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Atelier de la traversée

A Workshop to Reflect on a Possible Mediation Between Affective and Political Atmospheres

Alice SALIMBENI²

Abstract. As part of my doctoral research, I organized Atelier de la traversée¹ workshop in Brussels, which involved 12 women in individual exploration of their relationship with public spaces. My aim was to investigate from up close some gendered urban experiences and to let emerge atmosphere of spatial inclusion or exclusion. In this paper, I will focus on a moment in the workshop, when women experienced space through the body and express their affective state through a creative medium. This phase produced images, audio, poems that helped me (at least to try) to enter into some atmospheric realities and to reflect on their possible both affective and political meanings.

Keywords. Atmospheres, Feminist Urban Geography, Nomadic Theory, Creative Methodologies

A Nomadic Choice Between Affective and Political Atmosphere

I begin this paper by giving two short and different definitions of atmosphere drawn from the literature: a non-representational, affective one and a situated - and for this reason potentially feminist (Haraway, 1988) - one. Then, I propose my own definition, based on the possible mediation between the two and enabled by the adoption of the nomadic theory (Braidotti, 2011).

The first definition concerns post-affective studies, where the term affection is referred to a set of intensities, forces and energies emanated from human and non-human bodies. (McCormack, 2013) When bodies establish a relation with each other in urban space, affection begin to circulate between (and through) them, thus generating an affective atmosphere. (Anderson, 2009) Affective atmosphere cannot be seen but felt, it manifests itself by invisibly enveloping the body (McCormack, 2018) and it is perceptible only through its direct physical experience.

The second definition concerns the situatedness of atmospheric perception. For Löw and Goodwin (2016), atmosphere is the encounter between *spacing*, *synthesis* and *habitus*: *spacing* refers to the way living beings and social goods position each other in space, and emanate an external effectuality (Löw and Goodwin, 2016) akin to an aura. The sum of all the external effectualities of the elements that make up the space produces a wider aura which may be identified as the overall effect of space.

The perception of this wider aura by the subject happens through the process of *synthesis*. As Bordieu (in Löw and Goodwin, 2016) explained, the habitus of the subject

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(social class, gender, race) intervenes in the perception of the atmosphere as lenses that allow to see reality differently. At the same time, the subject projects actively its social structure into space, setting in motion affects from a politically, situated, bodily position.

Despite the debate on the incompatibility of affective and non-representational theories with feminist theories (Cadman, 2009; Colls, 2012) it seems to me that the first conception of atmospheres (affective) and the second (politically situated) can be hybridized and made run together with the mediation of the nomadic theory (Braidotti, 2011). Affective theories are accused of always remaining too close to the non-political exploration of space and of being incapable of reaching and producing valid meanings for everybody, while feminist theories are accused of working on a plane that moves away from the body to pursue political goals, risking flattening the subjective value of women's urban experience (Cadman, 2009; Colls, 2012).

Combining the two points of view, adopting a nomadic approach based on atmosphere, is a way to open up to the possibility that women's urban experience can be read both from a political and affective perspective, due to the concept of nomadic subject. The nomadic subject holds a status of materiality which enables it to experience space from a corporal and affective point of view, but it is also interrelational and in a constant becoming with the social structures that determine power-asymmetries, such as those that produce conditions of gender spatial in-exclusion. A concept of atmosphere, hybrid between the two presented, hence based on nomadism, helped me to interpret the perceptions of the women I worked with, without putting aside their subjectivity and, simultaneously, highlighting the political value of their spatial relations.

Atelier de la Traversée

Between December 2019 and March 2020, I organised in Brussels a creative workshop supported by the feminist association *Le poisson sans bicyclette*. I named it *Atelier de la Traversée*, alluding to the way the body actively crosses space, projecting its habitus into it, generating a political-affective atmosphere, and to the way it is crossed by space, its energies, its forces and power structures.

The aim was to create a context for exploring the public space from a gender perspective to bring out spatial conditions, emotions and affections qualifying women's urban experience.

Focusing on affect required me to develop a theoretical and methodological framework that recognizes the creative approach as a good way to invite participants to express their spatial relations, (Thrift, 2008) through tools that ease the communication of both conscious and unconscious meanings.

The workshop has been advertised on the Facebook page of the association, which has a feminist target population. Indeed, it was attended by 12 feminist women between 21 and 51 years old, in need to find a channel through which to express their urban experience. It was structured in 5 moments. The first consisted in the administration of a survey through which I collected generic information on each woman and a synthetic judgement (comfort and discomfort) on the quality of her urban experience.

The second was conceived as an exercise during which each woman immersed herself with her imagination in some of the public spaces she had indicated in the survey. In the third, an actress expert in public space performance guided them in carrying out different body exercises, inviting them to use the space in a non-regulatory way

(dancing, shouting), to focus on the sensations that these actions produced. This moment was aimed at propel women to pay attention to the way space affects their body and to suggest them an approach that did not want to reproduce daily life. Rather, the exercise was structured as an extemporary performative moment, with the specific aim of *feeling space more intensely* than in everyday life. The third one, which is what I'll focus on in the next paragraph, involved women and their bodies in what I like to call an individual and exploratory performance (Thrift, 2003): a practice beyond the daily habits of using space, during which every woman, inspired by the collective exercise did together, has deliberately let herself be carried away by the events and the atmospheres, while carefully investigating her relationship with space and trying to creatively express it.

Finally, during the last moment we collectively reflected on our path, to detach ourselves from the subjective value of personal perceptions and to discuss about their collective meaning. The outcomes of this last phase are 3 short films that we used to explore more deeply, and then communicate, our experiences.

A Nomadic Approach Based on Atmosphere

The first experience I want to talk about is the one of J, a 27-year-old Belgian girl who took a picture of *rue de l'Evêque* - a street of connection between *boulevard Anspach*, where the Stock Exchange is located, and a well-known shopping street. *Rue de l'Evêque* does not have the æsthetic quality of the main avenue, it is rather an interstitial space occupied by fast-fashion shops, which can be found everywhere in the area, along with fast-food ones. Around *rue de l'Evêque*, bodies move in predictable ways, all quickly following pre-established ordered directions, orbiting around functions that have a precise target, of whom J does not feel she is a part of.

This space is really unpleasant. There are all these cars and these hyper-large buildings, it's grey, and further away there are all these shops and... and for me there's a concentration of capitalism in it all. And then, now it's even worse than usual, there's a sale... voilà! It's not a space I like to be in. It's not nice. The buildings are super tall, super close by, with uninteresting shops. It was raining, too.

J is enveloped in a multitude of forces that go through her body and give shape to her experience of that urban space. She is in what, with Thrift (2008), we could define a storm of affections but, since this one is perceived as a negative storm, J needs to put a certain distance between herself and space. To do it, she performs an objectifying act, taking a photograph of a paper on which she writes what she believes is the dominant character of the atmosphere: *maussade*, meaning gloomy, bleak, dark.

In order to give an atmospheric interpretation of her experience, I recall Massey's conception of space (2005), according to which space is produced by transcalar relationships. I want to include in them the affective ones. Here relationships are mainly global, far from the body, linked to the historical competition between cities that wish to achieve similar global standard. This generates a complex, articulated, chaotic, intensely stimulating atmosphere, which I would otherwise call violent, saturated, frantic, intrusive and overwhelming. It dominates the body, crossing it with strength, and thus shaping its experience more than the body can shape the atmosphere. It is introjected and it clutters up thoughts, sensations, emotions, limiting the intensity with which J manages to project something of herself into space. *Rue de l'Evêque* asks J a lot of attention and diverts her from taking more introspective attitudes perhaps precisely because the relationships that shape that space are far

from the dimension of the individual experience of her body.

The second mechanism is triggered by a shy atmosphere, less dazed and heavy than the previous one, not necessarily less intense or vital, but able to facilitate the moments of introspection that rue de l'Evêque obstructed. This is the case of B, a 52-year-old Belgian woman, and a space with a special charm, where the ancient Abbaye de la Cambre is located, surrounded by a large park, in the Ixelles district. The condition experienced by B allows her to concentrate on a single significant object, a tree that McCormack (2018) would call an *atmospheric thing*, since it dominates her experience, establishing with her a privileged special affective relationship.

I was like this (the lowest tree), all humped, all crumpled up on myself. It's frightening, suddenly I have so many memories. In this picture, there is hope and sadness.

This atmosphere does not monopolize B's attentions, on the contrary, it shapes a space for her feelings to be expressed, it induces her to take a more active role in the space, to own it and, then, to project her own intimacy into things, objects, situations. B does not try to keep a protective distance between herself and the perceived space. Rather, she opens up towards it and the tree with which she feels *tuned* (Löw, Goodwin, 2016).



Figure 1. Mauseade, J; the tree, B.

Open Reflections

This part of the fieldwork has produced pre-discursive impressions, cognitive reflections, clear or unclear suggestions. Through them I tried to grasp something of the great complexity of emotions, memories, affections, desires and fears that have marked these women's experience of urban space.

The nomadic approach based on atmosphere proposed for the interpretation of the urban experiences of the workshop has some significant implications. i.e., first, it produces a reading of space as such, without giving in to the temptation to decontextualize the elements that compose it in order to study them individually and thus withdrawing them from the circulation of affections that depends on their position and function in relation to the whole. Secondly, it is based on the assumption that spatial knowledge is possible only through the direct experience of bodies. As Böhme (2017) writes, the atmosphere is the union of the perceiving subject and what is perceived. It means that the spatial readings that can be produced by mobilizing this concept are inevitably politically positioned and determined by the intersection of the powers to which the body is subject and object. Consequently, such an approach tries to keep together the intimate and personal relationship between subjects and space and political considerations over the body, which aim to reveal some of the

conditions of spatial inclusion and exclusion women lives in their daily life. The way this practically happens is what I am working on in my research, looking at different atmospheric relationships and trying to figure out if there is a pattern behind them, by grasping all the suggestions that come from such an approach.

Without sin of absolute relativism or determinism, it is difficult to understand if, i.e., B's spatial experience can arouse similar feelings in other people as well, gaining a collective value. I moved, then, to a similar (but very different) question. Rather than wondering if, and how, B's experience could be considered of a collective value (what collective value means might deserve a special issue) I felt curious for *the kind and the way* she establishes a relation with space and which political reflections may raise by paying attention to this. Her relation with space is featured by a certain freedom of intimate expression (the kind), allowed by a state of attunement (the way). I began to wonder if her freedom to project herself into space (just as J's lack of freedom to do the same) can be approached by questioning this specific sense of freedom itself. This has pushed me to wonder whether, for some women, the capacity of space to accommodate the projection of intimacy might be an important factor when talking about feeling of spatial in-exclusion. It becomes a question of protection of one's personal sphere, one's thoughts and sensations from powers reproduced by different places of the city, which generate bodily affective state that increase or decrease women's possibility to feel *tuned* to public spaces.

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