



Staging atmospheres: Materiality, culture, and the texture of the in-between



Mikkel Bille ^{a,*}, Peter Bjerregaard ^b, Tim Flohr Sørensen ^c

^a Roskilde University, Department of Environmental, Social and Spatial Change, Universitetsvejen 1, Room 02.1.233, DK-4000, Denmark

^b University of Oslo, Museum of Cultural History, PO Box 6762, St. Olavs Plass, 0130 Oslo, Norway

^c University of Copenhagen, Saxo Institute, Department of Archaeology, Karen Blixens Vej 4, DK-2300, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

The article introduces the special issue on staging atmospheres by surveying the philosophical, political and anthropological literature on atmosphere, and explores the relationship between atmosphere, material culture, subjectivity and affect. Atmosphere seems to occupy one of the classic localities of tensions between matter and the immaterial, the practical and the ideal, and subject and object. In the colloquial language there can, moreover, often seem to be something authentic or genuine about atmosphere, juxtaposing it to staging, which is implied to be something simulated or artificial. Nevertheless, people's experience of the environment is sought manipulated in a variety of contexts, often without offering a less 'true' experience of a situation than if it had not been manipulated by people. In fact, orchestrations of space are often central to sociality, politics and aesthetics. This introduction seeks to outline how a number of scholars have addressed the relationship between staged atmospheres and experience, and thus highlight both the philosophical, social and political aspects of atmospheres.

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1. Introduction

What is an atmosphere? Where and when does it begin? And how does it transform, structure and shape the lives of people? Such questions are becoming increasingly pressing for scholars in a growing number of academic disciplines ranging from philosophies of atmosphere (Böhme, 1995; Bollnow, 1941; Rauh, 2012) over analyses of urban environments (Edensor, 2012; Hasse, 2008, 2012; Kazig, 2008; Thibaud, 2001) to the applied orchestrations of architectural settings (Stidsen et al., 2011; Urich and Benkenstein, 2010). In recent years, such studies, among others, have argued that atmosphere constitutes a fundamental aspect of the human experience of the world and that it thus is an important part of the identities and conceptualisations of landscapes, architecture and homes. In this sense atmospheres circumscribe or fill the space we inhabit, and they may define moments for individuals as well as for human collectives. For instance within recent philosophy there has been a prominent notion that atmospheres are 'subjective facts' (Böhme, 1998b: 114): something that has to be *felt* as the co-

presence of subject and object. Yet, the processes of aesthetisation that increasingly shape public and private spaces also entail the possibility of *sharing* and *staging* an atmosphere, and thereby become central to social activities and experiences, beyond the realms on individual experience. But what social consequences do such sharing and staging of atmospheres have?

This special issue deals with the social and staged aspects of atmospheres: the cultural, economic or even political premises that lay the ground for the sensuous and emotional feel of a place. Through a cross-disciplinary approach this introduction and the articles that follow investigate the concept of atmospheres, its potential for deliberate staging, and the social impact and premises that allows it to matter as both lived and analytical focal point. We believe that this aspect of staging atmospheres is in need of deeper academic elaboration as it draws the attention to social and political manipulations of people's experience of their world, beyond the realm of the individual. Yet these manipulations often work in tacit or ambiguous ways, making them easy to overlook as social, economic, and political instruments. The collection of articles in the issue will take us from the atmosphere of a football stadium, over atmospheric orchestrations of Danish homes, to the staging of atmosphere of a museum exhibition, and much further, adding salient – but not always consonant – testimonies to the social power of atmosphere.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: mikkelbille@ruc.dk (M. Bille), peter.bjerregaard@khu.uio.no (P. Bjerregaard), klq302@hum.ku.dk (T.F. Sørensen).

2. Atmospheres

Even though the term ‘atmosphere’ is – strictly etymologically speaking – a metaphorical adoption of a physical phenomenon surrounding a planet or a star as a layer of gases (Henckmann, 2007: 48), atmosphere has increasingly become a point of reference for the immediate human interaction with particular places, even being applied as a marketing tool for promoting tourist sites and hotels. Regardless if atmospheres are discussed colloquially or academically, there seem to be something slippery and poorly defined about them. Atmospheres can be encountered in everyday language as ‘ambience’, ‘sense of place’, or the ‘feel’ of a room, and more philosophically in terms such as *Stimmung*, ‘mood’ or ‘attunement’ (Heidegger, 1962: 134), as ‘tempered space’ (Bollnow, 1963: 230), as ‘tinctured’ or ‘tuned’ spaces (e.g. Böhme, 1993: 121), or as that which ‘corporeally moves the perceiving person’ (Schmitz et al., 2011: 257).

Much philosophical literature on the subject of atmosphere, and its variants of *Stimmung* and ambience (Böhme, 1993, 1995, 1998a; Bollnow, 1941; Heidegger, 1962; Spitzer, 1942; Tellenbach, 1968, 1981), investigates the nature of atmosphere as a concept and experience of the *in-betweenness* of subject and object in which the emotional and sensory experience are central. As sociologist Jean-Paul Thibaud notes in his contribution to this special issue, this focus on *in-betweenness* highlights a potential shift from addressing the ontology of the *object* to the ontology of the *elements*: whereas the object is an entity for subjective perception, elements are dimensions through which perception takes place. So when atmospheres are perceived as sensory experiences it means that they underscore a gradual process of transformative rather than absolute and stable perception. Thibaud hence proposes an alternative to the ontology of things and the primacy of substance.

We may think of atmospheres as the personal experience of a situation that may be qualified as ‘friendly’, ‘cosy’, ‘dull’, ‘tense’ or ‘depressing’ and with various degrees of ‘thickness’ and intensities. Yet an atmosphere is never exclusively a psychological phenomenon, as state-of-mind, nor solely an objective thing ‘out there’, as an environment or milieu; atmospheres are always located in-between experiences and environments. Following philosopher Böhme (1995, 1998a, 2006, 2007), who is probably the most influential current philosopher of atmosphere, it may be argued that the properties of atmosphere are captured in the intersection of the objective and the subjective. Even more importantly, Böhme contends that atmospheres issue forth as a cross-over of the material and the immaterial, forcing us to deal with the conceptually and experientially ambiguous in order to appreciate atmospheres shifting our scholarly gaze away from fixity, beyond multiplicity (Law and Singleton, 2005; Mol, 2002), towards *indeterminacy*. Böhme thus argues that:

Atmospheres are indeterminate above all as regards their ontological status. We are not sure whether we should attribute them to the objects or environments from which they proceed or to the subjects who experience them. We are also unsure where they are. They seem to fill the space with a certain tone or feeling like a haze (Böhme, 1993: 114).

For Böhme, atmosphere is thus not simply the subjective feel of a room or a situation, nor is it an objectively observable state of the physical environment. Yet contending that atmospheres can be staged (Böhme, 2013), he also implies that they can somehow be built and anticipated, which means that they hinge on the material world as well as subjective dispositions. Atmospheres emerge, according to Böhme (1993: 119), as an intermediate position between subject and object, or rather as the inherent unity characterised by the co-presence of subject and

object (2001, 56). Böhme defines the presence of things not as their mere factual existence as subjects or objects, but in terms of the ways they make their presence perceptible; a thing is articulated not as being-there or not-being-there, but instead as ‘the ways in which it goes forth from itself’ (1993, 121). These ways of ‘going forth’ from itself is what he terms ‘the ecstasies of the thing’, i.e. the way a thing qualitatively and sensuously stands out from itself (1995, 32–34). In this sense, atmospheres are the perceived quality of a situation, made up by the constellation of people and things. Atmospheres, he argues, are ‘spheres of the presence of something, their reality in space’ (Böhme, 1993: 121–122). Atmosphere, presence and materiality thereby become caught up in one instance and are inseparable from one another, or what geographer Jürgen Hasse has called ‘immaterial exceptional things’ (Hasse, 2002b: 23).

In the historical exploration of atmospheres, philosopher Martin Heidegger speaks of *Befindlichkeit*, which may be translated as ‘state-of-mind’ (Heidegger, 1962: 134n2), ‘situatedness’ (Guignon, 2003: 184) or ‘moodwise situatedness’ (Casey, 1993: 219), and denotes the way people are ‘there’, or what he terms *Stimmung*. *Stimmung* however is equally challenging and has been translated and interpreted in a number of ways, for example as ‘mood’ or ‘Being-attuned’ (Heidegger, 1962: 134), as ‘disposition’ or ‘affect’ (Shepherdson, 2007: 57), as ‘attunement’ (Ruin, 2000), or as an ‘attunement to things’ (Edwards, 1997: 13). Is one then to understand the difference between terms such as ‘*Stimmung*’, ‘mood’, ‘atmosphere’ and for instance ‘ambience’ by the level of subjective involvement – moods being primarily oriented toward the subjective, ambience towards the objective, with atmospheres in the *in-between*?

In Heidegger’s words, *Stimmung* or moods are relational, and they ‘are *not side-effects*, but are something which in advance determine our being with one another. It seems as though a mood is in each case already there, so to speak, like an atmosphere in which we first immerse ourselves in each case and which then attunes us through and through’ (Heidegger, 1995: 67, emphasis in original). Through Heidegger, philosopher Ogawa (2004) further argues that human beings are always characterised by having some sort of mood, but that this mood is influenced by the way things stand out from themselves, i.e. the perception and sensation of their materialities and their capacity to be co-creative of atmospheres. Atmospheres belong to the reality of the world and more than simply a personal, spatial encounter, it has also been conceptualised as a way of engaging literature and other forms of art (Gumbrecht, 2011: 34).

As many of the articles in this issue indicate, atmosphere is characterised by a certain ontological and epistemological vagueness, which means that it does not easily lend itself to becoming a subject (or object) of social analysis. So when Heidegger (2001: 66–67) speaks of the relationship between the mood of the subject and its bearing on atmospheres as that which facilitates intersubjective attunement, it suggests that atmosphere is a phenomenon or a condition that transgresses boundaries, such as subject and object. However, by transgressing boundaries it also connects people, places and things. Accordingly, atmospheres are bound up in temporal dynamics, which again make them difficult to pin down, because they are socially and historically contingent, and bound up in the incessant metamorphosis of the sensory world, not to underestimate their inherent temporal nature.

There are thus continuities and contrasts in the sensory experience of atmospheres, offering depth, texture, contour and form to places and situations, which bridges, obfuscates or confuses the boundaries of humans and things. Atmospheres are therefore not necessarily expounding manifestations of the meaning of a situation or social scene, nor can we necessarily

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