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► To cite this version:

Simon Runkel, Andreas Wesener. ”Rencontre sur les lieux”: memory construction in urban ambiances - A video-based research approach. *Ambiances in action / Ambiances en acte(s)* - International Congress on Ambiances, Montreal 2012, Sep 2012, Montreal, Canada. pp.121-126. halshs-00745827

HAL Id: halshs-00745827

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00745827>

Submitted on 26 Oct 2012

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“Rencontre sur les lieux”: memory construction in urban ambiances

A video-based research approach

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Abstract. *The paper discusses the place-bound construction of individual and collective memories. The question is to what extent atmospheres assist in processes of remembering and/or are remembered themselves. The paper discusses the advantages and challenges of using video analysis techniques. It suggests a framework for empirical research encompassing the analysis of immediate and reflected memory construction, and the role of urban ambiances in memory construction.*

Keywords: *memory construction, urban ambiances, qualitative video analysis*

Introduction

The observation that place and memory are ‘naturally’ intertwined (Casey, 1987: 186-187; Hayden, 1995: 18), and that historical events and meanings have materially ‘inscribed’ in place, have resulted in the widespread assumption that individual and collective memories are closely linked to the material settings of place, and that in particular the built environment plays an important role in recalling individual and collective memories (Halbwachs, 1941, 1980 [1950]; Hornstein, 2011; Assmann, 2011 [1992]: 161). The paper, however, suggests that besides material properties, sensuous and affective qualities are also able to facilitate processes of remembering. Walter Benjamin’s (1968) account of the ‘aura’ in reference to urban landscapes has been linked to a multitude of dimensions of how a city can be experienced involving not only visual stimuli but an entire range of sensual perceptions with the potential to produce a diversity of memories (Savage, 2000: 46). The aura may be experienced as “spatialized time” (Savage, 2000: 40) whereas the “textual juxtaposition of modern and old in the landscape along with multiple senses used in its perception inspires an emotional response which contains the potential for the recovery of memories” (Rickly-Boyd, 2012: 280). Ambiances and atmospheres¹ have been described as noticeable but transitory environmental qualities, not directly attached to physical entities but inexistent without, possessing the ability to capture people’s sensuous conditions in particular situations. If we recall places where we used to live, love, or simply spend some of our life time, we may remember a particular ambiance which made a place distinctive and memorable. If we visit particular places of the past we might experience familiar atmospheres which – being unexpectedly encountered again – may trigger a variety of memories. In addition, places may facilitate reflections about the past which are shared collectively by a particular community of remembrance and transcend the individual cognitive processes of remembering such as collective cultural memory (Assmann, 2011 [1992]). The relationship between

1. In this paper, the terms ‘atmosphere’ and ‘ambiance’ are used synonymously.

atmospheres and memories can therefore be described in a two-fold way: first, atmospheres are remembered; second, atmospheres trigger place-bound memories (individual and collective ones). *Rencontre sur les lieux* relates, on the one hand, to individual memories of places experienced in the past. On the other hand, it points at the surprising experience of being overwhelmed by unexpected memories while visiting a particular place. In addition, *rencontre sur les lieux* refers to the in-situ method which – as a mobile method – turns a particular place into a reflective basis for studying the construction of memories. However, the hypothesis that atmospheres and ambiances function as a non-material² memory carrier needs to be supported by empirical evidence.

Ontological considerations of atmospheres

Atmospheres have been conceptualised as “half things” (Böhme, 2001; Schmitz, 2005a, 2007) or “immaterial exceptional things” (Hasse, 2002b) pointing at their temporary and mutable character (cp. Hasse 2012: 15; Kazig, 2007). Thibaud (2003) and Kazig (2007) understand atmospheres as mediations between subject and object, a ‘sensuous background’ that is not directly perceived (cp. Merleau-Ponty, 1968). It rather influences the conditions under which phenomena emerge and appear. In this context, a difference has been made between perception and sensation (Thibaud, 2003: 294ff.) which in a way resembles Schmitz’s distinction between perception and affectedness (“*Ergriffenheit*”): In the first case, atmospheres enter the realm of mere perception without ‘affective involvement’ (“*affektives Betroffensein*”). In the latter case, atmospheres may overwhelmingly affect a person’s condition, in particular his mood (Schmitz, 1992: 22). Affectedness in the sense of an overwhelming ‘affective involvement’ may include bodily needs such as hunger, thirst, etc. as much as feelings such as fear, hope, melancholy, etc. (Schmitz, 2005a: 92f.). In this paper, the ontological notion of atmospheres as either ‘half things’ or mediums is not considered incommensurable. Noticeable vital qualities of an atmosphere can be understood in terms of their mediating functions. These functions are readily applicable to Schmitz’s notion of “half things” which has been chosen as an ontological model for this paper. Atmospheres are bodily ‘felt’ rather than cognitively ‘understood’ (Schmitz, 1993; Hasse, 2005: 119; Hasse, 2008: 106). They are spatially predimensional, their particular spatial position is not defined: “They seem to fill the space hazily with an emotional tone” (Böhme, 1995: 22). Feelings are spatially extended atmospheres. The spatiality of atmospheres is not measurable. However, spatial characteristics such as narrowness, width, depth and surface can be distinguished (Schmitz, 2005a: 185ff.). The distinction between perception and affectedness is chiefly based on the personal situation. Schmitz distinguishes between an objective character of atmospheres - or rather pre-objective character due to the assumption that, from an ontological point of view, atmospheres are not ‘full’ objects (Hasse, 2008: 107) – and a subjective one. From an object-orientated perspective, facts and programmes appear as impressions and expressions with the ability to blur the boundaries between subject and object. Particular ‘thingly’ aspects of the environment have been conceptualised as “the ecstasies of the thing”, whereas an object is not determined by the characteristics which distinguish it from other things but by the way it ‘comes out’ of itself (Böhme, 1995: 32f.). The extension and volume of a thing provide “weight and orientation” to the surrounding space: “On the basis of such an altered thing-ontology, it is possible to conceptualise atmospheres [... as] spaces; insofar they are ‘tinted’ by the presence of objects, people, or environmental constellations that is by their ecstasies. They themselves are domains of the presence of something, their reality in space. [...] atmospheres are not imagined free float-

2. Here, the term ‘non-material’ memory carrier describes memory carriers which are not necessarily object-related. Referring to atmospheres one could perhaps also speak of ‘more-than-material’ memory carriers.

ing but vice versa as something which originates from and is created by the things, people, or their constellations” (Böhme, 1995: 33). Architecture and the built environment have been considered important on the production of particular atmospheres, being able to influence people’s feelings and moods (Böhme, 1995: 18). Architecture is not only perceived visually but also through “tactile reception” (Benjamin, 2008 [1936]: 34f.), the way the built environment is experienced by being entered, walked through, and being used. This leads to the question if experiencing architecture is rather achieved by ‘feeling’ it rather than looking at it (Böhme, 2006: 107). The term ‘situation’ points at the mediated character of atmospheres incorporating the experience of a particular holistic impression – a chaotic and manifold wholeness (Schmitz, 2005b). Even if in some cases single elements may stand out, wholeness remains the characterising expression of a situation. The experience of place may become a crucial and in explicitly noticeable element of a situation. The atmosphere of an urban environment, for example the ‘distant’ atmosphere of an exclusive residential quarter (Hasse, 2008: 104), is not only influenced by the built environment but also, and in particular, by social gestures such as class- or milieu-orientated self-representations. Urban atmospheres are therefore not based on single phenomena; they include a variety of different material, habitual, and cultural heterogeneities which are experienced as one characteristic atmosphere (Hasse, 2008: 106). From a subject-related perspective, atmospheres are characterised by features, for example related to a culture, sub-culture, ethnicity, or gender (Hasse, 2005: 119). These include moods – or a “state-of-mind” (Heidegger, 1962 [1927]: 172ff. [134ff.]) – which represent important personal dispositions for the experience of atmospheres. However, the distinction between moods and atmospheres is of vital importance. While moods are intensionally linked to the subject, atmospheres are rather object-related (Hasse, 2005: 119). An atmosphere can influence personal moods whereas a personal mood can shield an atmosphere (Hasse, 2008: 108). The paper argues that a personal mood that got affected by a particular atmosphere of a place is of crucial importance for remembering the vital qualities of that place. It raises the hypothesis that we remember specific situations as atmospheres in particular if we experienced a level of affectedness that changed our personal mood significantly.

Remembering atmospheres as moods

Memories are not controlled in terms of conscious reflexivity (cp. Jones, 2005). They are produced as something cognitively new with reference to the past: “The strangeness of memory is the presence of what is apparently past in the present” (Jones, 2005: 208). Memories may be experienced as an unwanted obtrusion (cp. Game, 2001), and they can be bodily inscriptions through experiences which follow, accompany, and hassle us (Casey, 1987: 146ff.). Traumatic experiences, for example, keep on existing as affective, pre-reflective bodily memories influencing bodily movement and spatial experiences. Memories may unexpectedly appear and be suddenly released from hidden periods of life (cp. Bollnow, 1988: 205). The intensity of memories can be related to the intensity of emotions experienced at a particular past event. Memories are situation-related; places have been considered as contributing to the construction of situational memories in the sense that “a memory is either of a place itself or of an event or person in a place [...] place serves to situate one’s memorial life” (Casey, 1987: 183f.). Memories include an image and a feeling, a situation and the resonance to a situation. Remembered atmospheres find their expression in the concept of ‘nostalgia’: The atmospheric qualities of a place are (re)constructed in someone’s memory; however, the place itself can only be encountered in someone’s mind. Remembered atmospheres may lead to a state of reverie in which they – unclear and beautified – re-appear (Bachelard, 1971). Places appear fragmented, broken, and vague such as Rilke’s description of a house which he describes in his novel “The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge” as “[...] not a building, but it is quite dissolved and distributed inside me”

(Rilke, 2006 [1910]: 14). Atmospheres which fit in a current situational mood (Hasse, 2008: 108) open up possibilities to remember. In his analysis of Marcel Proust's prose, Bollnow shows how a moment of the past is able to become part of the present. Peculiar, random, and supposedly insignificant perceptions such as a smell or a taste are able to recall things which seemed to be long forgotten. Memories are not retrieved through conscious processes of the mind but on the basis of a "peculiar law" requiring a particular "undetermined mood which, in any moment of life, combines the multitude of surrounding circumstances to a whole" (Bollnow, 1988: 206). By remembering a situation, one is able to experience a place under the holistic impression of an atmosphere which has – prior to that experience – influenced one's mood. Against this background, Schmitz refers to the American psychologist G.S.Hall and his memories about the house where he grew up. Hall is able to recall specific details and associations linked to particular rooms in the house. However, he misses a 'feeling' about these memories even if they are his own (Schmitz, 2005b: 329) which has been described as a lack of "subjectivity of facts" (Schmitz, 2005b: 359). Atmospheres are remembered if they affect someone: "Not only events of one's own life story, but also impersonal masses of situations and atmospheres, as far as they are linked to each other, belong to memory in form of a remaining treasure or active seed, but only if they have become, clad with subjectivity, the individual cause of the memory-loaded human being" (Schmitz, 2005b: 360). An atmospheric quality may be even attached to material memory carriers as long as they have accomplished a personal meaning.

Ambiances as situational triggers of memories

Hasse (2002a: 68, cp. 2012: 147ff.) conceptualises street spaces as cultural collective spaces of memory. He focuses on the relationship between the creative conditions of ambiances and circulating societal knowledge about the felt distinctiveness of being involved in an atmosphere. He refers to Schmitz's notion of "programs" which represent, as premises and historical inscriptions, situational components. These are appealing, repulsive, or ensnaring strategies based upon architectural rules of construction. In their communion with the personal situation, ambiances may trigger a flood of memories: "The personal situation, the personal character, mediates in such cases an uninhibited after-flooding of memories and respectively a flooding-together as something new" (Schmitz, 2005b: 366). Schmitz compares this process to a musical motif, which resonates holistically in memories: "Such memories may become noticeable by emerging in a mighty way from time to time, and indeed not so much through explication of singular facts, programs and problems, but rather through a more holistic resonance in later situations, which seem to be related" (2005b: 363f.). Ambiances which correspond with and influence one's specific mood, for instance due to their creative thickness, continue with or tie in with past situations in our memories: "Less in ephemeral moods [...] but rather in situations with distinct moods, a continuity is established with similarly tuned situations of a past, which in a sense fades unto the future, e.g. as pessimism" (Tellenbach, 1961: 138).

Towards empirical observations

The empirical challenge, however, is to find a way to approach ambiances via subject or environment (cp. Kazig, 2007). As illustrated above, the relation between a personal mood and a particular present situation, i.e. the ambiance, is in focus. The researcher may approach and reflect the experiential "flooding-together" of memories in a specific situation with experimentees on the basis of interviews. Audiovisual material may serve as a reflective basis for the interview; the interview itself may be supported by audiovisual material which facilitate as a medium, reflections about past experiences. Specific situations may be identified and emphasised in a dialogue. From an analytical point of view, the movement of

participants in space, documented by audiovisual devices like head mounted cameras, is important. The unity of perception and action which has also been called “perceptual action” (Thibaud, 2003: 283), has been elaborated by Bergson (1964: 150). Hasse states: “In personal movement, (singular) places will be transformed into experiential space. [...] In movement things will be created and connected as networks for the subject” (2002a: 86). From an empirical point of view, we remember reflectively through the narration of events. And by that we may be able to open up again for affective involvement. The utilisation of video technology, based on the overall conception of “following memories” at a specific place, enables access to remembered ambiances which are present in our daily experience of space. In-situ-methodologies such as head mounted cameras facilitate narrative interviews with participants after their walks through a specific environment. The object of our study is a pre-defined urban setting, well known by residents and tourists for its architecture and its atmospheric qualities. Our research focuses on participants familiar with the site through personal bonds. Participants will be equipped with head mounted cameras, and they will be asked to stroll through the pre-defined urban setting, to think aloud, and to verbalise their memories and associations as commentary of their inner experiences. The experiences of their walks will be reflected in immediate narrative interviews afterwards. While watching the audiovisual material during the interviews, participants are allowed to explain specific situations, felt atmospheres, and their connection to their own memories further. The transcriptions of the interviews will be analysed in terms of individual and inter-subjective descriptions of atmospheres with a focus on the role of ambiances in memory reconstruction.

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