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AMBIANCE

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It. *Ambiente*; Fr. *Ambiance*; Germ. *Stimmung*; Span. *Ambiente*. "Ambiance" can be defined as a space-time experienced in sensitive terms. With *ambiance*, it is less a question of perceiving a landscape or measuring an environment, than a question of feeling situations and experiencing the sensory contexture of social life. An *ambiance* is of a fundamentally pluri-sensorial nature, summoning simultaneously all the modalities of the perception (vision, hearing, olfaction, touch, taste, movement). The notion of "ambiance" has been developed and tested in numerous empirical investigations over the last thirty years, essentially within French-speaking research in the humanities and social sciences, and in particular in the field of architectural and urban studies.

The research carried out in the field of *ambiance* covers a very wide range of works, from the physical characterization of ambient phenomena to a socio-aesthetics of situated experience, from a sensitive ecology of urban public spaces to a sensitive conception of architectural spaces, from the study of very ordinary urban situations to that of more remarkable places or architectures, from a perspective in terms of urban ethnography to experimentation in virtual reality.

The notion of "ambiance" relies on a transversal approach at the crossroads of the sensitive, the social, the built and the physical. This sensitive approach to inhabited spaces has led to the development of original interdisciplinary methodologies, whether they involve in situ investigation tools (commented walks, recurrent observation, sound reactivation, urban transects), simulation and modeling tools (modeling of ambient physical phenomena, morphodynamic models, virtual reality), or transversal analysis tools (sound effects, sensitive formants, ambient objects).

An *ambiance* is always situated and embedded in a material framework. If any *ambiance* is anchored in a concrete space-time, it is not reduced in any case to a physical environment, nor moreover to a subjective and individual state. The notion of "ambiance" proposes an alternative to the classic opposition between a feeling subject and a felt object. It also enables to support the idea of a shared, embodied, enacted and

situated sensory experience. It emphasizes the pathic and affective dimension of any sensitive experience and puts forward its corporal and pre-reflexive content. In no case reducible to the register of the representation, ambiance shows a power of immersion, infusion and contagion which shapes our body schema and our capacities to feel. It is less a matter of a particular aesthetic appreciation than it leads to restore a thought of the aisthesis and to question the aesthetic discipline itself. Ambiance involves the affective tonalities of the situations and can be related to the notion of "Stimmung" in the German-speaking world, and to the notion of "attunement" in the English-speaking world (in English, "ambiance" is sometime translate by atmosphere, or affective atmosphere).

If ambiance occupies a particular place in the works on the sensitive world, it is because it engages a strong version of the sensitive. The ambiance is not a sensitive domain among others but rather that by which the world becomes sensitive. It is not an object of perception – as could be, for example, a spectacle or a landscape – but the very condition of perception. In other words, we do not perceive an ambiance strictly speaking, but we perceive according to it. The ambiance is what makes the perception possible, what from which we perceive, what makes the sensible exist. Let us add that the domain of "ambiance" is not an isolated domain, autonomous, independent of the social practices.

On the contrary, any ambiance is embedded in common gestures and forms of sociability. It involves social performances that actualize the resources of the built environment and accomplish our ways of being together. Ambiance is thus the place *par excellence* of formation of our perceptive habits, of activation of our sensory-motor schemes and of engagement of our socio-aesthetic relation to the world. Thus we need to pay particular attention to the background of ordinary practices. What is taken for granted and usually goes unnoticed is the basic material of an ambiance. A way of walking, looking or speaking, quality of air or light, bright sunshine or sudden rain, the height of a stair or the material of a sidewalk are part of the composition of an ambiance. But an ambiance does not come from one or more of these components, it is not limited to their mere addition. An ambiance is rather the connection and coalescence between these various elements, to hold them together by giving a single tone and a unique pervasive quality to everything that appears. We are dealing here with the power of homogenization and atmospherization of an ambiance.

As a nomadic concept, it goes from one science to another one. It migrates, circulates, translates. Far from being attached to a single scientific discipline or domain of action, it spreads and proliferates in regions as diverse as sensitive architecture or existential psychopathology, social anthropology, cultural geography or phenomenological philosophy, literary or urban studies, the area of organizations or consumption, the world of art, and so on. In doing so, ambiance pushes the boundaries of the disciplines and becomes more complex each time it comes into contact with them. One can see this scientific diversity and uninterrupted dialogue between disciplines in the four volumes of proceedings of the International Congress on Ambiances (Grenoble, 2008; Montreal, 2012; Volos, 2016; E-conference, 2020) and in the "Ambiances Journal" devoted to this topic (<https://journals.openedition.org/ambiances/>).

Finally, ambiance is part of a general movement of openness to the senses. It contributes to the emergence of new frames of sensitivity. Whether one insists on the aestheticization of urban spaces or the

increasing attention to ecological issues, the development of experiential marketing or the diffusion of ambient intelligence, our way of being sensitive to the spaces we inhabit is changing. No doubt we are engaged in a historical moment of transformation of our sensory conditions of existence. In other words, we are witnessing the birth of an atmospheric sensitivity of the world. Percepts and affects regain their own rights, involving the diversity of sensory modalities and recognizing the importance of bodily experience.

Among the various topics of discussion, three ones can be mentioned as particularly important. First, a basic theoretical problem concerns the role of the subject and human subjectivity in relation to ambiance. If affects and bodies occupy a central place recognized by all, the question remains open as to how to understand them. Is it necessary to make human experience the measure of an ambiance or rather to open it to the non-human, the more-than-human, the pre-individual? How far should we be inspired by post-phenomenological thoughts that propose a decentering subject? Second, instead of focusing on what an ambiance is, and how to define it, we could explore what ambiance accomplishes and performs. What does an ambiance enable to perceive, to do, to feel, to share? Where does the notion of "ambiance" lead us in terms of sensitivity, thought and design? Third, how about the capacity of these various perspectives to confront empirical reality and integrate the major mutations of contemporary life. The challenge here is to give a concrete account and thick description of the ambient world. How then to seize an area that first and foremost deals with the diffuse, the discreet and the molecular? How to explore and experiment with new forms of inquiry? How can the art world help with this?

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