

Politics of the sensory and languages of the city

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3rd part of three one-day encounters devoted to
Shared Urban Atmospheres:
Experiencing a Change of Scene (expériences du dépaysement)
coordinated by Jean-Paul Thibaud

"By sharing of the sensory I mean the system of sensory self-evidences which at the same time reveal the existence of a commons and the divisions defining respective places and parts in it."

"It is a division of time and space, of the visible and invisible, speech and noise which defines the place and stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics has a bearing on what one sees and may say about it, on who is competent to see and has the capacity to say, on the properties of spaces and the possibles of time."

Jacques Rancière, *Le partage du sensible*. Éd. La fabrique, Paris, 2000

In his reflections on sharing the sensory Jacques Rancière tries to define a space in which the paths of historically constructed sensory experience, ways of life and relations of production may cross. Fabrication of the sensory would no longer be restricted to the art world but become a real political issue with immediate implications even in the way we live.

This was the third and last day of the seminar, which set out to explore the experience of a change of scene. The theme of the first day was the body and intercorporeality, ordinary aesthetics for the second. The third day was partly based on Rancière's proposition, taking as its theme the politics of the sensory and languages of the city.

Exploration of the relation between aesthetics and politics, starting from the question of the sensory, was divided into two parts. The whole of the morning session was devoted to the work of Henri-Pierre Jeudy and Marc Abélès on the place and effects of sensory politics in the public sphere, in an era of globalisation. The afternoon was given over to a succession of short talks working outwards from the same question, but on the basis of various experiences and examples in which the introduction of the sensory opens the way for a consideration of the processes of fabrication, sharing, pervasion and contagion of atmospheres. How, we asked, do the breaks in perceptive habits help to question this share-out of the sensory, these collective emotional phenomena with their drama and languages?

Jeudy divided his talk into three parts, each of which drew on one of his books, in the following order:

- *L'absence d'intimité* [the absence of intimacy], Paris, Circé, 2007.
- *L'exposition des sentiments* [exhibiting feelings], Paris, Circé, 2009.
- *Critique de l'esthétique urbaine* [critique of urban aesthetics], Paris, Sens & Tonka, 2003.

Introducing the dimension of an intimate sphere, as a third category reconfiguring the conventional separations between the private and public sphere, enables Jeudy to resituate the body, expression and individual actions as components making up a contemporary space which may then be conceptualized collectively. Intimacy can be

lived out in the public space. A face may betray intimate feelings despite the determination to maintain a degree of secrecy; others may opt to make “a public display of their ego”, which might be taken as “a conquest of universality”: in both case the intimate enters the public sphere, bringing out about “self-swapping by and for the eyes of the other”. This intimate relation (Jeudy refers to shared intimacy) is always rooted in a relational process, going so far as to produce “intimist communities”.

One of the social and political expressions of such “collective sentimentalism” is group compassion. For example the idea of a “moral relations assize court on pity” is particularly present in the ideology of reparation, or even in the state of collective resignation, as a “collective therapeutic atmosphere” which unfolds with the intimate spheres. Differing with Rancière, who suggests that aesthetics is a manufacture of the sensory, Jeudy tends to see the sensory as “the public artifice for the moral legitimization of politics [...] with aesthetics coming to the rescue of politics”.

Marc Abélès also based his talk on recent publications:

- *Anthropologie de la globalisation* [Anthropology of globalization], Paris, Payot, 2008.
- *Le spectacle du pouvoir* [The spectacle of power], Paris, l’Herne, 2007.
- *Politique de la survie* [Survival politics], Paris, Flammarion, 2006.

He looked at the place of new forms of power at a time of globalization (an economy based on finance capital, fast changing information and communications technology, global reshuffling of relations between countries, between the principles of centre and periphery, which are no longer as clear-cut as before) in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the present situation, in which an individual can no longer hope to control his or her destiny, in which the differences between global and local are steadily dwindling, yet increasingly interlocked.

He then drew on the work of the British geographer David Harvey, with his critical analysis of the post-modern condition, and returned to the hypothesis advanced by Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity at large: cultural dimensions of globalization* (1996). In this book the author describes globalization as a cultural phenomenon which has taken us into a post-colonial era, a time when imagination becomes a social force whereas the nation-state has come under violent attack, and relations between western and non-western cultures have been profoundly reshaped. A world without sovereignty, a governance without government has appeared, leaving control to transnational players such as the International Monetary Fund, non-governmental organizations, the World Bank and such. Whether or not states try to resist, there is a shift in politics, which does not only concern its organization but also our relation to policy-makers.

We are moving from a regime of “*convivance*”, or living together (under which we coexist, peacefully or not, in conditions which politics sought to improve) to a state of “*survivance*” (uncertain as to what tomorrow holds in an increasingly global world). Facing up to the anthropological experience of (environmental or economic) threats, we focus our anxiety about survival on politics, a field in which tomorrow is no longer synonymous with progress.

The change of paradigm (from living together to surviving together) is also apparent, but at a different level, in the debate between atmosphere and environment. How are we to contextualize and give meaning to atmospheres with the current phenomena of globalization and threats. If sustainability becomes a pivotal notion, how is such survival to be managed? How can global politics coexist alongside institutional policies, requiring as it does each individual to rethink their position on collective action. One form of reappraisal requires us to bring conflicts out into the open, to affirm our presence individually and as a group. The current configuration of sharing the sensory is needed to create the conditions for our position and existence to be visible, not just locally but in resonance with global networks, outside a politically organized framework.

Debate was engaged on these new forms of political organization of the sensory (digital space, the rough deal for faculty members but also, for example, the recent installation, now permanent, of “poverty markets” in town) which find room to exist in public spaces, to gain visibility and recognition. Such manifestations have more to do with a situation of existence than a message addressed to known recipients. Here too is shared collective compassion which may give the impression of a sense of resignation and the acceptance of permanent exclusion, in the face of an equally permanent dynamic of our (now invalid) frames of reference.

The move from a society in which we live together to one in which we merely survive reconfigures being together, bringing into play at one and the same time a need for immediacy, visibility and a certain distance from the confusion between local and global. Here too is a form of parallel politics that gives room to the body, in which the spheres of the intimate and exhibition also confuse the conventional distinction between private and public.

The afternoon session hinged on a series of short talks followed by debate on collective emotional phenomena in the urban public space, their dramatization and their languages.

To sum up the content of debate and possible lines of research, several points were discussed.

According to Pascal Amphoux, drawing on examples cited during the proceedings, we are seeing in the practices encountered in the public space many new forms of connection between the status of a crowd or mass, and that of an audience, or at another level between situations in which we are spectators and others in which we are actors, situations in which we may switch from one state to the other at any time, with the figure of a third party intervening in play (as for example may occur with an orchestra, operating as a third party between the audience and the stage). We are seeing new ways of public-being, when ordinary inhabitants “act” as if they were on stage, but in the public space (at various forms of event, gatherings, some previously prepared, etc.), no longer just an ordinary passer-by, but not an actor identifiable as such either. These games, and the roles for each player, are no doubt related to the emergence of projects of an unusual form, in terms of the way they take shape, prompting the question of how some spaces allow the invention of such practices. Similarly there is scope for relating these phenomena to the way an architectural or urban project may emerge and build itself up with new forms of actor-involvement. In the power play of cultural policies this intermediate space between the audience and stage is in a way comparable to orchestration, in the sense that it localizes and seeks to focus practices. But these attitudes also relate to Hermes (see for instance work carried out in the 1980s, in particular *Les 5 Hermès* by Michel Serre). Hermes is the god of escape, sowing trouble and inverting roles. He is the god of traders and thieves, of reversals and ambivalence, but with a rationale that is neither militant nor related to power, but rather escape, escaping the atmosphere of things, slipping out of a double-blind and such. The question of the jubilation of fear is present in public manifestations alongside three threats, as Sophie Wahnich reminded us – constraint, menace and enjoyment – the three motors motivating crowd motion. In such situations it is neither one nor the other, or even the substitution of one with the other, but the way we come to terms with the three registers, how we associate and dissociate them, and give them varying weights, that enables us to say different things on public atmospheres, both in terms of analysis and with respect to project design. The disconnection between present expressions and collective representations, is apparent in the new ways in which speech may emerge.

According to Henry Torgue, inhabitants, artists, developers and policy-makers are concerned and one after another play a part in the construction of living spaces and invent ways of contributing, without necessarily becoming mixed up or forming a

homogeneous group. But the varying and sometimes new degrees of involvement, and the occasional inversion of roles between players pose, in different ways, the question of how to grasp the ordinary aesthetic resulting from the production of environments by their inhabitants. All these actors in their singular way, have their parts, participating, playing, dramatizing, inventing and deciding, without these parts necessarily being allocated in every case and without becoming confused, each player having their know-how, craftsmanship and method. But the various forms of potential each one represents cannot be stripped from them, in particular inhabitants who should play a creative role in their basic environment.

Inhabitants certainly produce their environment but how are we to address this ordinary aesthetic? How does it manifest itself? Artistic action is one possible point of entry, as the experiment presented by Nathalie Blanc shows. Carrying on from there, with regard to the role of various players, in particular inhabitants, in the transformation of territory, Jacques Lolive cited the work of Olivier Soubeyran on a possible comparison between musical composition and the development process. How should we reconcile a composer or an improviser's musical figures with work in urban development? Does jazz, with its implicit rules and its improvisation, have something to tell us about urban composition?

There is the concept of the artist, acting as a form of completely inventive demiurge, who because he or she belongs to the modern regime of the arts is capable of overturning and transforming local issues. But this idea may prevent us from seeing that we may be in this Utopian regime, yet at the same time still under the permanent, all too familiar regime of a discourse which saturates the public space and will end up by completely concealing the real social and political issues. We may cite as examples the word made heritage, living together transformed into a value, artists as the revealers of place and so on – so many forms of intervention that are now regarded as classics and perhaps illusory in part [Sophie Wahnich].

Jean-Paul Thibaud suggested that the day had been marked by tension between two postures, which may be seen as complementary on the question of sharing the sensory on the basis of political approaches:

On the one hand a critical posture which advances arguments based on resistance and reproduction, or on criticism of reproduction;

On the other a pragmatic posture, rooted in the application and practical involvement of things, leaning more towards creation.

Hélène Hatzfeld thought three questions had inspired debate all day long, three questions which could serve as the basis for a research programme:

- The question of expressing the world, if one starts from "feeling" subjects, with the question of what is common, different and shared. This "feeling" subject and its various parts in the public sphere raise the question of its relation to the global, calling into question the relation between public and private and a new place for the extimate. What methods and postures should we adopt to study these new forms of expression?

- The political question of changing scene: Who has a part in this, and who does not? What values are attached to a change of scene and the sharing of atmospheres? What dynamics? Around fear and energy, for example.

- The question of public policies on which all actors are currently focussed, which introduce new systems and claim to represent new postures – with in particular the need to question public cultural policies, now and in the future.

Paraphrasing Richard Sennett:

"Our culture needs an art of self exhibition. Such art would not make us victims of one another. On the contrary it would forge more balanced adults, capable of coping with complexity and learning from it".

The Conscience of the Eye: The design and social life of cities, Faber and Faber (1991).