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AIR DESIGN

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It. *Air Design*; Fr. *Air Design*; Germ. *Air Design*; Span. *Air Design*. Air Design encompasses all the strategies, systems, and techniques aimed at manipulating and conditioning the atmosphere with respect to its chemical, thermal, socio-political, affective, and aesthetic qualities. In science, technology, engineering, environmental policies, and urban planning, the term refers to the control of air quality and hygiene and the management of aerial industrial pollutants. In philosophy, air design is notably addressed by Peter Sloterdijk in his *Spheres* trilogy, who defines it as the direct modification of breathing environments and *airspace users' mood*, especially through olfactory stimuli and smell-induced impressions. Here, air design corresponds to the "aromatechnic modification of the atmosphere" (Sloterdijk 2016: 165), becoming a synonym of what consumer science calls 'olfactory design' and 'smell marketing'.

Focusing on socio-political and ecological issues, in the humanities air design takes the shape of "air conditioning" or "atmospheric manipulation", a recent notion aimed at shedding light on the relationships between atmospheres, often odours, and communities' marginalisation, power relations, human geographies, production and consumption practices, environmental and social justice, market strategies, and political apparatuses.

Understood as smell monitoring, air design is key point in the traditional placemaking processes of several institutions including hospitals and jails but also galleries and museums. Since decades artists have been trying to overcome the aseptic and deodorising paradigms well entrenched in the arts by using smells as key elements of their works.

THE CURRENT DEBATE

As a Latin neologism coined at the beginning of the 17th century, *atmosphæra* appeared in mathematical and astronomical works to designate and understand the gaseous layers surrounding the Earth and specifically the nature of *air* (cf. Martin 2015; Tedeschini 2019). Starting from the 18th century, atmosphere became a synonymic expression for aura, climate, mood, and indeed air – the fluid space in

which vague feelings linger. The scientific and metaphorical meaning of atmosphere are therefore two twigs budded from a common branch: the weather, which, in turn, is rooted in the aerial realm.

Although theories on atmospheres are all but univocal, philosophers are today by and large inclined to consider it a promising tool to rethink traditional ontology and the dichotomy between mind and body, emotion and cognition, superior senses (sight and hearing) and inferior ones (taste, smell and touch). The notion of atmosphere has increasingly been integrated into various disciplines with a view to interpreting human experiences as affective engagements with the world. The same can be said of smells.

In the wake of the so-called 'affective turn', there has also been an atmospheric turn in the humanities; and unsurprisingly, studies on olfaction have been booming (cf. Jaquet 2010). As Mădălina Diaconu (2021: 60) observes, a causal link seems to bind the current reappraisal of smell to "the tendency of some subject theories to move away from an intentional subject to an affectable subject, or 'patheur'". Among the manifold aesthetic, phenomenological, ontological, social, and ethical analogies they share (cf. Griffero 2022), atmospheres and smells are both "affective powers of feeling, spatial bearers of moods" (Böhme 2017: 16). In fact, "air" can also designate a pervasive mood: it is a mixture of gases, the medium of the weather, *and* a space tinged with feelings. Air can be filled with humidity as well as with sadness or hopes; *clearing the air* can mean that pollutants are being removed, but also that somebody is smoothing tensions; *fresh air* is not just the contrary of *hot air* (which is also another way to say 'empty boasting'), but refers to the refreshing sensation of positive changes. As Hubertus Tellenbach (1968: 21-22) has made clear, the German *wittern*, "to sniff", is etymologically related to *Wetter*, "weather", and to *Wind*, the wind as a propulsive and directional force that spreads odours in the air. In this respect, air as a mood has often an olfactory quality: you can get the *flavour* of something by sniffing the air. This is particularly apparent in *Air and Dreams* by Gaston Bachelard (1988: 136), according to which smells are the "most strongly *substantivized* qualities of air".

Then, air is also the aura that "gives the body a presence beyond the confines of its skin" (Illich 1985: 51), a radiation as the *principium individuationis* that makes a person (but also a place, a thing, etc.) unmistakable, which often coincides with the odour as the ecstatic signature of an organism or of a material. Indeed, as supported by James J. Gibson (1969: 144), each being is "the source of an invisible cloud of diffusing vapor that seems to be specific not only to his type but also to him as an individual. The air is full of such overlapping clouds of emanation". Like smells, personal air oscillates from being something essential to being something added to one's personality, that is, designed on purpose. In a way, Georg Simmel (2009: 579) has addressed the matter of perfumes precisely by seeing them as air design devices. According to him, fragrances replace personal air, concurrently making it stand out. Such remarks have also been translated into a somaesthetic view (cf. Shusterman 2011).

Air and smell, both invisible and fluid, have generally and for a long time played a marginal role in Western thought due to the thematic centrality of the visible and the solid. The common destiny they share corroborates their close connection. A proof of this can be found in Luce Irigaray's work on the forgetfulness of air in Heidegger's phenomenology. As she observes, it is thanks to air that beings dwell, meet, appear, mingle, come closer, or move apart. Suggesting that "being-in-the-air" is the essential

requirement for *being-in-the-world*, as reworded by Sloterdijk (2016: 165), olfaction comes into play by metaphorizing – although only parenthetically – invisible, hidden, and overlooked modes of perception, from its basic act (breathing) to the most refined one (meditation), that is, from “animal olfaction to philosophical scenting” (Irigaray 1999: 161).

Although philosophers are divided on the issue of whether it is possible to intentionally create an atmosphere, the relationship between smell, air design, affective spaces, and ‘emotional marketing’ has attracted the attention of many *aesthetic works* (Böhme 2017) in recent years. Design, retail, and more and more businesses in the service sector are using odours, especially food ones (cf. Mancioffi 2023), to stage, evoke, and enhance the desired feelings. Hence the interest toward smell in consumer science applied to the new frontiers of technology and the arts such as virtual reality. Air and olfactory atmospheres are increasingly designed to serve practical and commercial ends, *mood-managing* being the ultimate goal.

As said, this aspect is explicitly addressed by Sloterdijk (2016: 168), who, in line with Walter Benjamin, draws a parallel between consumer society and its connection to the atmosphere of the arcades, where “a first generation of experience customers learned to inhale the intoxicating fragrance of a closed inner world of commodities”. Of course, architecture in general – whose basic purpose is to provide shelter and to protect against the weather – can be seen as a peculiar application of air design. The modern developments in buildings, with hyper-tech systems of air conditioning, have also been taken as emblematic of the Promethean spirit of the humans and their will to (partially) tame the vagaries of the life-sustaining medium they depend on (cf. Ingold 2015: 69-72).

Nowadays, indoor (but also outdoor) ambience and commodity scenting is invasive and deliberately staged to convey emotions and to affect customer behaviour (cf. Henshaw 2014, 2018). In the so-called *retail atmospherics*, scented commodities are designed in order to convey different atmospheres, narratives and values, such as temporal, seasonal, affective, social, gender ones. Beyond the direct rise in turnover and sales volume, the use of fragrances provides further indirect pros, not only improving the performance of employees and optimising working time, but also, as they spread in the air, occupying a space that has no rental costs. Moreover, there is evidence that certain aromas can help induce or deter behavioural attitudes, thereby facilitating discipline, control or social care in clinics, public transport or waiting rooms. In this sense, Ruwen Ogien (2015) reflects on ethics by referring to the case of aromas as mood modifiers – specifically, to an experiment on the correlation between the scent of warm croissants and induced prosocial behaviours.

ORIGIN, APPLICATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF AIR DESIGN

However, instead of being economically driven, contemporary air design has, according to Sloterdijk (2016: 85-118), its origins in war strategies. This is what he calls “airquake” or “terror from the air” and, specifically, *atmoterrorism*, namely offensive technologies adopted in the gas warfare, inaugurated in 1915 by the first massive use of lethal gas by the German army against the French-Canadian troops on the Ypres front (Belgium). From that moment on, attacks are no longer aimed at directly, physically eliminating the

enemy, but rather at rendering their *milieu* uninhabitable and, especially, unbreathable. Sloterdijk recurs to that event to discuss the new awareness of the role of the environment as a vital/lethal ecology, especially in its aerial dimension, which is the *Zeitgeist* of the 20th century and even more so of the 21st. Interestingly enough, the use of chemical weapons was (and still is) counterbalanced, on the one hand, by a meticulous study of the weather and the direction of the wind; on the other hand, by an olfactory education to teach soldiers and civilians to recognise the danger. In a way, the nose fully carries out its function as guardian when dealing with the toxicity of the air as a vehicle of contagion and death.

A connection may be ventured between *atmoterrorism* and the miasmatic theory, by interpreting the latter as the archetype of the former. According to the long-lived miasma theory, air was a vehicle of disease *when* foetid. Infection was indeed caused by breathing *miasmas*, foul-smelling exhalations that were thought to result from the corruption and death of the air (hence the Italian term *malaria*, literally 'bad air'). The chronicles of plagues in European history from the Hellenistic era to modernity display the deadly role ascribed to the air, the medium of odours that qualified it either as a fatal or beneficial vector. Burning balsamic essences met the demand of disinfecting the air by perfuming it, an *ante litteram* air design application. People also used to protect their nose using tissues soaked in perfume, or to wear *pomander*, a ball made of perfume as a shield against contagion. Likewise, the bird-like beak mask of the plague doctor was filled with strong-smelling substances as a prophylactic measure against polluted air.

Thus, a well-established link between smell and sickness has entailed a close intertwining between the aesthetic quality and the affective operativity of effluvia: what smells unpleasant corrupts, pollutes, and plagues; on the contrary, what smells pleasant heals and purifies. As Bachelard (2011: 51) puts it, "[n]oxious vapors seep into the center of substances, carrying there the germ of death, the very principle of decomposition". With all evidence, we still deeply, albeit mostly subconsciously, rely on smells as aesthetic indicators of the environment we are immersed in; if necessary, we modify it by designing its air.

AIR DESIGN IN SOCIAL AESTHETICS AND THE ARTS

Air design has manifold connections with socio-political issues. One concerns the fact that the way people feel deeply depends on the air they breathe (literally and metaphorically). As such, air design, as well as the olfactory dimension of spaces, gravitate towards a social aesthetics. This proves particularly evident today, in that places are the aesthetic outcomes, among other things, of economic disparities, ghettoization and social frictions (cf. Hsu 2020). Aesthetics is indeed integrating its orbit with all those perceptual experiences that fall within the realm of *negative aesthetics*. The disadvantaged segments of society often have to deal with perceptual annoyances including air pollution, littered streets, industrial fumes, crowded and poorly ventilated buildings, and bad odours of all sorts. As Yuriko Saito (2022: 181) observes commenting on Arnold Berleant's work, all these "are aesthetic matters insofar as senses are assaulted by eyesores, stench, untoward noises, as well as dulled and enfeebled by the lack of stimulation".

For at least several decades, art has turned to the odorous and aerial dimension too. "Olfactory art", for instance, operates according to the principle that the air of the museum has to become an expressive

dimension in itself instead of a “white cube” (O’Doherty 1976), aseptic and anosmic (Drobnick 2015). The use of smells, stench, and flavours in galleries is a growing phenomenon, which suggests that such spaces will be increasingly air designed in the future. Other artists have addressed air in general, to reactivate an aesthetic imaginary around the invisible gaseous dimension. An exemplary case is *Aerocene* founded by Tomás Saraceno, an interdisciplinary artistic community exploring alternative ways of conceiving and living in the atmosphere.

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