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Nathalie Blanc, Jacques Lolive

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# A Politics of Forms

Nathalie Blanc, Jacques Lolive<sup>1</sup>

The proposal we are developing here concerns a politics of forms. It is based on the inclusion of aesthetic criteria, namely landscape-related criteria, into public policies and associative mobilizations. The importance of a new environmental aesthetics acquired in the area of perceptions. Our forms, i.e., landscape, narrative and atmosphere, are operators aiming at rearticulating the private/public sphere, the spheres of the intimate, the spaces of the public.

A first part will be devoted to the experience of form. For Dewey, an American pragmatist philosopher, form is the vehicle of a self-acknowledgment, of a taking into possession of one's space as an experienced space. What he calls aesthetic experience partakes of this acknowledgement, thus distinguishing it from Kant's judgement of taste.

A second stage in this development will be devoted to the transition between aesthetic experience, the aesthetic judgment, and the public sphere. Setting out from aesthetic experience, as rendered problematic by Dewey, and from the aesthetic judgment as a way to make one's experience objective and as a place of passage and communication of a universal experience, we attempt to open up the public sphere, a concrete space, and one of dialogue, to different ways of apprehending the real – namely aesthetic ways – from those of science.

The last part of our development is devoted to landscape, to narrative and to atmosphere as being essential forms of concrete/abstract public sphere construction.

## I. Forms and aesthetic experience

Form is global, first perceived, before any analytical decomposition, and commits the whole body, i.e., a body that does not reside anymore in the separation between subject and object, but, in the contrary, a body that submerges into its environment. Thus, following for that matter Arnold Berleant (1991, 1992), author of numerous books on these topics, we don't reserve aesthetic experience to art but enlarge it to environment: aesthetic experience is at the core of the process of learning, of adapting creatively to one's environment: it is a process of environmentalization.

John Dewey suggests in *Art as experience* (Dewey 1934) a reading of form along these lines. For Dewey, the form bearing the experience of the thing, the object or the stage up to its complete apprehension, is understood as an ensemble of coordination and of adjustment of qualities specific to the object, to the scene or to the situation, and of significations related to it. Form is one of the conditions of aesthetic experience. This experience, open to all (John Dewey does not reserve it to the elect few), is born when there is a fusional unity of values and meanings when approaching an object, a scene or a situation.

In these sense, aesthetic experience does not stem from a subject/object distinction, but quite on the contrary, it comes from a complete cooperation between these two levels. The vital point for Dewey is that reciprocal incorporation which is the aesthetic experience is vital: "*the subject feels his vital connexion to things and objects turn into new living entities*" (Zepke 2003); this incorporation tends to renew the feeling of life felt by the subject; aesthetic experience keeps "*alive the power to experience the common world in its fullness*" (Dewey 1934) . Indeed this experience is aesthetic since the object that emerges from it, that comes

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<sup>1</sup> Nathalie Blanc is CNRS (French National Center for Scientific Research) Senior researcher in the LADYSS laboratory, Jacques Lolive is CNRS Senior researcher in the PACTE laboratory.

out of it, expresses this community specific to the subject and its environment. By the way it works art brings together the conditions necessary to aesthetic experience, but its isolation on the social scene is counterproductive on the political level. For Dewey, the issue is one of “restoring continuity between aesthetic experience and the ordinary processes of life.”

Discussing form is, therefore, valorizing an experience in its singular aspect, but also, in its universal one, since the fact of its possibility is open to all. However, a notion such as aesthetic experience is not sufficient, according to us, to create the conditions of a communication or a sharing and, therefore, the development of a judgment of taste in the public sphere. Aesthetic experience as it is defined proceeds from an immersion in the environment, whereas procedures of adhesion in the public sphere go hand in hand with the constitution of a subject able to speak. Thus, in a first step, we will evoke what are the passages between aesthetic experience, a vector of attachment (to the environment), and the aesthetic judgment as one of the modes of objectivation of experience that associates itself with a capacity for detachment in the public sphere; before showing in a second step how aesthetic experience and judgment could be some factors of democratization of the public space.

## II. Aesthetic judgment and public sphere

What are the relations between aesthetic experience, aesthetic judgment and public sphere ? In her *Conferences on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Arendt 1991), Hannah Arendt refers to the Kantian conception of aesthetic judgment, that is, the faculty to judge in order to deal with the particular, in order to define political judgment. The close proximity of both judgments only holds because politics is defined by Arendt by « *the putting-in-common of words and acts in a sphere of appearances* » (Arendt 1958). According to Kant, taste is a common sense that proceeds from a disinterested relation to the world; the condition for the existence of beautiful objects is the “*communicability*” that proceeds from taste (Kant 1787). The judgment of an audience represents the public sphere where beautiful objects appear.

To the extent that this judgment proceeds from an intersubjectivity already at work, from a capacity to communicate, it favors the communication of an experience, that, although potentially universal, is not always possible to share. The passage to aesthetic judgment partakes of an objectivation of one's own experience, objectivation that forces one to take into consideration the conditions of its formulation: it is easier to share the pleasure provided by a sunset than the pleasure felt when looking at objects of torture. Many examples would work. There is indeed a public sphere for this judgment even if communication between singular experiences and aesthetic judgment requires some translation whose modalities we will delve into in details later on. We still have to specify what aesthetic judgment provides public sphere with. The answer is twofold. First of all, aesthetic judgment, supporting itself on the imagination, which prepares this reflective judgment, provides an ability to resist the inertia of public politics which are often guided by admitted rules that have become simple recipes. For Kant, imagination transforms the object perceived as an object of representation about which I can reflect within a public sphere potentially open to all viewpoints. It “*initiates the detachment, disengagement, disinterestedness requisite for appreciating something at its just value*” (ibidem). Thus, freedom is related to the power of imagination that prepares judgment. Besides, this point of view is argued for all the better in that the contemporary approaches to art insist more on the creative process than on the monumentalization of the art work. Today, art as it is expressed, looks very much like the Arendtian attempt to reformulate the public sphere, as it is illustrated by numerous contemporary artists who “*incorporate process, sustainability, plurality of spectators and unpredictability. Furthermore, because they do not*

*resemble what is usually considered as art, a reflective judgment is required for them to be noticeable and to determine whether it is art*” (Spaid 2003).

The Arendtian reading of Kant allows us to consider the aesthetic judgment as an act contributing to political renewal. This action, synonymous of freedom, guarantees the contribution of the imagination to the public sphere. In this revived public sphere, aesthetic judgment accords with experience, because it is the object of a negotiation that involves the capacity to rise to generality from a particular point of view.

The idea of a politics of forms is to exceed the condition of expert. Knowledges stemming from aesthetic experience are combined to a capacity of attachment, of opening to the spirit of place. Aesthetic experience, combined with attachment, and even more with the creation of a specific, informed, relation to places (creators of forms) goes together, for its valorisation, with the aesthetic judgment, a factor of objectivation in the public sphere.

### **III. Landscape, narrative, atmosphere**

These theoretical positions are confirmed by the examination of new associative mobilizations. Many of them deal with the redefinition of the aesthetic experience’s political framework, and, more specifically, with three subjects: the reference to the subject which returns in the form of inhabitant or resident; the “small” life territories (landscapes, places, milieux...) to which the subject is attached; the aesthetic judgement that allows us to justify the associative struggle. It seems to us that landscape conflicts and some urban mobilizations express a new strategy of *aesthetisation of public spheres* that relies on links of proximity and on aesthetic judgment to attempt the transformation of the public sphere, and therefore of the rules of public debate. How does the passage between singular experiences and aesthetic judgment operate? Three forms of commun expression and representation are present in political decisions and/or in new mobilizations and they could validate the aesthetic experience in public debates: landscape, narrative and atmosphere.

#### ***Landscape***

A new perspective in the transformation of public spheres is currently developing, it relies on conflicts, including landscape related conflicts, and feeds on the pluriform refusal of expertise. They refuse expertise, even democratic expertise, putting forward that scientific evidence suppresses the sensible and the imaginary: “landscape is not science”. The protagonists of these disputes criticize “the NIMBY stigmatisation,” but they refuse to conform to the conventional models of general interest *à la française*. This heterogeneous movement brings together urban movements fighting to promote “rich” urban life environments and associations defending landscape.

**Example 1: *The fight against the Mediterranean TGV in Bouches-du-Rhône in 1991.***

The movement of the CARDE associative federation that was fighting the TGV (High-Speed Train) was chaired at the time by M. W., a landscape painter. It managed to exist because diverse groups joined together with vaguely defined aims around a common project. This project defended a landscape whose multiple translations made it easier to involve the CARDE’s allies. We can distinguish:

- Landscape, as a garden, unique, fragile, created by the work and the sweat of the peasants, in a ceaseless struggle against the violence of the climate and the rudeness of the soil. This is the one that interested the main farm unions of the department.
- Landscape as a source of inspiration, glorified, recreated by poets and used by painters as a working tool. This is the one the painter responsible for the movement was most concerned with, although he managed to express the other dimensions of the project.

- Landscape as a surrounding, inhabited by rural-urbans for its quality and for its affordable price, essential elements of their quality of life. This is the one the residents' associations were attached to.
- The Provençal Landscape, with prestigious sites celebrated by painters. This is the one journalists were interested in.

Beyond the fact, that such movements have some organizational and strategic motivations, it is also prompted by identity-related motivations in line with the creation of an environment. Indeed, the invention of landscape is related to an aesthetic or artistic invention. (Roger 1997). In fact, a beautiful landscape is still the one that refers most to the harmony of the social and natural dimensions, where they are most deeply experienced; the source of pleasure is thus response not only in what is seen, but in what is known or assumed: an accord between man and nature. But the aesthetization of space is not just the product of an artistic and intellectual elite; it is a common process and belongs to everyone.

Example 2: *The fight against the very high voltage line of Quercy in 2001* (Labussièrè 2007). Set-up by a landscapist opposed to the project, it relies on a photo album that compares, for the whole line, views without pylons and views with pylons integrated on a realistic manner through computer graphics. This aesthetic projection is interesting not because of the representation of pylons, whose outlines everybody knows, but because of its capacity to make the proximity of a phenomenon exist. This line allows for the reopening of the debate on forms, which had been hidden so far, by the definition of sensitive zones on a map... Where maps were showing a preferential course, pictures show a high-voltage line that sometimes competes with the culminating points of the space, sometimes conflicts with the narrow valleys. Furthermore, the pictures put the project back in a significant context, material as well as symbolic, that forms a whole. Where maps were justifying the preferential path, according to criteria related to their distance from habitations and listed sites with preservation orders, photos show the singularity of the Quercynois landscape based on its geological configuration, the villages settings, the linking up between inhabited and uninhabited spaces.

Procedures of landscape assessment are numerous and some experiences of participation show the importance played by images in prefiguring places; therefore, they resort to the aesthetic feeling to help the public become aware of what is at stake in the planning, but also in envisaging its own possibilities of intervention. But their aim is mainly social acceptability of planning projects. If we focus on *Landscape Character Assessment* in Great-Britain (Countryside Agency 2002), we see that it displays a will to take into account the aesthetic and perceptual qualities grounding the singular character of the assessed landscape. However, the fear of subjectivism leads the assessors to prefer quantitative methods and to neglect this relational dimension of the components of the landscape's character, which are simply objectivised and incorporated into a purely descriptive and axiologically neutral language (Brady 2003). The hybrid richness of the concept of landscape, situated at the interface between subjective and objective, is erased, as is as this human capacity by excellence that is the aesthetic apprehension of things.

### *Narrative*

Narrative proceeds from the development of an individual story; it relates a singular, particular experience; it proceeds from a common weaving of narratives, which gradually moving in space and time, are going to develop a collective fabric. A shared narrative valorizes the development of a collective representation of places. Narrative enables anyone, individual and collectivity, to communicate his singular experience in order to bear witness to the memory of place.

Indeed, not only does narrative point to the past when it partakes of local memory, but it can be a form of projection into the future and guide the elaboration of a metaphor. Coming back

to the example of landscape, the debate on the landscape's character does not necessarily lead to the prescription of a conservation of aesthetic integrity present in landscape as a reference to an ahistorical state. The opening to the "*diachronic dimension*" could inscribe landscape in a historical narrative, that of human and natural events that take place in the experience of the inhabitants and the lovers of the place. It leads to a negotiation in order to choose "*the appropriate trajectory*" that can "*best continue the narrative*" about landscape (Holland, O'Neill 1996, p. 4, taken up in Brady 2003).

### ***Atmosphere***

Describing atmospheres corresponds to reviving an experience of places: thus "*every city is incarnated in a singular experience*", explain Jean-Paul Thibaud and Rachel Thomas (2004). From the point of view of form, atmosphere is a notion incorporating different sensorial dimensions; it thus attempts to restore the richness evoking its richness: "*though atmosphere brings up in every case a sense-based experience, the latter is based on various perceptive attitudes. Whether Moscow, Las Vegas or Los Angeles, these are different ways of being in the city which are called upon.*" From the point of view of form, "*each time in all cases, the atmosphere is not defined or established once for all, in every case the aim is to invent a new mode of expression in line with the experiencing of the city itself. It is only on this condition that atmosphere emerges; when the style of writing relays the ways of feeling the city...*" Form does not emerge only when "the part is articulated to the whole, fragments to the whole city..." Furthermore, "*a whole rhythm ensuring unity and consistency of atmosphere seems to be associated with each city. It is no doubt at this point that levels as different as the ones of sensorial, affectivity, mobility and sociability articulate around each other.*"

An *a contrario* piece of evidence about how important atmosphere is, is delivered to us by the example suggested by the anthropologist, Fabienne Watteau (Watteau, 2003): The residents of Luz, a village in Portugal, had to leave their village in 2003 because of the opening of the Alqueva dam. After having been totally razed, the village was rebuilt "identically" 3 kilometers away by EDIA, the building company. In this example, aesthetics is instrumentalized as a way to accompany the transformations resulting from extensive redevelopment to make them accepted more easily. The residents' narratives raise the issue of atmosphere which seems to be what is missing. The new village, "identically rebuilt," is deprived of atmosphere. The notion of atmosphere translates, according to us, the richness of pluriformic relations woven by the inhabitants to their living territories. The dam planner has just taken into account a purely formal and spatial link. The village is rebuilt based on the former respective positions of houses and streets. Spatial analysis cannot, by itself, rebuild a city: memory, the imaginary dimension, and a sense of place are missing. This example prompts us to criticize planning and redevelopment considered as a utopian production of pure forms, without links nor context. Politics of forms cannot be limited to formalism, a formal determinism. It includes a symbolic revalorization of places.

### **Conclusion**

This work is in line with a participative aesthetics that aims at making the inhabitant a competent actor in public planning policies. For them the constitution of a new protagonist, the inhabitant, and new criteria politicization can be determining.

In this sense, using the three terms, landscape, narrative and atmosphere aims at a theoretical scope. The politics of forms tries to introduce into political reflection tools with a subjective/objective interface reducing the feeling of "disenchantment of the world"; on the other hand, it tries to make sure that these tools induce processes of reattachment to places and of re-legitimization of places of life. Thus, it seems essential, for instance, in an urban

context, to carry out processes of symbolic re-valuing of places; processes involving some formal and some aesthetics in the name, in the end, of quality of life.

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