PERCEPTIONS OF PLACES IN MAGICAL-REALIST NOVELS[1]

Delia-Maria RADU
University of Oradea

E-mail: dradu@uoradea.ro

Abstract:
Our senses create a connection with the world, structure and define spaces. Perceptions help us give meaning and order to the world we live in. We perceive places subjectively (and even culturally and socially conditioned), visually, but also through their sounds, smells, tastes or textures. The present study, part of a larger project, stems from Paul Rodaway's theory of perception, defined both as sensation or feeling, i.e. information collected and mediated by senses, and as cognition, i.e. mental process involving memories and associations. Understanding perception as information about the surrounding world mediated by senses, the paper focuses on the way writers use senses such as sight, smell, touch and hearing to build urban fictional worlds in three novels labelled as magical realist, namely Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children *(1981), Jeanette Winterson's* The Passion *(1987) and Angela Carter's* Nights at the Circus *(1984). Another useful theory has been that of Kathy Mezei and Clara Briganti (2002), according to which spaces of domesticity shape the people who inhabit them, storing memories and setting the grid for their lives. The paper sets out to answer questions such as the*

[1] Article History: Received: 02.08.2024. Revised: 19.09.2024. Accepted:24.09.2024. Published: 15.11.2024. Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution License CC BY-NC 4.0. Citation: RADU, D.M. (2024). PERCEPTIONS OF PLACES IN MAGICAL-REALIST NOVELS. *Incursiuni în imaginar 15. Magical Realism in Literature*. Vol. 15. Nr. 1. pp. 179-202, https://doi.org/10.29302/InImag.2024.15.1.7
No funding was received either for the research presented in the article or for the creation of the article.

following: how do the characters perceive the settings? How does the description of the different places where the novels unfold use sensory elements to introduce the reader to the atmosphere? Is the visual element predominant or do the authors also resort to the other senses? Are the senses used only in perceiving the external world or are they also used in rendering the inner worlds of the protagonists in the selected works? Are there moments in the text where senses are also connected to memories? Close reading of the texts generally reveals that the background places in which the novels unfold are most often perceived by the characters through sight, smell and hearing, and sometimes by touch, although this happens less frequently.

Keywords: perceptions; senses; places; Rushdie; Carter; Winterson.

1. Introduction

Talking about the representation of place, Paul Rodaway defines perception as sensation, information collected and mediated by the senses, and perception as cognition, as a mental process involving memories and associations mediated by culture (Rodaway, 2002, p. 11). The cultural dimension of perception is given by the fact that perceptual sensitivity is learnt as socialisation of a cultural group, since ways of perceiving and meanings given to perceptions vary over time and between cultures. We experience the world through our senses, which contribute to our orientation in space. Our sense of smell enables us to identify odours and associate them with sources and situations, with an important part in remembering experiences. Olfaction may be connected with an exploratory behaviour focusing on specific smells, stirred by certain odours, associations or memories.

Human beings are primarily visually oriented (environment is first and foremost visually experienced),

but information is also gathered through hearing and sounds, used for communicating not only among them but also with natural elements (aboriginal people using singing and instrument playing, for instance). Rodaway coins the syntagm "sensuous geographies" which, applied to literature, points to the setting, to the characters' spatial movement and activities, to the descriptions of places or landscapes, the invocation of shapes, olfactory and sonorous intensities. Other researchers such as Sten Pultz Moslund speak about a topo-poetic reading. It examines the way in which language creates the sensorial experience of the physical presence of space/place (Pultz Moslund, 2015, p. 11) within the text, and sees place as emotional, imagined, remembered or experienced by the senses (in Tally Jr, 2011, p. 30).

Versions of places

In his *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie talks about writing his novel *Midnight's Children*, recalling how he had spent many months simply trying to recall as much of India as he could before beginning it:

> Bombay is a city built by foreigners upon reclaimed land; I, who had been away so long that I almost qualified for the title, was gripped by the conviction that, I, too, had a city and a history to reclaim. [...] Writing my book in North London, looking out through my window on to a city scene totally unlike the ones I was imagining on to paper [...] I felt obliged [...] to make clear that [...] my India was just that: 'my' India, a version [...] of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions. (Rushdie, 1992, p. 10)

"I have been a swallower of lives, and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well",

warns the narrator of *Midnight's Children* at the beginning of his story (Rushdie, 1991, p. 4). He thus invites the readers to a journey into his inner world, as the story that follows is recounted from his perspective.

This movement forward, the step inside the character, anticipates the story of Aadam Sinai, Saleem's grandfather, but Saleem's overflow of stories has its counterpart in Aadam Sinai's inner emptiness. Returned home after having completed his five-year medical training in the west, he bumps his nose against the ground while bending to pray and decides never to pray again, i.e. gives up faith, which creates an inner void, an empty space inside of him he is not aware of. He sees the previously familiar landscape of his native land "through travelled eyes" (Rushdie, 1992, p. 5), an altered perspective which, instead of the beauty of the place, reveals its narrowness, backwardness, even hostility, as if he were an unwelcomed stranger. He feels enclosed. The physical space is the same as it has always been, but the perception of it has changed following Aadam's foreign training.

The events of Aadam Aziz's life take him to several cities. The first city he moves to after his marriage is Amritsar, presented through olfactory details, mixing the disgusting with the appetizing:

> On April 6th, 1919, the holy city of Amritsar smelled [...] of excrement. [...] Amritsar dung was fresh and (worse) redundant [...] issued from the rumps of the horses between the shafts of the city's many tongas, ikkas and gharries; and mules and men and dogs attended nature's calls, mingling in a brotherhood of shit. But there were cows, too: sacred kine roaming the dusty streets, each patrolling its own territory, staking its claims in excrement. And flies! Public Enemy Number One, buzzing gaily from turd to steaming turd, celebrated and cross-pollinated

> these freely-given offerings. The city swarmed about, too, mirroring the motion of the flies. […] (Rushdie, 1980, p. 30)

Despite the suffocating smell and flies, food is still sold on the streets and trade unfolds naturally: "Spicy sweet fumes rose from a street-snack barrow. 'Hot pakoras, pakoras hot!' A white woman was buying silks from a shop across the street and men in turbans were ogling her." (Rushdie, 1980, p. 30)

In Agra, Aadam Aziz's house, made of stones, is distanced from the road, with a well in front of it, a walled-in garden at the rear and a low outhouse with poor tenants who pay a small rent. On Cornwallis Road, old men chew betel and compete to see who spits farther, hitting an old brass spittoon, while children engage in childlike activities (playing hoop, kabaddi, or drawing beards on posters). Cows walk on the streets and the cycle-rickshaw are a novelty, after the old ones carried by people. Houses are conceived to hide the secrets of their owners, so Aadam Aziz can shelter Nadir Khan, a fugitive, in his cellars: "concealment has always been a crucial architectural consideration in India, so that Aziz's house has extensive underground chambers, which can be reached only through trap-doors in the floors" (Rushdie, 1980, p. 57), which leads to his daughter Mumtaz's love for Nadir and her double life after their subsequent, never consumed, secret marriage.

When Mumtaz, divorced of Nadir, gets married again to Ahmed Sinai, her sister Alia's indecisive suitor, she renames herself Amina Sinai, to begin her new life with a man in Delhi. While New Delhi belongs mainly to the British who have raised palaces in pink stone, the cramped and shabby houses in the Old Delhi shelter the chaos of lives lived from hand to mouth:

> …the houses in the narrow lanes of the old city leaned over, jostled, shuffled, blocked each other's view of the roseate edifices of power […] In the Muslim muhallas or neighbourhoods which clustered around Chandni Chowk, people were content to look inwards into the screened-off courtyards of their lives; to roll chick-blinds down over their windows and verandahs. […] There was no greenery and the cows kept away, knowing they weren't sacred here. Bicycle bells rang constantly. And above their cacophony sounded the cries of itinerant fruit-sellers: Come all you greats-O, eat a few dates-O! (Rushdie, 1980, p. 76)

On her way to the fortune-teller who would reveal what lies ahead for the baby she carries in her womb, Amina Sinai enters "causeways where poverty eats away at the tarmac like a drought, where people lead their invisible lives […] streets which are growing narrower by the minute, more crowded by the inch" (Rushdie, 1980, p. 91). Looking around her, she loses her 'city eyes' and starts noticing human misery and how desperation makes parents mutilate their children in order to provide them a future income from begging.

Old Delhi is also the birthplace of Saleem's future wife, Parvati:

> clustered around the steps of the Friday mosque. No ordinary slum, this, although the huts built out of old packing cases and pieces of corrugated tin and shreds of jute sacking which stood higgledy-piggledy in the shadow of the mosque looked no different from any other shanty-town… because this was the ghetto of the magicians […] the conjurers' slum, to which the greatest fakirs and

> prestidigitators and illusionists in the land continually flocked, to seek their fortune in the capital city. They found tin huts, and police harassment, and rats... (Rushdie, 1980, p. 238)

In a slum clearance programme, in 1976, after the birth of Parvati's son, Aadam Sinai, the ghetto will be torn down and its inhabitants forcefully subjected to sterilisation.

The description of Methwold's Estate, with four identical houses one of which was the house bought by Saleem's parents, provides the narrator with the opportunity to take a brief look at how the city of Bombay evolved in time: "Our Bombay, Padma! It was very different then, there were no night clubs or pickle factories or Oberio-Sheraton Hotels or movie studios; but the city grew at breakneck speed". (Rushdie, 1980, p. 106)

The real estate project of William Methwold, an East India Company officer who dreamed of a fortified British Bombay, designed by British standards, consists of four identical houses named after palaces of Europe (Versailles Villa, Buckingham Villa, Escorial Villa and Sans Souci); it corresponds to Lefebvre's notion of dominated, authoritarian space, the space of power, of the master's project, which disregards the landscape of the place it occupies, and brutalises it (as cited in Armstrong, 2013, p. 17). Thus, transformed according to the wish and interest of those who hold power, the space is dominated and contrasts with the space occupied by natives. The estate ends up being sold to natives, provided that everything stays the same for two months after the sale and the buyers adopt the British lifestyle meanwhile. Revolted and confused at first, the inhabitants of the four mansions start to change under the influence of the houses and imposed customs, resembling the "Britishers", which

mirrors Kathy Mezei and Clara Briganti's perspective, according to which the spaces of domesticity shape the people who inhabit them, they store memories and set a grid for our current and future lives (Mezei and Briganti, 2002, p. 840).

Designed and built to impress first on the outside, these western houses contrast with the Indian architecture, where the houses close on themselves and hide secrets and secret rooms in which characters can lead parallel lives. At the end of the novel, Saleem returns to the city of his childhood, to Bombay, only to find it notably changed: "yes, it was my Bombay, but also not-mine [...] the past failed to reappear" (Rushdie, 1980, p. 540).

In another magical-realist novel, Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*, published in 1987, the young Frenchman Henri gets carried away by his admiration for Napoleon Bonaparte and, together with several of his countrymen, joins the French army, dreaming of meeting and serving his emperor. After a while, homesick, he fondly remembers things he had once hated about life in a small village not too far down the Seine, where news barely arrived, and life followed its natural rhythm. What he remembers are the valley, the sun, the daffodils, the sense of community and the way people talked to each other and helped each other. Compared to his native village, then, the city appears as a place of decay, corruption, degradation, a place that ends up destroying people. Henri remembers the story of a man who considered himself an inventor and who wanted to try his luck in the city, but came back after a few months with no fortune and after having wasted all his family's savings.

In Boulogne, "a sleepy nothing port with a handful of whorehouses" (Winterson, 1987, p. 8), Henri walks around the docks and along houses resembling each other

and lined in rows – they are irrelevant to him, who feels alone and a stranger there. Stationed there while waiting for Napoleon's visit and the imminent invasion of England by sea, Henri barely knows the city but explores it through olfaction, looking for odours that remind him of home. Thus, for him, Boulogne smells of ribs, freshly baked bread and porridge, which brings back happy scenes from his childhood; thus, we believe that the second part of Rodaway's theory of perception, i.e. as a mental process involving memories and associations, applies to this scene as well.

During the Russian campaign, the French soldiers have to endure the freezing cold of the Russian winter, the lack of food and proper military equipment. They hope to march into Moscow, and find shelter and warmth: "Our sustaining hope as the temperatures dropped and we gave up speech was to reach Moscow. A great city where there would be food and fire and friends" (Winterson, 1987, p. 83). Instead, they found that "the city of domes, built to be beautiful, a city of squares and worship" was deserted, blazing, a city refusing to surrender to its invaders. He crosses paths with Villanelle, an unusual young woman, born during an eclipse of the sun and with webbed feet, a hereditary feature of fishermen's sons, but never inherited by their daughters – a sign of her extraordinary destiny.

Solitary, closed in herself and a gambler, Villanelle resembles her native city of Venice, the city of mazes, known only by its inhabitants, a city of disguises, which "enfolds upon itself. Canals hide other canals, alleyways cross and criss-cross so that you will not know which is which until you have lived here all your life", as she tells Henri (Winterson, 1987, p. 113). But for her, Venice is a mysterious space, full of secrets and promises, which needs time to be understood and known. Judith Seaboyer links the city of Venice to the female body, "Venice's

seductive, decorative beauty, its historical reputation for duplicity, and its topography, at once contained and enclosed by water and penetrated by it, has rendered it an ideal vehicle for the historical and cultural burden of ambivalence that inheres in the female body" (Seaboyer, 1997, p. 485).

Mercurial, a city of disguises, Venice is associated by Villanelle with the night, a prosperous past due to trade, and secrets. She talks about the city within the city, known only by few, harbouring thieves, Jews, vagrant children and downfallen aristocrats who have come to live in misery among dejections and rats, as is the case of the old lady whose fortune, ships, expensive jewels and wines were envied and taken by Napoleon and Josephine.

An alternative to the harsh world of rules, reason and balance, Venice symbolises the irrational, the core of passions where fantasies can come true, of gambling in which fortunes and lives can be won or lost in the blink of an eye. After a night at the Casino, just before dawn, revellers drift away "through the arches around St Mark's or lying in piles by the cafés, opening early to provide strong coffee" (Winterson, 1987, p. 60). Another famous café is Florian, where Villanelle occasionally drinks and gazes at the Square, just like countless tourists enjoying their visit in Venice.

The canals are either deserted, silent, or crisscrossed by boats carrying vegetables or water hearses taking away the dead, bridges both unite and divide spaces and people, imposing houses border derelict ones. The house of Villanelle's lover who has stolen her heart reveals the social position and well-being of its inhabitants: it is an elegant and modern six-storeyed house, located on a quite canal, with large, simply furnished rooms. Opening one door after another, like the city, the house seems to

Henri a true maze which he has to navigate in order to find Villanelle's heart.

With the help of well-known elements and landmarks of Venice blended with the imaginary, Winterson achieves what Andreas Mahler considers an individual construct of what can be imagined, not an imitation of the real city but a 'performance' of it, a creation of the textual Venice which comes into being in and through the act of narration, through fictionalisation (see Mahler, 2020, p. 35).

Venetians feel comfortable in the dark, which they can use to their advantage (unlike Henri, who talks about being terrified of and limited by the Dark). Their quiet life is disturbed by the presence of Napoleon's armed forces: "nowadays, the dark has more light than in the old days. There are flares everywhere and soldiers like to see the streets lit up [...] they don't trust our soft feet and thin knives" (Winterson, 1987, p. 57).

Uncapturable by maps, Venice changes depending on when it is seen. During the day it seems a quiet, well-organised city, but at night gambling begins, darkness facilitates the manifestation of true identities and moral standards no longer have value. This duality mirrors that of Napoleon who, apparently, is a great hero, fighting for the glory of France, but in fact he is an invader in his own name, envious of the goods and achievements of others, an inflexible man keen to always impose his will on others. Having taken over Venice, Bonaparte the invader is far from being popular among the locals as he tried to impose his vision and order on it:

> That man demolished our churches on a whim [...] There were four churches that I loved, which stood looking out across the lagoon to the quiet islands that lie about us. He tore them down to make a

> public garden […and] filled it with hundreds of pines laid out in regimental rows. (Winterson, 1987, p. 52)

For the Polish people Henri and Villanelle meet on their way after deserting the French army in Russia, Venice is a place of perdition: "When Villanelle revealed her Venetian origins, hands flew across mouths and saintly women crossed themselves. Venice, the city of Satan" (Winterson, 1987, p. 104).

While Villanelle is reborn after returning to Venice, comments Seaboyer, regaining her old life back, Henri's experience of the city is very different: "In a ritual cleansing, he shaves off his 'ruffian's beard' and casts it into the canal outside his window, and for a moment he thinks he has escaped his past – in Venice such things are possible. But he remains an exile unable to navigate the labyrinth and is swallowed up into madness and despair" (Seaboyer, 1997, p. 485)

At first sight, Venice seems to Henri like "seeing an invented city rise up and quiver in the air […] not built on any lines […] swelled like yeast in a shape of its own" (Winterson, 1987, p. 110). Henri gets lost and wanders for five days until he unexpectedly finds Villanelle's house in this place, he is unable to understand, a city of "madmen", as he calls it. Hopelessly disorientated and unwilling to speak to the natives, he comments on Bonaparte's failure to impose order on this strange city:

> Where Bonaparte goes, straight roads follow, buildings are rationalised, street signs may change to celebrate a battle but they are always clearly marked. Here, if they bother with street signs at all, they are happy to use the same ones over again. Not

> even Bonaparte could rationalise Venice. (Winterson, 1987, p. 112)

Henri sees a different face of this city he does not comprehend: ransacked palaces, with curtains swirling from shutterless windows, busy canals crowded with all kinds of boats and rowed by people standing up, others littered with waste and rats floating pink belly up, churches which seem "to spring overnight like mushrooms and dissolve as quickly with the dawn" (Winterson, 1987, p. 112).

With Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus,* we travel to London and St. Petersburg with Fevvers, a famous "aerialiste", a big attraction of the Alhambra Music Hall, interviewed and followed by Walser, a cynical American reporter, who wishes to write a sensational article about her and find out whether she is an impostor claiming she is half swan and was born with wings.

The story begins in London, in 1891, with Fevvers' interview in her dressing room. The artist talks to Walser about her conquests abroad and her return, as a prodigal daughter, to "my lovely London that I love so much. London - as dear old Dan Leno calls it, 'a little village on the Thames of which the principal industries are the music hall and the confidence trick'" (Carter, 1986, p. 4). Evoking moments of her life, Fevvers speaks highly of London, to which she seems very attached: "dawn rose over London and gilded the great dome of St. Paul's until it looked like the divine pap of the city which, for want of any other, I needs must call my natural mother" (Carter, 1986, p. 25).

During their conversation, in which the initially sceptical journalist becomes more and more enthralled with Fevvers' story, Big Ben strikes the time repeatedly, but at midnight its sound gives Walser the feeling that

"the clock might be striking in a deserted city and they (were) the only inhabitants left alive" (Carter, 1986, p. 25).

For a while, Fevvers had stayed with Madame Schreck, an old lady who owned a museum of woman monsters, in a house whose appearance reflected the horrors hidden inside: "It was a gloomy pile in Kensington, in a square [...] The façade of her house was blackened by the London soot as if the very stucco were in the mourning. A louring portico over the front door, sir, and all the inner shutters tightly barred" (Carter, 1986, p. 42).

At the end of their first meeting, Walser, Fevvers, and Lizzie walk together for a while through Piccadilly, by Nelson's Column, down Whitehall. Even this early in the morning the cold air of the city is dominated by an odour of soot and horseshit. A coal cart is followed by a procession of women of the poorest class and barefoot little children, trying to catch any pieces of coal that might fall out. In spite of Fevvers' repeatedly declared attachment to London, the scenes containing images of it are far from being impressive: cold, soot, bad smells, destitute women and children struggling to survive. It is either an unreal city, as Walser feels sometimes, or the city of soot and poverty reminding us of Dickens' London.

Joining the circus in order to follow Fevvers in her tour to Russia, Walser, turns into a foreign correspondent, and tries to write an article about St. Petersburg, evoking its history in a glorious way:

> At the command of the Prince, the rocks of the wilderness transformed - turned into palaces! The Prince stretched out his lordly hand, pulled down the Northern Lights, used them for chandeliers... Yes! built as St Petersburg was at the whim of a tyrant who wanted his memory of Venice to take form again in stone on a marshy shore at the end of

> the world under the most inhospitable of skies, this city, put together brick by brick by poets, charlatans, adventurers and crazed priests, by slaves, by exiles, this city bears that Prince's name, which is the same name as the saint who holds the keys of heaven... St Petersburg, a city built of hubris, imagination and desire. (Carter, 1986, p. 71)

But Walser realises he is only using his imagination ("I am inventing an imaginary city as I go along", he admits to himself) as Petersburg, like London and any other city, has its share of duplicity as well. The reality is different. It is "a city stuck with lice and pearls, impenetrably concealed behind a strange alphabet, a beautiful, rancid, illegible city" (Carter, 1986, p. 72). As a clown in the circus, Walser is hosted by a poor family, on a street "of warped, shuttered houses (where) the fog closed down like the lid of a pot. A melancholy dog barked in the distance" (Carter, 1986, p. 94).

After becoming aware that he had fallen in love with Fevvers, and after being humiliated by her, Walser loses his balance and "in a state of mental tumult, conflict and disorientation, he wanders the freezing city night, now gazing at the ice thickening on the dark waters of the Neva" (Carter, 1986, p. 109), a sight very different from the initial image he had of the city. His change of perception and his feelings for the city remind us of Henri's disillusioned experience in Venice.

Following a train crash, out of his mind and devoid of memories and identity, Walser tries to find his bearings in the dazzling whiteness of Siberia using his olfactory and auditive senses and reaches a shaman in a trance, beating his drum: "When Walser sniffed the air this time, his nostrils dilated at a whiff of something savoury, something aromatic on the cold-scoured air. The drumming grew

louder and louder [...] as he pursued the delicious scent; until, among the trees, he found a brazier containing a small fire from which fragrant smoke issued" (Carter, 1986, p. 177). The shaman saves his life leading him to his native village where people rely on sight for perceiving the world: they read the tracks left by animals and birds on the snow, the sky reveals the weather forecast, "the wilderness that seemed a bundle of blank paper to the ignorant, urban eye was the encyclopedia, packed with information they consulted every day for every need, conning the landscape as if it were and instruction manual of universal knowledge of the "Inquire within" type." (Carter, 1986, p. 191)

Sensorial instances

The texts we have chosen for this article contain numerous references to the various senses in order to complete and shed light on the fictional worlds in which the characters evolve. For the sake of illustration, with just a few instances, places are perceived as follows, through:

Olfaction

Smell appears repeatedly in Rushdie's novel. The atmosphere, danger and the whiffs of change are sniffed, odours are filled with unease, curiosity has a sharp stink. Mad at the pigskin bag in which Aadam keeps his medical kit, an unclean symbol of his change, Tai reacts not only verbally but also by emanating a strong smell "like a casualty ward overpowering the incense" (Rushdie, 1980, p. 13), and then stops washing. His unbearable smell practically drives Aadam away, forcing him to leave the valley after his mother's death.

Following an accident, Saleem acquires a fine sense of smell that he uses to explore the world, distinguishing smells, even shades of emotions, and aims to put together an encyclopaedia of smells. In another episode, after

losing his memory, his olfactory asset will turn him into a real human dog used by the army, and the taste of a dish helps him regain his memory. Senses, visual elements, sounds and smells are the ones through which the author brings to life before the readers the exotic and chaotic cities and places of India, rather than through detailed architectural descriptions, which are, however, present in some chapters. The cramped, poor and miserable dwellings of the Indians, enclosed in themselves in neighbourhoods invisible to the indifferent, 'city eyes', are reminiscent of the shelters in the labyrinths of Venice for those who escape the law and order of the French invaders, contrasting with the houses of the British conquerors, which reflect another reality and another level of comfort.

Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* shows how Henri and Villanelle understand and experience life and spaces differently and we discuss Henri's image of Boulogne and the way the two characters perceive Venice. Henri barely knows the city but explores it, like Saleem, through olfaction, looking for odours that remind him of home. Thus, for him, Boulogne smells of ribs, freshly baked bread and porridge, which brings back happy scenes from his childhood. The freezing, starving, ill-equipped soldiers of the French army sent by Napoleon to conquer Russia, hope to march into Moscow, and find shelter and warmth, only to end in a deserted, blazing city unwilling to surrender to the enemy (just as Venice resisted Napoleon's systematisation).

Fevvers' dressing room is dominated by a "marine aroma" attributed by Walser to the ice probably bought from a fishmonger and reused for the champagne she drinks, an aroma mixed with perfume, sweat, greasepaint and raw, leaking gas. Her performance bears the mark of "the greasy whiff of stage magic" (Carter, 1986, p. 7). After

the train crash in Siberia, Carter's male protagonist survives by following a scent to a shaman who shelters, feeds him and takes him to his native village.

Sight

Visual elements predominate, naturally, in the outlining of fictional places. The fragmentation of India Saleem refers to, corresponds to the fragmented image Aadam Aziz, his grandfather, got of his future wife by consulting her through a perforated sheet placed, in turn, over the various ailing body parts. Perceptions are subjective, as shown by Aadam, who finds Kashmir valley narrower and less imposing when he returns from his medical training. His vision has been altered by his contact with the Western world, his blue eyes resemble but are different than those of Kashmiri men who see life traditionally, "who have not forgotten how to look" beyond the surface (Rushdie, 1980, p. 5), Saleem writes.

The idea of a different, foreign gaze (called "city eyes") is repeated in relation to the extremely poor part of the population hidden in ghetto-like neighbourhoods, where tourists or outsiders scarcely penetrate. For these "city eyes", the poverty-stricken streets do not seem to grow narrower by the minute, as they do for Amina Sinai, the beggars are invisible, just like the concrete sections of drainpipes used as dormitories.

Jeanette Winterson wrote *The Passion* before visiting Venice and resorts to its well-known landmarks combined with imaginary elements to outline her city. Constantly changing, complex and secretive, Venice does not allow itself to be changed, mapped or known, just like Villanelle, who remains an enigma for Henri. Its canals can be wide, lined by beautiful, imposing houses and crisscrossed by supply or festive boats, as well as maze-like, narrow, endless, filled with deadly water carrying garbage, inert fish and funeral boats. Mazes in Venice

resemble the poor neighbourhoods of India, enfolding upon themselves, with a secret life of their own.

At the beginning of the novel, Fevvers is perceived in her daily after-performance ritual, in her dressing room where garments and things are thrown at random and many of them are not the cleanest. She removes her make-up looking at herself in the mirror (through which she sometimes glances at Walser as well). At one point, her eyes give Walser the feeling of Chinese boxes confusing him, drawing him into an endless abyss.

Heather Johnson notes that in *Nights at the Circus*, Carter grounds her story in a realistic manner "through the references to the actual geography of London – Queenstown Road, Belgravia, Piccadilly, Trafalgar Square, Chelsea Bridge and St. Paul's" (in Stoddart, 2007, p. 76). The magic of the story occurs in Fevvers' dressing-room, while the outside places of London mentioned in the novel, in spite of Fevvers' repeatedly declared attachment to the city, remind the reader of Dickens's descriptions of London, foggy and full of soot. The eulogistic text about St. Petersburg that Walser struggles to type is in complete contrast to the reality and the conditions the circus employees are forced to live in during their tour.

The cold, the lack of food and light, the impoverished neighbourhoods of the ordinary inhabitants, who share their homes with the circus staff contrast with the luxury of the hotel where the circus star, Fevvers, is lodged, and with the services she benefits from. The expanses of Siberia are another place where the senses are needed for orientation and survival. Walser's glorious lines dedicated to St. Petersburg "built at the whim of a tyrant" remind us of Napoleon Bonaparte's intervention in Venice mentioned by Winterson's Villanelle.

Sounds

Despite writing his story, Saleem uses spoken language which adds to the sonorous background of the public, urban scenes. His chatter is doubled at the beginning by boatman Tai's "endless verbiage" swiftly carried over the lake. The conflict between his grandparents, in which The Reverend Mother refuses to speak to her husband, leads to her visible swelling (due to the repressed, unspoken words) and a scene in which she bursts into a stream of reproaches for everything that has happened meanwhile. In cities, bicycle bells are combined with the cries of street vendor praising their merchandise. Following an accident, when Saleem pretends to turn into a human radio, he begins to hear in the dark the voices of the other children of midnight and it takes a while before he can distinguish and control them, putting them into contact with the others and helping them communicate.

Winterson demystifies Napoleon by presenting a cruel and ridiculous image of him. His obsession with chicken meat means that, wherever he travels, he is accompanied by birds kept in cages and mutilated (beaks and claws cut off) so as not to make any sound and attract the enemy's attention. The silencing of the wretched birds corresponds, symbolically, to the silencing of the French people in the name of the emperor's ambitions. In Venice, Henri is asked by Villanelle to find and fetch her heart stolen by another woman, so he breaks into the woman's house and finds the heart by the regular, steady noise it makes.

Visual elements are blended with auditory ones, as Fevvers removes her make-up, eats, drinks and makes various noises very casually. Her voice, which tells her story with a particular accent, detains and bewitches Walser who perceives London as an illusory city in which time stops and everything gets suspended. The feeling of

irreality during his interview with Fevvers is also strengthened by the distant sounds of Big Ben striking midnight several times. Later, in their tour to Siberia with the circus, following a train crash, out of his mind and devoid of memories and identity, Walser tries to find his bearings in the dazzling whiteness of Siberia using his olfactory and auditive senses. At the end of the novel, Siberia points to Man's lost connection to nature and his senses that used to help him read the world and the spaces in order to survive.

Touch

On her way to the prophecy for her yet unborn baby, Amina Sinai climbs an airless stairway in the dark, and the eyes glinting at her through the shuttered doors are "lapping her up like bright rough cats' tongues" (Rushdie, 1980, p. 76). The prophecy is also triggered by the seer's touching of Amina's womb, "a brief sharp jolt of electricity passed between pudgy fingers and maternal skin" (Rushdie, 1980, p. 80).

During Napoleon's campaign in Russia, the cold affects the soldiers who get serious wounds between their toes and above their upper lips due to salt and the wind. These wounds are felt, they are painful and can be touched.

Fevvers' wings, when not performing, are covered by clothing. In her dressing room, at the beginning of his interview, Walser notices them through the palpable smoothness of the satin, through "the soiled quilting of her baby-blue satin dressing-gown, where they made [...] bulges, shuddering the surface of the taut fabric from time to time" (Carter, 1986, p. 1). Brought up in a brothel, Fevvers remembers its marble staircase with a slippery handrail down which she used to slide in her childhood.

Conclusions

We have started from Rodaway's theory about the perception of the surrounding world as mediated by the senses and wanted to see how these senses are used by three subjectively chosen authors to create the universe in which their characters evolve. We have wondered whether the visual element is predominant or if the authors also resort to the other senses. We have seen that, repeatedly, reference is also made to smell, sometimes supplemented by auditory elements, that perception is multisensory and, most often, the three writers discussed have combined several senses to render the places their stories unfold.

By means of a few examples, we have seen that although the visual element predominates in the chosen texts, the fictional world is also created through other senses such as smell, hearing and even touch, which give a complex image of the way in which the characters perceive the world around them or their inner one. To a lesser extent, the texts also reveal the cognitive dimension of perceptions, the one in which mental processes involve memories and associations, especially related to the universe of childhood, confirming Rodaway's theory.

References:

Armstrong, I. (2013). Theories of Space and the Nineteenth-Century Novel, in *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Issue 17/2013, Space. Retrieved June 12, 2024, from https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.671.

Carter, A. (1986). *Nights at the Circus*. New York: Penguin Books.

Johnson, H. (2007). Metafiction, Magical Realism and Myth. In Helen Stoddart, *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus* (pp. 69-81). London and New York: Routledge.

Kindermann, M., Rohleder, R. (Eds.), (2020). *Exploring the Spatiality of the City across Cultural Texts. Narrating Spaces, Reading Urbanity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mahler, A. (2020). City Scripts/City Scapes: On the Intertextuality of Urban Experience. In Kinderman, M., Rohleder, R. (Eds.), *Exploring the Spatiality of the City across Cultural Texts. Narrating Spaces, Reading Urbanity* (pp. 25-44). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mezei, K., Briganti, C. (2002). Reading the House: A Literary Perspective. *Signs*, 27 (3) 837-846. Retrieved May 25, 2022, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/337928.

Preston, P.; Simpson-Housley, P. (Eds.). (2002). *Writing the City: Eden, Babylon, and the New Jerusalem*, Taylor & Francis e-Library.

Pultz Moslund, S. (2015). *Literature's Sensuous Geographies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Pultz Moslund, S. (2011). The Presencing of Place in Literature: Toward an Embodied Topopoetic Mode of Reading. In Tally, R.T. Jr (Ed.). *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies*. (pp. 29-43). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rodaway, P. (2002). *Sensuous Geographies. Body, Sense and Place*. Routledge: London and New York.

Rushdie, S. (1992). *Imaginary Homelands*. Essays and Criticism 1981-1991. London: Granta Books.

Rushdie, S. (1980). *Midnight's Children*. New York & London: Penguin Books.

Seaboyer, J. (1997). Second Death in Venice: Romanticism and the Compulsion to Repeat in Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*. *Contemporary Literature*, 38(3), 483-509.

Stoddart, H. (2007). *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus*. New York: Routledge.

Tally, R. T. Jr. (Ed.), (2011). *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Winterson, J. (1987). *The Passion*. New York: Grove Press.

≈≈

Delia-Maria RADU is an Associate Professor of Comparative Literature and Theory of Literature at the University of Oradea, Faculty of Letters. She is the author of *Specular Women in Romanian Fiction,* co-author of *Gastroselves: Expressing Identity in a Hyper-Consumerist Society* and has published numerous articles on comparative literature, cultural studies and magic realism, such as: *Riflessi della storia e della politica nei romanzi di Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Salman Rushdie e Isabel Allende*; *On Silences and Voices in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children*; *Magic Realism, Between Globalization and National Identity; Solitude, Longing and Struggle for Survival in Cătălin Dorian Florescu's "The Man Who Brings Happiness"; Coming from Elsewhere. Migrant Experiences in Fiction/Cuando venimos de otra parte. Experiencias migratorias en la ficción; From Commodity to Daily Ritual: Coffee in Fiction;* a.s.o. Her research has three main strands: food image and symbolism in fiction and film; magic realism; migrant identities and experiences in fiction.