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THE SPACE OF SLOVENIAN LITERARY CULTURE: FRAMEWORK AND GOALS OF A RESEARCH PROJECT

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Abstract:

The paper presents a recently launched project on studying the space of Slovenian literary culture from the enlightenment to the mid-twentieth century. By mapping geo-cultural data with GIS, the research will explore, how and to what degree geographical factors influenced the development and spatial distribution of Slovenian literary culture, but also, how literature, with its spatial representations, shaped the apprehension of geographical spaces and imbued them with semantics that was crucial in identity building.

Key words: Slovenian literature, spatial humanities, literary history, literary geography, GIS

The Institute of Slovenian Literature and Literary Studies at the Research Center of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts has recently started the project entitled *The Space of Slovenian Literary Culture: Literary History and the GIS-Based Spatial Analysis*. With it, our research group consisting of literary scholars and geographers¹ is taking part of the interdisciplinary field of the spatial research of media and culture (e.g., Döring & Thielmann 2009) more precisely described by the terms “literary geography”, which has been in use since the early twentieth century, and the new formulation “spatial literary studies.” Literary studies, being a humanities discipline, have in recent decades systematically analyzed the meaning of space in the objects of its study. Among many possible approaches, such as, for example “area studies” in comparative Slavic studies (cf. Pospišil 2003, 2006, 2010), we have selected the one that, in considering the role of space in and for literature, connects with social (“human”) geography and contemporary technologies of mapmaking based on geographic information systems (GIS). From the perspective of current contextual methods, literature is thought to be a complex system in which texts, as elements of discourse, are inherently connected with realities, actors, media, producers, and institutions in a special and to a degree autonomous field (Juvan 2011; Perenič 2010). We use the term “literary culture” to designate the field. Slovenian-language literary culture began forming in the context of the awakening of European nations, and it continued a process of differentiation into the first half of the twentieth century. In the period between the almanac *Pisanice* (1779–81), the first publication intended for esthetic enjoyment, and the beginning of WW II in Slovenia (1941) Slovenian literary culture and the Slovenian ethnic territory underwent successive divisions of state governance and political changes. This influenced the dynamic

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of the internal territorial distribution of Slovenian literary culture and its external ties to other literary fields.

Methodological self-reflection in the humanities and social sciences since the 1980s has been marked by a shift in attention to space as an interpretive key for understanding society, history, and culture. The shift from the temporal and narrative to the spatial can be connected to the early twentieth-century modernism, when nineteenth-century historicism had exhausted itself (cf., for example, Foucault 1967). Others perceive the spatial turn in structuralism of the second half of the twentieth century (from Braudel and French New History on). Yet others connect it only with postmodern geography and theories of the late 1980s (e.g., Soja and Jameson). Evaluation of the epistemological value of the turn ranges from the conviction that it brings fundamentally new views to the humanities and social sciences and introduces a new discipline, comparable to the totality of historiography (e.g., Soja 1989, 1996; Bachmann-Medick 2006; Halle & Neumann 2009), to the opinion that the “spatial turn” is just another self-promoting slogan (e.g., Schlögel 2003).

Geographers have kept their distance from the spatial enthusiasm of other humanists and social scientists, although it was one of their own (Soja 1989, 1996) that gave currency to the “spatial turn.” After all, for geography space is the fundamental epistemological category from the very beginning. Geography appeals to humanists because it is a discipline that has successfully connected the natural physical and intellectual-cultural spheres of humans’ existence in the world. On the other hand, contemporary geography itself has been transforming itself in recent years with a view to literary studies. It employs the fashionable metaphor “the landscape is a text” (Barnes & Duncan 1992) or the concept of “writing” (Barnes & Duncan 1992). The term “geography” means “description of the Earth” (Duncan & Duncan 1988).

The position of our project in these debates is that the spatial turn is nothing but a shift in the structural dominant that permits scholarly discourse epistemologically to advance new or heretofore undervalued dependencies. An example is the historical dynamic of cultural centers and regional identities. Thematic maps of literature’s spaces and literary spaces play an important role in this. Their epistemological value has not yet been tested in Slovenia. The project’s point of departure is that the space of Slovenian literary culture is multi-layered and diverse, situated in a spatial complex of the natural physical given and the socio-culturally produced, which is also connected with spaces imagined by literature. Space has a temporal dimension that comprises the sequence and coexistence of rhythmically unlike processes. A space thus understood, does not causally determine literature (Bakhtin [1981] refuted spatial determinism already in the 1930s, as did Lotman [1977], Soja [1989], Moretti [1999, 2005], Böhme [2005], Dünne in Günzel [2006], and Stockhammer [2007] after him).

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Geographical space doubtless influences literature, but in such a way that by virtue of literature's social existence it facilitates and engenders or hinders and discourages various developmental possibilities (e.g., technologically progressive transportation increase the possibility of cultural transfer). Physical geographical and socio-cultural spaces are two factors influencing the construction and meaning of textual worlds (e.g., Bakhtin's concept of a chronotope [1981] or Lotman's concept of the semiosphere [1990]). However, literature, too, has a reverse influence on space, by means of its material and socio-institutional reach as well as by textual structures and imagination (see Westphal [2000], Soja [1989]). Literature is involved in the social formation, production, imagination, and conceptualization of space: without literature, there would be no theater, public libraries, cultural societies, and other essentials that changed the image of the Slovenian environment. Without Prešeren's poetry, the Savica would be simply another Slovenian waterfall; without Kosovel's poems, the Kras region would have no poetic value in the Slovenian consciousness.

At the end of the 20th century, maps sparked the interest of historians and literary scholars because of their great informativity: maps are involved in both shaping and presenting human relations with the world. Maps for studying literature have for the entire 20th century been aids for visualizing the findings of literary studies. In Europe, pioneer "literary" maps appeared already in the second half of the 19th century (Baedeker and Murray included scenes from *David Copperfield* in guidebooks and offered tours in the steps of Byron's *Don Juan*). The visualization of literary spaces according to scientific cartographic rules begins only at the turn of the 20th century (e.g., *Literary and Historical Map of London*, 1899), especially with literary atlases, such as *Deutscher Literaturatlas* (1907). It is Morretti (1999, 2005) in particular who began explicitly to use maps as an analytic tool for bringing literary studies closer to the scientific ideal. He mapped spaces depicted in literary texts (literary geography has recently developed markedly in this direction [e.g., Piatti 2008]), but also spaces in which literature lived. The mapping of these data, such as the number and distribution of libraries and the profile of their collections, is not only an illustration of given literary historical findings, but a tool that makes possible for literary scholarship to determine the laws of literary processes.

Our point of departure is the expectation that mapping historical processes will furnish new knowledge of Slovenian literary culture and empirical confirmation or rejection of existing interpretations. The map is becoming an ever more potent analytic tool thanks to the development of satellite navigation technology and GIS (cf. Bodenhamer, Corrigan & Harris 2010). GIS makes possible the spatial distribution and flexible representation of various kinds of data, quantitative and qualitative alike. Although the advantages of this technology have further spurred interest in space, relations between GIS and the

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humanities are complex. The structure of GIS is adapted to realistic, positivist epistemology and quantitative analyses characteristic of the social sciences. Therefore, GIS would appear to be difficult to unite with the nature of the humanities, with their interest in unique, qualitative, and historical treatment of phenomena. Our project will be part of the recent search for a solution by which GIS can be adapted to the special needs and methods of the humanities (i.e., GIS humanities).

To conclude: The project's main thesis is that literary discourse in Slovenian could become dominantly manifest in public in two ways, in both of which space played a key role:

- by the formation and extension of a socio-spatial network of literary actors, media, and institutions in the ethnically Slovenian territory (these networks were organized around increasingly important urban centers whose cultural capital gradually grew);
- by Slovenian-language literary works referring to geographic spaces that according to their geographical names and described features could be recognized by the audience as Slovenian chronotopes; in this way media created an idea of an unified national space that became the basis for a national movement and a drive towards cultural and political autonomy.

The project will employ GIS analysis and case studies to test whether it is also possible to support other hypotheses:

- the development and spatial distribution of literary culture were also a function of geographic factors: settlement network, population density, economic, traffic, and cultural development in an area; internal Slovenian relations between centers and peripheries, urban and rural, changes in state borders, and the gravitational force of cultural and administrative centers outside of Slovenia;
- by representing specific geographic spaces, literature aided the formation of regional and provincial identities;
- literature influenced the perception and valuing of Slovenian lands and settlements and invested them with meaning.