

Happiness in the air. Atmospheric imaginations in modern literature and culture

The planned research will focus on atmospheric imaginations in cultural texts of modernism and postmodernism, especially the dream of flying in the age of its technical realisation (since the first powered flight by the Wright brothers in 1903). The metaphor of flight touches on the most important existential themes, above all freedom, transcendence and (im)mortality, because it articulates not only the dream of an unleashed movement, but also a need for mobility in a certain direction, namely heavenward – and implies the hope of salvation. The aim of the project is a comprehensive analysis of selected cultural texts of German-speaking countries which stage a variety of motifs of flying, floating, levitation or aerial acrobatics in different ways. The interpretation of cultural images of flight makes it possible to look at metaphysical, emotional, religious and political contexts and to consider material and atmospheric conditions. The air space can be interpreted as an utopian space and flying as an (ambivalent) metaphor for the rise (and fall) of the ambitious man: a perfection of human beings beyond their limits, a vision which transcends all boundaries.

Beyond the imaginations of flight, the cultural texts to be analysed create atmospheres, which are either pre-conditions for flight experiments or they represent creations of a new quality and anticipations of important events and processes (something can “hang in the air”). These atmospheres should be considered in their physical and social dimensions. They are formed by weather conditions as well as constellations of things and humans, and thus they provide a basis for micro- and macrospheric exploration of space, moods, affects, relationships and their dynamics. Atmospheres are total phenomena, largely non-representational, difficult to put into words and images, but they are something that always surrounds us and determines our relationship with the world. Therefore, the corporeality of human experience is one of the most important analytical categories of the planned research on atmospheres in cultural texts. It refers to the subject and emphasises the affective significance of each world encounter as a confrontation with different atmospheric dimensions of the space. The subject of analysis are not just situations, sensations, emanations of atmospheres and perceptual processes but, to a certain extent, interpersonal and even cultural aspects, determined by symbols, expectations, anticipations or conventions, which also play an important role as collective phenomena. The research will be centred around the fiction of human ability to fly and on asking questions why and where people want to fly, what motivates them to rise up into the air or to dream of flying, what their expectations and hopes are, how they perceive, sense, appropriate the air space and, finally, how the flight fantasies end. This objective implies the need to include the “earthly” reasons for air expeditions, the atmospheric and affective qualities of the spaces people live in as well as a vision of an alternative air space. The next question concerns the possibilities of distancing oneself from the reality of social space by border crossings and the state of weightlessness. The bird’s-eye perspective provides a revealing outlook on reality which can sometimes appear distorted, modified and changed. Despite all the rebelliousness of the flight as a protest against the “compulsion” of the horizon, the reading of many literary texts raises the question of the (a)political dimension of the air spaces which do not always create new framework conditions for perception and reflection, but often represent a projection space for deficits and cultural and social dependencies. Another topic of the planned analysis involves literary and iconographic images of flying lovers, removed from the heaviness of earth, freed from the burden of discursive attributions in “earthly” cultural contexts. The imaginations of flying lovers, who entrust themselves to the air and the forces of nature, perform certain functions in socio-cultural interpretation systems and are connected with the rules of social spaces as well as with the time-related concepts of love and cultural repressions. The next aspect of the problem to be analysed is connected with the meaningful and symbolic triad of flying – floating – falling and illustrates the ambivalences of the flight dream, which is repeatedly shown and reflected as an integration of liberation momentum and suffering or failure.

In the sense outlined above, as a part of the project, a general question should be asked: the question about the ‘atmospheric’ knowledge stored in literary texts and captured in pictorial representations. This knowledge is difficult to grasp, because atmospheres act as a kind of aura and exemplify paradigmatically the challenge of the humanities to make research on intangible things. Atmospheres combined with the affective tone and the utopian dimension provoke a reflection on important aspects of the human condition and being-in-the-world, even beyond created and controlled social constructions and cultural discourses. The planned ‘atmospheric’ readings of a variety of cultural texts could illuminate a significance of the categories of presence and atmosphere in the field of literary and cultural studies and show how they are intertwined with emotions and other social and cultural phenomena.