

Moulding Sorrow


The interdependencies of memories of a place where I am not physically present and the experience of the place, I am now.

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Introduction

“Each man’s destiny is personal, only insofar as it may happen to resemble what is already in his memory.”
—Eduardo Mallea (quoted from Paul Bowles, *The Sheltering Sky*)

“Moulding Sorrow” (“Formgebendes Leiden”) was initially developed in the early 1990s in a discourse between Vienna and Santa Monica, California³, slowly solidifying the concepts of its meaning over many years. It is bound to the city of Vienna, from conversational content, literary texts, texts of old and new Viennese songs, popular television series, newspaper reports on the subject of migration and flight and other aspects in contrast to the Pacific coast of Southern California. These observations were held together by the thesis: Viennese people appear unfriendly, grumpy, dismissive, murmuring and lamenting. Our aim with “Moulding Sorrow” was to describe the observed phenomena from a coherent conceptual framework. The theme meandered along over time, becoming broader and narrower, drying up, but always reappearing. We present some facets which are connected to the concept of “Moulding Sorrow” and discuss the usefulness of this approach. A first approach opened up for us via the novel “Too Loud a Solitude” by the Czech author Bohumil Hrabal (1990), providing us with a literary description of the facts. A further facet was the discussion about home, self-alienation, leaving or loss of home in the nineteenth century. Henry David Thoreau’s “Walden” (1854) is an essential work for this consideration.

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³ Based on a report by M. Fugléwicz about a personal experience during a hike across the Austrian Alps on a hot summer day, wrapped in wet white linen, the authors developed the concept of “Moulding Sorrow” based on differentiated perceptions of narrative in Vienna and Santa Monica, CA that evoked the image of a pilgrimage.

“Moulding Sorrow” is the slightly uneasy feeling that you want to be in a different place, and as you reflect upon it, it moulds both the place you are in and the place you consider. This “other” place can be on the other side of the table or the other side of the world. These places are co-dependent and shaped by your experience. The other place can exist only in a book or your imagination, and it may be easier to access than a physical location that requires an arduous journey. The two locations cannot be experienced independently from one another and create a unified image.

The interdependence of the relationship between space and time continuously changes – in our lives and over centuries. We experience different spaces differently as we age, yet the way our feelings and sorrows are moulded remain connected to the places we visit, or we care for. The ways we access physical spaces through travel have significantly changed over the last 216 years,⁴ due to the ability to travel long distances by mechanical means. In the last 100 years the perception of distance changed by delivering moving images of places in an ever-increasing reality, with virtual reality providing immersive experiences for armchair travel. See also a review by Paul Joseph (2020). As the relationship between places and our physical experience to reach them changes, the memories of these places change as well. Exploring these relationships allows access to the sense of belonging as well as the opposite – the feeling of displacement. This paper has two parts, Part I: Memory of Places and Part II: Habitus and Migration.

Part I: Memory of Places

There

Experiences mould the sense of longing and belonging in both places – “the place you are in and the place you are no longer or not yet in” (Concept developed by the authors). This shapes our socio-cultural way of being in both places over the years. The experience of multi-locality makes us all migrants, and we discuss in this paper how “Moulding Sorrow” can help understand how to find one’s place in a world of real, virtual, and imaginary places. Exploring these binary relationships allows of a deeper sense of belonging and home. The notion of leaving and returning requires an anchoring point that the home provides. It is a necessary element in the development of places of memory as we travel and develop our imagination. As the Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa puts it: “It is the power of memory that gives rise to the power of imagination” (Kurosawa, 2011, p. 30).

Here

Memory not only shapes who we are and how we develop, but it is also directly connected to the spaces where we live. The house we grew up in defines how we perceive the space we inhabit as well as the sequence of spaces we remember. “A house constitutes a body of

⁴ The first steam engine with a passenger train

images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability. We are constantly re-imagining its reality” (Bachelard, 1969, p. 17).

The importance of the house as a place of reference is relatively new for humans and became a necessity during the agricultural revolution. Before personal dwellings, religious structures served as a geographical reference. Gobekli Tepe, a prehistoric structure in south-eastern Turkey, dating back 11000 years, is the oldest holy place we know of. It is 6000 years older than Stonehenge (Curry, 2008). These places of worship were visited more or less frequently and did not serve as housing. People travelled there on pilgrimages such as the Hajj, the Islamic pilgrimage. “The literal meaning of the word Hajj is ‘heading to a place for the sake of visiting’” (Jalaldeen, 2016, p. 26).

The feeling of belonging to a place, a house, a room is also culturally shaped by the community and impacted by how often and how far you move (Cavell, 1991). Constant displacement may be experienced as a level of freedom to roam or as a missing sense of grounding. The sense of not belonging is acquired or inherited. Jewish identity is inherently shaped by diaspora and the many legal limitations, not being allowed to own land, being expelled, deported, or otherwise limited in one’s personal sense of place in time.

Space and time define our ontic way of being, our “Dasein” (Heidegger, 2010, § 4) and our memory about spaces we have visited. The English quasi-translation of "being-there" has too many spatial qualities compared to the German term in its general use as well as in Heidegger's use, while “sein” is translated as being.

The proposed framework explores these binary relationships between the place we are now and the place we reflect upon, i.e. the place we are at the moment experienced through the filter of another location. Every space we enter is also a memory space that we experience both physically and in our imagination. While we all conform in our daily practices of getting up and going to bed, as Pierre Bourdieu describes it, our experience is vastly different based on our memories of places: “‘Don’t we all eat the same wheat cake (or the same barley)?’ ‘Don’t we all get up at the same time?’” These various ways of reasserting solidarity contain an implicit definition of the fundamental virtue of conformity” (Bourdieu, 1977). As we all get up at the same time, we find ourselves in places that are different from the places we want to be, assuming that we have ever been in more than one place, which is very likely. These places include both real and imaginary places. We are unclear as to where we belong and where we want to be at a given moment, which creates this notion of “Moulding Sorrow”.

Ars memoriae and places

The fleeting character of individual and collective memory, the loss of memory, as well as its maintenance, has occupied humans for millennia. Scott (1999, p.32) discusses how