

Bodies and intercorporeality in public spaces

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Rachel Thomas

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Shared Urban Atmospheres:
Experiencing a Change of Scene (expériences du dépaysement)
coordinated by Jean-Paul Thibaud

The growing volume of work on the body in the human and social sciences highlights the numerous points of view on this subject and makes us realise its complexity. From social bodies to objectified bodies, from the representation of bodies in pictures to body marking, from bodies as tools to the emotional body, a vast swathe of research is trying to grasp, in the wake of the ideas on which social and cultural anthropology are founded, the various facets of this key instrument in our relations with the world. The content of this one-day session on bodies and intercorporeality in public spaces was consequently just as partial and particular as countless previous endeavours. Its goal was to sketch out the premises of a debate on the relations between atmosphere and culture, starting from a problematization of the question of the body in the public urban space: how can a particular sensory culture – provisionally taken to mean various ways of being, experiencing and living together in a town – develop, express itself and be shared, often implicitly? In other words, how does my body bear witness to my relation with others and to the act of sharing every sensory frameworks?

To try to answer these questions participants in the forum were offered two lines of thought. The first option, which was explicit and common to the three days of the seminar, was to use the theme of a change of scene (*dépaysement*) – previously defined as “a break in our perceptive habits”, or “questioning the relation of familiarity with the world” (JP.Thibaud) as a means of gaining a better grasp of the plasticity of bodies in town, and the ways we move and interact with others in public urban space. The second, implicit option was to investigate the possible contributions of modal and sensory anthropology to grasp theoretically and empirically the theme of bodies and intercorporeality in public spaces. Thanks to their (G. Chelkoff, Y. Winkin) re-reading of the work of François Laplantine and debate in the presence of the author, and above all the manner in which this resonated with thinking on the notion of atmosphere, we may now outline several preconditions for a new approach to bodies and intercorporeality in public spaces which pays attention to “tiny modulations in sensitivity” (Laplantine, 2002).

Research into architectural and urban atmospheres is beginning to take an interest in the role of sensory cultures in the way we perceive and act in town, but it is still in some doubt about how such cultures not only shape the sensory framework of everyday life but also how they are embodied in the shared ways in which we move, express ourselves and relate to others. The interest in the modalities of bodily expression in public urban space, the respective relations between bodies, how they may change, the sensory output they may produce and how bodies may be set in motion in the urban public space could be a valuable way of analysing the relations between atmosphere and culture, as well as a heuristic means of conceptualizing the synaesthetic dimension of the urban experience. From this point of view, bringing the body into play in urban life cannot only be taken into account on the basis of the model of interpersonal communication and self-presentation strategies so aptly described by

Erving Goffman. Similarly our understanding of this process cannot be reduced simply to what bodies do or practical actions, nor to the description of the various “body techniques” (Mauss, 1950) underpinning it, nor yet to a description of the clues which are supposed to reproduce a certain fashioning of social relations (Jarrigeon, 2004). The interest focussed on the processes by which bodies are brought into play in urban life first leads us, by necessity, to build what we might provisionally refer to as an aesthetic of urban life, in other words a form of knowledge of the present-day urban world which attaches less importance to understanding the ways we perceive and to giving meaning to the sensory environment, focussing on the contrary on grasping the way we feel and experience it. This initial posture of research immediately invokes a second posture, which requires us to reassess the primary character of the body in our grasp of the environment, of the objects and beings which surround us. The body is more than just an envelope of skin, more than a symbolic construction, and should be regarded as a participant and primary agent in our common action in and on the urban world, as the absolute foundation of our sensory culture and our relation to urban atmospheres. Put differently, the body is a means of experimenting with, expressing and making intelligible the world and the sensory cultures at work on a day to day basis. “My body is not just one object among all the other objects, a complex of sensory qualities among others, it is an object sensitive to all the others, which resonates to all the sounds, vibrates to all the colours and gives to words their primal significance in the manner in which it receives them. The body [...] is this strange object which uses its own parts as an overall symbol of the world, through which we may consequently ‘frequent’ the world, ‘understand’ it and find a significance in it” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 273-274).

In gear, anchored in the here-and-now, engaged in the many situations that make up urban life and set its pace, these bodies – alternately hidden or exhibited – always in a state of torsion and tension (A. Pecqueux, A. Chêne) – operate on different registers which need to be grasped: the register of alternating appearances (described by F. Laplantine and Y. Winkin, with regard to physical interaction between the Japanese, and by A. Jarrigeon, in reference to “working appearances” in public); the register of simultaneity of presence and absence (observed by A. Pecqueux, in people walking and listening to their media players, or by A. Chêne, with free-party dancers); the oscillation between engagement and disengagement (mentioned by S. Tessier in his work with street children in Brazil or indeed R. Thomas when she observes the ways that disabled persons move about). Plastic and adaptable these bodies model in turn, in an almost constant reflexive process with others, the sensory frameworks of their daily lives, regulating their grasp and producing various visible clues to the sensory transformations at work in town at a given time.

The hypothesis that urban experience has corporeal, even carnal roots (Thomas, 2006, 2007) nevertheless raises a number of epistemological and empirical problems. One issue is that this assumption touches on something that is implicit, that cannot be put into words, an ultimately pre-reflexive dimension of the urban experience. Asking questions about the body, as well as investigating how it is set in motion, its postures, and the various gestural and sensory registers of the relation to others or the environment, involves questioning sensations, impressions, affects, humours and such that are barely palpable, often fleeting and hard to express in language. So how are we to observe, express and describe the inexpressible side of the body in public spaces? Can we do without some form of mediation, or more exactly what sort of mediation should we establish? Another problem posed by the hypothesis that urban experience has corporeal roots relates to the fact that it connects to the temporal dimension of this experience, and more precisely the overlapping of two forms of time: on the one hand the long, linear timeframe of urban history, with the evolution of sensory frameworks and cityscapes over the ages; and on the other the short, often jerky or ephemeral time of bodies moving about the public urban space, their repeated, more or less

synchronized motions and encounters, gestures and postures. How then are we to conceptualize the place of time in urban experience and how is it to be articulated with thinking on the body and intercorporeality in public spaces? Or, to put it another way, how are we to conceptualize the fleeting movement of these bodies, their ability to sketch out evolutionary trends in society in both their repetition and their continuity?

The dialogue initiated during the forum between the problematic of architectural and urban atmospheres, and the work of Laplantine offers some stimulating openings. The first one concerns the need to deploy a modal approach to the question of the body and intercorporeality, and more largely to the question of feeling in the public urban space. In this respect the proposition echoes the stance adopted by the founding members of Cresson and sets a pre-condition for any study of the sensory, and the relations between atmosphere and culture. In other words, we should focus more on the processes building, circulating, reproducing, adapting, reappropriating, sharing and upsetting ways of being and moving in town, on their articulation, modulation and transformation over time, rather than trying to explain the motives behind them by breaking up the bodies and their rhythms into discrete units. "The body is constantly being transformed and moving. It is impossible to stabilize it semiologically in units of sense cut up in a continuum" (F. Laplantine). The modal perspective leads Laplantine to propose two types of epistemology.

The first type, which addresses the need to "put words on the body", concerns an epistemology of translation and requires some form of mediation. It is based on two key principles: the need to "go round the body" rather than confronting it head-on, in order to avoid the dual pitfall of "thingifying" and reproducing the all too frequent division between body and mind; but also the need to resort to other languages (dance for A. Chêne, architecture for G. Chelkoff, film for F. Laplantine, video and/or photography for A. Jarrigeon, and deficiency for A. Pecqueux and R. Thomas) in order to develop descriptive repertoires which include the cultural and sensory backgrounds which underpin urban experience.

The second attitude induced by a modal approach to the body and intercorporeality in public spaces demands an epistemology of the continuity of rhythm. The aim in this case is to adopt a rationale of alternation enabling us to take care of our subject (in other words to take the time to impregnate ourselves with it) while at the same time systematically and periodically decentering the viewpoints used to address the subject. It is also important to encourage a reflexive attitude on the part of researchers, questioning interpretative categories and the manner in which they move between fields. In this respect the experience of a change of scene, not only because it has "the capacity to bring the sensory to the surface of experience" (JP. Thibaud), but also because it places individuals in an in-between posture, seems to constitute a pertinent methodological perspective for coming to grips with the question of bodies and intercorporeality in public spaces. The notion of "*dépaysement*" encompasses various forms of experience which all prompt us to question the relation of familiarity with the environment and our anchorage in the world. "A momentary loss of bearings in daily life" (JP. Thibaud), "a gradual dissolution of stereotypes" (F. Laplantine), the disturbance and/or upsetting of routine perceptions and interpretations (Y. Winkin, A. Jarrigeon), the strangeness and/or incongruity of self when confronted with a given situation or space-time (A. Chêne, S. Tessier, R. Thomas), such changes of scene place individuals, much as researchers, in a permanent movement of engagement and distance, involvement and retreat, agreement and discord. In the case of the individual – an anonymous city dweller – a change of scene calls into question the ordinary of his or her relation with the world. By throwing doubt on the everyday things we silently take for granted, it reveals the extent to which everydayness probably contributes upstream to our sensory experience of the urban environment, but also how far this everydayness is never predetermined but formed by the sensory relation we entertain day after day with the world. Turning to researchers and ethnographers, the same

change of scene calls into question conventional interpretative schemes every bit as much as attempts to universalize urban experience. A change of scene introduces various forms of bias into our knowledge of the world, focuses researchers' attention on the "processes by which the sensory is formed and transformed" (G. Chelkoff), and makes possible a sort of "unlearning" of reality. It thus enables us to see and understand implicit elements and processes at work in daily life. These two conditions – oscillating between familiar immersion and *dépaysement*, and querying the way our sensory relation to daily life is built up through reciprocation and the way a common sensory culture is shared on an everyday basis – are probably essential for an aesthetics of forms of urban life to take form.