

The Prokhorov Centre for the Study of Central and Eastern European Intellectual and Cultural History at the University of Sheffield announces the following proposed colloquium for Thursday, 17 May and Friday, 18 May 2018:

Ritzy, Recuperative, Critical: The Representation of Central European Hotels, Spas and Resorts in Cultural Critiques since circa 1900

CALL FOR PAPERS

The 1920s was the great decade of the “hotel novel”, especially among Central European writers. Austrian author Joseph Roth set his *Hotel Savoy* (1924) in Łódź. In 1928, Meinrad Inglin wrote about a Swiss “Kurhaus” being turned into a splendid spa resort for British and American health tourists, among others, called Grand Hotel Excelsior — a monstrosity that spoiled idyllic Swissness. The name of this gaudy new complex is a reference to Berlin’s Hotel Excelsior (completed ten years earlier and then expanded magnificently in the 1920s), which inspired Vicki Baum’s German novel *Menschen im Hotel* (Grand Hotel, 1929). The hotel was not only a popular literary setting in this decade between the two world wars; it was also the metaphorical source for Lukács’s early attack on critical theory as bourgeois idealism. And at the same time, the hotel lobby was central to Siegfried Kracauer’s theoretical reflections — as a microcosm of the modern city. In short, the hotel and the spa were spaces used for cultural critiques of society and modernity, or even civilisation *per se*. Many of the authors of such criticism had first-hand experience of working in hospitality or related industries. Inglin had been a hotel waiter, Baum a hotel chamber-maid, Kracauer an architect of public spaces, and so on. More broadly, their representations result from the fact that, from the turn of the twentieth century and into the 1920s, hotel construction boomed across the continent, and spas were expanding and becoming ever more high tech. The Germans, Austrians and Swiss — such as Lorenz Adlon, Anna Sacher and César Ritz — were among the leading hoteliers of the age, becoming famous worldwide. Some hoteliers also wrote: about their lives and hotels as representative of their time, its possibilities and ills.

Scholarship has already excavated the hotel of the early twentieth century as a setting in German and Austrian literature (see Bettina Matthias, 2006), and as a *topos* of transit (see Ulrike Zitzlsperger, 2013). Much work has been done on

individual authors, too (notably Vicki Baum). But how do the representations of hotels, spas and other resorts of this era compare across linguistic and cultural contexts, and across literature, film, criticism and life writing? What common stories do they tell? How have these representational histories developed since the golden age of the grand hotel, and to what extent do they use works of this period as their foundation? Above all, the colloquium asks whether a comparative perspective on cultural representations of hotels, spas and resorts since the dawn of the twentieth century gives rise to a typology of critiques of an emergent Central European, consumerist culture of cosmopolitan luxury and an apparently liberal wellness (that is actually racialized, among its many features). But these spaces of tourism, inherently connected with the themes of transit and change, may also resist systematic, synchronic and diachronic comparison. Perhaps post-war capitalist and socialist societies in particular have led to a divergence in the ways in which hotels, spas and resorts are allegorised?

Recent films have made creative use of such cultural, modernist material concerning hotels, spas and resorts, and were inspired by Central European literary writers of the early twentieth century. Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel* of 2014 playfully harks back to the glory years of grand hotels throughout Europe, and is a homage to Stefan Zweig. Gore Verbinski's *A Cure for Wellness* from 2016, meanwhile, takes a similar setting to Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* — but the noble and bourgeois elite here become wealthy, burnt-out executives. This interest in the hotels and spas of the past, and particularly the early twentieth century — for contemporary artistic ends and for entertainment — is complemented by similarly recent historical investigations for both general and scholarly readerships. David Clay Large's *The Grand Spas of Central Europe: A History of Intrigue, Politics, Art, and Healing* (2015) and Marina Soroka's *The Summer Capitals of Europe, 1814-1919* (2017) are just two examples.

The aim of the colloquium is to capitalise on the currency of Central European hotels, spas and resorts as a topic, examining its contribution to cultural criticism. We shall focus on historical and present-day cultural representations, rather than the empirical histories of specific places. We welcome both individual case studies and comparisons across space and time. We are open to the analysis of how Central European hotels, spas and resorts are appropriated as a foil for critiques of other cultures. Relatedly, we also seek “outsider” perspectives: those of authors and filmmakers from elsewhere (and especially the US, Western Europe and Russia), reflecting on the hotels, spas and resorts of Central Europe (e.g. the renowned French film from 1961, *L'Année dernière à Marienbad / Last year in Marienbad*). For us “Central Europe” includes Germany, Austria and Switzerland, as well as Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia and Romania.

We hope to cover accommodation and catering costs for speakers; depending on funding, we may be able to contribute towards travel expenses as well. We are talking to the editorial board of a leading comparative journal, since we plan to publish a special issue comprising selected papers.

Please send a substantial abstract and brief biographical sketch to:

Dr Seán Williams, School of Languages and Cultures, University of Sheffield:
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Deadline: 15 September 2017.

In the words of Fred Astaire, “you’ll declare it’s simply topping to be there!”

*For further information on the Prokhorov Centre and its past events, please visit:
<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/prokhorov-centre>*