

***En quête d'ambiances: éprouver la ville  
en passant* by Jean-Paul Thibaud, Genève:  
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The theme of ambiances is gaining increasing attention as a topic of research,<sup>1</sup> and is an area of great importance in understanding the social world. Ambiance is a constituent of the world, a part of what the world *is* and what *makes* it what it is; its importance and pertinence lie in the consideration of the sensible world, our existential milieu, the *stimmungen* (*tonalité affective*) and our experience of social life.

Jean-Paul Thibaud's book is a crucial theoretical and methodological tool to help us form an understanding of the complexity (in the sense of *complexus*, meaning "woven together") of this thematic, and of its heuristic scope. The author, based at the research laboratory CRESSON,<sup>2</sup> must be considered one of the leading figures in the theorization of ambiances. This book can likewise be seen as one of the most comprehensive pieces of work to address this question, and more importantly as a valuable tool for researchers interested in comprehending the sensible world--a world that we can understand from the *perceptio* (in the

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<sup>1</sup> See The International Ambiances Network: <http://ambiances.net/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cresson.archi.fr/>

sense in which Merleau-Ponty used that term) of lived experience and the different situations of everyday life, the sensible environment and the urban space, and all of the myriad social and affective interactions which together comprise place. This system is also based on the consideration of the interdisciplinarity and transversality of subjects relating to the theory of ambiances; a theory regarding the sensible world and its influences on the social one, the ways in which the city affects us, and in turn how we affect it with our actions and senses.

Before us is a perception of the urban world where we accord signification and value to the lived collective space in which the human and the landscape are brought into harmony. This space must be thought of as a condition of possibility for experience. In this observation lies the possibility of identifying the sensible nature, the organicity and the modes of perception through which individuals, for example via *déambulation* (the walk), and the different manifestations of presence form a composition of trajectories and styles of existence. It is a question of acts of transformation and adaptation to the space of which ambiances compose a situated experience, a sensible expression of social life. Reading this book, the reader has the sensation of traversing the social world, appreciating its atmospheres, living the affective tonalities of its territory. This leads us to a comprehension of the way the experience of society is lived; a way that we can understand through taking into consideration the diverse ambiances and ways of inhabiting the world. If we are used to understanding and describing the city via its morphology and metabolism, it is also appropriate to take into consideration the world around us which we envelop in affection, i.e., the ambiance and its relationships with the milieu and the atmosphere, as Thibaud shows us in his exploration of the archaeology of the notion of ambiance. This notion is nourished here by theoretical references following an interdisciplinarity which reveals the significance and richness of ideas from psychopathology, ethnomethodology and Daseinanalysis, with

references to the likes of Jean-François Augoyard, Gernot Böhme, Tim Ingold, James Gibson, John Dewey, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Erwin Strauss, Georg Simmel and Pierre Sansot.

Ambiances produce situations, interactions, ways of “being there” which place the accent on qualitativity. It is interesting in this respect to examine the first part of the book in order to grasp the importance of ambiance in the structuring of urban social life, the way we manifest our presence to the world; this is the “how of our being in the world” (p. 21) – in other words, the “how” of an experience (p. 25). It is this emphasis on the “how” rather than the “why” that is a way of considering a kind of philosophy of life and a social aesthetic capable of comprehending the multiple situations of everyday life.

An ambiance must be considered “the support from which the sensible world configures itself daily” (p. 57); it is a configuration that we can see from a specific perspective through walking, a modality which the author analyses in a rich and pertinent way from a methodological and phenomenological viewpoint to illustrate, for example, the urban gesture on the street, the flux, the appearance, the glance. We can find these elements in an interesting analysis of an experimental piece of observational fieldwork (the Place de la Convention in Paris, cf. pp. 123-150) that aims, in the author’s words, “to explore how an urban ambiance is personified in corporeal behaviour and an ordinary journey” (p. 149).

One of the main qualities of this book, beyond its theoretical contributions discussed above, is its methodological elaboration via the observation of practices (this, in the CRESSON laboratory, is defined as a survey method *in situ*), which in our view relates to the poetic sensibility of Pierre Sansot, and its objective method, outrunning the canonical body of social science research and giving a particular verve to the need for quality (from the viewpoint of qualitative approaches) in research.

The importance of this book, despite some repetitions, lies in its

consideration of an opening to the pluri-sensory, which pays attention to the affective perspective, the “ordinariness” of situations, the modalities of “feeling” places as inhabited experience. In the production of the ambiances of places in the contemporary metropolis, there is a will to “give the tone to the urban territories” (pp. 221-236) through a situational analysis and situated perception (we might tentatively say a “situationist empiricism”) which shape the complexity of the ambient atmosphere, sociality, affectivity, temporality and sensoriality of the spaces enveloped by those ambiances. In substance, ambiance is a process that defines the environment and its social practices, and must be considered a modality of the transformation of the urban.

In this transformation, it will be necessary to consider the significant impact of technologies, a thematic which is absent in this book, because, in the contemporary spatial situation, technology contributes to designing the ambiances of places. It also contributes to changing and influencing situations, in particular in the experience of a journey and in the flux of wandering, and to redefining the style of existence of the sensible. We might think, to choose just one example, of how the presence of the smart phone alters our perception of spaces.

Finally, this book opens our eyes and spirits to an understanding of our urban and existential milieu, enriched also by the various typologies which help us to grasp the daily experience of the sensible city shaped by ambiances. The book represents an invitation to immerse ourselves in the fluidity of spatial situations in order to “feel” their signs and their aesthetic particularities, and to be permeated by the ambiances of a city, which we must consider as a living organism. To browse the pages of this book is to learn and to understand, but also to feel--it is a voyage into ambiances.