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► **To cite this version:**

Damien Masson, Rachel Thomas. Politicizing Ambiances in a Turbulent World. 5th International Congress on Ambiances. Sensory Explorations, Ambiances in a Changing World, Mohammed Boubezari, Universidade Lusófona, Lisbon; Cristiane Rose Duarte, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro; Ethel Pinheiro, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro; International Ambiances Network, Oct 2024, Lisbonne, Portugal. hal-04741259

HAL Id: hal-04741259

<https://hal.science/hal-04741259v1>

Submitted on 17 Oct 2024

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POLITICISING AMBIANCES IN A TURBULENT WORLD

POLITIZAR AMBIÊNCIAS NUM MUNDO TURBULENTO

Damien Masson¹, Rachel Thomas²

Abstract

In a world marked by multiple concerns and disrupted by recurring crises – pollution of inhabited environments, threats to biodiversity, social and moral panics, terrorism, natural disasters, the growing weight of technology, etc. – the question arises of their effects on the ways of being and living together, and on ordinary urban atmospheres. These new and more frequent changes affect mundane urban life, altering our states of body and arousing different affects and emotions. How do atmospheres witness these changes, and how are they also used, engendered, and even politically employed, as forces and powers, for their capacity to include or exclude, to seduce or repel, count among the many questions we intend to discuss in this panel.

Keywords: Ambiances. Social, environmental and political change.

Resumo

Num mundo marcado por múltiplas preocupações e perturbado por crises recorrentes - poluição dos meios habitados, ameaças à biodiversidade, pânicos sociais e morais, terrorismo, catástrofes naturais, peso crescente da tecnologia, etc. - coloca-se a questão dos seus efeitos sobre os modos de ser e de viver em conjunto, e sobre as atmosferas urbanas comuns. Estas novas e mais frequentes mudanças afectam a vida urbana quotidiana, alterando os nossos estados de corpo e suscitando diferentes afectos e emoções. Como é que os ambientes testemunham estas mudanças, e como é que são também usados, engendrados, e até politicamente empregues, como forças e poderes, pela sua capacidade de incluir ou excluir, de seduzir ou repelir, são algumas das muitas questões que pretendemos discutir neste painel.

Palavras chave: Ambiências. Mudança social, ambiental e política.

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1 ATMOSPHERES IN A CHANGING WORLD

In a world marked by multiple concerns and disrupted by recurring crises – global climate change, pollution of inhabited environments, threats to biodiversity, social and moral panics, terrorism, natural disasters, the growing weight of technology and the social concerns it raises, etc. – the question arises of their effects on mundane life. These changes are of many kinds and operate on different scales. Whether they are changes on a global scale, such as global warming or the loss of biodiversity, regional upheavals, such as the rise of authoritarian political regimes, the multiplication of conflicts and wars, terrorism, or local problems, such as the marginalisation of certain groups, natural disasters, etc., we are all affected by them.

These changes and upheavals have a range of effects on the production and management of inhabited spaces, on distributed affects and emotions, on social practices and representations, on the ways of being and living together on the feeling of uncertainty and the ability to live in a world where ordinary life is no longer necessarily a matter of given neither a guarantee.

These changes have as much to do with the ordinary lives of the inhabitants and users of these spaces as with the practices of the stakeholders responsible for their production and management. They have many implications:

Firstly, in the materiality of built spaces, which aim to absorb these new constraints, and propose more resistant or more resilient solutions (Coaffee, 2020; Coaffee et al., 2009; Madden, 2023), with regard to natural disasters for example, or even in the ways of channelling crowds in urban space to avoid friction and tension (Klauser, 2013; Landauer, 2009).

Secondly, in the symbolic register, political and media discourse, but also information campaigns (visual and auditory in particular), urban spaces are the medium for a whole range of information, aimed at regulating ordinary behaviour (such as simple information panels, like the advice not to forget your luggage when using transport), but also at knowing how to react in the event of an emergency, and to always remain vigilant and able to report any abnormal or worrying phenomena to the authorities (Drongiti & Masson, 2023). What was historically a feature of sensitive areas (e.g. seismic zones) has now spread to a wide range of areas open to the public.

Thirdly, in the sensory world, where smells, sounds, lights and ways of using the body appear, disappear and are reconfigured. The biodiversity crisis is reflected in the disappearance of birdsong in some places, while the Covid-19 epidemic was accompanied by the return of a certain amount of wildlife to urban spaces (Masson & Thomas, 2020). In some places, urban security injunctions limit the capacity to stand still in public spaces (Scott, 1990), and the gathering of groups where, at other times or places, these ways of using the body are characteristic of a certain quality of urban spaces.

Fourthly, in the register of interactions and social ecology, which is an underlying theme of the three previous registers. The material, symbolic and sensitive reconfigurations of our lived worlds in the face of the changes mentioned above have the effect of reconfiguring the forms of encounters in the public space, and the modes of ordinary interaction, as the previous examples demonstrate.

Fifthly, and lastly, they concern affects and emotions. When these changes result in the loss, or the feeling of loss, of something, for example, of a past situation or mode of existence, idealized or actualized, or of a living world that is changing in an undesired direction, they are accompanied by feelings and states such as nostalgia, solastalgia (Albrecht, 2019), anxiety (Laketa, 2021) and even trauma (Gensburger, 2017), but also by collective emotions of commemoration, remembrance and resilience (Closs Stephens et al., 2017). These situations are also accompanied by political affects (Anderson, 2014), which reflect the way in which the uncertainty associated with these changes translates into a specific climate that weighs on people's minds and potentially catalyses forms of action.

Because they are distributed at the material, symbolic, sensitive and interaction levels, as well as in terms of affects and emotions, these manifestations contribute to ambiances. The various theorizations of ambiance (Augoyard, 1995; Thibaud, 2015) and atmosphere (Anderson, 2009; Griffero, 2017; McCormack, 2008) emphasize their intermediary position, between the manifestation of phenomena in a situation, and modes of relating to them that are reflected in experience and action. They also show that they cannot be limited to a set of 'objective' material conditions, and that we should not limit them to strictly phenomenological apprehension. Ambiances are in fact, on the one hand, a condition of possibility of experience, and are a way of accessing ordinary situations. As well as being a sensory quality of certain situations, it is through them that these situations are encountered: experiencing crowds or heat implies experiencing them bodily, so they are not just felt as a quality external to the body, but as a condition of its use. But the same is true of a-phenomenal atmospheres, such as political climates or affects, which are experienced and acted upon at the deepest level of the body (Breviglieri, 2021). On the other hand, ambiances unfold in situations rooted in historical, geographical, cultural, social and legal contexts, which are not indifferent to the ways in which they can be interpreted. For example, a signal such as a siren in an urban setting will not have the same meaning depending on the context in which it occurs. Lastly, they are always experienced by subjects who are situated, gendered, racialized, able-bodied or impaired, hyper- or hypo-sensitive, benefiting from certain capitals, and so on. Put differently, atmospheres are always 'angled' (Ahmed, 2010), experienced from a certain position, or even a certain 'point of life'³.

2 RESEARCHING ATMOSPHERES POLITICALLY

The upheavals mentioned above imply the use of a political understanding of atmospheres (Thomas, 2021). On the one hand, this kind of apprehension can mean focusing research on the political uses to which ambiances are put (Masson & Thomas, 2020), as is done in works that examine the place of the sensory in the control of ordinary practices (Bonicco-Donato, 2016), the 'powers' placed into atmospheres (Allen, 2006) and the atmospheric manipulation of moods and emotions (Albertsen, 2016), or of conducts (Masson, 2024). But beyond these cases, which illustrate the ways in which political intentions are translated into action on the ambient world, a political apprehension of atmospheres also takes account of the fact that every ordinary situation is intrinsically political, as illustrated by the presentation of the three preceding arguments (atmospheres are experienced bodily, even if they are not necessarily

³ This expression refers to the title of a column by the philosopher Emanuele Coccia in the newspaper Libération.

translated at the phenomenal level; they unfold in the contexts of societies; they are experienced from a situated perspective.)

The challenge then is to implement methods of investigation that can maintain such a perspective in order to answer questions such as the following: How do atmospheres witness the changes evoked above? How atmospheres are they used, engendered, and even politically employed, as forces and powers, for their capacity to include or exclude, to seduce or repel? How can we describe ambiances whose powers exceed atmospheric phenomenality? How can we grasp and understand the forces that drive them? How can we think ambiances as historical, social and cultural constructs? And so on.

By addressing these challenges, this session aims at laying a critical reflection to discuss the methodological, theoretical and practical issues arising from the politicization of atmospheres. How can we capture and describe the changes at work, most of which are long, ongoing and unfinished processes that also involve complex socio-political issues? How can paying attention to the socio-political dimension of ambiances contribute to a critical reflection on the sensory future of the urban world?

All the papers of this session question atmospheres as a spatial, affective, social and sensory problem. Based on theoretical reflections and case studies set in a wide variety of contexts, they take account of the non-neutral nature of ambiances, their effects on bodies and the intentional uses that can be made of them.

3 POLITICIZING ATMOSPHERES IN PRACTICE

This session will be organized as follows. It opens with three papers looking at significant changes in sensory urban contexts, for very different reasons: one linked to urban planning policies, the second to a festive event, and the third to war. By developing phenomenological and aesthetic approaches to ambiances, these contributions help to show how the grasp of sensory environments is linked in many ways to an understanding of the underlying political contexts. Ambiances thus take on a variety of statuses: sensitive witnesses, aesthetic instruments, enabling or disabling devices.

The first communication stems from an urban planning agenda. Transformed by a "revitalization" project of the harbour, an urban development program of a favela a "police pacification" policy, Rio de Janeiro's port area has been the scene of numerous urban struggles. David Almaric describes the related atmospheres and ordinary sensitive experiences of contestation, ultimately drawing up a phenomenology of a challenged right to the city.

Secondly, Isabella Pontello Bahia paints a historical portrait of the carnival of Belo Horizonte (Minas Gerais state, Brazil), which use to be a carnival of struggles, and slightly turned into a vehicle of urban marketing policies developed by local authorities. She shows how carnival scenography is a twofold tool that is used by some inhabitants to denounce inequalities, while it is aimed by officials at glorifying power.

In a third time, Perrine Poupin proposes to highlight the work of Ukrainian artists and sound engineers with whom she collaborates and who have been documenting the daily life of the war since February 2022. While this work provides a sound archive of a war in progress, this soundscape also documents a – not so mundane – everyday life, and the sensory experiences associated with it.

Following these three papers, which are based on a substantial body of sensitive ethnographic work, the session continues with two papers looking at the uses of ambiances from the perspective of controlling bodies and affects, in the wake of work examining the sensory dimensions of government techniques (Little, 2015), 'atmotechnics' (Wall, 2019) and, more broadly, 'atmospheric politics' (Sloterdijk, 2005).

Emmanuel Doutriaux's proposal is part of a reflection on the political stakes of architecture and ambiance, in a context of ecological emergency. He aims at focusing on the disruptive dimension of ambiance, i.e. the possible modulations to which it can be subjected by architects and users. In this way, he proposes to open an approach in terms of a "cooperative empowerment" around ambiances, which could serve as a source of emancipation.

Then, Maoli Xing's paper questions the links between political ideology and the production of atmospheres in the age of atmospheric engineering. In doing so, he aims at developing a Lefebvrian approach to political atmospheres, to show how and at what level atmospheres, though diffuse, conditions our affects and experiences.

After hearing papers on the evolution of sensitive contexts and on the ideological use of atmospheres, the third part of this session focuses on the effects of ambiances on situated bodies, encounters and interactions. By documenting processes of social marginalization and exclusion, these papers reflect the enabling and/or disabling powers of atmospheres in practice.

Zacharias Valiantzas' paper interrogates ambiances of care. Based on an ethnography of practices of (in)visibilization and appropriation of spaces developed by migrant and refugee populations in Thessaloniki (Greece), he shows how forms of attention to the other and solidarity are created, and experimented with, the transformation of ordinary ambiances that challenges current regimes of exclusion.

Then, mobilizing a feminist approach, Diogo Mello Jeremias explores the daily lives of migrants in Berlin through two distinct paths: on the one hand, the way they are subjected to forms of control and racialization that undermine their sense of belonging; on the other, the way they construct forms of collective life based on practices of resistance, activism and sense of belonging.

Finally, Tanguy Sandré and Louise-Marie Jouault conclude the session by exploring the political and critical potential of sensory cartography. They show, on the one hand, that sensory mapping is the tool through which "marginalized voices" such as that of the Tunumiut, inhabitants of East Greenland, become intelligible. On the other hand, this tool is also the one through which allows us to understand the complexity of ordinary inhabitant experiences, made up of exclusion, isolation and attachment to the territory.

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