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Damien Masson, Rachel Thomas

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From a Sensitive Ecology of Ambiances/Atmospheres to a Political Ecology

Session 6 – Introduction

Damien MASSON¹,
Rachel THOMAS²

Recently, there has been an evolution in urban practices and sensibilities that bear more or less directly the mark of the effects of certain “ambiances policies” which translates in the urban realm in terms of sensory marketing, feeling of safety creation, pacification, aestheticization, hygiene, entertainment, and so on. However, these “ambiances proposals” also generate pervasive forms of normativity that make certain practices, some forms of attentiveness, some ways of being and being together in public more or less acceptable.

Most of research in the field of architectural and urban ambiances show how they affect the experience of spaces and place, by giving a certain tone to the situations in which we find ourselves, we act and interact. In doing so they contribute to open up the field of urban ecology by paying attention to the sensory dimensions of the environment, and by contributing to show in which manners these dimensions contribute to making such environments livable for city-dwellers. Nevertheless, few of these works address issues of sensory un-livability or highlight the role ambiances play in situations of unrest, marginalization, stigmatization - in short, in situations that increase our sensory vulnerability and undermine our ability to participate in ordinary social life.

One of the challenges of this session is to give a precise attention to the ways in which descriptive approaches to ordinary social life - attentive to their sensitive and affective dimension - can help to understand the social, cultural and ethical issues involved in the current transformations of urban atmospheres, notably when these transformations reflect climates of tension, vulnerability, intranquillity, threat... A second range of challenges of this session concerns the global environmental crisis that translates locally into deeply altered sensory worlds. Such transformations contribute to create uncertainty, unease and certainly affect our modes of living.

By addressing these challenges, this session aims at laying the first steps of a critical reflection on the conditions of moving from a sensitive ecology of atmospheres to a political ecology of these. The session also aims to provide some answers to the following questions: How does an ambiance-based approach allow us to apprehend these issues in terms of symbolic violence, hierarchy, inequality? How does it allow the researcher to access these phenomena below their visibility and enunciation? In which

1. CY Cergy Paris University, MRTE Research group.

2. AAU Laboratory, Cresson, France.

ways do they upset our affects, ways of feeling, tones of experience? How can this become a critical research category that addresses changes in our living environments?

All the chapters of this session question the production of space as a problem not only political, social and cultural but also sensitive, affective and atmospheric. Based on case studies from both the North and the South, or on literary explorations, they all deal with the issue of demonstrating that policies that act on living together, whether they are conducted by public authorities or planners, or grassroots, whether they concern the shaping of material or socio-cultural public space, have sensitive effects, which can be characterised in terms of atmosphere, and which act on the situated bodies. Finally, they all contribute to show how these effects contribute to creating situations of discomfort, loss of reference, and even stigmatisation. They also show, in hollow, the environmental resources potentially contained in urban environments, be they social, material or sensitive, and which are likely to provide critical levers for action to overcome these limits.

The session is introduced by the chapter by Masson and Thomas who question the political dimensions of the uses of ambiances, and in turn ask how to raise awareness of the political dimension of research on ambiances. Based on a theoretical reflection using the concept of living well together, they lay the groundwork for a political ecology of ambiances, its conditions of possibility and its effects.

Their article is followed by Appel's, which questions the secular colonial logics in Canada, their consequences on the construction of a controversial collective memory and their socio-aesthetic effects. The text thus shows how colonialism pervades atmospheres in Canada, and what bodily forms of resistance and agency can be opposed to it.

The chapter of Di Croce explores the sensitive dimensions - sonic, in particular - of the social vulnerability of the Quartiere San Giovanni e Paolo in Palermo (Sicily). In doing so, the author uses the ambiances as a witness, which makes it possible to account for the sensitive and cultural effects of a situation of social and economic fragility. But he also uses them as a critical tool, aiming at transforming the situation by mobilising aesthetic experiences to raise the awareness and empowerment of the inhabitants.

This text is followed by the chapter of Vyzoviti and Chalvatzoglou which starts from the refugee crisis that began in 2016 in Greece to question the ordinary practices and sensitive forms of social life in refugee camps in Athens and Thessaloniki (Greece). Their chapter helps to show how the urbanity of the camps, and the identities of the refugees are constructed in the daily practices, particularly the sensitive ones, of the inhabitants of these spaces.

For their part, Lamounier and Tângari examine how the attractiveness of a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), marked by a high level of conflict, and its socio-environmental vulnerability is constructed. To this end, they propose the notion of a preference atmosphere which articulates the material, visual and emotional dimensions of the relationship to place. From there, they construct a methodology to account for the paradoxes inherent to this territory, in which attractiveness does not appear as directly being opposed to the experience of risk.

Soeiro's text questions the logics of urban renewal and territorial promotion in Lisbon (Portugal) since the financial crisis of 2008. It postulates that the success of urban

renewal processes depends in particular on their capacity to take into account the sensitive ecology of the situations that will be created, not only with a view to producing quality spaces, but also to limit the phenomena of gentrification.

Also questioning the mobilisation of affects and sensitivities in the logics of production of lived spaces, Laffont's text questions the contemporary transformations of sensitivities. To this end, he examines the urban evolutions experienced by the cities of Nantes and Saint Etienne (France) in recent decades. His text contributes to showing clear logics of the instrumentalization of ambiances for the purposes of territorial revitalization and to criticizing the forms taken by these logics, leading to a strong standardization of proposals for sensitive and affective urban landscapes.

Finally, Barchetta's text concludes the session by linking together ecological stakes, atmospheres, and political issues. Starting from the case of the city of Turin (Italy), this work reports on the dynamics of environmental and urban degradation, and ruination. Thanks to an atmospheric-based analysis of these dynamics the author allows us to grasp the specific forms of the socionatural assemblages at stake, which articulate, planning decisions, situated practices, and ecological dynamics.