

ATMOSPHERE

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It. *Atmosfera*; Fr. *Atmosphère, Ambiance*; Germ. *Atmosphäre*; Span. *Atmósfera*. The term comes from the Greek (ἀτμός, "vapour", and σφαῖρα, "sphere") and in meteorology denotes the gas envelope surrounding a planet. Although its use has been metaphorical since the 18th century along with some forerunners (*aura*, *Stimmung*, *genius loci*), it has boomed only recently in the humanities. The latter, in fact, bypassing positivist conventions and endorsing more spatial and affective paradigms rather than temporal and cognitive ones, focus more on the vague and expressive *qualia* of reality (the how) than on its defined and quantified materiality (the what). Never wholly detached from its climatic meaning of immersion in the weather-world, as recently emphasized especially by ecological anthropology, atmosphere, first of all, is a colloquial term meaning a "something more" one feels "in the air" without being able to precisely express it – let alone rationally explain it. Depending on the context, atmosphere works sometimes as a neutrally descriptive expression of a situation (persons, spaces and nature), and other times it is assessed through qualifying adjectives (there are tense, relaxed, gloomy atmospheres, etc.). In any case, in today's debate, atmosphere is not simply meant as a decorative aspect of life, but rather as a feeling or affect that, being not private and internal but objectively and spatially spread out, "tinctures" the situation in which the perceiver happens to be and affectively involves her.

THE CURRENT DEBATE

In its recent theoretical sense, the notion was independently introduced by psychiatrist Hubertus Tellenbach (1968) and philosopher Hermann Schmitz (1969 and 2014). Tellenbach conceives of atmosphere as an elusive but essential quality of intersubjectivity, especially generated through olfaction and taste. If positive, it gives the new-born the necessary trust for a correct development of her personality. From a different point of view, the oral atmosphere provides the psychiatrist with an effective diagnostic tool of psychic diseases whose symptom is indeed a loss or deterioration of olfaction. Schmitz, on the basis of a wide and challenging antireductionistic (new)phenomenology of the felt body (*Leib*), considers feelings as atmospheres, thus restoring the Homeric concept of feelings as daemons poured out

into a non-localizable space that preceded the age of introjection (from Plato onwards). Therefore, atmospheres are not subjective moods, as internal psychic states projected outside, but affective powers that exist discontinuously yet objectively and that authoritatively fill a certain surfaceless spatial situation. Thanks to felt-bodily qualities common to both perceived forms and perceivers (suggestions of movement, synesthetic qualities), in principle atmospheres can be experienced by anyone, regardless of whether the single perceiver merely notes them or is so deeply involved in them that she is assured of her personal identity through these absolute subjective facts.

The notion of atmosphere, however, finds its full aesthetic legitimacy only thanks to philosopher Gernot Böhme (1989, 1995, 1998, 2001, 2017a and 2017b). Highlighting the sociocultural factors underestimated by Schmitz, Böhme places atmosphere at the centre of his New Aesthetics (or "Aisthetics"), understood as a general theory of perception intended neither as information processing nor as a distal recognition, but as an affective experience of the perceiver. Following neophenomenological externalism (atmospheres are something out there), he sees atmosphere (perception aesthetics) qua a tuned space and even as the primary object of perception: the in-between where environmental qualities (object) and human bodily feelings (subject) meet and is responsible of our feeling well or not. According to Schmitz (1998), the intentional creation of atmospheres means simply producing "impressive situations" for propagandistic or advertising purposes; and a non-manipulative cultivation of atmospheres can only happen in very few cases such as in dwelling and in church, in the garden and in a Japanese tea house. Instead, Böhme, whilst recognizing that an atmosphere is nothing without a person feeling it, conceives of staged atmospheres (production aesthetics) both as the main goal of what he calls "aesthetic work" (art in a strict sense, but also cosmetics, advertising, design, scenography, interior decoration, acoustic furnishing, etc.), and as the paradigmatic reflection of the late capitalist aesthetic economy, increasingly based on lifestyle or stage-value than on use-values and exchange-values (Böhme 2017c). This new aesthetic approach to phenomena and the atmosphere they radiate through various generators (movement impressions, synaesthesia, scenes, social characters, ecstasies of things, etc.) would help overcome the intellectualism of classical aesthetics and its obsessive focus on great art. It thus would also explain better than meaning-based (judgement and interpretation) theories the ephemeral, immersive and time-place-dependent character of contemporary art, further providing – exactly through an increased atmospheric competence – the tools to develop a non-regressive critical theory of the aestheticization or theatricalization of our everyday life.

APPLICATIONS AND OPEN QUESTIONS

The discussion of atmosphere today covers a wide range of hardly separable theoretical and applied issues, very often analysed in collective works and conference proceedings (Griffero and Somaini 2006; Goetz and Graupner 2007 and 2012; Andermann and Eberlein 2011; Heibach 2012; Tedeschini 2014; Griffero and Moretti 2018). Philosophy has generally understood atmosphere more as a sensory-affective engagement with the world than as a perceptually limited object (Hauskeller 1995), giving particular attention to the ontological vagueness, the predualistic and quasi-thingly nature of atmospheres, taking the latter as the key elements of a general pathic aesthetics (Griffero 2010, 2013 and 2016), or focusing on

the suddenly perceived intertwining of environment and feeling as the real subject of promising research fields (Rauh 2012). Apart from studies more directly related to media and arts (Mahayni 2002; Blume 2005; Blum 2010; Graupner *et al.* 2010; Brünner 2015; Ulmer 2017) and the large-scale research on *ambiances* and urban life (see at least Hasse 2012; Thibaud 2015), it must be pointed out that the humanities today use the notion of atmosphere in an ever increasing number of fields such as (first of all) architecture and human geography (which is not surprising given the common focus on spatial *qualia*, but also design, pedagogy, psychotherapy, marketing, politics, sociology, ecological and social anthropology – in short, in every study that problematizes the producibility and management of effective individual or collective emotional states). The highly relevant impact of such researches in terms of the aesthetic discussion can certainly not be ignored.

However, there are many questions left open that should be philosophically addressed. Here are just some examples. Can the career of the notion of atmosphere be explained, like Sloterdijk's immunological spheres, through the increasing awareness of the risk that atmospheres (in a physical and in a cultural sense) may be manipulated or become unlivable (Sloterdijk 1998-2004)? Can an atmosphere intentionally be produced and controlled or is it groundlessly floating in space and fully independent of humans? Is it a metaphoric-linguistic effect or a real world entity? Is it, as an in-between, the outcome of the subject-object relation or is it rather its predualistic background? Is it something we perceive or just the condition of possibility of our perception? Is it cognitively penetrable and therefore influenced by knowledge and cultural socialization? Is it an "entity" that supervenes on its material generators or is it fully independent from them? Does it exist only in first-person experience, therefore being akin to a mood/*Stimmung* (Pfaller and Wiese 2018), or can we remember it, even counterfactually design it and intersubjectively communicate it with no loss of meaning? Does its perception change in time? Are there different types of atmosphere, depending on its degree of independence from the perceiver, its prevailing generator, the more influent sensory channel, its synesthetic character, or even the syntactic structure through which one expresses it? Can the traditional aesthetic categories (beauty, sublime, grace, ugly, etc.) be fully converted in atmospheric terms? The discussion of atmospheres is currently trying to answer these and other questions.

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