on the room floor with the leaves: both signs function as a warning of Roderick's approaching death, which she is likely to cause. However, the most important of Madeline's spatial representation can be seen at the end of the film, in the scene of Roderick's death. Roderick, who throughout the film is represented by the chair, is placed in front of the door and when they are open – when dead Madeline as a haunting ghost appears – we see on the other side of the threshold the absolute whiteness/bleakness, or to put it differently, the absolute emptiness. We can relate the first fissure, mentioned at the very beginning of the film by the narrator, with Madeline and her spatial status: as her death approaches, the fissure becomes larger and in the end the whole house falls apart – it collapses into itself. We can conclude that „Madeline is the true male and last hero of the House of Usher, while her brother has in the end become a figure of passivity whose body is reduced to a trembling mass“ (Spitzer *n. pag.*).

We would like to finish with some reflexions on Švankmajer's art in space, that is, in concrete historical conditions under which he worked and created. The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was in conflict with him because of his critique of totalitarian power throughout his work. They censored him during the 1980's and allowed him to dramatize only the classics of literature, thinking that the classics do not have any subversive potential³². But, as Harold Bloom remarked, it is precisely the canonical work which could never become fully assimilated and known, and for that reason, it will always remain strange and disturbing. After posing the question "What makes the author and the works canonical?", Bloom concludes: "the answer, more often than not, has turned out to be strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange" (Bloom 3). However, Švankmajer played them on this and he ironically used this „opportunity“ and, despite the imposed censorship, managed to criticize the communist regime of his time, although he did it implicitly. We can associate the atmosphere in the house with the paranoid ambient in the rigid state regime which is closed in itself, where the inner and the outer – or: the citizen and the state – constantly produce fear and paranoia to terrify each other. Švankmajer's art, based on the surrealist *procédées*, „a cultural performance that questions the effect of totalitarian ideology“ (White, Emmett Win *n. pag.*), actually became a

³² See also: "Ironically enough, the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia was itself responsible, in part, for Švankmajer's decision to adapt Poe's short stories. During the 1980s, the animator was allowed to make only films adapted from 'literary classics,' only a bureaucrat could believe that literary classics could be 'nothing but 'safe,' as was proven in these two works (and, in fact, *The Pendulum*, *the Pit and Hope* was censored and led to Švankmajer being blacklisted)" (White, Emmett Winn *n. pag.*).

crack, a rupture, a fissure in the allegedly indestructible and unchangeable state organization – and so it became a crack of freedom.

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