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Ambient Outlines of Children's Urban Experience

A Look Back at an Interpretative Methodology

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Abstract. Based on commented walks (school/home) carried out with children between the ages of 9 and 11, this article addresses the interest in an *ambience-driven approach* to listen and account for the emotional and sensory elements that recount children's daily urban experience. With a method of interpretative translation in which the analyst is a distanced third person who can listen and pay attention to what happens here and now in the commented walk, initial ambient outlines of children experience appear.

Keywords. *Ambiances, Children, Commented City Walks, Interpretative Methods*

Introduction

This work stems from the Mobikids⁴ interdisciplinary research program, in which we study over a hundred schoolchildren (Rennes, city-centre and Orgères, its suburbs in France) by collecting geo-tagged, quantitative and qualitative data. This long-term study follows children over two or three years (depending on the cases) to document the conditions of their mobility and autonomy, notably during the transition to junior high school. We present here part of the analyses regarding the realization of commented walks, re-adapted from the initial tool (Thibaud, 2001), tested with children (Depeau, 2005). This type of survey in motion has been already experimented with by Kullman (2010) and Bourke (2017), among others, who worked on similar methodologies. The processing of the sound and visual data from the realised walks is a methodological challenge. We aim to report on the elements that constitute it. Aiming to qualify children's daily urban experience, we developed an interpretative methodology focusing on a dual relationship: the child and the researcher, and the child with the spaces crossed. The 'translation' of this dual relationship makes ambient outlines emerge. To that end, the analyst writes synthetic interpretations from the listening of recordings of the walks. Ambient outlines illustrates the dual relationship, between the adult and the child and between the child and the environment *here and now* during the commented walk. The outlines are drawn from the analyst's synthetic

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interpretations - i.e. the third person and distanced witness. At different times, a commented walk can borrow from different outlines, as the ambiances of the children's experiences can change with the relationship and the spaces crossed.

Qualifying the Ambiances of Children's Urban Experience

The city is seen as a necessary "playground" (Noschis, 2006) for children. It is considered as a space suitable for children, later teenagers, to explore, discover and gain the autonomy that they need to become adults. The city is thus the ideal space to learn, where children and teenagers arrange their daily spatialities (Abu-Ghazze, 2002; Aragau et al., 2016). In this context, children's autonomous mobility conditions seem to be the main focus in recent works to quantitatively and qualitatively describe children's experience (Depeau, 2008; Christensen et al., 2011; Pacilli et al., 2016). Many studies focus on children's daily trips, where the one from home to school is often studied to document the abilities for learning independence.

Despite emerging security understanding, the evolution of urban forms and sociabilities, we still struggle to consider children's daily and urban experiences. Some sensitive approaches are being explored to understand in more detail child-urban and suburban spaces relationships. How can we account for the everyday experience, the important little things that are too obvious to be said? How can we make the affects and emotions in places talk and tell stories? These objectives require rattling our usual research frameworks. Measurements, observations, interviews are no longer enough because of the high risk of imposing 'adult-centred' models and standards. We do not think that children experience an isolated and self-sustaining world that we should reveal without misrepresenting it. On the contrary, we believe that connections and relations are constituent, and that they require to be taken seriously. *Going on the field* thus involves us differently (Volvey et al., 2012) and children's studies explore forms of co-research with children (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; Cope, 2008; Honkanen et al., 2018) and thus hold the turn of a relational geography (Volvey, 2014).

We precisely think that the nature of this research involving relationships is important to study and to understand the fine reality of children's experiences. These relationships are those notably woven between the child and the researcher and between the child and the space. This dual relationship plays a part in the creation of ambiances. By providing a narrative approach⁵ of ambiances, we suggest another way to grasp children's urban experience. Constitutive of these urban walks, sensitive phenomena and perceptive modalities are then highlighted (Thomas, 2018). This analysis of commented walks about ambiances reinforces a slice of reality (Torgue, 2012). It also surely reveals a still-dark part of this way children are in spaces and deal with spaces.

From Revisited Commented Walk to Interpretative Analysis

As part of the Mobikids program, 69 school-home commented walks were performed with children (including 25 with another travel mode). The method was revisited to invite the child to prepare a small report documenting the places visited. The child then becomes the guide or reporter of such daily spaces and freely talks to the researcher. The sounds are recorded, and the child is asked to take pictures of what is important to him. Upon arrival, in a post-walk interview, the child and researcher talk about the journey and talk about the pictures taken.

5. Account of experiences made by the analyst.

Therefore, for each walk, a walk-audio recording, a post-walk interview and several pictures (between two and ten, depending on the child) were obtained. To prepare the collective data analysis, a third person pre-analyses the recording and the audio transcription. The researcher analysing the commented walk is not the field surveyor - he is an outsider, like a neutral witness who is not affected by the investigation or the dual relationship: between the adult and the child, and between the child and the places crossed. The analyst is potentially able to see what is at play while listening in a distanced way to the trust, pleasure, discomfort, familiarity, curiosity, induced responses, judgments or sometimes moralising reactions. By doing so, we realized that what was at stakes *here and now* during the walk told an ambiance in which the relation with the researcher and that with the places interconnected and echoed each other.

Here we retrace an ongoing methodology and would like to focus on one of the components . To document what the analyst perceives in the dual relationship at play, he writes a synthetic interpretative text on the walk. In this free text, the analyst finds room to inform the research collective of elements that are hard to detect except with a less constraining, intuitive and almost poetic writing. We can read the tones of voice that translate emotion, silences, hesitations, surrounding sounds and modulations of the walk. The text becomes the possible space to tell the attention that takes place both in the relationship between the researcher and the child and between the child and the space crossed. We can draw the first ambient outlines. The elements recounting the different forms of relationships at play were not indicated in the analysis grid, but they triggered us as they could create the story of ambiances.

We thus have a translation methodology in three successive steps: orality (the child's words during and after the walk), inter-subjective listening (of the recording) and interpretative writing (ambiance storytelling). This process, here open to discussion, involves the analyst researcher's intuition and subjectivity and questions the ecological validity of such a process. Our eye and ear, specific in their subjectivity, precisely bring another dimension of the analysis of the research data by revealing "non-verbalised" perceptions and experiences as they are at the heart of these relationships. Those are elements that are not central to the research objective but that inform it nevertheless.

Ambient outlines

Places Crossed "While Holding Our Breath"

The metaphor of holding one's breath refers to a bubble in which the child is enclosed in, to limit or to be protected from the connection with the environment. The minerality of the pavement does not match, traffic is loud and the other can represent a danger, sometimes in the parents' discourse. The journeys are often prescribed by parents and not chosen by the child, which enhances the withdrawal. The physical and/or social relational distance is also understood in the child's emotions. He is careful with security, mostly with road safety. We can hear a form of concern, which is translated in the relationships with the peers, associated mainly with the other's eye and the fear of the unknown. With the researcher, the child is shy or uncomfortable, as witnessed in the terse answers, hesitations and awkward laughter. During the walk, or certain moments, the discomfort seems significant, and the child is withdrawn or defensive. Upon listening, we sometimes understand his desire, even his impatience to go to a more peaceful and familiar environment, as if to extract himself from an uncomfortable place. Certain streets, noise or high schoolers can scare him. The child can also express anger, when he mentions a place that he loved that was transformed, often built upon.

The walk takes place along a boulevard and the child seems uncomfortable because of the traffic that never stops. She appears weary of this phenomenon as she understands that she cannot change anything about it. She advises the researcher never to live on the boulevard. She often mentions the pedestrian crossings as “moments” she does not like and that punctuates her walk, not in a positive way. She qualifies this long boulevard with the adjective “giant,” which conveys efficiently the impression of infinity it represents for her [...]. The remainder of the walk gives the impression that she is holding her breath or floating, i.e. barely connected to the disliked environment, and she cannot wait to be close to home. [...] When she talks about her walk, her voice is monotone, even a little sad, and she struggles to qualify what she feels. At some point, she says “I don’t feel anything,” and her enthusiasm appears when she is close to home. Her voice gets lighter and happier.

Places Domesticated by Children

Other walks or sequences reveal a more familiar ambient outline. The child seems to have domesticated the places. Indeed, the connections appear stronger, since the child knows the routes well that may be emotionally charged. He has known them for long, mastering them as he walks through every day, sometimes alone, with a few friends or parents. Habits, good memories, aesthetic pleasures, comforting connections with home are elements where we know the child feels good. Places can become sources of inspiration to play, hide, meet and they are domesticated reference points.

She only likes the passage where there are trees because of nature, but also because it is aesthetic, even practical (to shelter herself when it rains). Later in the discussion, she mentions a play time when she had to go to school dressed in a tee-shirt and shorts when rain was pouring down. She talks about “struggling” but her voice conveys the opposite, a sort of excitement about running as fast as possible to school while jumping in puddles!

(Re)discovered Places

The commented walk proposed to the child is paradoxically an extraordinary *here and now*, even as it is a daily journey. However, the child never goes through it under the research conditions: walking on foot, with a stranger (researcher) who is trusted by the parents, with a recorder and a camera. Upon listening, some commented walks become an opportunity for the child to discover their living place differently. In some cases, the child is carried by car, and it is the first time he experiences a well-known space differently, by foot. We can hear the desire to fully explore those spaces, where the child can express his desires, which are usually constrained, and now allowed. He chooses the itinerary, explores the spaces and possibilities. The body and verbal expressions that follow show her letting go, unveiling her way of being connected.

On this walk, we easily feel that the child is excited about doing it, living this experience with GPSes that he mentions on several occasions while walking. The child quickly shows the pictures he would like to take, we can imagine that he mentally represents his route before living it. He mentions a few times elements left to be met or crossed or directions to take, or changes in the ground roughness or slopes (holes, mud), which help him orient himself.

Perspectives

Investigating children represents a significant methodological challenge. Here, the ambiance approach offers a solid and flexible theoretical framework to listen and account for emotional, sensory and perceptual elements that tell children's daily urban experience. We worked by trial and error, based on an interpretative translation method where the analyst is a third, distanced person that can listen and pay attention to what happens in the *here and now* of the commented walk. The point is to accept an interpretative process that requires letting go of controlling and monitoring positions before the scientific data that we produce (Despret, 2016).

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