

A SENSE OF PLACE

A Sense of (Non-)Place

By Anja Utler (Germany)

0

When I published my book *münden – entzünden* at Viennese publishing house Edition Korrespondenzen¹, they wanted a sample of my handwriting to appear on the book cover. They do this for all authors. However, I felt deeply uncomfortable with this and suggested they instead print a drawing of the river that courses through the town where I was born. That seemed, and still seems to be, the more adequate and candid solution.

1

When the two Germanies were reunified in 1990, the newspapers printed maps to familiarize us with our new country. On one such map, the place I lived was invisible. This 'somewhere in the South-East', close to the border of what was then Czechoslovakia, was hidden under the map's legend. I remember that our region being covered by instructions on how to correctly read this new Germany did not upset me then. It seemed natural, in a way. And it was only paper. Me, my friends, family and everybody else were still, and obviously, taking place.

2

I like the English expression 'to take place', it's tempting to use it in ways it's not supposed to be used. I like how it says that if something wants to happen, it will need a place. But of course, if there's a place, something will be happening anyway, regardless of whether you choose to think about it or not. Place is happening. Always.

3

There's a playful phenomenological way of thinking about things, called 'eidetic reduction': Subtract qualities from things to see if they still resemble what they were supposed to. For example, if one were to subtract some places from a map, it would still be a map. The map itself though, will always need a place and a space. In fact, it's hard to imagine anything outside the category 'place'.

4

What would literature look like after subtracting place from it? It might be a text cleanly encapsulated within literature's own little rules, avoiding friction. Non-literature, so to speak.

5

What would a non-place look like? Does it exist?

6

French anthropologist Marc Augé thinks there are such things as non-places. Plenty, in fact, and increasing in numbers. Airports, shopping malls, hotel rooms qualify as non-places for Augé. Space, where people bustle but nothing ever happens due to a lack of interaction. Thus, strictly speaking, there is no time in non-places. While the local is accidental, idiosyncratic and may undergo erratic,

¹ In 2010 published in the translation by Kurt Beals as "engulf – enkindle" by Burning Deck, Providence, RI.

A SENSE OF PLACE

unpredictable change, non-places are directly linked to (more or less) global economic and organizational structures that encourage, stabilize and control them. Establishing a non-place on its site will help the local in transcending itself. It will become more than just itself. It will be part of the system. Ready to be put on the map.

7

So, seen from Marc Augé's angle, irrelevance is freedom. Being covered by the legend of a map will not erase a region, but make it a place in the proper sense of the word. A place that defies being measured by the coordinates of the system.

8

Very flattering. And most certainly untrue for my region. Or not more true there than for anywhere else. Once you define place as something composed of all the relations of the things existing and living in it, there will be place everywhere. There's place at the very seam where the shopping mall ends and unpaved surroundings begin – with human relations being of less importance there, though.

9

The German language, at the moment, has no proper word for 'place'. It has 'Platz', which is the same as the English 'place', but the German word can only be used in concrete and narrow senses such as for 'square', or the spot where one stands or sits. We feel that this is a bit awkward for everyday language. We watch how the English and the Americans use their 'place', and we like that. So we copy it and produce German sentences that sound a bit awkward.

10

Not having a word for it though, unwittingly reveals that 'place' cannot be captured in a single expression. As soon as we put everyday language and communication aside, 'place' needs more effort to show in language, once it's not supposed to be stowed away under some neat term. This accidental gap in the language points (again: unwittingly) to the fact that the smallest place, however marginal or central, is infinite in the relations that run through it and define it. Define it physically, (animate and inanimate), and linguistically (in written and spoken varieties). In action and thought and feeling. Historically. And currently. It seems as if language were opening up some space and saying: Let place happen here. Maybe it is sneering, for that's an impossible task, of course. However, it may not be the worst place for literature to start from all over again, and again – trying *to fail better next time*.