

For a sensitive approach to living together: understanding the limits of community building through action-research on the theme of the veil

In line with the academic work of J.J. Boutaud (2016), J. Rancière (2000), F. Laplantine (2010) on the notion “the sensitive” and the research works done by D. Wolton (2014), S. Lepastier (2013) and E. Dacheux (2015) on “incommunication”, this contribution seeks to question these notions in the plural public space through an original action-research conducted with a contemporary French artist, Pierre David. This project led by researchers from Clermont, France, belonging to different disciplines (Information and Communication Sciences, Civilizations, Management Sciences, etc.) aims to study the question of otherness and sensitivity in the plural public space. To this end, a set of paintings entitled *Les Voilées* was produced by the artist Pierre David. The collection includes 12 portraits of veiled women presented on a silver foil (format 100 X 150 cm). Accompanying the exhibition, portrait films give a voice to the exhibited models. The aim of this project is to study as precisely as possible the reception of the black veil in the French public space. Taking up the models of cultural mediation developed by Anne Bationo and Françoise Decortis, we will study the way in which audiences encounter works of art and then how they report on them. Thus, we will first try to see how the negation of otherness in the public space leads to the stigmatization of the veil and, consequently, to a problem in terms of the visibility of minorities. Secondly, we will try to focus on the issue of incommunication, which leaves room for the sensitive.

Keywords: Political communication, public space, minority, stigma, visibility, identity plurality.

Introduction

Our project consists in working on incommunication starting from a hypothesis: the reduction within French society of the plurality of identities to the sole religious dimension which largely explains the controversies and misunderstandings surrounding the veil. From her own phenomenological perspective, Hannah Arendt defines the public space as that of making political issues visible. It is also the place where the problems of democratic societies become visible to the very eyes of citizens (Arendt, 1981). Now, the question of what can, or cannot, be shown in the public space has crystallized in France around the question of the Islamic veil and has led to the banning of the full veil in the public space. The ambition of contemporary artist Pierre David was born out of this controversy in the context of the exchanges established during a first work on the color black and its impact on the public space. A committed artist, Pierre David likes to show the public what is not shown, and proposes to unveil portraits of veiled women. This project, first sketched out in 2013, has been taken in reverse by the events of January 2015. The dramas of *Charlie Hebdo* and the *Hyper Cacher de la Porte de Vincennes* could have put an end to the project (potential financiers solicited showed a strong reticence to the idea of participating in such an undertaking), but these, in reality, show all the interest in it. It is not a question of

relying on an ideological construct to question the meaning of the veil in the public space, but, on the contrary, of starting from a sensitive construction based on art, using silver leaf portraits of veiled women, to understand the reasons for incommunication. Nor is it a question of taking a stand for or against the veil, but rather of hearing the plurality of motivations that pushes people to accept to pose veiled, and the plurality of receptions of those who have taken the initiative to come and see these portraits. On the contrary, we will first see how the French historical context tends to deny the question of individual and collective identity plurality in favor of a questioning centered on the visibility of minorities. Secondly, we will distinguish ourselves from this approach by presenting in more detail this action-research centered on incommunication linked to identity essentialization¹.

The question of the visibility of minorities: a sterile question?

As Philippe Corcuff (2012) explains, the debate around the veil suffers from an essentialization of identity. Far from recognizing the plurality of individual affiliations (social class, religion, ethnicity, city, age, gender, etc.), the individual wearing the veil is reduced solely to his religious identity, a religious identity whose plurality is also denied (there are several interpretations of Islam and several degrees of commitment to Islam). This denial of individual plural identity is developing in a country, France, marked by a republican and Jacobin tradition which tends to perceive cultural differences as threatening the unity of a Republic that is “one and indivisible” (Article I of the constitution). A country which, moreover, bears a vision of secularism that is not simply the separation of temporal and spiritual powers, but which, much more profoundly—as the French Revolution demonstrates—is marked by the mistrust of religious institutions perceived as interest groups defending collective values that can hinder the emergence of the general will.

The veil has thus crystallized this tension between a tendency towards identity essentialisation on the one hand, and on the other, a new reformulation of the religious in a context of crisis, leaving not only the social lift broken, but the acceptance of a citizen representation inscribed in diversity. This tension seems to have had the effect of constituting the veil as a stigma, in the sense of Goffman (1959), a collective attribute which reduces the individual to a visible characteristic (skin color, particular language, clothing worn) which, on the one hand, essentializes the other and, on the other, devalues him or her by allowing him or her to be valued. This stigmatizing visibility of the veil in the French public space, which contrasted with the media invisibility of minorities, saw the racial issue return to the forefront.

Media Visibility of the Muslim Community

Invisible in the French media, as Pascal Blanchard has largely shown², and then present in a fragmented way with community tendencies, Muslims seem to be little

¹Essentialism is a philosophical current which considers that any entity can be characterized by a set of essential attributes necessary to its identity and its function. The verb essentialize and the noun essentialization stem from this conceptual definition.

²Reference is made here to his intervention during a study day entitled “Communicating the Invisible”, which took place at the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme (House of Human Sciences) in Clermont-Ferrand on 30 May 2013. Pascal Blanchard is a French historian,

visible in the media space. François Dubet does not share this analysis. According to him, “*French media representations are often criticized for not giving a fair place to women and minorities, and the numerous discrepancies observed seem to justify the denunciation of a refusal of diversity due to discriminatory practices. While it is true that the discrimination lawsuit addressed to the political system and television was largely founded until the 1990s, things have changed and the argument of discrimination is hardly ever invoked by our interlocutors. Not because it does not exist, but because it is not enough to explain the discrepancies and dissatisfaction... Hence one of our conclusions shows that the feeling most commonly shared by our interlocutors is that neither in the political world, nor in the media, nor even, deep down, in the French national community, they really feel ‘represented’. Indeed, they are condemned either to dissolve into abstract representation or to be locked into the identities imposed on them as women and minorities. The progressive reduction of discrimination does not automatically lead to a transformation of the social representations, categories and identities on which they are based.* (2013)

The French national newspaper *Libération* in date of April 30, 2013, is an excellent example of Dubet’s point, showing how the performances are deeply rooted despite the groundwork done in the framework of the National Education system. In an article entitled “*Nous on a des origines, les Français n’ont pas d’origine*”³, journalist Alice Géraud explains how, surrounded by mediators, the students of the Gabriel-Péri d’Aubervilliers College express themselves on discrimination. A presentation of the vocabulary used by the young people shows that the representations are not only difficult to understand, but that they are transmitted in a trans-generational spirit marked by alienation. Indeed, some might have thought that the associations of terms such as ‘Arab, thieves’, ‘young people from the city, thieves’, ‘youngsters from the city, breakers’, ‘inferior black’ would be the prerogative of the dominant or majority group. In fact, this is not the case, which reinforces, through the acceptance of minorities, the confinement of many discriminatory representations and thus confirms Dubet’s analysis. It is therefore necessary to change perspective: no longer focus on the question of the representation of visible minorities in the media space, but understand how the sensitive can engender incommunication in the public space. This is the subject of the second part.

Action research that raises the sensitive issue of incommunication in the public space

The problem of cultural difference does not arise in the same way in a country displaying its multiculturalism, such as the United States, as it does in a country claiming its republicanism, such as France. In both cases, the visible changes in the political system (the arrival of B. Obama to the presidency of the United States, the occupation of a ministry as regalian as Justice by R. Dati or C. Taubira in France, for example) poorly mask the problems encountered in the context of living together in the public space. How can this difficulty be grasped scientifically? How to grasp the incommunication resulting from the negation of identity plurality? The decision was taken to propose to the researchers of the *Communication and Societies* laboratory to

documentary filmmaker and co-director of a French communications agency. He is a specialist of the French colonial empire, postcolonial studies and immigration history.

³“We have origins, the French don’t have origins”.

approach this question through a particular field that allows us to take into account this visible, sensitive dimension of otherness: color.

A Preliminary Transdisciplinary Research: The Study of the Color Black

The use of color as a subject of study finds its justification in John Rawls's *Justice and Democracy*⁴. For him, the foundations through which political institutions and their functioning are expressed within societies vary considerably, as they come from diverse historical and cultural sources that individuals are free to combine, in application of the principle of freedom of thought or consciousness. Consequently, it would have been difficult to arrive at coherent and relevant conclusions without the vector of color, in this case black, capable of giving the dimension of the sensitive in the expected comparative mode. This sensitive dimension is also, as Jacques Rancière points out, a political dimension. In fact, aesthetics is a '*system of forms that a priori determines what is given to be felt*', a division of time and space that '*defines both the place and the stake of politics as a form of experience*' (2000, pp. 13–14). Such a sensitive, and therefore political, approach to the social perceptions of the color black cannot but be inscribed at the confluence of several disciplines in the human and social sciences: civilization, sociology, communication, art history, etc. (2000, pp. 13–14). Linguist Patrick Charaudeau brings an additional dimension by proposing a definition of transdisciplinarity. '*The prefix trans-corresponds to a movement across disciplines leading to a "co-construction of knowledge that literally crosses the constituted disciplines"*'. This, it seems to me, is the approach that Roland Barthes (between literature, philosophy, psychoanalysis), Michel Foucault (between philosophy and history) and Edgar Morin (between the different disciplines of knowledge) follow, although in different ways. It is a question of integrating the knowledge of various disciplines in such a way that a discourse emerges, constructing its own place of thought. '''⁵.

This transdisciplinary research on the color black in our multicultural societies was built on an issue raised by the historian M. Pastoureau at the end of his book devoted to black (2008): is black still a dangerous and transgressive color in the twenty-first century? Multidisciplinary research (SIC, civilizations, linguistics, history of art, management sciences) has shown that although black became a valued and rewarding color in the arts, fashion or computer science, it was still, on the contrary, perceived as dangerous or transgressive as soon as it was associated with skin color or otherness (Agbessi, 2010 T1 and T2). During a conference devoted to the presentation of this research⁶, we came across the work created by the artist Pierre David, commissioned as part of the Year of France in Brazil in 2009, entitled *Le Nuancier* (The Color Chart⁷), which presents a range of paintings made from the different pigments of the skin of Brazilian museum guards (from dark black to the lightest white). Eager to work together on a new project extending our respective research, we started to discuss with the artist P. David on a project concerning the black veil.

⁴*Justice et Démocratie*, John Rawls, Éditions du seuil for French translation, 1993

⁵*In Questions of Communication*, 17, 2010 "Cultures of Science in Europe".

⁶Colloquium "Diversity and innovation in socio-professional environments" Clermont-Ferrand, 2011

⁷<http://www.pierredavid.net/>

1 **An Action Research Combining Sensitivity and Incommunication: The Veiled** 2 **Ones**

3
 4 Pierre David proposed a work on the portrait, in silver⁸, of women veiled in
 5 black. Why focus on the black veil, when black is not an obligatory color for the
 6 Muslim woman's veil (Aboudrare 2013)? For two reasons, the first one is to place our
 7 work in a continuity, to make the link between this research and our previous work,
 8 black being here the link between the two. The second is precisely to try to understand
 9 what is specific about this garment. Indeed, our hypothesis is that there is a
 10 misunderstanding about the black color of this piece of fabric: the conclusion of our
 11 previous research (black is, in the West, a valued color in the world of art and fashion)
 12 makes the veil appear as a simple fabric. However, Muslim women often adopt this
 13 color in order to get as far away as possible from the notion of adornment (which is
 14 likely to attract men's attention). There is thus a misunderstanding: the color
 15 supposedly not to attract the eye being a factor that accentuates the perception of the
 16 veil in the French public space. In any case, this is one of the hypotheses that we will
 17 try to verify.

18 Following several meetings, the project finalized at the end of 2014 took the
 19 following form:

- 21 • 12 portraits of veiled women in 115x90 cm format were produced on silver
 22 foil by the artist Pierre David, original creations from photos for the exhibition
 23 "Les voilées". The women represented came from diverse backgrounds and of
 24 all ages, the only criterion being their acceptance.
- 25 • A documentary film was also made on the basis of interviews with the veiled
 26 women who served as models, accompanying the exhibition of their portraits.
 27 It will be used whenever the exhibition is held in a city.
- 28 • During the exhibitions (in museums but also in schools in priority education
 29 districts), people who have seen the portraits will be questioned face to face.
 30 The aim of this reception survey is to compare the analyses of the visitors with
 31 the intentions expressed by the models. It is therefore a question of moving a
 32 politically sensitive issue onto the terrain of the sensitive in order to take
 33 advantage of aesthetic emotion to enter into an understanding of
 34 incomprehension that goes beyond the stereotypes invading the media and
 35 intellectual debate.
- 36 • The national funding obtained through the CGET (General Commission for
 37 Territorial Equality) commits us to presenting these works in France—a tour
 38 de France will thus be organized on the principle of a conference during the
 39 time of each exhibition—and to carrying out the same surveys in each
 40 stopover town. The problem is that the sanitary crisis put a halt to this project.
 41 We also have to mention that many curators and local elected officials have
 42 quite tedious to have such an exhibition held in their cities, the reasons put
 43 forward being, first of all, the tense social context on the religious level since
 44 the attacks of the years 2010. Despite the difficulties mentioned, in the years
 45 to come, a more precise perception of the sensitive will thus be sketched out.
 46 At the same time, through the academic links forged on this project within the

⁸It should be pointed out that it thus takes up an idea that was developed in 2010 and is entitled "Silver Portraits". For the creation of this work, the artist reversed the usual portrait process by soliciting models at the rate of one per month for a year. Pierre David does not depart from the rule of not knowing those who pose for him.

framework of the European association EUCEN⁹, the project will be able to take on an international dimension by traveling from one country to another.

Action research but four scientific objectives

The scientific objective of this ongoing action-research is fourfold:

1- A theoretical objective: to link research on the sensitive and work on incommunication. On the theoretical level, it is a question of continuing the work on the sensitive that we have begun in our previous works on the color black by including them in a more recent reflection on incommunication. Indeed, by associating, with Jacques Rancière, aesthetics and politics—“*Politics is about what we see and what we can say about it (...)*” (Rancière, 2000, p. 14)—we think that the question of sharing the sensitive gives us access to a better understanding of incommunication around the veil. Incommunication is not understood here as the inevitable failure of all communication (Lepastier, 2013), but as “*one of its conditions of existence. Without inspiration, no expiration, without possible incommunication no desirable communication. In other words, if one can rightly try to remedy non-communication, incommunication must be preserved at all costs. Indeed, if to deny communication is to deny society, to want to destroy incommunication is either to fall into communion (the fusion of otherness) or to succumb to the sirens of acommunication (denial of the other’s freedom and/or equality)*” (Dacheux 2015, p. 270).

2 Taking into account the plurality of identities in the plurality of representations of the other. The veil has become a stigma: an instrument of discrimination that encloses otherness in a threatening (terrorism) and devalued (does not respect secularism) essence of religious identity. Yet intercultural communication teaches us that stereotypical stigmatization is not the only possible outcome of interaction in a multicultural public space (Dacheux 2010). Indeed, Alexander Frame (2013), in his work, proposes four typical categories of modality of representation of the other, each of which has its own expectations regarding the nature of the intersubjective relationship: stereotypes, individualized prototypes, cultural doubles and barbarians. There is therefore a possible plurality of the perception of the other that is veiled. And if it is possible to reduce the other to a stereotype that reassures us or, worse, to assimilate him or her to a barbarian that we reject, it is equally possible that a feeling of empathy provoked by the larger-than-life portrait highlighting the face behind the veil or a change of perspective linked to the museum device may appear. In any case, this will be the hypothesis tested during the reception interviews that will be held during the exhibition with the visitors.

3-Shifting the problem. In the Sciences of Information and Communication, the issue of visible minorities is often treated from the perspective of their visibility in the media space (Macé, 2008, Nayrac 2011, Cervule 2013). This is linked, in part, to the decision of Hervé Bourges, then director of the CSA, to follow up on the demands of the “Collectif égalité” and to launch a study on the presence of minorities on television. But it is also linked, also, to the role of amplification of social debates played by the media, whether we remember, for example, the coverage of *Valeurs actuelles* which, in the aftermath of the attacks against *Charlie Hebdo*, put the portrait of a veiled woman on the front page with the headline “Fear about France” or, in a more pedagogical tone, the Arte documentary “Sous le signe du voile” (Under the sign of the veil) broadcast in January 2012 on the Franco-German channel. Furthermore, as

⁹European Universities Continuing Education Network: EUCEN <http://www.eucen.eu/>

Nahida Nakad points out, while the issue of the veil is often dealt with from the angle of the opposition between equally intangible rights (secularism and equality between men and women, on the one hand, religious freedom and individual freedom on the other), it is more rarely dealt with from an understanding position seeking to give a voice to veiled women (Zerouala, 2015) or offering an explanation for the ideological tension surrounding the veil (Aboudrare, 2014). It is resolutely in this understanding perspective that we are working, focusing our research, as B. Aboudrare on the question of the sensitive in the public space, on the opacity of the veil opposing, according to this author, the ideal of transparency in the information society. Admittedly, this access to the reasons for incommunication linked to the veil is indirect, since it shifts, on the one hand, from the question here central to that of the artistic representation of this sign of clothing and moves away, on the other hand, from the question of the opposition of rights to understand the discrepancies between the intentions of the models and the reception of the portraits by the visitors of the exhibition. But it is precisely by shifting a problem that is too marked out that we hope to reach a different understanding, proposing a communicational analysis of the reasons for the incommunication.

4- Propose an analysis in the reception that takes into account the specificity of the museum, which is a singular public space. This approach is based on the research work undertaken in the museum public space.

Conclusion

This ongoing action-research project is a continuation of our previous research on blackness (which led us to work on the sharing of the sensitive) as well as a long-term comparative perspective on minority struggles for equality. This singular approach marks its limits, but also offers avenues for the renewal of political communication that we would like to recall, in conclusion:

1- Propose a “focused interdisciplinary approach” (Chareaudeau, 2010). Our democracies are multicultural, and it does not seem heuristic to us to take this cultural plurality into account by combining the contributions of SCIs and civilization. It is by combining historical knowledge of cultures with an understanding of communication processes that we can best analyze the problems of intercultural communication.

2- Focus on the issue of minorities. Given that the majority is only “the strongest of minorities” (Rancière, 2005), it is important not to be carried away by media modes that address the issue of pluriculturalism through questions of diversity or, more recently, secularism, but to return to questions that are rooted in time and that haunt all democracies: the relations of domination between minority and majority, the emancipatory struggles for equality.

3-To go beyond the question of the visible in the media space to address the question of the sensitive in the public space. Even if the media play a key role in our imagined communities (Anderson, 1983), they do not, as E. points out, cover all of our imagined communities. Dacheux (2008) points out, they do not cover the entire public space. In the same way, the question of visibility is included in a broader question of sharing sensitivity (La plantine, 2010). It is therefore necessary, on the one hand, to broaden approaches centered on the media (Macé 2008) or political representation (Simon-Escafré-Dublet, 2009), by multiplying the places of analysis (museum, school, public places, etc.) and the subjects analyzed (color, clothing, food, etc.).

4- Confronting production and reception. As Céline Ségur and Sylvie Thiéblemont-Dollet suggest in a methodological note explaining their research, we cannot, on subjects as sensitive as immigration or the veil, be satisfied with an analysis of any corpus whatsoever (in this case, for their research, a television corpus). An analysis in the reception is indispensable: “But *can we still ignore the relationship between the image and the receiver? Is it possible to deal with media texts without including the fact that, in order to exist, they are both conceived by producers, but intended for receivers who appropriate them?*” (2005, p.162). In the context of our research, it will be a question of taking into account the motivations and the anticipation of the reception of the models, and confronting them with the reactions and reconstructions of the supposed motivations of the models by the public of the exhibition.

5-Connect critically to the epistemological ruptures proposed by researchers working on incommunication. Recognized researchers in SCI such as A. Mercier (2001), P. Robert (2005) or D. Wolton (2012) have worked on the notion of incommunication. By opposing the Palo Alto School’s adage that “one cannot fail to communicate”, but by showing, on the contrary, that communication processes must be approached on the basis of the real difficulties encountered by each individual, these researchers propose a fruitful epistemological break, which makes it possible to address the question of blockage and incomprehension in the public space, not on the basis of an exceptional dysfunction that should be resolved, but on the basis of a common social difficulty that needs to be made explicit.

6- Adopt a model of cultural mediation as defined by Anne Bationo-Tillon and Françoise Decortis to better address the issue of incommunication within the museum space.

These six points may not yet constitute a program likely to profoundly renew research in Information and Communication Sciences concerning the public space, but they already form anchor points for a renewed approach to the question of minorities by any researcher in political communication.

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