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Towards a Sensory Patrimoine?

Atmospheric, Psychological and Ecopolitical Issues on Smell and Sound Identity

Victor FRAIGNEAU¹

Abstract. This paper addresses the notion of “sensory patrimoine,” by questioning our control of the natural elements, and the processes of patrimonialization. It considers this notion according to the sound or smell sensorialities. These thoughts are illustrated by several examples, in Switzerland, France, and Japan. We define under what conditions we can characterize the sound or olfactory identity of a place or an environment. Helped by the works on environmental identity, we thus investigate the modalities for sharing these sensorialities to create a common identity. We then define a key to understand our responsibility toward the environment, and we call for a balance to be found in future works on the inventory of smell and sound characters.

Keywords. *Smells, Sound, Patrimoine, Environmental Identity*

On Ambient ‘Patrimoine’

The notion of a sensory heritage and identity, which we will first address as “sensory patrimoine,” is not foreign to the field of ambiances. In 2012 for the 2nd International Congress on Ambiances, Nathalie Simonnot already put forward some guidelines to understand this rather new field. Her thoughts followed the milestones that she herself set up in 2011 with Daniel Siret, written in a later paper (Simonnot and Siret, 2014). Their observation is as follows: while many mediums are emerging and innovating for the promotion of a certain “sensory patrimoine” in the built environment, whether in the cultural, tourist or educational fields, these attempts are revealing the elusive and highly subjective status of ambiances, which can easily escape or dissolve with each attempt to fix them. Nevertheless, such efforts often prove to be highly instructive, and the means used to present a past sensory situation prove that to a certain extent the knowledge that we can draw from an experience of ambiance can be shared. We then suggest, keeping in mind their conclusions, updating the notion of “sensory patrimoine” extended to natural environments. We are going to test this notion regarding invisible and short-term temporality sensorialities, such as sound or smell.

Considering the natural environment in its sound dimension, recent research (Sueur and Farina, 2015) tends to prove that determining a sensorial identity in a given territory allows us to observe the evolution of acoustic qualities in particular, and biodiversity in general. We have here an alternative measurement tool to evaluate the impoverishment of the sound diversity coming from non-human actors (such as birds or insects), which informs us about certain characteristics of biodiversity and can subsequently lead us to take caring actions. With this example, we are witnessing a

1. ENSA Paris-la-Villette & Université Paris 8, GERPHAU laboratory, France, victor.fraigneau@gmail.com

shift from identity characterization to means of “patrimoine” characterization. Jérôme Sueur’s work, which focuses on the inventory of animal sounds diversity, calls for a similar approach for other characters of the soundscape, and, by analogy, we can foresee that similar results could be achieved by looking at the olfactory dimension. There, many experiments have identified characteristics that help to define the olfactory identity of a place or even a territory. Assuming the ephemeral and subjective nature of this sensibility, cartographic works such as those by Kate McLean (2019) thus overcome the issues of fixing modalities that are in essence dynamic.

By reading Simonnot’s work and her thoughts about the means to “patrimonialize,” we understand the relationship established, by analogy, between the history of the construction of the material heritage and the consideration of monuments. What about immaterial heritage, and now sensory “patrimoine”? For the first point, the answer is brought by the actions already carried out, for example, at the national and international levels in specific lists. But how can we define what would be a monument for the sensory field? We would like to point out that this attitude would seem like ranking the sensory qualities of a situation.

The Patrimonialization of Elusive Characters

A first answer, for instance, can be indicated by the museification of sensory characters, where they then acquire a cultural status. One of the first remarkable attempts in this matter was the exhibition held in 2003 at the Forum of Swiss History in Schwyz, which had for topic “Alpendüfte”: the characteristic smells of the Swiss Alpine landscape². This exhibition presented a historical-cultural approach to the sensual phenomena in the Swiss environment and an exhibition experience with more than 80 different smells. On one part, the public could feel smells typically pleasant, such as certain typical species of flowers, wood, hay and musk. On the other part, it was possible to experience less consensual smells: the strong smells of alpine livestock farming, traffic, and goods that today also characterize this environment. In both cases, the exhibition value creates for the smell inventory a phenomenon of patrimonialization. A similar approach leads designers to imagine ways of diffusing the olfactory identity of an entire country, as it was the case for the French pavilions at the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai, or the 2015 World Expo in Milan (Busschaert, 2016). In these examples, for the first one, the goal was to experience luxury and perfume through scents, and for the second, certain gastronomic and agricultural specialties, with disputable results in terms of intentions and means.

In 2001 in Japan, the Ministry of the Environment listed places that exhibit sensory situations and phenomena worthy of preservation (100 sites for their olfactory qualities, 100 sites for their sound quality)³. The selected sites fall into two categories: those expressing sensory qualities directly or indirectly related to human activities (including craftwork, cleaning, plantations, cultural or historical practices), and those whose sensory qualities are preserved from human influence. We could link the first category, by analogy, to the definition of a material or immaterial heritage, and the second to what could be called a natural heritage (the term in Japanese is literally “natural monument”: Ten’nenkinenbutsu 天然記念物). In all cases, we have there a choice of situations because of their exceptional - and therefore monumental - character, and thus a sensorial patrimonialization.

2. “Wie riecht die Schweiz” <https://www.swissinfo.ch/ger/wie-riecht-die-schweiz-/3510058>

3. “かおり風景・音風景・星空” <https://www.env.go.jp/air/life/index.html>

The notion of “sensory patrimoine” appeared notably in political debates in France at the end of 2019 when the proposal for a law “aimed at defining and protecting the sensory patrimoine of the French countryside” was presented⁴. This initiative was aimed in particular at making an inventory of agricultural sounds and smells and including them in the “patrimoine code.” The goal was not only to guarantee characters of French “rural identity” - as such worthy of being recognized - but above all to limit the possibilities of legal complaints about neighborhood disturbances, precisely because of the recognition of these heritage characteristics. This law intended to include sounds and smells produced by domestic and wild animals. This motion was rejected by the French senate, arguing that “it is not about human action, whereas the purpose of the patrimoine code is to ‘protect the worthiest works of man’”⁵.

From ‘Patrimoine’ to Environmental Identity

From these different examples, we sense that such a field of research could be worthy of interest in the future. First of all, let us return to the term “patrimoine”: in it as in heritage, there is at least an idea of mastery, if not domination. The processes of domesticity of the environment are linked to a need for trust and a system of control. This can be read from the very etymology of the terms. To come back to the notion of monumentality, with the notion of “sensory patrimoine,” and to a certain extent with the examples we have cited, we can observe each time a call for authenticity. This is defined by an anthropocentric viewpoint, which risks strongly affecting environments that are already very constrained by human influence. On the other hand, we may be confronted with an authoritative argument as to which sensory quality should be representative of a given territory. We see it with the political stakes involved in the issue of sensory identities, and to another extent, in the cultural field. Another balance can be shaken: by setting these characters in history, is there not a risk, as Nathalie Simonnot foreshadowed, of disembodiment of the ambiances that we intend to control? Such conclusions call for prudence and responsibility: this is also what the notion of patrimoine contains. Indeed, we owe architectural and urban historian Lucie K. Morisset, the enlightening distinction between the two notions: “patrimoine - patrimony - is something that you are responsible for developing. You may have inherited it, but beyond that, it has to be actively constituted in order to be handed on to future generations. Heritage thus comes from the past, while patrimony looks to the future” (Morisset, 2010, 54).

Once again, such thoughts raise more questions than they provide answers: if an inventory of sound and smell situations and phenomena can be promising and could guarantee an indirect recognition of human and non-human processes, with what criteria should they be collected, and how should places be chosen, in their locality, their scale, their relationship to humans and nature? Before thinking about “patrimoine,” we should first take an interest in the precise identity of the environments in question. Of course an important step in this field was made by Lynch (1960, 1976) when he advocated for the sensory qualities in environment, but in environmental psychology this very notion of environmental identity was particularly brought to us with the work of Susan Clayton, who established firstly a plurality of identities, as well as an obvious broadness in the appreciation of environments. A major character of the identity of individuals and collectives lies in the links they build in interrelation with the natural world: non-human actors, domestic or wild, inert elements or physical

4. “Patrimoine sensoriel des campagnes françaises (PPL)”

<http://www.senat.fr/tableau-historique/pp19-286.html> [our translation]

5. “Définir et protéger le patrimoine sensoriel des campagnes françaises - (n° 2211)” [our translation]

phenomena linked to a particular place, or more broadly territories of various scales. “An environmental identity is one part of the way in which people form their self-concept: a sense of connection to some part of the nonhuman natural environment, based on history, emotional attachment, and/or similarity, that affects the way in which we perceive and act toward the world; a belief that the environment is important to us and an important part of who we are.” (Clayton et Opatow 2003, 45-46).

Environmental psychology uses the notion of identity as a sentiment, which expresses a relationship, a collective belonging. This definition then constitutes a tool to understand the aesthetic and political involvement in environmental issues, at both the individual and collective levels. It is not a fixed state, but a complex structure that also involves processes, values, attitudes, and behaviors. Clayton argues that this identity is both a personal projection on the environment, as a matrix of ourselves, and a reflection of our actions on it. In this sense, there is a reciprocal synergy between the environment and the individual or collective. Attachment to the environmental identity then incites a feeling of conservation, but also an aura specific to the entities that constitute it. The notion of identity shares similar qualities with sensoriality: our sensory experiences participate in the constitution of our own and group identity, a quality that serves to define us, describe us, and position us. Particularly for the sense of smell, these are also Truong’s conclusions when he states that “olfaction directly impacts human emotion and memories; by virtue of its connection to environmental identity, it also draws emotional, memory, and personal factors into physiological processes” (Truong, Bonnefoy, and Prévot, 2020, 10).

In other words, it is precisely its ambivalent character that constitutes for sensory identity a relevant understanding tool for evaluating our relationship to the environment. It can be defined intrinsically, influenced by the social context, can be enforced, can evolve in intensity or quality depending on individuals and over time: “Identity matters in considering environmental problems because it is contested: Who counts? Who is considered?” (Clayton 2012, 173). In 1995, Mitchell Thomashow already put forward the notion of “ecological identity” to describe how individuals conceive the environment and how they relate to it. He was interested in the notion of ecological identity as manifested in their personality, values, actions, and sense of self. “Ecological identity describes how we extend our sense of self in relationship to nature, and that the degree of and objects of identification must be resolved individually. To be more specific, each person’s path to ecological identity reflects his or her cognitive, intuitive, and affective perceptions of ecological relationships” (Thomashow, 1995, 3). Arguing that personal experience of environments is relevant to evaluate our ecological worldview, he also suggested that the reciprocal is also valid, and wondered how this interpretation leads to new ways of understanding personal identity. Subsequently, this reflection, in a pragmatic application, led him to link up with bioregionalism thinking, to focus, as an educator, on ways of becoming aware of the relationship between man and nature for personal fulfillment and community health (Thomashow, 1998, 129).

To sum up, environmental identity can be understood as a plural notion with several uses: it refers to an identity of territories, to that of individuals themselves about environments, and to that which they attribute to the environments they know. We understand from the work of Clayton and Thomashow that the identity in question is created regardless of the temporal magnitude of the situations or phenomena we experience, even if they only partially address their reflection to the direct sensory contribution in the part of identity. The notions involved may be ephemeral, dynamic, metaphorical, or projected, they nonetheless build our relationship to the environment.

If in this way there is no doubt that environments, even if they are intangible and invisible as for smells or sounds, shape our identity, we have here a fertile field of investigation for the definition of ambiances helped by psychology and ecology. By better understanding the processes at work within urban and natural territories, we can promote recognition of the sensory qualities for the expression of ambient tones.

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