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Cockroaches, or Worlds as Images

Nathalie Blanc

Abstract

The cockroach is an insect of tropical origin whose presence in urban space draws our attention to the fact that the city is not only an artificial and controlled universe but also a porous one because of the interstices through which the animals slip. This article analyzes the role of animals in cities, and more particularly of the cockroach, in the city dweller's imagination and in the construction of an aesthetic experience of urban life. Imagination, metaphor, and domestication are the clues to understanding a sharp, active thought of the lived environment. One will thus approach the place of aesthetics in representations of cities between nature and artifice.

Key Words

domestication of space, metaphor, urban animal, urban discomfort, image, imagination, metaphor

1. Introduction

The image is a way of thinking that anchors the environment aesthetically, framing the world representation of individuals and groups. Such a way of thinking, following the example of the crystal, gives a great formality to the environment.^[1] The cockroach, an insect living in urban environments, projects an image that can evoke a world. More than one hundred investigations concerning the representations and practices of cockroaches (*cafard* in popular French and *blatte* in scientific language) were carried out by a team of social science researchers among an urban population living either in blocks of flats or individual houses in the large French cities of Paris, Lyon, and Rennes. This original, scientific work shows the extent in which the lived environment is based on the relationship between the collective representation and aesthetic experience of the places of habitation and of the animal that lives in them.

After explaining certain elements of the method of approach and its theoretical framework, I will first study the role of imagination in the constitution of the collective living space, and then that of metaphor, before showing the extent in which the animal, and more particularly the cockroach and its motility constitute an essential element in the domestication of urban space. Of course, one should not think only of the positive aspects of such a domestication; the domestication of our living space and the creation of a familiar environment; but one should also include images representing the difficult aspects of life in big cities and the disappointments that it may hold.

2. Motivations

This researchers consisted of a multi-disciplinary team, associating ecologists who are specialists of *Blattella germanica*, a species of insect, with geographers. The ecologists, having very quickly formulated the assumption that the urban inhabitant-cockroach relationship was of decisive

importance in the understanding of the dynamics of populations of cockroaches, called upon geographers to conduct an analysis of the practices and representations of this insect whose natural environment is urban. The work concerned only *Blattella germanica*, a species of small size (12-15 mm at the adult stage) and of brown color with two black longitudinal bands.

This omnivorous and cosmopolitan species did not adapt to the various climates under which it developed but, on the contrary, sought favorable microclimates corresponding to its own ecological requirements. One therefore finds *Blattella germanica* only in inhabited buildings, but since another of its requirements is shelter, one does not have the same probability of finding it everywhere in a dwelling. This gregarious species prefers kitchens, the places where food is stored, and bathrooms, where there is food, water, additional heat (boilers, electric household appliances, general heating of the dwelling) and shelter. In fact, this species, rather than adapting to the urban environment, withdraws from the external climatic and seasonal variations and settles in the interior of dwellings. In this urban environment it occupies neither the streets nor the parks but is mainly found in regularly occupied apartments.. It is the city itself as an urban ecosystem that generates a species, the cockroach.

For the geographers, the choice of the cockroach as a key to studying the appearances of nature in cities was dictated at the beginning by two requirements: the first was the interdisciplinarity characteristic of the French tradition of research on the environment.^[2] The second was to think of the dark aspects of city life, to approach the city from a different perspective, i.e., to consider the cockroach as natural, which could be justified from the ecological point of view, but which, obviously, from the point of view of the common representations of the inhabitants, did not make sense.

Consequently, it was obvious that the question of what was at stake in the representations of nature would arise; indeed, what explains why the cockroach is not linked to the idea of nature? What justifies the ostracism of which it is the object?

The majority of reasons is of aesthetic nature. Indeed, a whole category of arguments has to do with the bestial characteristics of the cockroach. For example, morphological aspects are emphasized. The description of the cockroach highlights the disgusting aspects: crawling object, dirty or large animals, small monstrous legs and, more precisely, small black and brown beasts. Its form, size, color, mode of locomotion (which is frequently mentioned), crawling character (small monstrous legs), as well as its appearing in swarms - it is never pleasant to see animals swarming in the apartment - and thus its reproduction are causes of repulsion. Another category of arguments holds with the nature of the city or, more exactly, with the modernity that it evokes.

The latter is closely associated with the question of hygiene. In France, urban sanitation has particular importance, which is why Colette Pétonnet (1991), an anthropologist, is justified in writing, "the Western city is clean because this artificial universe, this place of the domestication of time and space,

light and the seasons, has tended for centuries to perfect the control of nature. . ." Thus stagnant water, mud, snow, dust, animals and waste were successively driven out of cities. . . The cold and the night were overcome, and increasingly great artificial spaces were built. What is the meaning of this insistence of urban planners who preach the cleanliness of the city, continually wishing to make it better and greater? Thus urban space is narrowed down to the dimensions of a flat: all stains have been wiped out, removed as if outdoors and indoors were the same, that is, an artificial, constructed human space.

In this context, it is remarkable to note that the cockroach is like a stain. This French pun, which does not translate easily into English, evokes the idea or image of the cockroach's appearance as similar to a spot of ink on a white tablecloth. Thus the question is that of the image of the city, the representations with which, still today, it is associated and of what the animal presence evokes. A last category of arguments is not associated with urban spatial organization, i.e., an image of the city. It invites us to take into account the temporal nature of the animal: born and living in a space that is not made for it, it multiplies and invades this space. Therefore, it concerns the characteristics of the living organism. It is sufficient to evoke only these associations of the image of the cockroach to provoke the question of how they might enrich the the question of environmental aesthetics. As a result of living with the cockroach, human imagination makes it possible to build a representation of its environment. This imagination unfolds on at least. Let us explore them.

First, let's consider the aesthetic experience of the cockroach's form: the rhythms of its silhouette, its color, and its position in the environment. In what way does it relate to aesthetic experience? Admittedly, individuals are unequally equipped with the aptitude to taste the world in such a way, but the aesthetic capacity is a potentiality which is present in everyone. The way in which ordinary individuals use it in the composition of the environment, but also the way in which they thus divide up their own environment into negative or positive areas, attest to its presence. Some environments show bad taste; others, less formalized, appear only piecemeal. All have an aesthetic presence: that which the speaker expresses when s/he gives some formal account or by his or her way of living. The second holds primarily for the way in which the environment appears in the eyes of a possible public.

I will now briefly expose the modes by which imagination represents the cockroach, and then show certain aspects of the way in which the metaphor becomes a powerful vehicle for other types of representation.

3. Imagination

Imagination is defined as the ability to work out images originating in previous acts of perception. It can be used to represent objects which are not there, that is to say, to invent new objects from those that one already knows. When it comes to cockroaches, the imagination, as a powerful engine for the introduction of new elements into public space, is

activated to an extraordinary degree. Cockroaches are imagined as dark and, consequently, as animals which one closely associates with technical objects. The pipes of buildings, the interstices of the building, faults of all kinds, are their house; the cockroach nests there and hides there when it is hunted, the better to invade familiar spaces. It is thus an animal of the shade. It stands at the margins of the familiar world.

Let us listen, for example, to the following informant, a woman speaking about the way she perceives cockroaches and the places where they hide. Pragmatic, her relationship to cockroaches is not an obsessive one: "It is a problem; it is like dirt. I find it disgusting. There was a time when I saw one. I crushed it and then it was over.... But the fact that it goes into built-in cupboards, that it goes everywhere, one wonders whether such an animal cannot transport microbes. It is not the animal itself.... Sometimes I even catch it with my hands.... No, it is what it represents: dirtiness! I cannot stand it. I am not afraid . . . If I see one of them that I did not crush, I will go down on my knees in the kitchen until I have found it! In the evening, when I switch on the light in the kitchen, I see some. That does not stop me, but it annoys me. It is a question of cleanliness...." She does not understand why these animals are there and wonders whether it is not the dirtiness of her apartment: "When I see one of them, I say 'zut,' what is the problem? If you see one of them, it means that there are others. One is only the beginning. However, behind the gas cooker and the refrigerator, there should not be any at all, because I regularly move my washing machine to clean behind it, then I don't know where it comes from. Once I saw one: it fell from the mouth of the ventilation shaft. . ." This small beast also represents poverty and doubles the feeling of exclusion which characterizes the inhabitants of the peripheral districts known as "difficult."

One woman who came from the countryside now lives in a large apartment building: "People were not accustomed to seeing us living in an area like this one. You sort out your friends. It is the same for the building, people say. 'You see where you live, you see how it feels, you see how people are, you see their color. . .' I made it clear and I warned people. Either you accept it and you stay, or you don't and just leave. . ."

Her practices towards cockroaches result from a more general struggle to adjust to a place that represents the "zone." She has also to adjust to other people's practices: mutual intolerance, irresponsibility, and so forth. She is seeking to improve her living conditions.

In this context, this animal of the shade represents the foreigner, the other that, in these large, subsidized blocks of flats in the south of Rennes, a French city in Brittany of approximately 292,000 inhabitants, is considered a problem. As an inhabitant explains: "One year, I just returned from my holidays, they were crawling on the walls. There must be a reason for this. People say that it is linked with the Arabs. Where they came from and how they got here, that I do not know...."

There are two explanations. First, the insect is dark, and

second, it likes heat: "I never studied the behavior of the cockroach. I simply noticed that one does not see them during the day time, and that they come out in the evening. Once, when I was in Tunisia and went to a store and there were some. It appears that there are many of them in hot countries." These two characteristics of the animal are used to link it with foreigners for, in France, many immigrants come from the south and have brown skin. Dans le jardin de la nature by Keith Thomas (1985) offers a striking example of it. The author analyzes the exclusion which strikes animals and parts of humanity between the XVIth and the XIXth century. He quotes a letter that an animal's friend wrote to him in 1879. The cockroaches invaded his house: "I hate to make the war with cockroaches. They have as much right to live as Zulu blacks. But in one case as in the other, what should we do?"

The above examples show how the imagination is likely to enrich the collective life starting from the animal whose presence is disputed in urban space; it is a symptom, the living translation of one's difficulty of living in cities. First of all, it is an objective difficulty: the badly maintained buildings, the degraded green spaces, the conflictual social life. It is a subjective difficulty insofar as it generates a feeling of ill being.

The image of the cockroach offers a double exclusion: not only is it symptomatic of the poverty of a given district, but also of its dirtiness. In fact, the cockroach's specific characteristics contribute to transforming it into a sign of social infamy. Its animality and its autonomy feed the representations concerning its mobility in the building and the way in which it penetrates the apartments and hides there. This provokes two kinds of suspicion: that it has come either from the neighbors or from some fault in the building where a nest is localized, for it passes everywhere; it is like water, a small crack is enough..

4. Metaphor

Several metaphors anchor the cockroach in the daily universe. Metaphor is one of the essential operators of new figurations of reality and new connections between the natural world and the social world. Metaphor constitutes one of the aesthetic "catches."^[3] It is thus a link, and even one of the methods, for weaving together the natural and the social world. It is a link, a tool to compare and to adjust worlds, essential to the functioning of societies. Human thought has a permanent tendency to project onto the natural world (and especially onto the animal kingdom) the categories and the values coming from human society, and then to use such figuration to criticize or reinforce the human socio-political organization. Thus it may justify certain social and political values which are supposed to be more natural than others (Thomas, 1985). But it is true, as P. Descola (2005) points out, that the Western ontology characterized by the division of subject and object is only one of several possible ontologies.^[4]

For example, our informants used a specific metaphor to evoke the place from which the cockroaches come. It is the metaphor of the nest. The nest, which is under the building or in its foundations, represents the potential invasion of crawling insects and their capacity to proliferate in familiar spaces. From there, the cockroach lends itself to the metaphorical

process that transforms it into a figure that represents immigration problems. This metaphor is not positive. It is even the incarnation of daily racism, but it does help to gain a better understanding of the links woven between the natural and the social world, between animals and humans in a highly symbolic system. One can think that the cockroach itself operates like a metaphor. For example, the etymology of the word 'cockroach' in French is a marvelous indicator of the metaphorical construction of the relationship between human beings and things. The French terms used to name this insect, 'blatte' (the scientific denomination) and 'cafard' (the popular term) refer to the night life of the animal. Indeed, 'cafard' (1589) is probably borrowed from the Arabic *kafir*: one who does not have the faith. The pejorative suffix 'ard' replaced the initial combination. The word was re-employed in a religious context to mean "an excessively pious but false person," a "hypocrite" in the XVIth century, and used polemically, in particular during the religious wars. It seems that the usual way to employ the word cockroach since 1542 has been metaphorical, generally indicating a false, excessively pious person, the animal being of black color and concealing itself from the light.

This use was initially regional (Normandy, Berry) and became general in all French regions in the course of the XIXth century. The originally Latin term for the cockroach includes various insects which flee the light (*pline*) and thus implies the same characteristics as the vulgar one. By the intermediary of scientific Latin, *blatta*, the naturalists of the second half of the XVIIIth institutionalized the generic name for the cockroach. The nightly manners of the animal thus play an important part in the representations and the figurative practices connected to it, as is testified in many literary texts where the cockroach pullulates, threatens, must be destroyed, generates a faintness, etc.

The metaphorical universe is a "bridge suspended above reality" that highlights the illusory depth. Metaphors are nourished above all by aesthetic experience. The popular judgment that confers on certain metaphors the quality of self-evidence to such an extent that they seem natural, such as the sun "going down" or "setting," recognizes this universality of the aesthetic experiment. Metaphor establishes a link with reality and makes it possible to contribute to the value of places. By joining a term to another term, one does not only enrich the description of the first term, but gives it a new value. Metaphor develops a poetic and imaginative entry into reality; it expresses a consciousness of the relations that link us to the environment. Thus it is possible to unite the aesthetic and the ethical by the awakening of a more or less pleasant relation to the world. The aesthetic experience and its general acceptance and common use within the public sphere function like experiments in the reallocation of value starting from individuals and small groups. Metaphors operate like a cosmic links.

5. Domestication of Space

From this point of view, it is obvious that the thought of cockroaches introduces the idea of indoor and outdoor spaces, of buildings within a given district or within the city. Practices

of hunting introduce a geography of living accommodations that modifies its perception. Indeed, a large number of inhabitants attempt to exterminate the insects by exploding containers of insecticide, spreading poison, or traps, using these with precaution in regard of children and domestic animals. Let us note simply that almost only men kill them by crushing them with their foot or hand. People get up at night trying to surprise them by suddenly switching on the lights in order to kill them and thus adopt the behavior of a hunter. Others bleach all surfaces. In fact, the extermination practices also lead to a certain radicality in the field of representations of urban space. The presence of the cockroach points to conflict that is always latent. For

dissatisfaction and discomfort are dimensions of the city life. The cockroach transmits an unattractive image of the world. Consequently, it is obvious that the cockroach is not desired in urban spaces; its presence there suggests a badly managed city, a failure of urban society.

However, the cockroach is part of natural life in the city. Admittedly, it is never quoted in examples: neither an aspect of nature, nor an animal, neither domestic, nor even wild, the cockroach is a small beast, a kind of vermin or pest, but a being which nevertheless has its place in urban spaces. The cockroach stands for the intrusion of the dirt of the outside into the private sphere. It is dirty because it goes everywhere, eats everything, and thus transports dirt. All the terms which qualify the cockroach are related to this feeling: dislike, lack of hygiene, disgust, dirty animals. The feeling of nausea is probably related to the fact that the cockroach crawls over food and does not stay in its place: "I lit the light and they fled.... It was disgusting! It is not terribly dirty, but when you imagine all these small beasts crawling into your rice and your flour. . . These insects, they are nevertheless evil, they are intruders because they should not be there. . ." It is indeed the old definition of dirtiness, something that is not in its place. The apartment is a particular, human territory..The presence of animals is tolerated only insofar as it is desired and controlled. Admittedly, one inhabitant finds that city animals represent nature, except that there are too many of them. But on the other hand, she does not consider the presence of the cockroach natural in cities: "I find dogs and cats natural. But there are too many dogs in cities. People have several of them in their apartments. Too many of them to keep the pavements and public lawns clean. The cockroach should be exterminated. At the present period, it is in cities, but this is not normal. The cockroach is not natural; it represents dirtiness. Nature, it is not dirty."

But according to eco-ethologists who study it, the presence in cities of the cockroach testifies to its naturalness. Isn't it there to benefit from urban hospitality, from the opportunities that cities offer: hot, moist spaces? Surrounded by the technical space of the city, which often inspires a healthy terror highlighted by the image of the urban techno-sphere, it is remarkable to note that the presence of the cockroach betrays the fault lines of the urban world and thereby shows that living in a given place necessitates one's being able to detect weaknesses. Imagination, but also sensitivity, and sense perception are thus concerned. They are essential to mobilize

the resources necessary to the construction of a representation. The aesthetic dimension of the city depends on them, and so does its ethical dimension. Indeed, if one defines ethics as the ideas that make us persevere in our being, aesthetics - taste and dislike - consequently seem a strong index of well-being in cities. How to tame a city? If the practices of treating cockroaches show that what is concerned is above all a question of proper living, i.e., without animals, the practices in regard to other animal species, like stray cats, show that, on the contrary, there are means of domesticating urban space which call for the nourishing of animals and probably for an overall concern for the quality of life in the city in ethical terms. It is a life that one appreciates in a universe considered as dehumanizing and extremely mineral.

The inhabitants refer then to a world which is an image of paradise where non-human and human species cohabit harmoniously in a reconciled landscape. The practices of the *nourrisseurs* of animals (pigeons and cats) are, from this point of view, particularly enlightening (Blanc, 2000). A *nourrisseuse* of animals regularly nourishes many cats outdoors. The investment of external space thus takes the form of circulation between the various points of a network, but also incarnates this appropriation through the leaving of food or the construction of shelters. This behavior is not widely spread but exists in many countries and is not easily tolerated. That is to say, that it is not without causing neighborhood conflicts. One of the reasons of this behavior is the identification with animals or nature as symbols of freedom or of beauty and harmony in a city.

6. Conclusion

What role is left, then, to the cockroach and certain other animal species in city life and, more generally, in the experience of the city as a medium of life? In addition to the fact that an animal helps us represent urban life to ourselves, it also contributes to many narratives which we have of our lives in cities. From this point of view, one cannot dissociate the aesthetic experience of the city from the conditioning we receive due to collective life. The city is a specific space, in many ways different from the countryside, where our adaptation to the environment is not distinguished from our training as social beings. This opens the possibility of an individual extasis, of a freedom that incorporates collective standards even while rejecting them.

Adopting an aesthetic approach to question the relationship between city dwellers and urban animals means trying to understand the role of the image, of imagination in urban living. It also means understanding the role of narrative, its tone, its color and its style, as well as of ways of living, aesthetic configurations, for organizing relationships within an environment considered as dehumanizing. Thus domestic arrangements constitute a form of asserting the importance of the aesthetic in urban modes of life.

Endnotes

[1] The assumption is that our worlds are connected like living systems which change according to the dynamics of an auto-organizational type. The idea is as follows: The living

organisms are equipped with a certain degree of organizational complexity which enables them to resist noise, i.e., the disturbances which have occurred by chance in the environment, but especially to assimilate and integrate these disturbances and thereby to increase their degree of organization, their complexity. To be able to function thus, our worlds could be described as a mixture "of crystal and smoke" (Atlan, 1979).

[2] In the 1980s, rural sociologists and geographers working in vast interdisciplinary research programs adopted a new approach to the questions of environment. They were particularly attached to the comparison of usually disjointed levels of analysis, such as naturalness, culture, the symbolic system, and the hardware. In 1992, a collection of essays, entitled *Les passeurs de frontières (Crossing Borders)*, developed an interdisciplinary method devoted primarily to the relationship between social practices and the biophysical world.

[3] For Arendt, "Analogies, metaphors and emblems are the threads by which the mind holds on to the world even when, absentmindedly, it has lost direct contact with it and they guarantee the unity of human experience. Moreover, in the thinking process, they serve as models to give us our bearings lest we stagger blindly among experiences that our directions in the absence of unquestionable knowledge cannot guide us through. The simple fact that our mind is able to find such analogies, that the world of appearances reminds us of things non-apparent, may be seen as a kind of proof that mind and body, thinking and sense experience, the visible and the invisible, belong together, are << made >> for each other, as it were...." Arendt, 1978, p.109

[4] "On one hand," explains the author, "there are bodies, 'the physicality.' On the other, 'interiority.' As regard others, human or not human, I can still suppose either that they have elements of physicality and interiority identical to mine, or that their interiority and their physicality are distinct from mine, or that we have similar interiorities and heterogeneous physicalities, or finally that our interiorities are different and our physicalities similar. These formulas define four large types of ontologies, i.e. of systems of properties of existing which we will call, according to convention, totemism, analogism, animism and the naturalism (the Western posture)."

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