GATES AND DOORS OF SCHOOL : A FILTER TO NON-NORMATIVE BODIES

Essay written as part of the course Critical Strategies in the MIARD (Master Interior Architecture Design and Research)

Written by Maïlys Bonnet and supervised by Golnar Abbasi

December 2023

In 2014, I'm going to take my brevet, a common and mandatory exam for everyone aged 14/15 in France. At the time, I was in a wheelchair. Despite all precautions, when I arrived at this school, the lift provided for disabled people did not fit me. Having undergone an operation on both legs, I was "too big" than the «wheelchair standard», and I couldn't fit all the way into the lift. I was outside the norm for non-standard people. I was able to manage getting through the school gates, but the lift gates remained closed to me.

In this essay, I will be trying to analyse and theorize about the gates, doors and the enclosure of schools as places of an oppressive ban that forbids non-standard bodies to pass, with the help of feminist literature that already had spoken about norm issues.

The question of public spaces in France, and above all how we enter and inhabit them, is a sensitive one. I'd like to be able to draw a parallel between bodies with functional diversity (Preciado, 2019, p. 146), which are forbidden to speak out and reduced as a disability. And women's bodies who are also denied a voice, and are reduced to the way they dress, whether it is a cleavage considered too low or a veil (which even if the veil is mentioned in multiple religions, it is in almost all cases associated with Islam). Both are criticised for taking up too much space. Overwhelming paradox when it is they, whose speech and bodies are invisibilized in public spaces and discourses.

August 2023, the government in France (Attal, 2023) decided to forbid the "abaya" dress from school places. After forbidden any sign of a religious belonging in schools (law of 15 March 2004), this targeted directly women with veils, forcing them to unveil if they wanted to attend school. It was not uncommon then to see at school's gates women veil or unveil while entering or exiting the school space. Remining me of Monique Wittig (1980) when thinking about the consequences of having the straight mind ruling everything. She says "you-will-be-straight-or-not-be" (1980, p. 28). Understood in our case as, you will be in norm in nor be. Every day, the school gates are transformed into a ritual of passage to find out who will conform to the norm and who will not.

I want now to take an argument of Vergès "the invisibility of the cleaning jobs of women of color creates the visibility of clean homes and public spaces" (2019, p. 7) and paraphrasing it. The invisibility of non-normative people in the school space result in the visibility of a western and capitalistic system of living in public spaces like schools. Their invisibility allows the norm to be even more visible. It also accustom our gaze to the norm. In France, they have to disappear from the public space. Make themselves more invisible. They must adhere to the *western capitalistic dress code*.

School is also a place of a particular expression of patriarchal oppression. Because the *abaya question* reveals the valorization of a *standard* on which women should dress according to a moral western view. If women are not allowed any more to put on a large dress covering arms and legs, they are also not allowed to have a skirt shorter than above the knee. By making the mandatory place that is school a place with prohibitions that go as far as clothing, we accept that it is a precise and assertive political space.

Taking schools into account is also not an insignificant gesture on my part. They are sensitive places, where citizens are shaped. Because what a better way to integrate the norm than to start young. In France, 'civic education' courses are taught from the age of 10. These are classroom sessions where we learn about the «foundations of the Republic» and therefore the principle of «laïcité».

The school grounds thus become the place where a norm is learned. It is a place surrounded by the strict observance of this norm. Within this perimeter, the invisibility of differences and failure to comply with these rules is punished by banishment from this place, which nevertheless (and I would

like to emphasise this is intended to be a place for everyone.

Under cover of the word laïcité, French law creates a particularly precise directive norm. And of course, this law is aimed at women, and invisible human bodies in general. People who are already outside the standard of the white, straight, abled, cisgender, rich man. Taking again arguments from Verges's analysis of power relations, the space of laicism thus becomes the space for keeping out of sight those who are considered unclean and/or uncivilised (2019, pp 1-5), because they have not integrated Western social codes. And behind the principle of secularism lies the absence of recognition. Behind the freedom not to impose anything is the desire not to see, not to listen, not to think about anything else. Not wanting to understand, not being interested in the other if he or she is not already within the norm.

Here I want to pick up on an argument Johanna Hedva makes at the beginning of «Sick Woman Theory» (2016) about Hannah Arendt. She explains that Arendt's political definition (1958) excludes sick minorities, because if all actions performed in public are political actions, then many people cannot participate in them. I want to continue this argument. To restrict some people's access to public space is therefore to deny them the right to become politicised in a certain way. By reducing access to this public political space, an invisibilisation is taking place, without any attentive and informed person noticing.

I would like to add an argument from Monique Wittig, in "The Category of Sex" (1982, p. 2). It's not true to say that the cause of oppression lies in the division of the sexes themselves. Oppression creates binarities (Woman/Man, Cisgender/Transgender, White/Black, Disabled/Handicapped, Rich/Proletarian, Hetero/Homo, Wearing the veil/Not wearing the veil etc). The gates of schools are becoming, the space and time to check if you are "normative enough". If you check the boxes of the binaries, and if not if you can manage to fit. Otherwise, you are condemned to stay outside, like my legs that could not fit the elevator, like a young girl wearing an Abaya.

This is the frontier before entering the norm. But maybe this liminal space could become the space of a revolution. Like the porch is the in between place described by bell hooks (2009, p. 146), the doors could become the "feminine space" and a "danger zone" to a "sexist mindset". Here is my point, by acknowledging the frontier created by doors and gates for non-normative people, we could reclaim it; to expand it until making it a place on its own. Taking here the words of Paul B. Preciado "We don't need better disability industries, but architectures without barriers. We need collective structures of habilitation" (2019, p. 149). In other words, we don't need a new norm. We don't need a norm "allowing" you to enter. We need the end of the norm. Taking again the physicality of the door: we don't need it to allow a wheelchair to pass. We need the door wide open. We need the gates to be welcoming for the diversity, not for stereotypical bodies. Because by forbidding them inside the public spaces, in the visible world, we condemned them to be invisible. The door that exists today is a filter to non-normative bodies.

In other words, I want to criticize the idea of shaping normative minds, and desire for normative bodies. We exist in the public space. We exist in our bodies. We exist at all. Laws governing standards are therefore, by essence, restrictive, not inclusive. By calling «protection», it is the exclusion of most minorities that you condemn in becoming invisible. Humans who are already invisible because they don't fit in with the norm are invisibilised a second time because they are banned from the public space.

Whether it's a woman expressing herself outside the standard codes of Western dress or a person with functional diversity, they are invisible in school. Their uniqueness, their non-normativity (in the views of the people governing), is excluded at the school gates. The door becomes the frontier between school norms and non-standards, between «neutrality» and the forgotten.

REFERENCES

Preciado, Paul B. (2019) 'Your Wheelchair Turns Me On', *Un Appartement sur Uranus*[An Apartement On Uranus]. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions.

Attal, G. (2023) *speach in the name of the French government*. 27 August. «J'ai décidé qu'on ne pourrait plus porter l'abaya à l'école (...) c'est règle nécessaire et juste (...) Lorsque vous rentrez dans une salle de classe, vous ne devez pas être capable d'identifier la religion des élèves en les regardant» [«I have decided that we can no longer wear the abaya to school (...) it is a necessary and fair rule (...) When you enter a classroom, you must not be able to identify the religion of the pupils by looking at them»]. French television.

Attal, G. (2023) *speach in the name of the French government*. 24 August. « Là où la République est testée, nous devons faire bloc » [«Wherever the Republic is tested, we must stand together»]. French television.

Code de l'éducation (2004) *Law of 15 March 2004* (L. 141-5-1). «Dans les écoles, les collèges et les lycées publics, le port de signes ou tenues par lesquels les élèves manifestent ostensiblement une appartenance religieuse est interdit» [«In state schools, colleges and lycées, the wearing of signs or dress by which pupils ostensibly manifest a religious affiliation is prohibited»]. France: Minitère de l'éducation.

Wittig, M. (1992) 'The Straight Mind', *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Vergès, F. (2019) 'Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender', e-flux Journal, #100. Available at: https://www.e-flux.com/journal/100/269165/capitalocene-waste-race-and-gender/

Hedva, J. (2016) *Sick Woman Theory*. Los Angeles: Mask Magazine.

Arendt, H. (1958) *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wittig, M. (1992) 'The Category of Sex', *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press.

hooks, b. (2009) *Belonging : a culture of place*. New York: Routledge.

Preciado, Paul B. (2019) 'Your Wheelchair Turns Me On', *Un Appartement sur Uranus*[An Apartement On Uranus]. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ahmed, S. (2006) *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. London: Duke University Press.

Ahmed, S. (2010) *New Materialism: Ontology, Agency and Politics*. London: Duke University Press.

Bienaimé, C. (2019) *Féminismes et handicaps : les corps indociles* [Podcast]. 4 September. Available at: https://www.arteradio.com/son/61661891/feminismes_et_handicaps_les_corps_indociles

Hedva, J. (2016) *Sick Woman Theory*. Los Angeles: Mask Magazine.

Hedva, J. (2015) *'My Body Is a Prison of Pain so I Want to Leave It Like a Mystic But I Also Love It & Want It to Matter Politically'* [Lecture]. Available at: https://fleurmach.com/2017/12/20/johanna-hedva-my-body-is-a-prison-of-pain-so-i-want-to-leave-it-like-a-mystic-but-i-also-love-it-want-it-to-matter-politically-2015/

hooks, b. (2009) *Belonging : a culture of place*. New York: Routledge.

Ly, G. and Diallo, R. (2017) *Kiffe ta Race* [Podcast]. Available at: https://www.binge.audio/podcast/kiffetarace

No Anger (2021) 'L'invisibilisation des artistes handicapé-e-s' [The invisibilisation of disabled artists], *A mon geste défendant*, November 2021. Available at: https://amongestedefendant.wordpress.com

No Anger (2021) 'Les corps exposés' [Bodies on display], *A mon geste défendant*, November 2021. Available at: https://amongestedefendant.wordpress.com

No Anger (2021) 'Des voix et des normes' [Voices and norms], *A mon geste défendant*, November 2021. Available at: https://amongestedefendant.wordpress.com

No Anger (2021) 'Selon Wittig' [According to Wittig], *A mon geste défendant*, November 2021. Available at: https://amongestedefendant.wordpress.com

No Anger (2021) 'Scripts corporels et corps féministe' [Body scripts and the feminist body], *A mon geste défendant*, November 2021. Available at: https://amongestedefendant.wordpress.com

No Anger (2021) 'Scripts corporels et normes' [Body scripts and norms], *A mon geste défendant*, November 2021. Available at: https://amongestedefendant.wordpress.com

No Anger (2021) 'Les normes et moi' [Norms and me], *A mon geste défendant*, November 2021. Available at: https://amongestedefendant.wordpress.com

Preciado, Paul B. (2019) *Un Appartement sur Uranus*[An Apartement On Uranus]. Paris: Éditions Grasset, London: Fitzcarraldo Editions.

Reynaud, A. (2018) *Journal d'une Aspergirl*. Available at: https://les-tribulations-dune-aspergirl.com/category/journal/

Tuaillon, V. (2021) *Le Coeur sur la Table* [Podcast]. Available at: https://www.binge.audio/podcast/le-coeur-sur-la-table

Vergès, F. (2019) 'Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender', e-flux Journal, #100. Available at: https://www.e-flux.com/journal/100/269165/capitalocene-waste-race-and-gender/

Wittig, M. (1992) *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press.