

Mood

– (*Stimmung*) – an aesthetic quality not yet defined within the context of poetics, emerging in the process of a cultural text's reception, formed as a result of objective and subjective factors in that process.

The term *Stimmung* developed in German aesthetics and was closely connected with the concept of harmony, understood as an epistemological category. The first phase of the concept's development came in the period of Sturm und Drang, when a way of overcoming the rationalist paradigm then dominant in the study of cognition was sought. Even in the work of Immanuel Kant, however, we find a mention of the need to create proportional agreement between imagination and intellect (and thus emotional and rational perception) in order to achieve full cognition.¹ Friedrich Schiller would later speak of mood in a similar spirit.

Dawid Wellbery, in his *Historical Dictionary of Basic Concepts of Aesthetics*, quotes the words of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe referring to a sculpture by Falconet: "he likes to go inside a cobbler's workshop or a stable, he likes to look at the face of his love, or at his boots, or at some antique ruins, because everywhere he feels sacred vibrations and hears the quiet tones through which nature connects everything with everything."² Accessible to artists, as individuals of above-average sensitivity, mood thus constitutes an aesthetic quality that reveals itself as a harmonic unity shaped by a system of seemingly unrelated elements.

The concept was developed by Friedrich Hölderlin, and several decades later by Friedrich Nietzsche, but in their considerations we see a significant narrowing of the scope of categories that can be called moods. In their interpretation of moods, they permit only discussions referring to antiquity (Hölderlin) or, more generally, to earlier stages in the formation of civilization (Nietzsche). The impression (or illusion) of harmonious unity joining varied elements of those times is supposed to make possible the creation of a unified imagining of them, shared by all members of a given form of social organization later in history. Under their influence, to this day the discourse on mood has avoided using the concept to define the present.

In the 1940s, those reservations received partial confirmation in the writings of Leo Spitzer, who in the face of the Second World War declared that it was no longer possible to talk about mood, understood as a certain harmony joining various elements in social life. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, however, quotes a statement from the same period by Gottfried Benn from which it is possible to draw the paradoxical conclusion that the very fact of universal certitude in the impossibility of imagining a harmony capable of uniting the society of that time is in itself a certain kind of mood. From that moment on, as Gumbrecht continues, mood was freed of the constraints placed on it by Hölderlin and Nietzsche, and could be used with much greater liberty – so that we can now talk about the mood of practically every historical event and every cultural text.³

¹ See I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. P. Guyer and E. Matthews, Cambridge 2000, 134-136.

² D. Wellbery, "Stimmung" in: *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe. Historisches Wörterbuch*, vol. 5, ed. von Karlheinz Barck et al., Stuttgart-Weimar 2003, 705.

³ H.U. Gumbrecht, "Reading for Stimmung: How to Think About the Reality of Literature Today," in *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, trans. Erik Butler, Stanford 2012, 1-23.

The term *Stimmung*, in the sense outlined above, comes across in its context of Western literary and cultural theory as untranslatable. Leo Spitzer, in his study *Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony*, observes that while it is easy to find French or English equivalents for some German phrases incorporating the term (*in gutter/schlechter Stimmung sein* = *être en bonne/mauvaise humeur*, *to be in a good/bad mood*; *erstellen Stimmung* = *créer une atmosphère*, *to create atmosphere*), those languages do not have an equivalent that fully conveys the meaning of *Stimmung* understood as “the unity of feelings experienced by man face to face with his environment, (a landscape, nature, one’s fellow man), and would comprehend and weld together the objective (factual) and the subjective (psychological) into one harmonious unity.”⁴ A Polish dictionary likewise notes two meanings for the Polish equivalent of *Stimmung*, *nastrój*: 1) “a general psychic state maintained over a given period in which feelings of a definite type prevail, and an inclination toward reaction in accordance with those feelings; disposition” and 2) “the reigning atmosphere in a milieu, or surrounding some place or phenomenon.”⁵ Though the Polish word is often used in Polish literary scholarship and represents an aesthetic category whose meaning is similar to the German version, it is understood rather in an arbitrary and intuitive fashion, and has never been precisely defined terminologically, whether in the domain of poetics, literary theory, or aesthetics.

The term *Stimmung*, understood as it is being used here, in a poetologico-philosophical context, should also not be confused with the category of *nastrojowość* (atmosphere), especially popular in the modernist era and used above all in modernist discourse on painting. Aleksander Gierymski understood *nastrój* to mean “making an image from feeling and memory”; he further presented the concept of painting as a representation of the world by means of only an aggregate of colored stains and tricks of light.⁶ In its late period, atmospheric painting became synonymous with a certain kind of kitsch and was quite radically rejected by members of the Polish avant-garde. Mood or atmosphere as understood in that context represents a certain objective property of the artistic work, one whose evaluation may vary, whereas mood as understood in poetics is an intersubjective quality emerging from the relationship between the reader and the literary work. Though it is connected in a natural way with the aesthetic contemplation of a given cultural text, it constitutes rather an epistemological category and therefore is not defined in the same way and is not subject to such kinds of evaluations.

The impulse to grasp mood within the categories of poetics and literary theory is presented by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s essay “Reading for Stimmung: How to Think About the Reality of Literature Today,” the introduction to his book *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*. The German-American scholar justifies introducing this category into literary scholarship in terms of the need to find a “third position” for the ontology of literature, to situate it between two extreme positions on literature’s relationship to reality. At one polarity we find the tradition of the linguistic turn (where Gumbrecht places deconstruction, among other currents), which *a priori* rejects any possibility whatsoever of linguistic reference to the world outside of language; at the other, we find cultural studies, for which there

⁴ L. Spitzer, “Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony. Prolegomena to an Interpretation of the Word ‘Stimmung,’” in *Traditio*, 1944, no. 2, 409-464.

⁵ *Słownik języka polskiego PWN* (PWN Dictionary of Polish Language), ed. E. Sobol, Warszawa 2002, 505. P. Baranowski, F. Hatt, *Światło w malarstwie* (Light in Painting), Poznań 2013, 41.

have never existed any circumstances that could undermine literature's referential capabilities. Gumbrecht's chief argument for allowing mood and atmosphere to occupy this special intermediate position is the fact that mood is a result not only of the text's referential aspirations (and thus everything that the text seeks to "present") but to an equal extent also of its material aspects, such as prosody, i.e., its constituent component parts. Because the incorporation of the level of representation in the process of reading manifests in this formulation as a possibility rather than a necessity, mood can also be understood to leave aside that kind of activity; the dispute over the text's referential capabilities or lack thereof thus becomes neutralized.⁷

In order to define mood in the context of literary studies (though Gumbrecht applies the category of mood to other cultural texts besides literature), the scholar invokes a statement by Toni Morrison in which she describes mood by means of metaphor, saying that it resembles something like "being touched as if from inside."⁸ Taking a cue from the novelist and poet, one might also attempt to define it as a category describing an elusive moment in the reader's relationship with the text, whether reading for work or for pleasure, that occurs as an impression or an illusion of "being absorbed" in the world presented in the text. Such a moment appears to be possible due precisely to the somehow harmonious tuning of all of the components out of which the work is constructed (thus referential components, such as the types of characters presented, the nature of the places described, intangible or ephemeral characteristics of a given culture or period, and such like, together with material components of the work, above all prosody, but also, bearing in mind the increasingly popular ontological studies of objects, features of the text's presentation, such as the form of its publication) into a coherent, if imperceptible, and perhaps largely illusory, whole, which yet allows the reader full acquaintance with the text, that is, both at the level of facts and on the emotional plane. The author of the present work holds that despite a certain amount of indistinction and intuitiveness inherent in the definition of mood presented above, it can at least be stated clearly that such a "Mood" (or, to be precise, such a *Stimmung*) is always single for a given cultural text (or rather, for a given encounter with a certain cultural text, a point to which we shall return toward the end of this inquiry) and is unique to it, unlike the purely aesthetic moods containing the events that take place in the text (such as moods of menacing, romantic, or idyllic moods), which may be subject to the same laws of variable dynamics as the plot and which will always be repetitive, just like the moods evoked by the atmospheric painting mentioned above.⁹

Gumbrecht distinguishes two basic kinds of relationships between a given cultural text and the mood it connotes. The first of them assumes a certain level of awareness of the work's participation in the process of absorbing the mood, which then becomes its clearly defined purpose and one of its primary functions. Gumbrecht here cites *Death in Venice* as an ex-

⁷ Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*, 1-23, 128-135.

⁸ Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*, 4.

⁹ See G. Ronge, "Czytanie nastrojów" Hansa Ulricha Gumbrechta jako 'antymetoda' analizy tekstów literackich" (Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's "Stimmung: Lesen" as an Anti-Method for Analyzing Literary Texts) in *Tematy modne w humanistyce. Studia interdyscyplinarne* (Fashionable Subjects in the Humanities. Interdisciplinary Studies), ed. Ł. Grajewski, J. Osiński, A. Szwagrzyk, P. Tański, Toruń 2015, 142-156.

ample of a work oriented at once toward conveying the specific *fin de siècle* mood in which Europe found itself at the dawn of the twentieth century rather than presenting a chronological chain of events.¹⁰ Following that line of reasoning, this model can be extended to all cultural texts presenting the representatives of a certain society (at the national level) or certain communities (at the class level) during a transitional historical moment, critical for them, that anticipates a new historical epoch. Examples of works that fit into this schema can be found both among the masterpieces of world literature (*Pan Tadeusz*, *War and Peace*, *The Leopard*), and in pop culture, particularly film (*Gone With the Wind*, *Once Upon a Time in America*, *Havana*).

In the second schema, Gumbrecht includes all of those cultural texts in which mood can come into being only through the development of certain conditions of the works' reception and the reader's adoption (consciously or not) of a corresponding interpretative position. It seems that we can here talk about a kind of hermeneutic meeting of "dissimilarities" that in the most obvious way can exist thanks to the chronological distance separating the moment of reading from the moment of the work's appearance. Elements of the reality surrounding the artist during her creation process which are completely neutral for her at that moment (i.e. they do not evoke any moods for her) are revealed with the passage of time to be important parts of that network mentioned by Goethe that connects everything to everything. Gumbrecht clarifies here that components of the work "absorb" a mood already at the moment of its emergence, but reveal it only later on, during the process of reading.¹¹ A mature hermeneutic approach may be essential here in that it conditions the possibility of distinguishing attentive mood-reading, motivated by curiosity and the desire to know the Other, from naïve escapism, driven by nostalgia and the desire for momentary detachment from reality.

For the moment, it remains an open question whether similar conditions arise in the case of a work's reception in its own time, but in a cultural setting radically different from that in which it was written. It seems that the cultural distance in this case is pregnant with the same or nearly the same effects as the distance in time. Perhaps it would also be worthwhile to consider the position of the category of mood in terms of worlds created by fantasy and science fiction authors, and thus works that often lack any obvious reference to reality. It seems that one can defend two positions here: the reader can strive to grasp a mood that has no connection to any historical reality of the represented world just the same as she would in relation to a world aspiring to recapture a concrete reality (and can thus perhaps simply ignore the problem of the represented world's relationship with reality and pronounce the invented world of the work to be the Other whose acquaintance she seeks) or can also try to read the mood of the epoch (or exotic cultural setting) in which the work was formed, attempting to feel it through decoding the way that epoch (or culture) "invented the world." As was mentioned, that question has not been raised in the discussion of moods so far and may constitute an area worthy of reflection in further studies of the concept defined here.

¹⁰See Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*, 6.

¹¹See Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*, 18, 20.

Another problem hitherto unexplored by scholarship is the interpretation of mood in the categories of translation studies. We cannot ignore the importance of prosody in the process of mood formation, and thus the question arises, impossible to answer for now, as to how to describe that process when we are dealing with the deformation of prosody through translation, all the more so, when that translation is written much later than the work itself?

Defining how to use the category of mood in literary studies gives rise to certain difficulties. Gumbrecht rejects the possibility of pronouncing mood-reading an interpretative method, because he considers mood to be a quality that takes shape during the process of the work's reception, not a value immanent in the work waiting to be decoded by the reader.¹² The mechanism of the mood's formation in the relationship between work and reader is in certain ways similar to Roman Ingarden's conception of filling in places of indefiniteness¹³ and the reader's far-reaching discretion and liberty in blazing a trail, naming and describing moods, certainly does rule out any formulation of mood-reading in a coherent methodological framework. It would seem, nonetheless, that the category of mood creates the potential for naming and classifying those intimate experiences that accompany the reception of a work, which due to their excessive subjectivity and uniqueness have so far failed to find a place in literary scholarship. So if mood can tell us nothing about the work itself, since it is a feature not of the work but of its reception, it is far from inconceivable that the rise of an entire library of interpretative essays presenting testimony on mood-reading could create a path to knowledge in literary studies of the mechanisms governing the emergence of a cohesive, harmoniously tuned whole from an aggregate of seemingly disconnected elements.

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¹²Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*, 13.

¹³G. Ronge, "Czytanie nastrojów" Hansa Ulricha Gumbrechta," 148-151.

*aesthetics**m o o d***KEYWORDS***category**Stimmung**literary theory***H. U. GUMBRECHT***David Wellbery***MOOD READING***f e e l i n g***wholness****Leo Spitzer***nastrojowość***HARMONY****ABSTRACT:**

This text on the keyword “mood” offers an attempt to define that category in the context of poetics. Though the term itself frequently appeared in discussions of literature in the eras of Romanticism and Symbolism, its meaning was then understood more intuitively and arbitrarily and it constituted rather a means of aesthetic evaluation of literary works than a strictly defined concept in the field of literary studies. A new approach to the idea of mood proposed by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and his simultaneous exhortation to examine it within the categories of literary and cultural theory and poetics demands a clear definition of its position among poetics concepts and an effort to define the function in scholarly discourse that could be performed by this category—a traditional one, but read by Gumbrecht in a completely new fashion.

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