

# Ordinary aesthetics and forms of urban life

summary of the proceedings on 30 April 2009  
Cresson, Grenoble

Sandra Fiori and Nathalie Simonnot

2nd of three one-day encounters devoted to  
*Shared Urban Atmospheres:*  
*Experiencing a Change of Scene (expériences du dépaysement)*  
coordinated by Jean-Paul Thibaud

The aim was to use aesthetics to make two basic objects of research into atmospheres – the sensory and the ordinary – work together. Such was the goal set for the second one-day session of the *Shared Urban Atmospheres: Experiencing a Change of Scene* seminar, which was based on several basic tenets of the Cresson laboratory<sup>1</sup>, but was also designed to be an opportunity to broaden the debate to include other voices, both scientific and artistic.

Far from restricting ourselves to the art world – however unconventional – and aesthetics in its accepted sense, our aim<sup>2</sup> was to look at aesthetics from a more pragmatic point of view giving the perceptive component of the experience an active part in the relation which each of us entertains with their environment and others, at one and the same time a way of knowing and a form of engagement with the world.

In this sense how can the ordinary, which forms the basis of a common urban culture, also be the object of aesthetic practices? Under these conditions what does the aesthetic experience embrace? How does it express itself? In what ways does aesthetics take root in the sensory? Similarly, how do we, each with our own discipline, come to grips with a pragmatic approach to aesthetics? What issues does this raise for design and creative pursuits? In what respect can aesthetics contribute to critical analysis of the conditions and forms in which contemporary towns remain shared spaces, or not?

To this series of questions the theme of a change of scene (*dépaysement*) – at first sight the opposite to all that is banal, familiar and routine – offers a particular way of pushing thinking on ordinary aesthetics to its limits. But by what process and in which configurations do we tip from the ordinary into the extraordinary, or more simply into the unordinary?

The summary we propose below follows the chronological sequence of the seminar fairly closely. Over and above the descriptive convenience or the coherence of the programme, this approach seeks to give a direct account of the horizontal issues and themes which emerged during the debate that followed the talks introducing the morning and afternoon sessions. This by no means exhausts the full potential of the subjects or lines of thought addressed during the forum, such is the interplay between talks – despite or perhaps because of the diversity of working topics and disciplinary backgrounds represented here – which mapped out a surprising amount of common

---

<sup>1</sup> The sensory - in its interactions with the social – as a force shaping urban life, the in situ construction of a shared experience and, more largely, the attention paid to the ordinary and the everyday.

<sup>2</sup> Which we owe to work by John Dewey, some time ago, and more recently Richard Shusterman and Arnold Berleant.

ground. We consequently encourage the reader to listen to the talks and subsequent debate<sup>3</sup> and to weave the various strands into their own particular web.

### **Aesthetics in the plural**

The morning session only addressed the theme of *dépaysement* indirectly. Centring on the work and thinking of Jean-François Augoyard, it consisted mainly of a discussion of the framework for an aesthetics of atmospheres, from a theoretical, epistemological and operational point of view. In this respect questions of intentionality and attentionality appear to be one of the horizontal strands by which aesthetics, in the plural, may emerge.

#### *Towards an autonomy of atmospheres?*

Augoyard's introductory talk needs to be seen in the context of his career, which over a period of about 20 years moved from the conviction that atmosphere is a matter of aesthetics – in so far as it is rooted in living and doing – to the hypothesis of aesthetics itself being rooted in questions of atmosphere.

His stance is one of "reflexive aesthetics", which maintains a basic relation to sensitivity and consequently with corporeality. In particular this stance involves a shift in the aesthetic question, from the theories of intentionality developed in and for the art world to a theory of aesthetic conducts that attaches more importance to the forms of attentionality.

The role played by the regimes of attentionality, often regarded as secondary in the processes of aesthetic conducts, finds additional support in empiric work<sup>4</sup>, which demonstrates that the aesthetic perception of ordinary architecture does not necessarily express itself in the form of statements and judgements, but also in scraps, astonishment and exclamation. It thus operates on a sub-reflexive plane, which according to Augoyard "is precisely that of atmospheres".

From a theoretical point of view, the idea of an aesthetic which focuses on objects in their manner of appearing relates particularly to the work of two contemporary German philosophers, Martin Seel and Gernot Böhme. Exploring situations of rupture, criticality, drifting attention or a vague sense of others' presence, and more generally the forms of perception related to indeterminacy, the "aesthetics of appearing" developed by Seel connects atmosphere to a sensory-emotional awareness. Böhme has a similar concern with nascent sensation and its indeterminacy, with particular attention to "odd objects" (such as clouds or sounds) which defy conventional categories (mass, stability and more largely Euclidian space), but engage our emotions – seen as "lived atmospheres" – to such an extent that the limits between the perceiver and the perceived, subject and object, tend to disappear.

Pushing the theory of atmospheres towards an equivalence between aesthetics and atmospheric, the work of Seel and Böhme is also of interest because it specifies possible points of passage, slippage and reconfiguration between an aesthetic of the ordinary, the purpose of which is to grasp what relates to the aesthetic experience in the urban ordinary, and an ordinary aesthetics which, by making the feeling body the centre of all experience, defines itself as the basic form of all human perception.

In this sense it is through introspection focussing on the basis of perception itself that the question of a change of scene resurfaces. In particular Fabienne Martin Juchat addressed it from the point of view of empathy, with reference to the recent findings of the cognitive sciences on the processes of articulation between sensory cognition, emotions and symbolic reconstruction in language. From this point of view emotion

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ambiances.net/?p=330>

<sup>4</sup> Augoyard Jean-François (dir.), Leroux Martine et alii. L'expérience esthétique ordinaire de l'architecture, volumes 1 and 2, Grenoble, CRESSON, 2003.

may be regarded as what brings us to “put ourselves in the place of” and to change the way we look at an object, and as such it allows us to conceptualize empathy as a “displacement”. In so far as it engages the relation of subject to object or to a device, emotion at the same time sets the condition for a shared experience.

In the course of the day we were given several illustrations of the possibility of surprise, the sensitivity to the momentary and accidental, and the use of fault lines which “tear us away from the ordinary”: in the form of artistic experiences, as for example the spaces designed by Anthony McCall and presented by Rozen Canevet, in which work on light maps out a route which stimulates all the sensory registers of the spectator’s body, while at the same instituting a timeframe which is never the same, depending on the direction of the sun or the flow of visitors; but also in the form of specifically urban experiences, such as the situation described by Rainer Kazig, passing at night down an underground walkway, which switched from being unpleasant to an aesthetic surprise and an “inner change of scene”, by being transported into an imaginary cinema world. Also of relevance here is the survey carried out by Marc Breviglieri on emergency welfare patrols, which bears witness to the sensory skills deployed by social workers to make contact with homeless people in the deep sleep induced by intoxication or cold.

#### *Of the uses of the aesthetic of atmospheres*

Returning to the question of the fundamentally accidental character of atmospheres propounded by Augoyard and adopting from the start the point of view of a “developer”, the talk by Olivier Soubeyrand questioned in its way the effects of the theory of atmospheres as a model for understanding and for action. In what respect do atmospheres contribute to thinking through – if not actually resolving – the paradox facing developers whose strategies are based on manufacturing the forms of usage the market expects (“making us do”), but who are nevertheless still subject to constant uncertainty?

Whereas the effectiveness of a strategic model depends on what defies control (its acceptance often being conditional on the scope for and effectiveness of misappropriation practices), what do atmospheres have to say about improving the conditions determining the effectiveness of a development scheme, in other words the predictability of behaviour patterns, given that those conditions are essential for the scheme’s success?

Rather than highlighting an opposition between the lived and the designed, Soubeyrand’s ideas prompt us to consider the parallel between the theory of atmospheres and thinking on risk and uncertainty: how can the accidental character present in the notion of atmosphere contribute to action-oriented disciplines, which focus on understanding unintentional action?

The contribution by Fabienne Martin Juchat sought to juxtapose atmospheres and communication. In theoretical terms the confrontation of concepts used by both camps tends to confirm the hypothesis of a possible distinction between atmosphere, on the affect side, and ambiance, on which we can put a name and which is a matter of social construction.

The question of atmospheres is also of direct interest to communication and marketing practice: on the one hand the built environment of our modern world increasingly immerses us in objects, or rather devices; on the other hand, communication, caught up in the race to sustain attraction and the quest for identity, has exhausted all the resources available to the media with its visual saturation and is now moving into public spaces and our urban environment.

As Juchat explained (territorial and sensory) marketing is increasingly focussing on atmospheres, but due to the excessive scene-setting it involves this field is dominated by a “social construction of boredom”. How then is one to foster a median position,

between demands for total prefiguration and scope for forms of appropriation and misappropriation that can introduce an element of surprise?

This question linked up with the queries raised by Soubeyran, as did the talk by Martine Bouchier on aesthetization of public space. In recent years there have been an increasing number of large-scale, all-night events – a mixture of artistic and cultural practices, and popular celebrations – a sort of “watered down version of emblematic 20th century events” in which the transgression inherent in spontaneous artistic expression has been replaced by a concern for “good governance”. These events are in fact testimony to the urban marketing which has overtaken contemporary art and its iconic power to theatrize towns, (re)building and managing an imaginary world or heritage.

One of the merits of studying the ways public policies may instrumentalize contemporary art is that it reveals the effects of mediation and “spectatorship” in the joint process of theatrizing urban space and coordination actually carried out by the general public. Paper trail games are a good illustration of this process. They require spectators to move around and display strategic skills, close attention and perseverance, but at the same time they predetermine the sequence of places to be visited, the route to be taken and the point of view to be adopted on what is on view.

### **Forms and figures of *dépaysement***

The second part of the one-day forum was more specifically devoted to a presentation of case studies and artistic experiences, highlighting in particular various ways of achieving a change of scene.

#### *Changing scene without moving*

The choreographic route designed by Julie Desprairies in 2006 for the Gratte-Ciel of Villeurbanne, France, was based on formal resonance between the architecture and the bodies inhabiting it for the duration of the show. It sought to reactivate the place’s past and the urban design goals of the district’s origins. Thomas Hirschhorn’s work also focuses on establishing links with territories. Martine Bouchier presented his Albinet precarious museum as a form of resistance to the increasing spectacularization of public space. For two months in 2004 the artist camped at the foot of a housing block in the Paris suburbs and with input from local people set up a venue for exhibitions, lectures and workshops on major 20th works of art.

In the research he is doing into aesthetic perception of and in towns Kazig addresses the practices of daily life which involve a form of aesthetic attention: the ritual of a visit to local heritage with friends; the aesthetization of unpleasant urban spaces through references to an imaginary cinematic world; or indeed the “cultural resonance” that some trendy bars try to achieve by immersing customers in a certain ambience. Such aesthetic practices all seem to share common ground with the experiences offered by the artistic projects presented above.

The talks by Desprairies, Bouchier and Kazig converge in the sense that they all involve ways of changing scene without moving, enabling us to revisit or consolidate a place. The experiences they evoke are rooted in territories, local people, established usage. They operate not so much by radical transformation of the everyday scene as by removing its usual framework: referentiation and imaginary distantiation of situation; poetization of place by highlighting unnoticed architectural features; composition with ordinary sociability (process of co-building of the work with local people, ritualization or just co-presence). In this respect, making use of the “aesthetic potential”<sup>5</sup> of a place

---

<sup>5</sup> An idea borrowed from the work of Catherine Avenir. See Avenir C., *Les espaces publics urbains à l'épreuve des actions artistiques*, doctorate thesis supervised by J.-F. Augoyard, Université de Nantes, 2005.

also corresponds, as Marc Breviglieri pointed out, to "a work of amplifying the space available in a town for common usage".

Desprairies' determination to cause confusion, blurring the border between dancers and passers-by, reflects an aesthetic of the pervasive, leading us to be moved by things we did not expect or no longer noticed, and to "tip" almost imperceptibly into an aesthetic experience, by way of surprise or resonance.

In its way this form of *dépaysement* also raises the question of attention and time. The work of both Desprairies and Hirschhorn has a long-term relation to place, but aesthetic experience properly speaking tends to be prompted by the immediacy of a situation and relates to the possibility of an accident<sup>6</sup>. What makes an event links up to some extent with the notion of aesthetic episode proposed by Kazig on the basis of an ordinary practice of the urban environment. The notion of an episode, which he has borrowed from Gerhard Schulze<sup>7</sup>, has the advantage here of showing us how, in a banal or artistic context, shared timeframes may form, and by the same token, reactivate belonging to a group or territory.

The construction of *dépaysement* at issue here could ultimately be described, to borrow a term from Henry Torgue, as "*repaysement*".

#### *Changing scene for oneself and others*

Although they relate to very different contexts the talks by Corinne Pontier and Marc Breviglieri also prompted converging lines of thought, each in its way linking up with the production of "extreme" situations in an urban setting. On the one hand Breviglieri gave an account of his observation of the work of night patrols by emergency welfare workers, focussing on various border-line states (intoxication, extreme cold, deep sleep) and the various forms of insensibility affecting homeless people on the streets of Paris. On the other hand a Grenoble-based art collective, Ici-Même, set out to "become foreigners at home" and to disappear in the midst of their own everyday world, spending three weeks crossing the city on foot<sup>8</sup>.

As Jean-Paul Thibaud pointed out these two contributions investigate the pragmatic side of aesthetics, opening onto "an aesthetics of existence". Both relate to a form of *dépaysement* by subtraction, based on lacking and absence. The states of rupture each one reveals (exposing oneself to danger, setting insensibility in motion) do not depend so much on a relation to a given environment as a relation to oneself and to others. Indeed the experience achieved by Ici-Même is akin to a form of "inner change of scene" described by Kazig.

Each example operates on a different mode but time is an important factor: whereas the welfare workers seize opportunities to communicate with the homeless in a time format which belongs to social interaction, the points of rupture sought by Ici-Même unfold in the process of slowing afforded by travelling on foot.

What both contributions highlight is the work of *dépaysement*. For the art collective this work is based on a set of protocols and constraints which reproduce the conditions of travel (set out with a backpack, spend the night with local people, communicate by postcard, etc.). In the case of the night patrols, the process brings out various skills, notably the tact displayed by the welfare workers "to rekindle the spark of sensibility": smiling, supporting homeless but without clinging to them, seating them properly and so on. The vocation shared with the aesthetic is "to work with bodily matter", to try "to open up worlds of perception" and thus "bring to the surface a space where sensation can occur".

---

<sup>6</sup> Which, for Thomas Hirschhorn, corresponds to a refusal of cultural and institutional mediation.

<sup>7</sup> Schulze, Gerhard 2000: *Die Erlebnis-Gesellschaft. Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart*. Frankfurt/Main; New York, p. 98-102.

<sup>8</sup> "Les paysages étaient extraordinaires", 2004.

Furthermore even if urban space and the process of creating an atmosphere do not bring about a change of scene in either case (the expedition mounted by Ici-Même did not attempt to change a place), the urban space does more than just provide a setting. In both cases the town enables the aesthetic process to unfold. In particular "the moving texture of the town", which according to Breviglieri constitutes a key backdrop to the work of the emergency welfare workers, provides a way, in the course of patrols, of dismantling the rule-based atmosphere promoted by other official bodies, by creating places and times in which social workers and homeless can share feelings.

Sensitivity to urban atmospheres thus operates as a set of resources. Here again atmospheres may be pervasive, but in their way they make the town into "a force of configuration" (Henry Torgue).