Chapter 7

Atmosphere

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"Atmosphere" refers to a feeling, mood, or *Stimmung* that fundamentally exceeds an individual body and instead pertains primarily to the overall situation in which bodies are entrenched. The concept of an atmosphere thus challenges a notion of feelings as the private mental states of a cognizant subject and instead construes feelings as collectively embodied, spatially extended, material, and culturally inflected. In this sense "atmosphere" can be considered a mereological concept: While "affect" refers to the ways in which (emerging) bodies relate to each other (→ *affect*), "atmosphere" describes the ways in which a multiplicity of bodies is part of, and entrenched in, a situation that encompasses it. In this respect, atmospheres tend to be contagious, as they wield authority over the entirety of bodies in a situation. Timothy Morton (2007) conceives of the homogenization characteristic of atmospheres as "rendering": a mass of elements is rendered in one all-encompassing rhythm or hue. Atmospheres are thus modes in which the world shows up or coalesces into an indivisible and intensive situation or in which a group of bodies comes to exist as a felt collective. In this regard, atmosphere operates as a medium that brings into appearance that which cannot be deduced from or reduced to the bodies present in a situation. Nor can an atmosphere be referred to as a single, specific source. An atmosphere, then, not only simulates a palpable unity where there might otherwise be difference, but can even render potential futures or repressed memories abundantly present, or make otherwise absent or ulterior persons or relationships perceptible. Crucially, these effects of atmosphere are not mental projections "into the world" but have a material presence and pertain to embodied processes of involvement.

German philosopher Hermann Schmitz (1969/2005), who introduced the term atmosphere into phenomenology in the 1960s, considered atmospheres as meaningful situations and as spatially extended non-subjective feelings. Drawing on Schmitz, yet largely dissenting from his so-called *new phenomenology*, the term "atmosphere" has been variously defined across disciplinary boundaries in recent scholarship. For instance, atmospheres have been characterized as qualities of a space (Böhme, 2017), as mediums of perception (Thibaud, 2003), or as a non-representational social dimension (McCormack,

2008; Anderson, 2009). Despite philosophical and disciplinary heterogeneity, these various notions of atmosphere all grapple with, and aim at subverting, binary distinctions between inner and outer world, medium and content, meaning and matter, individual and collective, body and mind, subject and object. *Atmosphere* is invoked as that which mediates between two terms, integrates both, or precedes their distinction.

To study the ways in which atmosphere pertains to affective societies, I suggest a move beyond traditional phenomenology of perception or aesthetic theory. These approaches consider the subject as a perceiver of atmospheres, and accordingly construe the latter as aesthetic or perceptual givens. My interest, by contrast, is focused on what an atmosphere *does* and *how* it operates. Thus, this chapter foregrounds the mereological structure of atmosphere, as well as its capacity to modulate situations and collectives into coherent wholes. While the manipulation and creation of atmosphere is critical in the arts and architecture, which share a traditional understanding of and concern with human perception, I will outline a concept of atmosphere by means of examples from domains that do not center on the perception of individual subjects. Instead, I propose to conceive of atmosphere in relation to (religious) transformation, (mass) mobilization, and processes of (political) homogenization. Furthermore, due to the close affinity that music and sound have with atmosphere, I approximate atmosphere through music. In what follows, I trace the genealogy of the term atmosphere in German, and point to its grammatical specifics, before elaborating on four of its key characteristics.

A genealogy of atmosphere

The modern Latin term "*atmosphaera*" that entered English, German, or French derives from the Ancient Greek "*ατμόσφαιρα*," a sphere of vapor, steam, or emanation. It is widely assumed in scholarship on atmosphere that the notion of *atmosphere as feeling* is a metaphorical adaption of a meteorological term. However, closer attention to the term's genealogy in German in important but so far largely neglected historical texts not only challenges this interpretation, but also significantly broadens the semantic scope of the term.

From the early 18th century onward, "atmosphere," particularly in German and French, did not simply denote the aerial vapors of celestial bodies but referred to corporeal effluvia, substances that emanated from and enveloped humans and all other sentient and non-sentient bodies, and also referred to the force field of magnets. These "atmospheres" primarily related to the sense of smell and were composed of various transpirations specific to a body, but also comprised *humors* and *passions*, all of which radiated into its surroundings. In the case of human atmospheres, *feelings as humors* could thus literally be smelled and prompted attraction or repulsion. Furthermore, since emanations varied according to gender, occupation, diet, and habitat, atmospheres were social indicators,

suggestive of the character of a person, their social class, and emotional situation. Historian Alain Corbin (1986) thus speaks of these atmospheres as "social emanations." Crucially, the *atmospheres* or *feelings* that bodies emanated were not mere immaterial aesthetic phenomena of perception but consisted of material effluvia and could even transmit contagion such as cholera. It is this non-binary concurrence of material substance and feelings already present in the early semantics of atmosphere that imbues the term with innovative potential and aligns it with affect in a monistic ontology (→ *affect*).

With advances in scientific knowledge about the human body, the term "atmosphere" became largely obsolete as a medical term by the early 19th century. But connotations of "social effluvia" and the idea of materially emanating feelings remained an important semantic dimension of atmosphere in poetical and philosophical writings until the beginning of the 20th century. Thus, when Georg Simmel (1917), whose seminal footnotes on atmosphere have so far gone unnoticed in scholarship on the topic, spoke of the "atmosphere" of both people and cities, he was not appropriating a meteorological term for the emergent discipline of sociology. Instead, his interest lay with the social implications of corporeal effluvia in processes of *Vergesellschaftung* (socialization). Like Simmel, psychiatrist Hubertus Tellenbach, writing much later in the 20th century, considered atmospheres in the quasi-medical sense of room-filling phenomena emanating from bodies. In his pioneering work *Geschmack und Atmosphäre* (*Taste and Atmosphere*) published in 1968 he extrapolated these personal emanations onto families, social groups, and nationalities where they would operate as *media* "of a prereflective and pre-verbal elemental contact" (Tellenbach, 1981, p. 229). In Tellenbach's psychological *Daseinsanalyse*, being social meant *emanating* and *discerning* atmosphere. With the discovery of pheromones, this decidedly materialist notion of atmosphere as corporeal emanation came to resonate with new scientific evidence. Teresa Brennan (2004) thus concludes in her *opus magnum* that pheromonal odors are critical to how atmosphere is felt and affect is transmitted.

Schmitz, who established "atmosphere" as a central concept of his phenomenology of the felt-body (*Leibphänomenologie*), bypasses the etymology of the word and considers atmosphere in its semantic confluence with the phenomenological notion of *Stimmung* (Wellbery, 2003). Schmitz was not the first to do so; William Stern (1935) who, like Schmitz, pursues a philosophical personalism, had already posited atmosphere as *Stimmung*. Stern argued that a feeling of familiarity, for instance, would be of "completely 'atmospheric' nature; it is a total mood [*Gesamtstimmung*] in which the special affective tonings of people, things, and events are indistinguishably embedded [my translation, F. R.]" (Stern, 1935, p. 784). Instead of drawing on Heidegger's fundamental-ontological notion of *Stimmung*, however, Schmitz refers to psychological phenomenology and quotes Theodor Lipps' (1906) "spatial feelings" (*Raumgefühl*) or Ludwig Binswanger's (1933) "tuned spaces" (*gestimmte Räume*), famously defining feelings as spatially poured out

atmospheres ("*ortlos ergossene Atmosphären*"; cf. Schmitz, 1969/2005, p. 343). He conceives of atmospheres in terms of what he would, in contrast to Gernot Böhme's (2017) spatiological thinking, later identify as a "situation ontology." Atmospheres were thus holistically embedding situations permeated by and unfolding in suggestions of movement that modulate the dynamics of the felt-body (Schmitz, 1969/2005). Feelings, consequently, were not internal states of a subject but encountered in the world as quasi-objective external forces that grip the felt-body. In this anti-mentalist and anti-materialist stance, to feel, then, literally means to move and to be moved. In contrast to a Spinozist ontology however, Schmitz's personalism is committed to a methodological anthropocentrism where a normative human person acts as the benchmark for an analysis of atmosphere: In order for his phenomenological accounts to gain general validity, the perceiver of atmosphere must be of normal human condition (Schmitz, 1969/2005, p. 131), of normal sanity (Schmitz, 1969/2005, p. XI) and normal mind (Schmitz, 1969/2005, p. 46). In light of this, Schmitz's felt-body becomes highly suspicious and complicit in the very humanist project that theories of affect have intended to challenge.

In the 1990s, Böhme translates Schmitz's idiosyncratic language into a popular aesthetic theory that now focuses on the *perception* and *creation* of atmosphere. According to Böhme (2017) atmospheres pertain to "the common reality of the perceiver and the perceived" (p. 20) and are located *between* subject and object. Böhme (2017) conceives of the term as a metaphoric appropriation from meteorology and, unlike Schmitz, considers atmospheres as emanating and radiating "ecstasies" of things, while apparently remaining unaware of the term's historical and lexical associations with bodily effluvia. In contrast to the *atmospheric emanations* of the 18th and 19th centuries, the radiations he speaks of turn out to be virtually immaterial since, as he repeatedly insists, they would be nothing without the perceiving subject (Böhme, 2017, p. 183). Böhme, whose writings are sometimes dismissed by his German peers as philosophically flawed (Wellbery, 2003), has nevertheless become a key reference in scholarship on atmosphere and applied research on ambiance. Critically expanding on Böhme, Jean-Paul Thibaud (2003), who develops a nuanced theory of urban ambiances, states that rather than being *objects* of perception, atmospheres *condition* perception. Rainer Kazig (2007) defines atmospheres as media between humans and environment, while Ben Anderson (2009) who, in a much-cited article, coins the phrase "affective atmosphere," conceives of them as "singular affective qualities that emanate from but exceed the assembling of bodies" (p. 80). Mikkel Bille, Peter Bjerregaard, and Tim Flohr Sørensen (2015) who have critically pointed out the tautological character of the phrase "affective atmosphere," suggest focusing on the shaping and deliberate staging of atmospheres while Kathleen Stewart (2011) has identified them as "force fields" and Tonino Griffero (2014) has emphasized their "authority."

The grammar of atmosphere

In German, the word "*Atmosphäre*" is often used in conjunction with the verb "*herrschen*" (to rule, to reign, or to govern). Writing about lodging-houses in Manchester, Friedrich Engels (1892/1952) rhetorically contends: "What physical and moral atmosphere reigns in these holes, I need not state" (p. 42). The German collocation that Engels uses here, "an atmosphere reigns" (*eine Atmosphäre herrscht*), grammatically places both climatic and moral atmosphere in the subject position and imbues it with the agency to govern a sphere. Herein lies a critical structural difference between the semantic capacities of the German word "*Atmosphäre*" and the English word "atmosphere" since the latter finds it much harder to leave its grammatical status as an object. Moreover, the verb "to reign" underlines the *mereological* character of "atmosphere": just as the sovereign reigns over an area by uniting its inhabitants under one law, ideology, or banner, so an "atmosphere" is said to reign over a particular place and wield authority over all bodies present in that place (see also Griffero, 2014). The authority of atmosphere thus pertains to a location or situation as a whole, for instance, an apartment, a concert, a mass uprising, or a religious event. These places or events can all be described as being "governed" by a particular atmosphere. It thus comes as no surprise that creating and mobilizing atmospheres can be considered a technology of power.

But this collocation is not exclusive to the lexeme "*Atmosphäre*." Various words, from the phenomenal complex of weather and *Stimmung* to feelings such as grief, joy, boredom, or silence, are all collocated in German with the verb "*herrschen*" (to reign) and can consequently be assigned the grammatical subject position. This linguistic co-association of these diverse nouns further adds to their affinity, in particular between weather, feelings, and moral sentiments (→ *sentiment*). Syntactically speaking then, *feelings* and *atmospheres* in German are not necessarily descriptors of subjectivated human existence or qualities of situations and places, but dominant forces that "govern" situations, societies, spheres of action.

Drawing on Morton's theory of *ambient poetics* and on the "situation ontology" in terms of which Schmitz frames his notion of atmosphere, I will elaborate upon the following four key characteristics of atmospheres: their mereological fabric, their modal structure, their intensification at affective thresholds, and their affective efficacy through "suggestions of movement."

From meteorology to mereology

Key to the mereological conception of atmosphere proposed here is the seamless coherence of atmospheric phenomena. Morton (2007) argues that "ambient poetics is a *rendering*" (p. 35), a process whereby, for instance, all elements of a film are drenched in a technically generated color-scheme. Photo filter applications put this aspect of atmosphere to work and ultimately

commercialize the longing for atmospheric experiences. They do so by filter-ing a photo into a finely-tuned coherent color-mode that retrospectively charges the image, and thus the memory of the situation in which it was taken, with an intensive atmosphere. Such rendering invokes coherence in two ways: First, processes of rendering pertain to a situation, a place or an artistic creation as a *whole*, and second, they also *constitute* its coherence; just as Johann G. Herder (1785/1869, p. 49) had posited that climate affected the entirety of things in a given region while at the same time rendering its inhabitants a cultural collective. In an atmosphere then, the multiplicity of bodies is imbued with a seamless hue, just as a sunset tinges the entire "world" in shades of red. The widely remarked affective "meaningfulness" of atmospheres (Vadén & Torvinen, 2015) is related to this coherence, for an atmospheric whole cannot be further differentiated into numerable elements or separate meanings.

Critically, however, such a hue or climate that pervades a situation as atmosphere does not necessarily affect or involve each individual body in the same way. For this reason, Morton (2007) refers to the absorptive capacities of atmosphere as *simulation*. Atmospheres transform a situation of diverse ele-ments in such a way that even discordant voices and bodies are fashioned in an all-encompassing style. Using the meteorological term "atmosphere" as a metaphor for the contagion of religion and religious mass mobilization, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1799/1958) argues that once religion has seized a critical mass, even those who are not converted by it shine in its light. In a crowd of believers, religiosity is *simulated* as strikingly genuine in the atmo-sphere. Here, atmosphere does not simply invoke coherence but also simu-lates it, erases inconsistencies, and melts, unifies, and homogenizes by imposing an overarching significance onto elements that might otherwise be unrelated. The 19th-century poet Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1842) names this the "deception" or "phantasmagoria" of atmosphere. Tim Flohr Sørensen (2015) exemplifies this aspect in his study on atmospheres of funeral rites in pre-historical passage graves, where he elaborates how the lack of light and thus visibility collapses the difference between living and dead bodies among whom one's own presence is no longer confined to a bodily and bounded identity but becomes a "seamless infiltration" (p. 7). Not only is death atmos-pheric in the penetrating darkness, but darkness undermines the (exceptional) status of the human subject as living being.

As smoothing forces that evoke coherence, atmospheres are also highly polit-ical, since they paint even conflicting voices in an all-encompassing homogen-eous light. This can be exemplified by the musical "accompaniment" blaring from concentration camp loudspeakers, which served not only to drown out death cries acoustically, but to assimilate them into the musical mood of Wagnerian marches. Or consider the singing or chanting congregation in which participant individuals both simulate and consume religious unity (Riedel, 2015). The monochrome uniforms in which the denizens of a totalitarian

regime or a religious community are attired are also such devices of unification. Similarly, the deliberate assimilation and mimetic strategies of dressing, moving, and shouting that prime a crowd for revolution (Runkel, 2018) or impel a football team and their fans to prevail are technologies of mobilizing atmospheres of power (Edensor, 2014). Since atmosphere presides over situations in their entirety, it not only subverts anthropocentrism, but does away with the idea of a center altogether (see also Morton, 2002). Or, to use Schmitz's terminology, atmosphere is spatial, but without a location and surface ("*ortlos*" and "*randlos*"). Atmosphere, then, does not simply surround a person as a centrifugal expanse, as some have argued, but, rather, following Morton, personhood itself may be conceived of as environmental or in fact atmospheric.

Modes and modulations

That music and sound but also light, odor, or weather all have a latent tendency to become ubiquitous and thus to invoke coherence and charge a situation with atmosphere is due to their capacity to operate as modes. A landscape at night might be charged with atmosphere because the moonlight, or absence thereof, renders the entire world in a monochrome mode of shades of black, which may even obliterate the difference between earth and sky, void and matter, human and non-human. The atmosphere of the night here is not a locatable object in the world but a *mode* in which the heterogeneous objects coalesce in one characteristic color scheme. The same can be said for odors that have no defined location in space but rather modulate a space in its entirety, as in the historical notion of atmosphere-as-effluvia. Likewise, sound does not appear as an object in the world with a defined location and surface, but rather, charges an entire place or situation with sonorous intensity due to what Schmitz terms its *surfacelessness*.

Appropriating the concept of mode from music theory, modes, like atmospheres, are structured mereologically. A mode in the modern sense of scale, for instance, determines the pitch relationships in a musical piece. To shift only one pitch of the scale may transpose the entire musical piece into another mode. Mode thus determines the musical material in which music unfolds and thus always affects a musical piece in its entirety. It is for this reason that musical modes have a strong affinity to moods and to being atmospheric. In its extended sense as fashion, style, manner, or way (*Weise*), musical mode is not to be reduced to pitch relationships. Friedrich Schiller writes in 1797 that rhythm serves as a tool (*Werkzeug*) to provide a dramatic production with an "atmosphere," because *everything* is subject to the law of rhythm. For Schiller, rhythm is a mode that combines "all characters and all situations [my translation, F. R.]" (von Goethe & Schiller, 1881, p. 329) of a play into one seamless whole.

In modulating mood, atmosphere governs the relationships of its parts just as the scale sets the degrees of its pitches. In turn, the embeddedness of each

body within the encompassing whole predominates the more individual affective vectors in which bodies are related to each other. Even if we approach such atmospherically charged situations from the perspective of individual perception, those who are repelled by it or remain unaffected by it may nevertheless recognize the way in which a situation coheres in a distributed feeling, or sense its grip as a modulating force (for modes of involvement and perception see Griffero, 2014). But it is also possible to turn this argument around and follow Robert Seyfert's (2012) notion of the *affectif*, which he defines as "mode of affective interaction" where only bodies sharing a certain frequency spectrum are drawn into affective resonance (→ *affective resonance*). Thus, contrary to Schmitz's normalized and ethnocentric configuration of the felt-body, a focus on the modes in which a situation coheres as atmosphere enables us to consider atmosphere with respect to the abundant cultural, historical, and physical diversity of embodied end even disembodied existences.

Affective thresholds

Atmosphere, Leo Spitzer (1942) writes, indicates "something characteristic which distinguishes one place from another" (p. 22). This diacritic function of atmosphere is not accidental, but essential. Social movements and ritual situations play on contrast to mobilize atmospheres. Victor Turner (1995), who in the 1950s proposes to conceive of ritual (and society) as a process "with successive phases of structure and *communitas* [emphasis added]" (p. 78), highlights the atmosphere of communal singing precisely at the point in the process of a Ndembu pregnancy ritual where moral rules are explicitly inverted and where a highly sexualized language is given voice to in ritual songs that would otherwise be fraught with shame. In the ritual mode, shame is powerfully defused and replaced by a sexualized atmosphere that animates not an individual subject but transforms the entire situation into a "collective feeling" (Schmitz, 1969/2005) (→ *affective communities*). Climatic situations of transition from one meteorological state to another, such as the first day of spring or the notoriously photographed sunset that marks the dramatic threshold between day and night, are also particularly atmospheric.

Such affective thresholds are critical to musical modes that only make sense and produce meaning in their difference from each other. Put simply, mode is inherently differential. Furthermore, musical mode operates most powerfully as an atmospheric tool when one mode contrasts with another. The juxtaposition of modes is thus a musical technique of invoking atmosphere and affording experiences of immersion (→ *immersion, immersive power*), as, for instance, in the traditional court-music of Myanmar where musical pieces performed by the Hsaing Waing orchestra are structured in alternating tempos. The musical shift into quicker tempos powerfully generates a musical, and indeed corporeal, momentum that unleashes dancers from the preceding slow meter and pulls them into rapid movements. Music *kicks* in. The atmospheric tension here

derives not just from the substance of each of the rhythms but from their con-trast. For this reason, the affective power of mode is always specific to histor-ically situated musical traditions and cultures of listening, and their repertoires and modal systems. Similar techniques are employed in baroque suites or in classical symphonic works that are composed of a succession of distinctive movements that contrast in various musical parameters, such as a shift in key, meter and rhythm, volume, timbre, tempo, or orchestration.

Caught up in movement

The question that studies on atmosphere have usually started with is how an atmosphere is felt, perceived, or experienced. Attending to the material texture of light, temperature, sound, and architecture inside pre-historic passage-graves, Sørensen (2015) argues that bodily movements of entering and – in the case of the living – exiting the tomb, are not simply caused by architecture but are themselves generative of the spatial form and of a shifting sense of presence and self in "evolving kinesfields" (p. 7) and further alter sensorial perception. Move-ment is thus integral to how atmospheres might have unfolded in situations of interment. Circumventing the clause of subjectivity characteristic of Böhme's notion of atmosphere, a focus on movement in which bodies are continuous with architecture, sound, or climate, Sørensen suggests, enables a study of atmo-sphere that decenters the human being.

   Schmitz, equally, elevates "movement" as a key term for his phenomeno-logy of perception to evade what he sees as the problematic reduction of per-ception to the senses. Rather than being seen, heard, or smelled, atmospheres are perceived in and through movement. "Being moved" is not a metaphor for feelings but a corporeal dynamic manifest in the felt-body. Even seem-ingly static phenomena are related to the felt-body through what he terms "suggestions of movement" (*Bewegungssuggestionen*). Albeit immobile, archi-tecture and landscape may nevertheless suggest movements through lines of flight, height, narrowness, darkness, or expansiveness. Climatic states, too, take effect as felt atmospheres by engulfing the felt-body in suggestions of movement, thus invoking feelings as atmospheres. Like architecture and weather, music assembles an entire array of suggested movements by means of harmonic tension, timbral shifts, rhythmic drive, melodic contour, or volume. In situations of worship and ritual music making, musical "sugges-tions of movement" may function affectively in the manner of atmospheres as they may lead to spiritual transformations and religious becomings (Riedel, 2015; see also Eisenlohr, 2018; Abels, 2018). Thus, in a worship service of a Pietist congregation, when the last verse of a protestant hymn is transposed into a higher key, a harmonic shift charged with movement suggestions takes place. The singing and seated congregation embodies this shift by standing up to sing the last verse, enraptured in a musical atmosphere saturated with reli-gious feelings (Riedel, 2015).

Conclusion

The ways in which atmospheres unfold and take effect are not limited to the four modalities outlined here. The diversity of culturally and historically specific situations in which atmospheres operate have yielded other key features such as vagueness, spatial extension, processual formation, or meaningfulness. The value of atmosphere as a heuristic concept, as I have sought to suggest here, however, is its mereological fabric that significantly exceeds the realm of (aesthetic) perception.

Acknowledgments

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