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(En) gendering ambiances in the city

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Abstract. *This paper discusses the construction and manipulation of ambiances in Birmingham, UK, from a gendered perspective. By applying Situationist, visual, and mobile methods, the role of the gendered human sensorium is considered in relation to everyday embodied engagement with the urban fabric. The sexed and sensing body is pushed and pulled by the various (engineered) ambiances of the city. Working towards an understanding of women's right to the city, it is shown how the sexed body is highly influenced, controlled, and hindered by the urban fabric through commercialisation, sensory splendor, affective resonances, and, crucially, ambient and sensory power.*

Keywords: *ambiance, ambient power, gender, psychogeography, emotion*

Introduction

The field of ambiances has developed rapidly in recent years due to its ability to bridge between urban environs, the spectrum of multisensory experience, and the affective tonality of the everyday. Despite the wide application of ambiance, issues regarding power have received insufficient attention. Ambiances are felt through the body both virtually and physically: *'[I]t is not the ambiance that is perceived per se, but rather that it renders perception possible... We can never actually perceive everything that is encountered by our senses. As Merleau-Ponty demonstrated so clearly, "every perception is the perception of something solely by way of being at the same ... relative imperception of a horizon or background which it implies but does not thematize"'* (Thibaud, 2011: 213). Whilst a phenomenological approach to perception interprets ambiances as a sensory background in everyday life, Thibaud argues that ambiances occur within a pre-reflective register, thus privileging the *perceptive capacity of the individual*, not the act of *perception*. However, perception cannot be disregarded in any application of ambiances since they are primarily understood as *'an emotional corporeal relationship to space as a mood, as unity but also as a process'* (Adey et al., 2013, p. 302) that *'expresses and conditions the way we behave and act collectively'* (Thibaud, 2002, p. 5).

Seductive ambiances designed to make people feel safe are a form of 'soft' power; they control movement and behaviours through the creation of pleasant spaces (Allen, 2006; Degen, 2008). Applying the work of embodied, affective, and feminist theorists to the notion of ambiances, this paper re-evaluates the notion of ambiances by considering the role of power. By using gender as a lens to uncover these power relations, the paper re-conceptualises women's right to the city,

analyses the various phenomena that can influence (and re-imagine) the urban *mise-en-scène* and, crucially, begins the process of undertaking a feminist interpretation of ambiances. In doing so, this paper discusses the theoretical links between ambiances, power, and (im) material assemblages and explores the ‘empathically human’ aspects of the urban ‘*mise-en-scène*’ by demonstrating how the *dérive* shows the ways in which the sexed body is pushed and pulled by various ambiances (Bridger, 2013). As such, it shows how Birmingham, as a coercive ambient city, has designed spaces of ‘ambient power’ which work simultaneously through a logic of inclusion and emotional stability.

Power and Ambiances

To paraphrase Thibaud (2015), an ambiance is the essence of an environment: it gives a space ‘life’ or a sense of value¹. It is this sense of value that forms the crucial difference between ambiance and environment, as an ambiance has the capacity to stir memories and the senses. Thus the medium of a space can never be bland or neutral (Böhme, 1992; Thibaud, 2015); rather a space always involves affective and emotional resonances (Grosz, 1994). Through its ability to combine the materiality and physicality of spaces, immaterial sensitivity and emotion, and the socio-cultural, the notion of ambiances has developed in recent years (Amphoux, 1998; Thibaud, 2015). Within such work, ambiances have typically been assigned three main properties (Tixier, 2001 in Adey et al., 2013): ambiances are tied to embodiment and the social environment; an ambiance forms an atmospheric mood or climate; and ambiances are a product. The production of ambiances (and the consequential feeling of those in it) has been primarily understood both functionally and through divisible engineering solutions that emphasise the separate manipulation of spatial design, and anything that affects the sensorium and people permitted to enter (see Adey et al., 2013; Allen, 2006). Thus, ambiances can be interpreted as a subtle and latent form of power if they are manipulated for a purpose.

It is commonplace for public spaces to be understood as contested spaces where different individuals and collectives negotiate their belonging and rights to space. Yet beneath these disputes there are other forms of control in space. Foucault (1977) described one of the key techniques of power, discipline, which is based on the use of surveillance (or ‘the gaze’) upon the body to create order. In recent years, subjects have said to be controlled (or governed) at a distance through behavioural change and psychological governance (Jones et al., 2013), biopower (Rabinow & Rose, 2006), and ‘seductive powers’ (Allen, 2006; Degen, 2008; Thörn, 2011). Consequently, the modalities of power have become more dispersed and fluid, infiltrating the daily life of individuals in more complex and insidious ways.

Coercive disciplinary regimes are pervasive and different from Foucauldian discipline. They are part of the physical nature and micro-social worlds of the environment; they are a relatively uncognitive process; and, crucially, they aim to facilitate *conformity through pleasure* (Degen, 2008). This ‘control through pleasure’ is principally based on the sensory and emotive/emotional manipulation of the

1. Value here refers to the emotional significance or meaning that a person ascribes to that space. Thus, value is what makes a space a place.

environment. When this sensory and emotional coercion is successful, the space poses no unexpected experience that can disgust, shock, or even alter the perceptive capacity of the individual; all the senses (and potentially the emotions) are hegemonised. Thus, the experience and perception of a space can be sensuously and emotionally prescribed and predetermined (see, for example, Allen's 2006 analysis of Potsdamer Platz). The seductive, emotional, and sensory qualities of 'ambient power' mean that it is quintessentially latent; it is present but concealed, it is subtle in its manipulation, and it is felt before it is brought into cognition. This manipulation of sensuous spaces works by creating disruptions in our experience. These disruptions occur when an individual's perceptive capacity is disturbed from the anticipated feeling (c.f. Edensor, 2014); in this situation the individual is forced to reassemble their perception of the world from a new viewpoint (Bille et al., 2015). Crucially, urban design that creates spaces of 'ambient power' leads to the simultaneous regulation *of* emotions and regulation *by* emotion through the modification of the situation.

Methodology

Taking inspiration from Situationist theory, twenty female participants undertook psychogeographical *dérives* in the city centre of Birmingham, UK. A *dérive* (French: 'drift') is the unplanned exploration of the city and which was guided by the ambient qualities of the built fabric (Debord, 1983). All participants were asked to take photographs of phenomena that stirred their emotions, whether good or bad. The wide variety of images produced stimulated a rich discussion of emotions in subsequent photo elicitation interviews (PEI). The photographs acted as a commutative medium used in two ways: as a tool for question expansion; and as a means for the participants to explain and describe the varying emotional dimensions of their *dérives*. Participants also wore a GoPro™ video camera which enables the production of a rich and *continuous* collection and presentation of visual data (Garrett, 2011). Mobile videography is an effective method for recording geographic experiences of place, situated in and around the videographer's field of vision while in motion (Chalfen, 2014). Attaching a stationary camera to a moving body produced a full (and uncensored) representation of the *dérives* in real time, which provided support for the spatial data and acted as an aid in the subsequent interviews.

The coercive city of ambiances

Birmingham is a transforming city; it reflects modern capitalist life and the continued organisation around consumption and a consumer culture. In a modern capitalist world, sites of consumption have expanded as the spaces of production (such as factories) have diminished. The participants highlighted how there is a promotion of a new image of a modern and spectacular Birmingham that aims to replace its reputation as a 'grey' and 'industrial' city such as that described here by Maya (26): '*I thought it [a tower block] was absolutely fucking hideous. [...] It's disgusting. It's grey, it looks like it belongs in Coventry² - it's just horrible.*' Brutalist architecture, such as the tower described by Maya, is slowly being removed from the landscape,

2. Coventry is a city in the West Midlands to the southeast of Birmingham. It is often seen negatively because of its succession of 'questionable' grey architecture and town planning.

and being replaced by iconic developments such as the Library of Birmingham, Grand Central and the Bullring Shopping Centre. These buildings are a touristic spectacle as the architecture and visual design *'force [s you] to spend money'* (Helen, 36). They were favoured by (and attracted) many of the women due to the appeal of *'the exterior of ... buildings outwards'* (Shirvani, 1985, p. 6). Participants gravitated towards the Victorian and iconic buildings, lingering there considerably longer than other areas.

The highly commercialised agenda for the city centre generates a mechanised, routinised nature for pedestrian engagement. For example, Furqan (18) highlights how the city is designed to encourage very specific circulation: *'[The city is designed] to get around as quickly and efficiently as possible, and get me from the Bullring to the top of New Street and back. It's just a loop isn't it?'* There is an apparent steer towards consumption and shopping within the city; the vast majority of participants admitted that they only come into the city centre to shop despite showing a dislike for the Bullring. Not only does this ensure a deliberate and predictable experience of the city centre, it also dictates people's movement through the city by creating a collective cognitive schema based on pleasurable experience away from unexpected and unwanted sensory or emotional experiences. Thus, the city centre of Birmingham represents how *'a novel kind of commercial public space has emerged where power works in less than obvious ways, through a logic of inclusion rather than exclusion'* (Allen, 2006, p. 442: original emphasis). The vast majority of the dérives were naturally pulled towards the main shopping high street because the women found comfort in its familiarity: *'I'm just heading down to New Street again here; I had been in the Jewellery Quarter which was quite quiet and derelict, and when I got back to New Street it was all familiar again - seeing Starbucks and things - the more bustling cute little things. [It was] comforting to see nice places again instead of empty warehouses'* (Helen, 36).

While Helen finds comfort in New Street, it is an example of a space that normalises the behaviour of those people in it through the use of surveillance and ambient power (Allen, 2006). This control through pleasure (Degen, 2008) leads to emotional and sensory hegemonisation. Manipulation occurs through a phenomenological plane and encourages certain forms of behaviour, which are in keeping with the experience of an area as 'public': free opportunity, movement, and exploration. Thus, manipulating the city's ambient qualities encourages and inhibits certain behaviours, which therefore changes how people experience, perceive, and interact with space.

Whilst it may appear beneficial to create spaces that cannot disgust or shock through engineering solutions, the familiarity of these spaces has the potential to impact upon the women's emotional wellbeing. Pacione (2003) has theorised that repeated exposure to a stressful or shocking situation improves coping abilities since the individual will be able to regulate their emotional response better in the future. As such, the construction of emotionally hegemonised spaces has the potential to impact upon the city's inhabitants' emotional wellbeing, and emotional responses in general. The dérives, however, provided the participants with increased confidence and emotional capabilities. For instance: *'I've never really seen that much of*

Birmingham before and it was quite nice and go and see everything in relation to each other. Even though I ended up in places that I didn't like, actually I was scared at points, [...] it made me more confident walking around the city and I saw beauty in things I wouldn't of [sic] before. Like "oh look, that piece of graffiti is nice" or something like that' (Nadia, 26). Whilst the pull of emotionally and sensorially hegemonised spaces alters the participants' mobilities and engagement with the city, it is the creation of habit and familiarity that hinders their full engagement with the urban fabric and their sensorium. The logic of inclusion that ambiently prescribed spaces omit from individual cognitive schema, or 'mental maps', based on a lack of sensory and emotional shock. The repeated exposure to these emotionally and sensorially hegemonised spaces, however, not only makes the spaces of shock more sensorially and emotionally stressful but also removes them from their own individual emotions. Crucially, urban design creates spaces of emotional and sensory conformity that hegemonises emotions through ambient power.

Conclusion

By discussing the construction and manipulation of ambiances in Birmingham, UK from a gendered perspective, this paper demonstrates how urban design creates spaces of 'ambient power' through a logic of inclusion and pleasure. The spaces of ambient power discussed in this paper demonstrate the subtle power of sensory and emotional attraction and the pull they have on the sexed body. Thus, manipulating the city's ambient qualities encourages (and inhibits) certain behaviours thus changing how women experience, perceive, and interact with space. The repeated exposure to these emotionally and sensorially hegemonised spaces, however, removes women from their own individual emotions by removing the possibility of stress or shock. Not only does this hinder emotional wellbeing but also numbs an individual's emotional entanglement with their surroundings. Crucially, it demonstrates that Birmingham, as a modern capitalist city ordered around consumption, regulates the mobile body through ambient power's logic of inclusion and regulation of emotion, but also the push of regulation by emotion through sensory and emotional shock.

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