

Public Space and Cultural Inheritance. Case Study: *Arizona*

-Summary of the PhD dissertation-

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My aim in this thesis is to understand the role of a social space – the cafe – by taking as a starting point the narratives of those who use it. I begun my research taking a concrete case as my starting point, the coffee house that I chose (or that chose me) having functioned in the town of Cluj-Napoca from the '60s until 2011. Its unofficial name was Arizona.

I chose to study a micro social phenomenon, through a qualitative undertaking, my main goal being to gather life stories from the members of an informal community, that took it's shape by attending a certain coffee house, that until recently had functioned as a literary cafe. These turned out to be stories about their shared experience in a public space the belonged to Cluj-Napoca. These life stories have an intrinsic value as primary recourses for further research. Through them we gain access to a small part of Romania's history, narrated by those who lived through it.

This thesis can be seen as part of the larger field of memory studies, the narratives that I gathered certify the importance of space and of the town's symbolic places in continuing a landmark not only for individual memory, but for social memory as well. The common usage of a certain space does not lead only to the construction/reinvention of that space, but also to the construction of shared memories. And these memories also play a part in the re-constructions of space.

The research that I conducted is also one of urban anthropology. In the narratives I gathered, one can easily observe the way in witch the state uses public space for the purpose of population control. Also, what become visible are the ways in witch public space is re-appropriated despite repression, in the communist period. As for the post communist period, what is highlighted in these narratives is the issue of the lack of interest in certain urban places and their symbolic meaning. This is seen as posing the

risk of losing certain local urban symbols that might contribute to the town's cultural identity.

This research might also be useful for the sociology of literature, or for the history of literature, as Arizona was the meeting point of many of Cluj-Napoca's literati, and as the narrative enclosed in this research contain many references and stories about the literary field. Many of those I interviewed are active in this field.

Those who participated in this research are writers, journalists and teachers that met in Arizona, although some came rarely after the Revolution, while some started coming only after it. A part of those who met almost daily in Arizona can be considered to form a small informal group. I chose this group because some of its members met until the place closed, in what the local media called „the last defense of Cluj's Bohemia". The place was shut down in July 2011 for refurbishment, and reopened in the autumn of 2013. Because of it' location, this place became in the communist period a meeting point for writers, journalists and academia, but not merely, as the access was free. It continued to be a literary cafe for the next two decades after the fall of communism.

As a privileged research method I chose that of unstructured, life story interviews, with a focus point on cafes (or coffee houses) and Cluj's cultural and literary life. Besides these I also had many unrecorded and informal talks with the research's participants and with others who used to attend the place but din not wish to participate in the research.

The individual narratives that were produced for this research highlight some of the issues that one might focus upon in order to understand the role that this place had for its users, but also its social role in the urban landscape. This place can be understood in various way, as the interviews bring to light it's role in the present lime, and the way that remembrance does not mean returning to the past, but bringing the past into the present, by focusing on the issues relevant today and also by the reflexive re-interpretation of things that were. At the same time, these narratives of space become narratives of individual and social identity. The narratives are constructed through the overlap of multiple evocations of moments, events, images and cultural figures, but also through reflections upon those and on the ways the relationships between them evolved over time.

I am including the Arizona cafe in the cultural field because it was one of the meeting points of those who, in the town of Cluj-Napoca, created works of culture. This

fact became obvious both in the narratives of the participants, and in the other interviews I encountered in local newspapers, cultural magazines etc.

I believe that the presence of the voices of those I interviewed in my thesis, not just as an annex to it, is extremely important. At first I wanted to introduce their voices only in fragments, intermingled with bits of analysis and my own interpretations, but eventually, together with my thesis coordinator, I decided to introduce the interviews as wholes, in a distinct chapter. I made this decision based on at least two arguments: the first argument is based on the theory regarding life story interviews that makes one consider the research participants as experts of their own lives, experiences and life stories. The second argument derives from the first and regards the fact that those I interviewed can be considered experts not only regarding their own life, but also in the cultural/literary field as they were for many years a part of it and in the last 50 years they contributed to its production, and they analyzed it time and again in this process. Including their voice in my thesis is thus both an acknowledgement of their life experience and of their professional experience and of their active role in the deployment of this research as active participants, and not mere depositaries of valuable information.

My hypothesis is that this place, the Arizona cafe, had multiple functions at the same time: it was a meeting point, a place for recreation and also some kind of alternative institution, to those of the state. Its paramount importance comes from the fact that it made possible multiple encounters and the establishment of relationships, and thus it facilitated the exchange of information and knowledge. I believe that the space itself facilitated and favored the entrance in the cultural field, making possible the development of feelings of belonging to a certain group. Because of this the place gains symbolic weight for those who use it. Some of those who shared their story with me, identified themselves as “arizonisti”, thus marking their belonging to a heterogeneous group.

Because many people, from various backgrounds attended Arizona, from university students, to literati and also ordinary folk, the personal experiences and stories that are linked to Arizona are multiple and diverse, as even some of my interviewees noticed. Because contacting everyone today may prove difficult, but also because I wished to use in-depth, face to face, interviews, I chose my participants from those who attended the

place in the latter part of its existence. This choice also made possible the confinement of the sample.

Considering the fact that subject of my research is currently occupying a place only in the memory of my interviewees, and that it's physical presence is slowly being erased of the map, by the modification of it's key physical elements, I believe that there is a necessity for having a discussion about memory and the narrative/s it can help build. This is why I chose to analyze the ways in which those who used or lived in a place in the past tell its story today. The past and the history of place, as it appears in the story about it, seem to be part of a bigger metanarrative. That is why I have tried to understand the ways in which a place becomes a symbolic space in the collective memory of a group. The group is not a strictly bounded one, the specificities of the place, makes it open to anyone, but for many writers and intellectuals, Arizona was their meeting place.

The first part of my thesis is based on secondary documentation resources with the help of which I put the main issue in context.

Thus, in the first chapter, I tried to unravel the connections between the coffee house and the urban environment, as the coffee house is regarded as an urban space by excellence (Grafe and Bollery: 2007). This chapter has three main subdivisions. In the first subdivision I presented the historical evolution of the coffee house, highlighting the fact that its particularities made new forms of socialization possible, but also its role in western culture. As for the Romanian context, I tried to identify the channels through which the culture of the coffee house entered Romania and its importance for the literary and artistic environments, but also the relationships between the Romanian and the European context. In the second subdivision I focused on the ways in which the urban space is produced and reproduced through the means of its use, but also through the ways in which it is read and storied by those who use it. In the last subdivision I tried to present the connections between the coffee house and the public sphere as it is conceived in the theories of Jürgen Habermas. His theories constitute a benchmark in the way public space, the public sphere, public opinion and coffee houses are researched.

In the second chapter I presented the socio-cultural and historical context of the Romanian writer in public space during the communist and the postcommunist period,

taking as a starting point some researches undertaken by foreign authors, but also by some Romanian ones.

In the third chapter I presented a couple of definitions of social and of collective memory, trying to highlight the connection between them and cultural inheritance and narrative identity.

The second part of my thesis is represented by the case study and it is divided in two chapters.

In the first chapter I presented the research methodology that I used focusing on some theoretical aspects regarding the case study and the life story interview. I also focused on the particularities and the evolution of the research I conducted.

The second chapter represents an analysis of the recurrent themes in the narratives of those I interviewed. I focused on those issues that regard the cafe/coffee house and the cultural/literary space, be it specific to Cluj-Napoca, or to Romania as a whole, in an effort to uncover the role that Arizona played in Cluj-Napoca's cultural field and its status as a symbolic good of the town.

The conclusions of the research are presented at the end of this chapter. I believe that the existence of such a meeting place had a great contribution to the outlining of a common identity for those with "literary affinities", it also facilitated their meeting in an informal public space that allowed free entrance, and that facilitated the serendipity of casual encounters. But the most important aspect of Arizona, and of the coffee house in general, is that it assumed face-to-face interaction.

The third part of the thesis comprises the narratives of those who attended the Arizona coffee house. As I mentioned before, I chose to present the voice of the participants in this research in an uncut manner, because I consider them to be the experts. Also, by doing this, one can observe not only the themes they mentioned, but also the way in which these narratives were constructed together with me, as researcher. Each interview is preceded by a presentation of the context in which it was done.

Appendix 1 presents the profile of the research participants, in most cases they were taken from literary dictionaries or from the Writers Union Cluj website, as their professional profile is the relevant one in this context.

Appendix 2 presents a themed index. I tried to highlight the main themes that are present in the narratives to facilitate a thematic reading. Most of the themes are those discussed in the second chapter of the second part.

I believe that this thesis can contribute to highlighting the importance of the coffee house in the urban landscape but also in acknowledging the importance of a symbolic place of Cluj-Napoca, that was sadly left to disappear. I managed through my endeavor to uncover a small part of the story of this place through the stories of some who attended it.

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