Beach

A beach is a geographical object that relates both to a geomorphological reality and to a social and cultural construction. Beaches were for a long time apprehended via physical geography, in particular the geomorphology of the coastal area which considers beaches as sections of coast where sediments, sand and shingle are accumulated by the sea. The beach is indeed regularly considered via the notion of the intertidal zone or foreshore, which refers to a terrestrial area, and above all an "indecisive" coastal area covered and uncovered by the movements of the tides. The loose material across the foreshore is washed into forms that can vary from one beach to another around the world, depending on erosive forces, geological parameters, near-shore elements along the coast, etc. To cite just one example, beaches on tropical islands alternate shapes formed by light-coloured sediments (rich in shell and coral debris) and shapes dominated by black rock (basalt debris). These materials are movable, so that beaches are highly dynamic natural systems (Paskoff, 2005, p.9).

These geomorphological characteristics are viewed in various manners by societies, differing from one time and one place to another. Thus a beach can be analysed as a landscape , a reality that is at once ecological and symbolic, and which supposes a set of aesthetic representations of the environment, localised historically and geographically (Berque, 1995). In the Western world, while the Roman elite developed a sensitivity to coastal landscape in the course of Antiquity (although they had no word for "landscape"), subsequent "Western" societies then turned away from these spaces for some thousand years. It was only from the mid-17th century that a movement giving aesthetic value to the marine environment got underway (ibid.) promoting what Corbin calls the "désir du rivage" or desire for the shore (Corbin 1988). The landscape model of the shore is today idealised via the image of the tropical island, constructed from a Polynesian paradigm summed up in the tryptic palm trees/white sand/turquoise lagoon (moreover imitated by the blue floor of swimming pools). The arrival of global tourism, with the intense occupation of some shorelines (Duhamel, Violier, 2009), bolstered this model. It is so predominant today that the tourist development of some beaches entails their artificialisation by imports of sand from elsewhere. Thus beaches of volcanic origin (dark in colour) in Tenerife (Canary Islands) have been rehabilitated by imports of white sand from Morocco (Rieucau, 2008). Beaches are even created ex nihilo in certain capital cities around the world, for instance Paris-Plages (Pradel, Simon, 29012) which is a temporary summer installation along the banks of the Seine reproducing certain beach codes (sand, palm trees, etc).

These positive values associated with certain coastal landscapes can favour action for their conservation, at a time when processes of erosion and retreat of shoreline are accentuating (Paskoff, op.cit.). The tourist stakes are sometimes explicitly cited to legitimise action, as in the example of Waikiki, Honolulu (Hawaii). The observation that erosion has been removing several dozen centimetres of sand each year since 1985 convinced the Hawaiian State to launch a plan of action consisting in pumping sand out to sea to replenish the foreshore. This sand is the sand that is carried away by currents, and covers coral reefs, so that the sea bed and the movements of the waves are altered.

However, the beach is not only a landscape, and geographers now focus on it as a social scene, organised in particular by tourism. As a use of space (MIT team, 2002), tourism supposes temporary travel away from day-to-day places, and this enables a "controlled relaxation of the constraints on emotions" (Elias, Dunning, 1994, p.130). The beach has been, and still is, a place for experimenting practices that reverse or divert certain rules in force in ordinary living, among neighbours. While the beach can be viewed as a public space, in the Western world users indulge in a degree of undressing or nudity (according to gradients that vary from one situation to another) generally seen as inappropriate in any other places where everyone is potentially exposed to everyone else. The beach raises the issue of the spatiality of the body in different settings (social, cultural, etc) a research theme that has been developing over the last ten years (Volvey, 2000; Barthe-Deloizy, 2003; Jarand, de Luze, 2004; Staszak, 2008; Duhamel, Violier, 2009; Coëffé, 2003, 2014; Coëffé, Guibert, Taunay, 20912; Taunay 2015). In fact the beach creates a discontinuity with the immediate environment, which translates into the production of spatial norms, generating an inside and an outside with more or less clear-cut boundaries. This can be seen in the municipal rulings in certain seaside resorts (Nice, Ajaccio etc.) attempting to regulate dress and undress, forbidding beachwear or nudity once the person has left the sand or the shingle. They have not however been able to contain these behaviours completely, and they tend to spread beyond the limit set. The question of spatial norms is of interest in geography if for instance it is linked to the issue of scale. The beach may itself be organised according to norms that favour "internal" discontinuities. Thus a spatialisation of gender relationships can govern the territorial order of beaches and bathing, as was the case in Illawarra (south-east Australia) at the end of the 19th and the start of the 20th century. The legislation imposed the segregation of men and women on the grounds of controversy concerning the exposure of the body (Metusela, Waitt, 2012).

The invention of social conventions in this instance is rendered possible by a system of opening and closing, which can isolate

beaches from the surrounding spaces. This can be seen in the case of "nudist" beaches (Barthe-Deloizy, op.cit.; Jaurand, de Luze, op.cit.). These beaches can be contiguous with "textile" beaches (where people are not completely naked), but this proximity also shows the juxtaposition of worlds regulated by antagonistic norms, symbolised by markers (notices, material boundary etc.) delineating the differentiated spatial appropriations. Opening is possible in certain cases, with a form of intrusion from "textile" territory into the territory of nudity. Certain nudist and gay beaches organise a spatial differentiation on even finer scales, organising "sectors" with different functions, as in Saint-Laurent d'Eze (Côte d'Azur), with for instance the back of the beach sector "where the vegetation acts as a curtain, and which can be characterised by sexual practices" (Jaurand, de Luze, op.cit. p.238). These unauthorised practices (except by the group organising them) develop so long as they remain opaque for the rest of society, which explains the choice of places that are not readily accessible (requiring climbing, for instance, which keeps family users and their paraphernalia at bay): "the wild nudist beach has to be won" (Barthe-Deloizy, op.cit. p.103). Across the world, these nudist practices are very unequally authorised by social and legal norms, and a large number of these beaches are organised illegally or confidentially (Jaurand, 2008), even in societies where international tourism is not only accepted but also promoted, as in Morocco or Thailand. The norms of "decency", with or without religious overtones, can organise behaviours on beaches consisting in veiling rather than uncovering the body, especially women's bodies. The burkini, with its several imaginary connotations (Western sea resort culture and Moslem tradition), exposing only the face and hands of Moslem women, thus appeared in the years 2000 on certain beaches in the Near and Middle East, and also in other countries such as Tunisia or Indonesia (Guidi, Karimi, 2014).

Finally, the beach can be apprehended as a break with "ordinary" time. This space is indeed, at least in the West, an object of dreams and fantasies, a sort of return to the origins of the world, a primitive, vacant stage enabling the deployment of new rules in a kind of paradise (especially if the beach is "tropical"). The paradox is that its apparent naturalness is derived from a thorough artificialisation of the different elements, and a purification of any object liable to "sully" the beach (seaweed for instance). The fantasised return to nature can also be seen in the bodily imaginary, and not least the often-dominant supine posture on Western beaches, contrasting with the usual upright stance, a symbol of humanity. Sun-tan, popularised on Western beaches (including Hawaii) from the start of the 20th century, can be seen as mimicking the "natural" state. This change in appearance in fact reflects a social and cultural construction of a bodily norm that is not shared worldwide (Coëffé, Guibert, Taunay, 2012), and can affect the way beaches are used depending on whether people frequenting them wish to sunbathe or not (Gay, 2008). While the bathing culture is still in its infancy in a country such as China, sun-bathing to obtain a tan is a practice that is very rare in a society that has instated the whiteness of the skin as a canon of beauty (Taunay, op.cit. p.217). Beach-users generally bathe at the end of the afternoon (Urbain, 1994), the time of the highest frequentation (Taunay, op.cit.). After the burkini, the facekini (a hood exposing only the eyes, the nose and the mouth) appeared on the beaches of Qingdao (north-east of the province of Shandong) at the end of the years 2000, no doubt reflecting the strength of a social norm taking precedence over exposure to the sun, but further analysis of usage is required (ibid).

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