Esthétiques périphériques. Décrire la vie périurbaine avec rigueur

MATTHEY, Laurent

Abstract

Reference
Peripheral aesthetics. A rigorous description of peri-urban life

LAURENT MATTHEY

Bibliographical reference

Translation(s):
Esthétiques périphériques. Décrire la vie périurbaine avec rigueur

Full text

1 A little over two centuries ago, the first Romantics (Novalis and Schlegel in particular) developed a scientific and aesthetic approach, referred to as “fragmentary” (Schefer 2003: 92), which sought to reflect the world using fragments rather than the flow of a totalising discourse. It is to some extent this project which Éric Chauvier draws on. The author opposes to the unified discourse of “those whose profession is to observe the world” [“ceux qui observent le monde de façon professionnelle”] a philosophy of the fragment, which is nonetheless based on the same structural principle as that of the experts: the “use of keywords to establish one’s authority” [“se servir de mots-clefs
Chauvier conducts a peri-urban “survey” (“enquête”), the need for which arose as a result of issue 3135 of “a Parisian weekly journal” (“journal hebdomadaire de la capitale”) (Télérama), which wrote about the “ugliness” (“mocheté”) of peripheral housing estates.

Chauvier’s small book (63 pages) addresses different issues which will interest those who use peri-urban observation as an element of their professional practice: routine life; the standardisation of suburban life; communities, the paradoxical desire for nature which destroys the countryside and produces the city (building up empty spaces in order to guarantee to each their own space); the blending of the rural and the urban in a third imaginary term, the rurban, which is neither one nor the other; the advent of new agoras (new places of exchange of a politics stripped of meaning) around the commercial centres (the hyperagoras of the supermarkets).

The key words which Chauvier uses “to establish his authority” (“faire autorité”) (in no particular order: “space” (“espace”), “politics” (“politique”), “neo-residents” (“néo-résidents”), “rurality” (“ruralité”), “science” (“science”), “franchise” (“franchise”) ...) are arranged in such a way as to lead towards a form of revelation – that of the everyday aesthetic of areas considered as being of no value. It is an everyday aesthetic which is nonetheless legitimate – despite the effects of the judgements which result from a rhetoric of distinction which deems it to be ugly. The peri-urban, we are told by one of its inhabitants, is woven out of fictions (“a reservoir of thousands of fictions debunked this statement” (“un réservoir de milliers de fictions contredisaient ce constat”)), which constitute its substance while simultaneously tending to insulate its residents in a capsule of “the stuff which dreams are made of” (“milliers de fictions insonorisées, justifiant, chacune à son niveau, son ensommeillement”) (page 61).

Chauvier unfolds for us several of these fictional stories which make up the peri-urban. These stories are techniques of making use of the peri-urban worlds, ways of making a place. In this way Chauvier traces “the potential for fiction that develops behind each bay window” (“les potentiels de fictions qui se nouent derrière chacune [des] baies vitrées”) (page 50) of the housing estates surrounding him. In so doing, the author examines the new countryside aesthetics developing in these spaces outside of the city – and leads the reader to question the very dynamic of the countryside within western society. Examining the possibility of having countryside within the city, and envisaging the death of the countryside following a “crisis of legibility” (“crise de la lisibilité”) (the seepage of the urban into the rural), it is possible, paradoxically, that the urban and the rural meet within the confines which are the peri-urban fabric reinventing the hybrid landscape. In these margins, the city is set against open country and empty spaces, in a juxtaposition of fields and car parks, of industrial zones and shopping centres, of urbanised villages and leisure areas which provide new landscapes. The intricate layout of motorway interchanges, the jumble of advertising hoardings, the intertwining of neon signs, the juxtaposition of city and field, the urbanism of shoebox-shaped shopping zones and the serial production of residential zones announce a new landscape aesthetic which some are describing (for example, Chauvier), filming (for example, Samuel Benchetrit) or photographing (for example, Jürgen Nefzger) before this emerging city disappears, reclaimed by a city which never stops transforming itself.

The frontline on which Chauvier positions himself is thus that between aesthetics and its position within the system of classification described by Pierre Bourdieu, in which “those who rank are ranked by their ranking” (“les classeurs sont classés par leur classement”). The statement made by a certain magazine about the ugliness of the peri-urban is thus understood as “unfair” (“injuste”), “inept” (“inepte”), based on an “intolerable class-based contempt” (“mépris de classe intolérable”) (page 58). Thus, Chauvier highlights – in a reading which is, ultimately, highly Lefebvrian – that space is a projection onto the ground of the society, and that the city is driven by three forces
(gentrification, marginalisation and peri-urbanisation – Donzelot, 2004) which are three modes of insertion into the social world. The people in the capital, who are also those of the central urban areas, the new middle class of flexible capitalism (D. Ley) and of the creative economy (R. Florida), are only of the “capital” [“capitale”], of the “centre”, because they have a province, a periphery. There is here a strong whiff of classification.

But, in drawing connections between his fragments, Chauvier also invites us to think through the relations between the scientific and the literary text, and of the worlds which produce these two writings. It is well known that the relationship between these two forms of writing has become more complex since anthropology (the discipline from which Chauvier originally came) became interested in the modalities of its discourse and the production of its objects within is discursive practices (Mondada 2000: 12). Earlier, Barthes drew on it to play with the “shifts” [“glissements”], the “parodies” [“parodies”] of language which allow distancing from “the theological image imposed by science” [“l’image théologique imposée par la science”] and “the opening of research” [“ouvrir la recherche”] to the pleasure of writing and its subversions (Barthes 1967 [2002]: 17). The way in which we are thus turned away from scientific majesty by Chauvier is exemplary of the technique of distancing which alone renders possible literary writing:

which brings us towards the very same authority that other writers, more concerned with academia and science, personify in the laboratory, the royal us as their exegetes say, a disembodied us, whose usage is most of the time absurd – such as this well-known sequence, found in an anthropology book whose author, after having mentioned his utmost isolation deep into a primary forest in New Guinea, writes: we reached the heart of our subject. With faked naivety, we asked ourselves who really was “in the heart of the subject”; then we confirmed that our usage of the first person plural was a lot more suitable in that we really were – having talked about it and having agreed on it – “in the heart of our subject”.

[nous portant vers l’édification même de cette autorité que d’autres écrivains, plus soucieux d’académisme et de sciences, incarnent dans un nous de laboratoire, le nous royal comme le disent leurs exégètes, un nous désincarné, dont l’usage est la plupart du temps absurde — tel ce fameux enchâinement, trouvé dans un livre d’anthropologie où l’auteur, après avoir mentionné son grand isolement au cœur d’une forêt primaire de Nouvelle-Guinée, écrit : nous parvînmes au cœur de notre sujet. Nous nous sommes demandés, faussement naïfs, qui était réellement “au cœur du sujet” ; puis nous avons vérifié que notre usage de la première personne du pluriel était beaucoup plus pertinent puisque nous étions réellement — pour en avoir parlé et être tombés d’accord là-dessus — “au cœur de notre sujet”].

This is one way of showing that description – whether scientific or not – is always an act of the arrangement of “facts” carried out from a specific point of view in order to produce a given truth effect. Chauvier’s brief peri-urban investigation thus offers both a detailed description of life on housing estates and a useful case study of what writing (journalistic, scientific, literary) does to the real.

**Bibliography**


About the author

Laurent Matthey
Laurent Matthey is director of the Fondation Braillard Architectes in Geneva. He also is head of research at the Centre for Urban Studies and Sustainable Development (Ouvdd) of the University of Lausanne and research associate at the Institute of Environmental Sciences of the University of Geneva.

By this author

Pour une géographie des espaces poreux. Polymorphie et polysémie des communautés fermées [Full text]
Published in Articulo - Journal of Urban Research, 8 | 2012

La « mondialisation », ce laminoir intellectuel [Full text]
Published in Articulo - Journal of Urban Research, Briefings, 2005

Splendeur et misère du périurbain. Introduction [Full text]
Published in Articulo - Journal of Urban Research, 5 | 2009

The city as body [Full text]
Published in Articulo - Journal of Urban Research, Book Reviews, 2010

De fragments en totalité : le paysage, un analyseur des mondes urbains. Introduction [Full text]
Published in Articulo - Journal of Urban Research, Special issue 2 | 2009

Avant-gardes et élites : agents de reproduction ou de transformation de la société ? Une présentation [Full text]
Published in Articulo - Journal of Urban Research, 3 | 2007
All documents

Copyright

Creative Commons 3.0 – by-nc-nd, except for those images whose rights are reserved.