Visual palimpsests: city atmosphere in cartography, city planning and painting

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Abstract

Atmosphere is a mysterious property of urban space that can be sensed only by personal experience. People describe it as a particularly intense and imposing emotion. The concept was born in the ’50s, together with the distinction between space and place. Place, a meaningful space, is discussed in the context of human psyche, perception, feeling, attachment, in psychology and philosophy. By extension, atmosphere in psychogeography is an important factor of urban place that reflects people’s feelings about it. But although atmosphere for Situationists is an experiential property that can be attributed only to the lived and not to the represented space, geographer E. Relph argues that an individual can also connect to places and develop feelings about them through fantasy and artistic representations in a state that he defines as ‘vicarious insideness’. In Urban Visual Culture, all images that represent the city and its multifarious content are mediums for the experience, perception, understanding of the urban, the development of feelings and attachment to it, in other words, they can create an atmosphere. This study will follow with the examination of atmosphere in European city representations.

In the paper, I will use semiotics to illustrate the mechanism of an individual experiences, the atmosphere of a European city representation with artworks from city planning, cartography, and painting. I will analyze: a) View of Florence with the Chain by Francesco Rosselli (1480), b) Römische Ruinenlandschaft by Paul Bril (1600), c) City of Truth by Bartolomeo Del Bene (1609), d) Via Appia by Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1756), e) Evening on Karl Johan Street by Edvard Munch (1892), f) New York City by Piet Mondrian (1942) and g) London functional analysis map by Patrick Abercrombie (1944). I will argue that while the viewer elaborates consciously the theme and the graphic motifs, unconsciously he/she receives sensual, emotional, and ideological data, carried by the expressive means of the representation. Geometric shape, line, colour, layout, etc. create senses, feelings, ideas, related to the wider historic and philosophical context, the worldview of the representation. An encrypted impression is then created, a palimpsest that consists of superimposed layers of meaning. The ‘emotional aura’, of that impression is ‘atmosphere’, which enriches the perception of the represented theme and graphic motifs. Because atmosphere is a cryptogram, I describe the representation of cities as ‘visual palimpsest’.

Keywords: urban visual culture, city planning, cartography, painting, semiotics, atmosphere, palimpsest

1. DEFINITION OF ATMOSPHERE

Atmosphere, a Greek word, means literally ‘globe of vapors’, which implies that its nature is airy and immaterial. In physics atmosphere designates the superimposed layers of gas that surround Earth and are held together by gravity. In spatial sciences atmosphere is used metaphorically and parallel with terms as ‘impression’, ‘sense’, ‘character’, ‘aura’, ‘spirit’, etc. It determines a ‘mysterious’ property of space with an impression to the individual that bonds her/him with it and leads her/him to perceive space with attributes such as beautiful, ugly, depressive, nostalgic, romantic, etc. Through this procedure, the homogeneous and neutral space receives substance and meanings from the individual, becomes ‘place’ with a particular identity (Tuan, 1974). Atmosphere is not transmitted only from the visible, material and morphological characteristics. More importantly it reflects individual and collective immaterial inscriptions, hidden elements, stories, experiences, attitudes, worldviews,
ideals of a place (Norberg-Schulz, 1979). For example, we may refer to a place's atmosphere as ‘explosive’, ‘revolutionary’, ‘anachronistic’, ‘feminine’, or even ‘square’, ‘colourful’, ‘frightening’, ‘playful’, etc., which are adjectives that designate abstract concepts attributed to a place, but cannot be directly related to specific material elements. Moreover, atmosphere has a multi-sensory basis. Hearing, smell, taste, and touch are involved in its formation and thus it has a synthetic nature, visual, sonic, odorous, gustatory, haptic. And as Merleau-Ponty and later Pallasmaa notes, atmosphere arises beyond the five senses, comprising intuition, imagination, orientation, balance, stability, duration, etc. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1964), (Pallasmaa, 2014).

The intensity and the hue of an atmosphere are key features. So, while all places have an atmosphere, the ‘atmospheric’ quality is commonly attributed to places with immense, intense, distinctive, profound character and moreover to places that emanate a painful sensation, that are melancholic, romantic, nostalgic and not normal, ordinary, mediocre, happy, etc. As Beardsley (1975), Boyer (1994) and other writers would put it, atmosphere is a spatial quality deeply intertwined with the sublime and hidden and not the apparent, picturesque or beautiful character of a place, for the former, as subconscious, has a more intense psychological impact to the person that experiences it. And Zumthor (2006) in his book ‘Atmospheres’ describes the architectural atmosphere as magic: “this singular density and mood, this feeling of presence [...] under whose spell I experience what I otherwise would not experience in precisely this way” (Zumthor, 2006). Feeling does not correspond exactly to atmosphere. The relevant term is ‘quasi–thing’. Quasi–things form a new ontological category that determines things that can be described as “powers poured out into the lived space we inhabit” that affect a person and are connected to specific moods that are however intangible (Griggero, 2017). From all the above it can be understood that atmosphere is a mysterious, complex, partially indeterminate, immaterial property of a place that can be sensed only by the testimonies of people that ‘feel’ it as a particularly intense and imposing emotion.

The term ‘atmosphere was born in the '50s in Europe, where it has been widely used by members of the Situationist International movement. Founder of the S.I. Guy Debord describes the city from the viewpoint of the flâneur. The flâneur is the urban stroller, traveler, explorer, admirer of modern Paris, but also the ordinary, anonymous and free person outside the control of any authority. He is a literary type founded by Baudelaire. In the 19th century was adopted by Walter Benjamin as a mean to describe modern Paris (Benjamin, 1940). The ‘situationist city’, the city experienced by the flâneur, consists of a network of places with distinguishable atmospheres, or qualities that impress sentimentally the individual. The concept of atmosphere or ‘ambience’ (meaning ‘flowing around’ or in Greek ‘περιπρέπουσα ατμόσφαιρα’), has been then related to the experience of the public space and the happenings in it, the spectacle, the situation, the festivity, the demonstration. Space was considered as a container that supported human action and was identified by it. Atmosphere was also intertwined with the anarchist ideology and was coloured revolutionary (Debord, 1967). With the introduction of ‘atmosphere’ Situationists put the basis for the description of space through the human psyche. They establish Psychogeography, “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals” (Debord, 1955). About the same time, American urban planner Kevin Lynch conducts experiments with mental city maps and finds out that the individual perceives space in a manner that does not necessarily correspond to its objective, geometric characteristics. On the contrary, space seems to be largely formed by latent and immaterial factors that urges one to recognize and prioritize spatial elements according to subjective and personal criteria (Lynch, 1960). Thus, parallel to the experiential atmosphere Lynch develops the structural concept of ‘image’ (the perception) of place by elements embedded to it (Wood, 1980). Even if the approach of Lynch differs from the approach of the Situationists, for the former talks about perception of the material configuration of a place, while the later refer to immaterial activities and the bodily experience, both agree that space cannot be objectively perceived.

So, theorists realize gradually that it is not sufficient to describe space only by determining its material, geometric characteristics, but it is necessary to investigate it also in reference to the way it becomes perceptible, experienced and sentimentally imprinted. Atmosphere becomes
thus a term to emphasize the new, phenomenological and existential approach for the definition of space. In a parallel path in philosophy, G. Bachelard points out the latent dimension of space, highlighted in artworks, poetry, and literature (Bachelard, 1957). And geographer E. Relph in his theory about the ways an individual can be connected to a place, refers to ‘Vicarious Insideness’, a state of deep identification with a place that is accomplished when the individual is transferred there through fantasy and artworks (Relph, 1976). Vicarious Insideness is based on the emotional overtone of a place, with other words, on its atmosphere. So, although atmosphere was by the Situationists connected with the lived space, it is possible that also representations of a place can create atmosphere. Based on this, I will attempt to build an argument about the palimpsest structure of the atmosphere that is emitted from a city's visual representations.

2. THE ATMOSPHERE OF A CITY’S VISUAL REPRESENTATION

In the interdisciplinary field of Visual Culture a city is considered as a cultural phenomenon or ‘text’ that is formed, perceived, communicated, distributed, modified, signified through a multitude of visual representations in various media. Hereinafter we will discuss the city in this context and more specific through its visual representations in three different disciplines, urban planning, cartography, and painting. While painting is obviously Art, it cannot be said the same for urban planning and cartography, which are operational representations. However, in many historical periods both urban planning and cartography presented a strong artistic character, while in every historical period, some artistic elements can be detected. Besides, Visual Culture, which is a broader and interdisciplinary approach, embraces Art history. The definition of Art has been hanged and the term ‘artistic’ is in many cases replaced with the term ‘cultural’. In consequence, many works outside the classic fine art genres, that present however artistic elements, or artistic intentions, are now classified as Artworks.

In the context of social semiotics, the mechanism that a city (regarded as a cultural text) is signified by its representations, presents a structure that is similar to the structure of a ‘palimpsest’. A palimpsest is a papyrus that consists of superimposed layers of text. Likewise, the (city) text consists of superimposed layers of meaning, allocated to layers of connotations with a direction from the specific, personal and individual to the abstract, collective and social (Kress & Leeuwen, 1996). In a visual representation at the first denotation layer, the meaning is conscious and is abstracted from graphic elements, the theme and the motif. At the second, third, fourth and so on... connotation layers the meaning is abstracted from the expressive means of the visual representation (Barthes, 1976, 1977, 1977a). As early as the 18th century theorists and artists were discussing the inner effect, the ‘hidden’, ‘unconscious’, meaning, ‘inner resonance’, ‘stimmung’ etc. of the expressive means of an artwork and moreover pointed out that they are carriers of collective archetypes (Jung, Franz, Henderson, Jacobi, Jaffe, 1964). Fine Art theorists like Goethe (1749–1832) wrote about the idiosyncrasy of paintings (Goethe, 1980), Warburg and Panofsky (1955) founded iconology in the 19th century and connected the form with several layers of meaning, Kandinsky (1946, 1979), Klee (1956, 1956a), Arnheim (1954), Gombrich (1960) discussed the psychology and perception of paintings at the beginning of the 20th century, and finally Barthes (1976, 1977, 1977a), Kress & Leeuwen (1996), Mitchell (1986, 1994), Berger (1972, 1980), Eco (1976) etc. placed visual expression in the context of semiotics and collaborated to the development of the visual semiotics research field. According to visual semiotics, the individual correlates the expressive means (such as geometric shapes, colour, layout, size, orientation, view, light and various regulations in several levels of abstraction) to senses (balance, stability, duration, etc.), emotions (joy, sorrow, fear, etc.), enriches them with cohesions and relates them with concepts that are formed through social, ideologival, cultural, historical patterns and conventions.

The mechanism of signification that allocates meaning in the superimposed connotation layers, creates impressions with an intense emotional hue. But, as with the palimpsest, here also the outputs of the mechanism are encrypted. Because they result from subconscious procedures, they cannot be explained through logic. The individual tends to describe them with enigmatic or intuitive terms, such as ‘sense’ or ‘atmosphere’. As litterateur
Gabriele D’Annunzio (1863–1938) puts it: “The richest events occur in us long before the soul perceives them. And, when we begin to open our eyes to the visible, we have long since committed ourselves to the invisible”. Now, if we attempt to associate ‘visually’ the palimpsest structure of the signification mechanism with atmosphere, we will notice that atmosphere has a similar structure to a palimpsest, and moreover, it consists of superimposed layers that become tenuous, immaterial, abstract as they move away from a planet’s surface, in the same manner that meaning becomes more vague, uncertain and general as it moves from the specific denotation level of the theme. In the following artworks, it will be apparent that the expressive means submit to the theme, highlight its context and strengthen it. They collaborate and contribute decisively to the emission of a distinctive atmosphere that makes the theme clearer and the expression more powerful.

3. ANALYSIS OF CITY’S VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS

In this section, I will analyze selected representations of the European city, classified into three types that correspond to three communicative aspects of the city, space production, survey, and cultural representation. Respectively the artworks come from the disciplines of city planning, cartography, and painting. Initially I will give a brief description of the three types of representation. The artworks are selected from different historical epochs in the period between the 15th and the 20th century, Renaissance and the modern movement, and are placed in chronological order in the text. In city planning, I will analyze a utopian city of the baroque period. In cartography, I will analyze two artworks, one from the Renaissance, one from the modern movement. In painting, I will analyze two artworks from the vedutismo tradition in the baroque and romanticism, a painting from realism and finally a painting from the modernist Avant-garde. The present analysis aims to describe the mechanism that creates atmosphere through a representative but only indicative sample of representations that vary in their historical and thematic context. Although not at all excluded, there will be no extent reference to correlations between the historic periods and the types of representation. The analysis of each representation in the text follows the structure: a) brief introduction to the wider historical and cultural context, b) analysis by means of visual semiotics with reference to the superimposed layers of meaning, allocated to layers of connotations, that is, senses, emotions, ideas, c) verbal expression of the created atmosphere according to the aforementioned analysis.

City planning – space production

“Either through a physiological, or through a pathological perspective it seems that today we are dominated by a latent desire for a perfectly organized and rational city, excluding anything that does not fit the mold of utopia” (Boyer, 1994, 18). Utopia expresses the human need in every historical era to imagine a better world as a solution to his problems. The formulation of utopias in city planning expresses the attempt to cure political, moral, residential, sanitary, etc. maladies of the society that are primarily related to the abrupt development of cities and the adversities it brings. In every historical era that big cities emerge, utopias are formulated: the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh epic, the Sanskrit Mahabharata, the Platonic Atlantis, the medieval Heavenly Jerusalem, the Renaissance Utopia of Thomas More, the Godin’s Famillistere in the 19th century, the cities of the Metabolists architects of the postmodernity, the contemporary Venus project of the Zeitgeist are some examples. In the broader sense utopias describe society in general and not only space, its geometrical configuration, and material characteristics. Consequently, the representation of space in a utopian plan is largely symbolic. Layout and shapes do not only refer to architecture, but also to archetypes, bodies of ideals. In this sense, every utopian city plan constitutes a source of information about the wider cultural context of the historical era that it belongs. Hence the atmosphere that creates the layout and shapes of the utopian plan, reflects the attitude of the viewer towards the cultural beliefs that are expressed. As we will discuss in the artwork of Civitas Veri by Bartolomeo Del Bene, the expressive means of the representation reveal in a second layer of observation even more actively the intentions that are realized by the theme and the graphic motifs of the representation.

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Baroque Utopian City Plan: *Civitas Veri*, Bartolomeo Del Bene (1609)

The ‘City of Truth’ is one of the many utopian urban plans that have been designed in the Baroque era. The common subject of the baroque utopias is the proposal of a new social – spatial program that would confront the problems of anarchistic and sinful life and free man from his suffering. The high angle of the representation implies the solemnity and validity of that proposal. The design of the plan is highly geometric, revealing the intellect of its creators and their intention to impose order and discipline. A circular wall surrounds the city, meaning integration, life, maternity. The designed city appears as a protective embrace that promises the birth of a new reality and the development of a new, better mankind. But the enclosure signifies also conservatism. The towers of the wall are masculine elements (rectangle and vertical) that enhance the sense of protection. The center, symbolizing birth, stability, significance, is here exaggerated, another symbol of masculine authority. From there flow the rays. The lateral orientation of the radial axes implies controlled and restrained expansion. The rather amorphous, cloudy shapes between the rays of the cycle imply the anarchy that the geometrical order of the design strive to settle. It should be noted here that the particular intention and the selected mode of representation – the juxtaposition of tortuous, irregular, anarchic with the orthogonal and geometric – is typical in many visual representations of social utopias in that era. Here especially, the anarchy and chaos of the civil life inside the city is illuminated rather than the anarchy and chaos of the nature outside the city, as someone would possibly expect. Nature, indeed, is usually being perceived as anarchic and chaotic, but on the contrary here anarchy and chaos are attributed to human society. The human activity on the crop fields, at the right of the representation (future), is depicted through a rectangular grid, an element that signifies order, discipline and submission. In conclusion, the juxtaposition of geometry over irregularity is a dominant element of the representation, in other words, the submission of anarchy and chaos to order. The centrality of the government is emphasized as an element of civilization. The combination of the cycle and the line signifies a synergy of protection and dynamic evolution. The expressive means favours these significations and the overall atmosphere is glorious, ambitious, optimistic.

**Cartography – city survey**

City cartography is here discussed through two artworks from the Renaissance and the 20th century. In the early Renaissance period in Europe appear the *incunabula*, historical, geographical, travel albums and pamphlets that are illustrated with engravings of cities from Europe and the wider Mediterranean area (Edson, 1997). In an *incunabulum*, the city is depicted as a unity in which the elements that characterize it, that form its identity, dominate visually. The use of symbols and aesthetic elements is very common, philosophical ideas and cultural meanings precedence over and even replace the geometric details. Truth and objectivity submits to the narrative and myth that the representation facilitates (Van der Krogt, 2009) (Gregg, 2009). All these contribute to the characterization of the Renaissance city map more as a means of cultural representation, rather than a functional depiction, although this role is not at all negated. Five centuries later, in the mid-20th century, the city map has been completely transformed from an aesthetic to a functional object: Symbols have been replaced by conventional codes, the vividness and the detailed depiction of the buildings by the abstract representation of the building blocks and the road network, the birds eye view and battle field perspective views by the orthogonal projection and the top view, the subjectivity of the sizes by the accuracy of the measurements. One could assume that the modern map does not create any atmosphere, since every element that could trigger feelings and make the viewer to connect with her/his imagination with the city is here absent. But, as we will observe in the artwork of the Bubble diagram map of London by P. Abercrombie, even here survive elements that
transfer cultural elements and create atmosphere. Even though this atmosphere is primarily based on concepts that deal with logic rather than emotion, as the modern era emphasizes the function and not the form. Finally, if the viewer would compare the two maps, would easily realize the paradigm shift in the depiction of a city from the pictorial to the abstract. The viewer would then be faced with two different types of atmosphere, narrative and rational, but definitely not the presence and the absence of atmosphere at all.

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Renaissance cartography: View of Florence with the Chain, Francesco Rosselli (1480)

This Renaissance map has been created at the time Florence was one of the biggest and more influential cities in Europe. The perspective of the representation adopts a high angle, implying objectivity and majesty. The chain that encompasses the city is rectangular, implying masculinity and protection. The rectangular chain links signify commerce and cooperation. A padlock is depicted at the top and left side of the representation. The top of the representation plane is a position of victory, power, glamour, ideals, while the left implies deep rooting and a strong past, based on agreements, discipline, and agglomeration of knowledge. All the above illuminate the historical fact that the growth of Florence was based on its glorious past, the connection and discipline of the church and the commercial agreements. In the centre of the map, a cathedral with a dome is depicted, a symbol of masculinity. The size of the cathedral seems large in comparison to the smaller surrounding buildings discloses a mastery on them. A cyclical wall surrounds the city. The cycle implies maternity, protection, provision, and integration – another element that supports the leadership and strength of the city. The sign with the name Fiorenza is depicted to the right – a future projection, an indicator that the city evolves vigorously. A man is depicted at the bottom right of the map, position of realism, submission, present, implying his inferior position. The man is depicted at the foreground, but his small size and his position towards the limits of the representation makes him imperceptibly perceptible, at least in comparison to the cathedral, that dominates the representation at its centre and is oversized. And indeed, at the historical period of the map, the dominion of the church was unquestionable. The combined effect of all the aforementioned expressive means results in the perception of the map from the viewer as a highly ceremonial and gracious documentation of the city. The map radiates an atmosphere of domination, authority and masculinity, imposes awe, admiration, solemnity. It keeps its viewer at a ‘safe’ distance. Let us not forget that a chain keeps its valuable content locked, disciplined and intact.
As the title indicates, the representation is functional, so the connotation threshold here is limited. The map was created at the historic era of the modern movement, where under the regime ‘form follows function’, aesthetics was excluded from the scopes of the cartography. The shapes and the colours of the modern map were now used in an entirely conventional manner, encoding geographical concepts with perfectly accurate content. However, the specific map presents a peculiarity: the use of the bubbles that do not depict accurate geographical boundaries, but in the contrary express flexibility, flow, evolution. The particular approach originates from biology and reflects organicism, life and body, concepts that in the middle of the 20th century are introduced into the city discourse, as in the Team 10 in England (Smithson, 1968). In this context, the choice of the bubbles with the corresponding connotations is entirely intentional and not subliminal. The creator of the map is also familiar with the theoretical and practical research in visual arts from Kandinsky, Klee and Arnheim, accordingly he knows the symbolism of shapes and colours. The map shows the greater London area with the proposed land uses. The settlements around London are represented by bubbles and the map is often referred to as ‘bubble map’ or ‘bubble analysis’. The particular oval shape facilitates variations, long, short, twisted, with penetrations, protuberances, etc., which in turn discloses the organic approach that is adopted for the cartographic representation. Space is here considered as consisting of dynamically, spatially varying, but independent departments (villages). The underlined limits of the bubbles are there to protect the content, without whatsoever being rigid. Being organic and curved, the bubbles connote the matrix, motherhood, protection, nest, birth. They suggest that their contents are alive, it is the people they protect, their societies and cultures and not the lifeless, material space. The bubbles do not reflect the geographical limits of each municipality, community, neighbourhood. They reflect concentration, security, confidence, space for life, fluidity. The yellow and orange colours of the bubbles in central London imply energy, vitality, power, radiation, while the brown colour in the bubbles around the centre indicates seriousness and domain. The dark brown and black outline of the bubbles indicates severity and the need of the settlements to protect their borders, to sustain their identity and to avoid the alienation of their distinctive characteristics. All the aforementioned expressive means contribute to the creation of a highly dynamic, sustainable, fluid, flexible atmosphere, which emphasizes the general spirit expressed by the map that records and anticipates the rapid evolution of the greater London area.

Painting – cultural representation of a city

Painting is interwoven with the city development, it is a medium to communicate its multifarious meanings. Painting is a direct reflection of how a city is confronted, perceived, experienced, accepted, criticized, understood, how it influences emotionally and ideologically the individual. Depending on the environment in which the artwork is produced, the above concepts appear diversified. Scholar and academic city painting captures different urban aspects than the common, popular painting. Although in the present study only artworks assigned to the scholar and academic environment are discussed, the importance of the latter type of artworks should not be underestimated. The number and importance of the revelations of popular city paintings are unquestionable. The first two artworks come
from the *vedutismo* tradition. Cityscapes or vedutes, started to appear in the Renaissance, when the architecture of the Greco–Roman antiquity was rediscovered and became the main object of inspiration for Renaissance architects. The Renaissance vedute depict ruins, covered by the glamour of time and the ideals associated with the ancient philosophy and aesthetics. In the 18th and 19th century in neoclassicism and romanticism the vedutismo was associated with the Grand Tour, a travel tradition that intended to record and catalogue visually the ancient world. As will be seen in the artwork of Piranesi, in this context the subjectivity and personal intervention of the *vedutisti* is evident. The representations are enriched with symbolic elements that denote specific ideologies. The exaltation of the past and memory, the admiration of the ornament as the representation of aesthetics, philosophy, mathematics, the scenographic elaboration of the themes are common characteristics (Di Furia, 2012), (Wittkower, 1980). The discussion continues with an artwork of Munch that is classified as realism with elements from symbolism and expressionism. The criticism of urban lifestyle is a common theme in realism, as the movement coincides with the evolution of the industrial city and the emergence of modernity. The Paris of Hausmann is the overall, notorious example. Munch painting focuses on the existential dimension of the city. In terms of atmosphere one could say that this artwork presents the most impressive kind. And indeed, this is true, as existentialism represents the most intense and sublime passions of the psyche. The last artwork of the discussion is New York City by Piet Mondrian, an artwork that although abstract, is in its own way very descriptive. Due to the lack of reference to representations of the outside world, the emotional reverberations of the expressive means become stronger. The created atmosphere is therefore very evocative.

Baroque Vedute: *Römische Ruinenlandschaft* by Paul Bril (1600)

This artwork is a landscape that juxtaposes the past with the present, the geometry of the architecture with the freedom of painting. The Flemish painter lived in Rome and became known for his atmospheric landscapes, which he created under the aegis of the Church, the Popes, and other notorious patrons of the era, such as the Barberini family and Carlo de Medici. Bril was highly appreciated by the academians and represented the dominant landscape school in his era. *Römische Ruinenlandschaft* depicts Roman antiquities. There are two planes, front left and rear right. The front plane is painted in intense, bright, naturalistic and warm tones, suggesting reality and present. The rear plane is painted in flaccid, cold tones of blue and purple, implying the dream, the past and the virtual. In the front plane is also evident the use of red and blue, which are primary colours and thus connote realism and confirmation. This reveals the theme of the representation, which is the juxtaposition of past and present, their values, ideals, worldviews. The juxtaposition is supported by the expressive means that oppose the certainty of the present with the uncertainty of memory. At the same time, the character of the rear plane (past) is clearly geometric. The use of architectural design and the reduction of colour tonicity indicates the superiority of the past that serves as an ideal. Moreover, it accentuates the submission of the momentum and the sentiment to the passivity and stability of the eternal logic. All this impels the viewer to think about the gravity, the irreversibility, the importance of the past, and the fact that it is the basis and reference point of the present. In the center of the composition a vertical element is
placed, three columns from the ruins. The verticality of the column suggests masculine power. The triad refers to Christianity implying perhaps the ecclesiastical authority that finances the artist.

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Of the artworks presented here, one that fits more the description of palimpsest is the following Piranesi vedute. Not only for its characteristics, but because the artist creates in many of his artworks historical palimpsests, such as the notorious Nolli map reconstruction. In Romanticism, the construction of imaginary and idealized scenes from selected historical elements is common. Romanticism often is referred to as historicism or as a surrealism with mystical elements (Schaller, 1997). The narratives that refer to the past are usually represented through the juxtaposition of selected elements, a practice that flourished in the 18th and the 19th century, mainly through the tradition of the Grand Tour. Thereby an essential dimension of city identity in Romanticism is emphasized, the city as an agent of museification (Boyer, 1994). Detail, geometry, ornament are all elements of Piranesi’s vedutes. In the particular artwork, principal expressive means are side perspective, the placement of elements in a line with perspective reduction, the extreme detail and the naturalism of the foreground. The use of side perspective emphasizes the movement from the past (left) to the future (right). The placement of elements in a row that fades away towards the rear plane creates a timeline and denotes time and the glorious past that the ruins represent. The abundance of artifacts that are literally stacked is depicted through a confusion of lines, shapes, tones, shadows. Thus, neither element is highlighted, on the contrary, the viewer’s gaze is withdrawn from the elements and is directed towards the awareness of their multitude and the perception of perspective, in other words, of the passing of time and the glorious past. The variety of lines, shapes, tones, shadows serves also to the creation of a sense of abundance that adds value to the treasure of artifacts. Although motionless and depicted with shapes that denote stability and duration, all these objects create the impression that they move from left (past) to right (future), that they are gradually revealed to us as their size and detail increases. These elements, then covered with dust, now become important, since Romanticism comes to record, study, classify, reclaim, protect, put historical elements in a museum context. In other words, an onerous past (rear plane) gives its position to the realism of the present (front plane), in a historical turn that everything becomes illuminated. The theme of the representation is not just the path from the past to the present, but also a statement for the restoration of order through science and rationalism in Enlightenment. The magnificent atmosphere created by this awareness is emphasized by the dramatic atmosphere of the side perspective, the confusion of lines, shapes, tones and shadows, that puzzle the gaze of the viewer and create a sense of the uncanny.

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Evening on Karl Johan Street, Edvard Munch (1892)

This painting is classified as realism and presents elements of romanticism, symbolism, and expressionism1. It belongs to an era in which the visual representation of the city focuses on the modern lifestyle. Besides, the negative

1www.edvardmunch.org/evening-on-karl-johan-street.jsp
impact of the abrupt development brought about the industrial revolution is a dominant theme that substitutes the older thematology of the architecture of buildings. Here the theme is centred around a frightened crowd of people in the foreground of a city. The use of one vanishing point central perspective that is not however symmetrical, introduces the viewer to an environment of uncertainty and partiality. Moreover, the perspective axis on which all human figures are placed except of one, emphasizes the movement of the crowd towards the viewer and at the same time the inevitable path and fate of humanity towards the modernity. This element creates a sense of grotesque threat. The light on the faces of the people and the windows of the buildings is a symbol of life. The crowd walk away from the light, from reality, they move towards the dream, they express an existential anxiety – angst. A similar effect has the lonely figure that walks away from the crowd and looks backwards. The black colour signifies authority and mourning. The isolation of the figure from the crowd signifies a change towards a new situation and a movement towards independence. All the above emphasize the angst of the modern man that now realizes the death of the old world and the birth of the new, ominous future. Loneliness also indicates the change of lifestyle and the alienation of the modern metropolis. The faces of the people have an uncanny expression, the gazes are empty, they transfer a sense of nocturnal catalepsy and existence of psychological disorders. The crowd is depicted as macabre, hypnotized, as a hidden threat. It should be noted here that similar elements are present in many other paintings of the same era with a relevant thematology – as, for example, The Burial of the Sardine by Francisco Goya. The strong tonal contrasts enhance the dramatic and threatening sense, as well as the use of cold colours, such as the black, the blue and the purple that indicates the oneiric and uncanny, and creates a mysterious and eerie atmosphere: Black signifies solemnity, severity, evil and underground. Blue signifies constraint, departure and sadness, purple signifies mystery, ritual and the soul. There is a slight contrast with the use of yellow on the windows and the hats that indicates a conflict, while the light that is symbolized through yellow, places the painting on the spiritual level. The characteristics of the people’s faces are curved – especially their eyebrows, an element that emphasizes the submission of logic to emotion. The contrast between the straight lines of the city, the curves and the colors of the crowd emphasizes their difference: the city appears as an expression of stability, order and power, while the crowd is depicted as a fluid element. The crowd is placed towards the bottom and the centre of the painting, a position that signifies present. The presence of black colour in that position implies a mysterious evil that is just about to happen. The crowd is looking straight towards the viewer, which signifies a direct contact. At the right side of the painting rises a dark and imposing figure with a masculine connotation. As that position symbolizes the future, this element may signify the naked terror of a disciplinarian future.

This artwork comes from De Stijl, a movement that was developed within the Avant-garde and advocates the abstraction and generalization, the use of net shapes and basic colors, and the exchange of ideas between the arts. The artwork comes from the period when the artist is experimenting with rectangular shapes placed in a grid. Although the initial inspiration of Mondrian to visualize rectangulars in grids has no connection with the city, his travel to New York and the observation of the

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2 www.youtube.com/watch?v=QkhOnHQwj0c
3 www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/great-works/great-works-evening-on-karl-johan-1892-edvard-munch-1696904.html
city’s absolute rectangular road network, inspired him to name the painting New York. In addition, the De Stijl movement supported the exchange of ideas and practices between the arts. The notion of a city represented through an orthogonal grid perfectly complied with the ideology of simplicity and functionality that are characteristic of the artist’s paintings. Moreover, De Stijl already had applied its manifesto to urban planning, for example, the General Extension Plan for Amsterdam of Cornelis van Eesteren in 1924. Being an abstract representation of the city plan, the grid also expresses other attributes of the modern metropolis, its functionality and order, rhythm of everyday life, and rationality. Beyond this, the use of rectangles indicates a territory of males, rigour, technology and bridled tension. As a network, it denotes grouping, domination, order, security, cooperation and reveals the existence of a strong infrastructure. As a layout, it implies the rhythm, the movement, the sound of the city, a connotation of the jazz music. The three basic colours of the artwork are depicted in a scale, indicating the existence of a hierarchy. Blue, as a distant colour, is placed towards the rear plane, which symbolizes the past of the city, when its rhythms were slower. Red is placed in the intermediate plane, which symbolizes the movement from the past to the present. In the front plane prevails the yellow colour, signifying the vigour and the intensity of urban life in New York at the historical period the artwork was created. So, again we can perceive a timeline and a hidden history of the city in the painting. Finally, the use of basic colours reveal the modern and realistic atmosphere of the city, which denotes the male. In other instances, the expressive means seem to collaborate and one emphasizes the activity of another. Or, elsewhere, the interpretation of the expressive means is vague and vast, as for example, the denotation of importance for a central element with a big size. However, the combined interpretation of the expressive means, even if it appears sometimes subjective, general, abstract, contradictory, eventually converge to consistent and definite outcomes. It seems finally that the semiotic analysis can describe with accuracy the senses, emotions, ideas that collaborate to create the atmosphere of the artwork. Moreover, as it has often become obvious in numerous artwork analyses, many different paths of interpretations coincide and finally shape for the artworks an identity that can be hardly challenged by their audience.

As it has become obvious, atmosphere reflects and reveals the wider cultural context of the artwork. The viewer through the specific artwork becomes partaker of the wider atmosphere of the historical era of the artwork. Ultimately the analysis shows that there is not only the individual, but also and more importantly, the collective atmosphere that an artwork communicates. As mentioned in the theoretical part of the paper, atmosphere is not only an indicator of place identity, but also an indicator of time.

The originality of this paper is the application of visual and social semiotics into the investigation of city representations with reference to their historical and cultural context. The paper attempts to connect semiotic analysis with the concepts of palimpsest and atmosphere. While palimpsest is a notorious metaphor for time, respectively, atmosphere is a metaphor for place. One can realize that time and place are interwoven. Both palimpsest and atmosphere have the structure of superimposed layers. In the palimpsest, the layers correspond to different historical epochs. But as time is accumulated in an artwork, so do also the various cultural elements that characterize every epoch. Similarly, atmosphere is a construction of senses, feelings, ideas, all of which represent the various cultural elements embedded in a place.

4. CONCLUSIONS

It appears from the artworks discussed above that in parallel to the graphic motives that perform the theme of the representation, the expressive means communicate additional meanings. Some of these meanings are contradictory, as, for example, the coexistence in the same artwork of a cyclical element, which symbolizes the female, with an orthogonal,
Bibliography


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**Biographical note**