

# POLITICKÉ VEDY / POLITICAL SCIENCES

Časopis pre politológiu, najnovšie dejiny, medzinárodné vzťahy, bezpečnostné štúdiá / Journal for Political Sciences, Modern History, International Relations, security studies

URL časopisu / URL of the journal: <http://www.fpvmv.umb.sk/politickevedy>

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Článok / Article: Politika foriem / A Politics of Forms  
Vydavateľ / Publisher: Fakulta politických vied a medzinárodných vzťahov – UMB Banská Bystrica / Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations – UMB Banská Bystrica

**Odporúčaná forma citácie článku / Recommended form for quotation of the article:**

BLANC, N., LOLIVE, J. 2011. A Politics of Forms. In *Politické vedy*. [online]. Roč. 14, č. 2, 2011. ISSN 1338 – 5623, s. 75 – 84. Dostupné na internete: [http://www.fpvmv.umb.sk/userfiles/file/2\\_2011/BLANC\\_LOLIVE.pdf](http://www.fpvmv.umb.sk/userfiles/file/2_2011/BLANC_LOLIVE.pdf).

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## A POLITICS OF FORMS

**Nathalie Blanc – Jacques Lolive\***

### RESUME

Presented paper elaborates on the topic of a politics of forms. It is based on the inclusion of aesthetic criteria, namely landscape-related criteria, into public policies and associative mobilisations, as well as the importance of new environmental aesthetics acquired in the area of perceptions. Our forms, i.e., landscape, narrative and atmosphere, are means through which we are aiming at re-articulating the private/public sphere, the spheres of the intimate, and the spaces of the public. Setting out from aesthetic experience, as articulated by Dewey, an American pragmatist philosopher, 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, an actual space of dialogue, to different ways of comprehending the reality – namely aesthetics – than those of science.

**Key words:** Politics of Forms, Landscape, Narrative, Atmosphere, Aesthetic judgment, Aesthetics experience, Environmental aesthetics, Public sphere, Environmental mobilisations

### Introduction

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 mobilisations. It also tries to evaluate the importance of a new environmental aesthetics acquired in the area of perceptions. Our forms, i.e., landscape, narrative and atmosphere, are means through which we are aiming at re-articulating the private/public sphere, the spheres of the intimate, and 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, means of taking into possession one's space as an experienced space. What he calls "aesthetic experience" partakes in this acknowledgement, thus

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distinguishing it from **Kant's** "judgement of taste".

Second part of our contribution represents an analysis of the transition between aesthetic experience, the aesthetic judgment, and the public sphere. Departing from the notion of aesthetic experience, as outlined by Dewey, as well as 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, an actual space of dialogue, to different ways of comprehending the reality – namely aesthetics – than those of science.

The last part of our contribution is dedicated to landscape, to narrative and to atmosphere in their function as the essential forms of concrete/abstract public sphere construction.

## 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, to the contrary, a body that submerges into its environment. Thus, following the reasoning of **Arnold Berleant** (1991, 1992), author of numerous books on these topics, we do not reserve aesthetic experience exclusively to art, but enlarge it to include the entire environment: aesthetic experience is at the core of the process of learning, of adapting creatively to one's environment; it is a process of environmentalisation.

**John Dewey** suggests in his *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 privileged few), is born when there is a fusional unity of values and meanings when approaching an object, a scene or a situation.

In this sense, aesthetic experience does not stem from a subject/object distinction, but quite to the contrary, it comes from a complete cooperation between these two levels. The crucial point for **Dewey** is that reciprocal incorporation in the aesthetic experience is vital: "*the subject feels his vital connection 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 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, valorising 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 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 become factors of democratisation of the public space.

## **Aesthetic judgment and public sphere**

What are the relations between aesthetic experience, aesthetic judgment and public sphere? In her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Arendt, 1991), **Hannah Arendt** refers to the Kantian conception of aesthetic judgment, that entails the ability 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** as “*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 inter-subjectivity already at work, from a capacity to communicate, it favours the communication of an experience that, although potentially universal, is not always possible to share. The passage to aesthetic judgment takes part in an objectivation of one's own experience; objectivation that forces one to take into consideration the conditions of its formulation: i.e. 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 more detail later on. We still have to specify what exactly aesthetic judgment provides public sphere with. The answer is twofold. First of all, aesthetic judgment, supporting itself with the imagination, which prepares ground for the 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 required for appreciating something at its just value*" (Kant, 1787). Thus, freedom is related to the power of imagination that prepares judgment. Besides, this point of view is argued even better in that the contemporary approaches to art insist more on the creative process than on the monumentalisation of the art work. Today, the way the art 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 to be 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 generalise from a particular point of view.

The idea of a politics of forms is to move beyond the status of an expert. Knowledge stemming from aesthetic experience is associated with a capacity of attachment, of opening-up 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) for its valorisation goes together with the aesthetic judgment, a factor of objectivation in the public sphere.

## **Landscape, narrative, atmosphere**

These theoretical positions are confirmed by the examination of new associative mobilisations. 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, milieu...) 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 mobilisations express a new strategy of *aesthetisation of public spheres* that relies on links of proximity and on aesthetic judgment in an attempt to transform the public sphere, and, by extension, the rules of public debate. How does the passage between singular experiences and aesthetic judgment operate? Three forms of common expression and representation are present in political decisions and/or in new mobilisations 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 criticise "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. Its existence was based on diverse groups that joined together for a common project, albeit with vaguely defined aims. 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, re-created 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 as well as urban residents 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 organisational and strategic motivations, they are 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 "aesthetisation 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 high voltage line of Quercy in 2001* (Labussière, 2007).

Set up by a landscapist opposed to the project, it relies on a photo album that for the entire projected line compares the views without pylons and views with pylons integrated in a realistic manner through computer graphics. This aesthetic projection is interesting not because of the representation of pylons, whose silhouette is well-known, 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, and 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 pre-figuring 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, just like 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 common narratives which are gradually moving in space and time, thus developing a collective fabric. A shared narrative valorises the development of a collective representation of places. Narrative enables anyone, individual and collectivity, to communicate his individual experience in order to bear witness to the memory of place.

Indeed, not only does narrative point to the past when it takes part in the 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 a 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).

## 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 by 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 various 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 gets 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 kilometres away by EDIA, the building company. In this example, aesthetics is instrumentalised as a way to accompany the transformations resulting from extensive redevelopment to make them more easily acceptable. 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 pluriform 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 criticise planning and redevelopment considered as a utopian production of pure forms, without links or context. Politics of forms cannot be limited to formalism and formal determinism. It includes a symbolic revalorisation of places.

## **Conclusion**

This paper is in line with a participative aesthetics that aims at making the inhabitant a competent actor in public planning policies. According to them the constitution of a new protagonist, the inhabitant, and new criteria of his politicisation can be determining.

In this sense, using the three terms, landscape, narrative and atmosphere has a deeper 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-legitimation 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 not just in the name but – in the end – in the of quality of life.

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