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Sensibilities to Lifeworlds

Abstract. *Our ways of being sensitive to the lifeworlds are profoundly changing. A new distribution of the sensible is emerging, giving rise to alternative feelings towards the living. My aim is to explore how sensibility comes into resonance with current socio-ecological issues. Five main forms of awareness to living environments are identified: 1) "weavers" tend to explore new attentions to living beings and to intertwine narratives together, 2) "resonators" tend to attune to ambient milieus and to vibrate to impersonal affects, 3) "appreciators" tend to revisit æsthetically the familiar and to appraise the qualities of everyday environments, 4) "performers" tend to alter ordinary gestures and to explore the powers of bodies, 5) "listeners" tend to pay attention to the ways the world sound and to render audible current environmental phenomena.*

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Our ways of being sensitive to the spaces we inhabit are changing. Not only is the contemporary world changing, but our very sensitive relationship to the world is also changing. Whether we think of the growing influence of digital technologies in daily life, the massive movement to æstheticize urban spaces, or the growing concern about the current socio-ecological crisis, everything suggests that we are witnessing a reconfiguration of the human sensorium that involves a new distribution of the sensible and new ways of being affected. In other words, the question of sensibility is a particularly relevant and operative way of thinking about current and future changes in our living environments. It also means that sensitivity is not a simple passive reception but rather a power to intensify and transform our relationship to the world.

Sensibilities in the Making

I propose to focus my reflection on the impact of the socio-ecological crisis we are going through and on the emergence of a new form of sensitivity to our living environment. First of all, it is a question of recognizing the fundamental role played by affects and taking note of our capacity to be affected. In this respect, anxiety, disorder, discomfort, concern or distress are some of the moods that colour our ways of being. It is now impossible to conceal the precariousness and fundamental vulnerability of our condition. Natural disasters and other global pandemics are there to remind us of this, in case we have forgotten. From this point of view fundamental affects infuse our relationship to the world, making us feel less and less at home on earth and accentuating the impression that the ground tends to recede beneath our feet. Glen Albrecht (2005) forged the notion of "solastalgia" to account for the eco-anxiety induced by global climate change. This sense of loss of comfort in the familiar world and homesickness without exile would thus be particularly symptomatic of our

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contemporary experience of the world. At stake here is ontological security, the basic trust we have in the world as it is, as it appears, and as it is supposed to unfold (Giddens, 1991). Moreover, the socio-ecological crisis we are going through is also and inseparably a crisis of the common sensibility in our lifeworlds (Zhong Mengual and Morizot, 2018). Although discreet and generally unnoticed, this crisis of sensitivity tends to impoverish our ability to perceive the richness and diversity of the living world. Robert Pyle (1978) spoke in this regard of the "extinction of experience" that increases our sense of strangeness towards the natural world. It is in such a context of eco-anxiety and crisis of sensitivity that a set of approaches is currently being experimented, which open up the field of the perceptible and explore new ways of being sensitive to living environments. It is as if the damaged world in which we live leads us to revisit the universe of affects, provokes a careful observation at beings and things, and encourages us to invent unusual ways of thinking. There is no royal road to learning to sense and feel the world, no overarching and encompassing paradigm, but rather a diversity of paths that cross to discover in a new light our sensitive relationship to the world. What about attempts to establish an extended and accurate sensitive relationship with the living world? The tentative mapping I draw up in the following sections is intended to show how different traditions of thought are working on contemporary sensibility by giving sense and exploring experience to our lifeworlds. Five constellations of work are identified that make us sensitive to our ways of inhabiting the precariousness of today's world.

Weavers: Intertwining Narratives Together

A first line of work focuses on weaving stories to show how forms of life are interconnected, composes tangled narratives to account for how worlds manage to make, unmake and hybridize. We can be guided by matsutake mushrooms and learn how to survive in ruins (Tsing, 2015) or follow wolves and try to connect with non-humans (Morizot, 2020), investigate the world of birds and discover new ways of making territory (Despret, 2019) or tell the story about our dog and open up to interspecific socialities (Harraway, 2003). In all cases, the aim is to explore step-by-step the interdependencies and complex assemblages between people and environments, between humans and non-humans. These narratives disregard the major divisions between nature and culture and refer each time to singular situations and original arrangements. The aim is therefore not to construct a grand and general narrative but to make ourselves available to the diversity of living worlds and to bring to light the many ways of inhabiting the earth. The option is then to multiply small stories and intertwine them, to take note of the singularity and variety of the little links that make up the world. Such a perspective implies broadening the scope and range of feeling. This means first of all that feeling is not the exclusive preserve of humans but concerns every living being. If it refers to a capacity to be affected, then it applies to animals and plants as well: when a dog is on alert and detects a danger or when a flower turns towards the light something has been felt. In the world of the living we share a common ability to feel, a common power to be affected. This openness leads to experimenting with new regimes of attention towards the living. Anna Tsing, for example, developed various "arts of noticing" that aim to reveal how various living species are closely intertwined in a common environment. This involves paying attention to the most trivial connections, to the most minute links that weave together the components of an ecosystem. In such works, narratives and writing styles play a fundamental role as they make us feel the composition of lifeworlds and help to intensify our sensitivity to living beings.

Resonators: Attuning to Ambient Milieus

This second line of work deals less with living beings as such and more with their conditions, contexts and environments. The questioning here focuses on forms of envelopment and modes of immersion in an environment. One of the questions asked is how a sensory environment pervades existences and makes life possible. Thus, we can develop a theory of spheres and climatic envelopes in terms of immune systems and life support (Sloterdijk, 2016) or highlight our exposure to meteorological elements and elaborate the idea of weather-world (Ingold, 2011), we can develop an æsthethics of atmospheres and critique the current economy of experience (Böhme, 2017) or bring to the fore the elemental domain to better articulate the materiality with the affectivity of atmospheres (McCormack, 2018). We are dealing with resonators that make sensitive various ways of tuning to an ambient milieu, play on the porosity and interweaving of sensory envelopes, and enable to experience the affective tonalities of situations. It is here more directly the domain of ambiances and affective atmospheres that is at work, mobilizing particular attention to sensory phenomena and impersonal affects, to flows, mediums, membranes and natural elements that compose and sustain a living environment. In this respect, the notion of medium is of prime importance, summoning the air in the first instance, that imperceptible but no less vital medium. Hence, we should not be mistaken: an ambiance is not what one perceives, it is not an object of perception. It is from this which one perceives, which opens up the perceptibility of the world, which enables perception. The quality of the blows and the intensity of the flows thus fully participate in the vitality and tonality of lifeworlds. With resonators, it is a question of the diffused and pervasive characteristic of the ambient environment, and the discreet and molecular nature of atmospheric variations. It is not only a question of perceiving a landscape or measuring an environment, but of feeling situations in common and experiencing the sensory contexture of social life. Such a perspective presupposes an ability to defocus and enter into vibration with the sensory dynamics and vitality of a world in the making.

Performers: Exploring the Powers of Bodies

This third line puts the body, gesture and movement at the forefront of questioning. It is a question of exploring unsuspected bodily powers by relying on singular techniques (Feldenkrais, Alexander, etc.) and original choreographic and artistic practices, or by focusing on impeded or different sensorialities. In all cases, the body routines are put in default in order to open up the field of possibilities in terms of gesture and body interaction with the environment. Here we enter the register of somatics, somaesthetics and ecosomatics in which the human body is experienced from the inside, in the first person. This is how we can propose to rethink ecology and our relationship to environments in terms of gestures (Bardet, Clavel and Ginot, 2019) or to elaborate the notion of minor gestures from autistic perception in order to revisit the ecology of practices (Manning, 2016), use a pragmatist stance to make the body the site of a project and meliorative practices (Shusterman, 2012) or look at Lisa Nelson's tuning scores to explore how it is possible to be in tune with others and one's environment (Damian, 2019). It is therefore on the basis of effective practices, situated performances and destabilising exercises that these variations are developed around the somatic. It is no less than opening up the field of sensoriality by paying attention to the pre-reflective domain of experience, exploring what a body can do and paying attention to microscopic and interstitial phenomena that often go unnoticed. If these propositions start from the body and the potentialities of the gesture, from an attention paid to the proprioceptive and the kinesthetic, it is to better put in variation our sensitive relation to places, to others and to non-human worlds. The body is always here a body-medium in which a renewed ecology of feeling is at stake.

Appreciators: Appraising Everyday Environments

This fourth line of work is more a question of environmental æsthethics. At the origin of these works the question of natural environments and landscapes was central, then a more recent movement developed which opened up to everyday life and ordinary situations. The interest of such a perspective is to be interested in sensitivity in terms of æsthetic appreciation while emancipating itself from the strict register of art. In a way, it is about cultivating a common sensibility by paying attention to objects, places, qualities or even practices that are usually excluded from the æsthetic field and go unnoticed most of the time. Depending on the case, the idea of æsthetic engagement can be developed by emphasizing the practical activity, bodily involvement and contextual dimensions of æsthetic experience (Berleant, 1992) or the capacity of ordinary æsthethics can be tested to enhance the quality of everyday life and serve a truly environmentalist agenda (Saito, 2017), an attitude of defamiliarization can be experimented to escape perceptual routines and reveal the æsthetic components of ordinary life (Haapala, 2005) or a careful attention to surface qualities can be developed to point out the existence of æsthetic qualities that have been completely neglected until now (Leddy, 1995). While this framework is divided between a descriptive and a normative approach, it involves in all cases the issue of moral sensitivity and introduces social, political and environmental dimensions into its field of concern. This attention paid to values and criteria for the appreciation of everyday environments leads to think in terms of the articulation between the æsthetic and ethical domains. This moral sensitivity to everyday environments does not consist therefore only in making æsthetic judgements on the living environments but in implementing concrete actions and leading to proper transformations.

Listeners: Paying Attention to Sounding Worlds

This fifth line of work develops a specifically sound approach. Since the seminal work "The Tuning of the World" by R. M. Schafer, a large-scale movement has developed to listen to the world. There are many and varied proposals in this field, whether we think of soundscapes, sound studies, sound art, acoustemology, auditory culture, or acoustic ecology. It is not only a question of listening to the living environment, but also of thinking about the ecology of the world according to sound, based on what we can hear from it. Sound is at once a sensitive manifestation of the world being made, an original way of accessing reality and a possible framework for thinking about it. In other words, sound opens up a singular ecology in terms of observable phenomena and a sensitive relationship to the world. By way of example, we can take an interest in the world of biophony and the sound universe of animals (Krause, 2012) or in the relationships that exist between sound and weather (Allan, 2017), we can develop an attentive listening of climate change (Burtner, 2017) or propose an ecology of narratives to give voice to water and its manifestations in daily life (Jones, Gorell Barnes & Lyons, 2019). Sound has given rise to the invention of numerous listening devices that both raise awareness of current socio-ecological issues and help to inform certain ecological processes from what can be heard. In addition to soundwalks, field recordings or other phonography that make it possible to be attentive and to document the evolution of sound environments, we are also witnessing the development of sonification and audification devices that make phenomena audible that are otherwise beyond the reach of the human ear (Polli, 2017; Kanngieser & Gibb, 2019). In this respect, sound becomes a formidable translator that manages to reveal, amplify, or intensify the experience one can have of the environments one inhabits. Ecoacoustics is now being talked about at the crossroads of artistic practices, environmental sciences, and human and social sciences.

Conclusion

This brief overview of the various paths leading to awareness of current environmental issues does not pretend to be exhaustive and would require further problematization. Thus, we have only discussed how these approaches take up arguments relating to the living, the elemental, the pre-reflective, the ethical or the perceptible. While there are significant differences between these propositions, there are nevertheless several meeting places that contribute to giving meaning to the transformations of contemporary sensibility. In all cases, it is a question of being attentive to the variations and mutations of the lifeworlds we inhabit, of developing new relationships with the more-than-human world, and of relying on a situated, embodied, shared and enacted conception of the sensory experience. We can also note the central role that the question of feeling plays in these approaches. In this respect, original frameworks of thought should be mobilized, making the plurality of capacities to be affected the touchstone of our relationship to the world and of common sensibility (Whitehead, 1929). These approaches also have in common that they make us sensitive to molecular perceptions, to the infinitesimal dynamics and tiny phenomena that work in the field of the perceptible. This applies to the thresholds of perception, which are particularly tested and open the way to hypersensitivity (Grossman, 2017). Finally, it should be noted that these ways of being sensitive to transformations in the living environment give rise to concrete experiments that intensify the powers to perceive and sharpen the sense of nuances. The emergence of this new form of sensitivity is the result of singular combinations of affects and percepts, powers to perceive and capacities to be affected, vulnerability and vitality.

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