

Thoughts on a French public library

The Mediatheque Jean Levy is an imposing white stone building with huge glass windows, sitting on a side street just outside Lille's town centre. It was a modern concept designed by two Lilloise architects, as highlighted by the large placard at the entrance. **The library is, for the most part, dominated by an atmosphere of religious silence.** On the first floor, teen learners sit at their desks, heads buzzing to the rhythm of school work. Their serious toil is accompanied by delicate notes struck on the piano in the hallway, by a bald Ray Charles who sways in his seat at every sweet cadence of sound. This breezy soundtrack is accompanied somewhat irregularly by a light snoring coming from one of the café seats across. Here a man is sprawled, as if practicing some demanding breakdance move, a brown wool hat over his eyes. His rugged hand hangs limply over a plastic coffee cup, fallen to the side and trailing a line of liquid over the parquet. In front of him, middle-aged men sit quietly at the rows of free computers, absorbed in their online war games.

But it is only on the second floor that the bookish atmosphere reaches its true height. Here, past a section where white-haired men flick through 80s CD's, is the "Espace Travail". Two rows of desks fit snugly in a glass-panelled box, huge glass windows flood with light this temple of the mind. A Rastafarian guy with a large bamboo necklace sits typing; a young man with a variety of multicoloured felt pens bends over his notepad, drawing the most accurate representation of a 3D lung; two high-school students with glasses sit scrolling through their Macbooks. Occasional chortles of laughter come from one of the free computers in the corner. A man with bulging eyes is sitting there, and he just can't keep himself, he is laughing his socks off, his jaw hanging limply off his head like an appendix to his stubbled cheeks. He is watching a comedy cartoon on YouTube. With each snort of laughter, all in the room lift their heads and look at each other with a raised eyebrow, an upward turn of the lip; no one speaks up. **For in the Mediatheque Jean Levy, where tramps roam and businessmen work, each individual goes about their business.** There may be a withered woman spouting at the librarian's desk just outside the "Espace Travail", knuckles white on the wood desk as

she struggles with a library card subscription, and never a rustle at the study desks. And eventually the woman gets her card, the man with bulging eyes' computer time runs out, and the library plunges back into buzzing silence.

I will tell you about the library's *toilette* – not only because this is one of the places most drenched in the library's essence, but because outside the *toilette* is where it happened. In this small rectangular room, we find ourselves immersed in the most tropical of smells, and the rainforest wetness of the terrain is something highly arbitrary, with no apparent connection to the world outside. A lonely window peeks in the corner, perhaps pondering on the weight of its responsibility. Usually there is a collection of multifaceted individuals standing in line in front of the doors, rather like elders in line for a boat tour. Time seems to have stopped here, until the doors open. Everyone raises their head; the first in line with jolting extasy, the last with sluggish acknowledgement. A towering tramp with drooping dreads of dark-grey hair walks out and past them. The skin of his dark cheeks is shiny and polished. He is trailing one of those shopping trolleys old people use, bulging with plastic bags wound tightly in what looks like climbing rope. A toothbrush juts out of the brim of one of the bags, and an upturned bottle of L'Oreal shampoo.

This kind of event is quotidian at the Mediatheque, but it is not what happened on that Tuesday morning. That day, when I descended from the "Espace Travail", only a man in suit was in line. He leaned with his back on the wall, a briefcase at his side, tapping away with his leather shoes. A bent figure barged into the building on a swaying trajectory. He passed the entry desk, where a member of staff sat head in book, and reached the toilets. He passed in front of us and tried the handle. Having verified that the door was indeed locked, he scanned his surroundings. The man with the briefcase instantaneously dropped his gaze, and it was maybe the look of curiosity in my face that prompted him to start a conversation. He started waving his arms in large arcs, as if trying to hold himself up by gripping thin air, and performing moaning sounds deep in his mouth. I had been bracing myself for yet another arduous conversation in French, so I was quite glad when I realized

that the man had quite possibly less capacity to articulate himself in the language than myself. He was deaf-mute.

The man stroked his beard and gestured to mine, complimenting my trim. He swayed and moaned and confessed to me that he was drunk, and to keep his secret – he pointed at the oblivious librarian. He was in the process of gesticulating his thoughts further when a large woman in a flowered dress came in. She did the ritual of walking past us and trying the door. When she realized what we all had, she walked back, whispering to herself in pointed French. My friend gesticulated an equivalent of “*what do you think we were waiting for?*” in a loud moaning soliloquy. The woman recoiled like a frightened ostrich, and the briefcase man turned around and moved closer to her, raising a protecting hand. But the deaf-mute went on gesticulating undisturbed. He was glad for my – he put his black indexes on either side of his parched lips, as he was happy only because – he dipped one dirty thumb over his mouth. He moaned and groaned and finally, he tapped a finger on his wrist and zigzagged out of the building with one last, huge moan. He had no time to waste.

I would have been in high-spirits at this point, had the large woman and man with the briefcase not been murmuring under their breath the whole time the moaning spectacle was there, shooting disapproving glances. For in those glances I smelled something that was new between those walls, a slightly acidic smell which wasn't coming from the restroom doors (they were still shut). It was the sour milk smell of unfamiliarity, of the *other*. The duo's reaction was nothing new. On the contrary, it was quite likely and logical, the by-product of fear. Drunk people do unexpected things. The tramp could have become violent, and the librarian certainly wouldn't have been there to help. Then why did I feel like the Kinder Bueno I had eaten earlier was stuck in my throat?

I would like to note that my experience of libraries had been somewhat luxurious so far, having always frequented the ones at my universities in England. These are populated uniquely by students, lecturers or people who bear some kind of relation to the institution, and there are clear signs to mark out the floors: *QUIET STUDY FLOOR*, *SILENT STUDY FLOOR*. There is no confounding what

needs to be done. If you find yourself working in the *SILENT STUDY FLOOR* and need to exchange a couple whispered remarks with your mate sitting opposite, be sure that a librarian assistant will swoop onto you before you can say *shh*.

My granddad considered himself a Utopian Anarchist. He believed that, if an anarchic society were possible where there was no need for rules because people naturally respected themselves, this would be the best kind of society. I like to think that the two Lilloise architects founded the Mediatheque with a similar idea in mind; respect for others which doesn't need to be slammed into place like a guillotine. I like to think of it as an example of French society, a society stuck together by a glue made on principles of cohesiveness, the principles of Europe.

But now I am sat in this library once again and I hate myself for it, but I can't stop smelling old sweat coming at me in waves. A man at the free computers keeps snuffling, and he has a riff of tissues at his side. I tell myself that it doesn't matter, but my attention flickers every time I notice it, and I hope that my writing won't come out a little bit worse just because of that.