



Affective atmospheres

Ben Anderson

Department of Geography, Durham University, South Road, Durham DH1 3LE, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 July 2009

Received in revised form

25 August 2009

Accepted 27 August 2009

Keywords:

Affect

Life

Atmosphere

Materiality

ABSTRACT

In this paper I reflect on the concept of affective atmospheres in the context of the distinction between affect and emotion that has emerged in recent work on emotion, space and society. The concept of atmosphere is interesting because it holds a series of opposites – presence and absence, materiality and ideality, definite and indefinite, singularity and generality – in a relation of tension. To develop this account of atmosphere I juxtapose Marx's materialist imagination with a phenomenology attentive to singular affective qualities. By invoking a material imagination based on the movement and lightness of air, we learn from the former about the turbulence of atmospheres and their indeterminate quality. From the latter, we learn that atmospheres are singular affective qualities that emanate from but exceed the assembling of bodies. As such, to attend to affective atmospheres is to learn to be affected by the ambiguities of affect/emotion, by that which is determinate and indeterminate, present and absent, singular and vague.

© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. A revolutionary atmosphere

On the 14th of April 1856, Karl Marx addressed an audience in London at a meeting to mark the fourth anniversary of the Chartist *People's Paper*. In a now famous passage, he began by invoking a certain 'revolutionary atmosphere' of crisis, danger and hope:

"The so-called revolutions of 1848 were but poor incidents — small fractures and fissures in the dry crust of European society. However, they denounced the abyss. Beneath the apparently solid surface, they betrayed oceans of liquid matter, only needing expansion to rend into fragments continents of hard rock. Noisily and confusedly they proclaimed the emancipation of the Proletarian, i.e. the secret of the 19th century, and of the revolution of that century ... the atmosphere in which we live weighs upon every one with a 20,000-pound force, but do you feel it? No more than European society before 1848 felt the revolutionary atmosphere enveloping and pressing it from all sides." (Marx, 1978: 577)

Marx's metaphorical use of the term 'atmosphere' in this famous address has long interested me. In particular, I have been intrigued by the question Marx addressed to his audience: "the atmosphere in which we live, weighs upon every one with a 20,000-pound force, but do you feel it?" (ibid, 577). His answer is

no. He assumes his audience does not "feel it", despite it "pressing" and "enveloping" society from all sides (ibid, 577). Marx's invocation of the term atmosphere is, of course, part of an epicurean material imagination that invokes the element of air alongside the state of a fluid ('oceans of liquid matter') and the element of earth ('hard rock'). Nevertheless, Marx crystallizes the conundrum that for me makes the term atmosphere interesting in the slightly different context of work on spaces of affect and emotion and in relation to the slightly different sense of atmospheres as affective and emotive. How does an atmosphere 'envelope' and 'press' upon life? How, put differently, to attend to the collective affects 'in which we live'?

In this paper I offer a series of reflections on what an 'affective atmosphere' is and does. I do so in the context of the recent invention of concepts, methods, and sensibilities that aim to attune to the prepersonal or transpersonal dimensions of affective life and everyday existence. By which I mean the momentary kindnesses that Stewart (2007) bears witness to, or the way that Brennan (2004) invokes the transmission of boredoms or loves between friends. Intensities that are only imperfectly housed in the proper names we give to emotions (hope, fear and so on). I will argue that it is the very ambiguity of affective atmospheres – between presence and absence, between subject and object/subject and between the definite and indefinite – that enable us to reflect on affective experience as occurring beyond, around, and alongside the formation of subjectivity. I am not alone, however, in being intrigued by the notion of affective atmospheres (Bissell, forthcoming; McCormack, 2008). If we understand atmosphere as a term – in Rabinow's

E-mail address: ben.anderson@durham.ac.uk

(2007) sense of the juxtaposition of a word, a referent object, and a concept – then we find that it has been used in multiple ways. I can only touch upon some of these here. In everyday speech and aesthetic discourse, the word atmosphere is used interchangeably with mood, feeling, ambience, tone and other ways of naming collective affects. Each word has a different etymology and different everyday and specialist uses. Moreover, the referent for the term atmosphere is multiple; epochs, societies, rooms, landscapes, couples, artworks, and much more are all said to possess atmospheres (or be possessed by them). Finally, when atmosphere has been developed into a concept we again find differences. Atmosphere is: impersonal or transpersonal intensity (McCormack, 2008; Stewart, 2007); environment, or the transmission of the other's feeling (Brennan, 2004); qualified aura (Böhme, 2006); tone in literature (Ngai, 2005); mimetic waves of sentiment (Thrift, 2008); or more broadly a sense of place (Rodaway, 1994). Of course, we find the same multiplicity when thinking about emotion, affect or any other term that might become part of a vocabulary proper to the logics of affect and emotion. This is unsurprising. Rather than having been downplayed, repressed, or silenced, affective life has been subject to an extraordinary array of explanations and descriptions (Despret, 2004). Acknowledging this multiplicity means we must be careful about the exaggerated trust we place in our theorizations of affect or emotion – whether they result in us attending to emotions and the specificity of subjects or affects and the singularity of a life. We might, instead, learn to offer concepts that are equal to the ambiguity of affective and emotive life.

My aim in this paper is not, then, to offer a conception of affect and emotion. Rather, by holding onto the ambiguities that surround the term atmosphere I want to learn to attend to collective affects that, to paraphrase Marx, 'envelop' and 'press upon' life. My guides will be two phenomenologists who wonder about atmosphere as an aesthetic concept – Gernot Böhme and Mikel Dufrenne – in dialogue with recent work on affect as intensity. But first back to Marx and his material imagination.

2. Collective affects

Marx's use of the term atmosphere is thoroughly materialist. Albeit, a turbulent materialism in which life is imagined through a combination of different elements and different states (Anderson and Wylie, 2009; Bennett, 2001; Tiffany, 2000). The revolutionary atmosphere he invokes is akin to the meteorological atmosphere in two senses; it exerts a force on those that are surrounded by it, and like the air we breathe it provides the very condition of possibility for life. Marx is not quite invoking an affective atmosphere, even though a revolutionary atmosphere must come charged with a sense of danger and promise, threat and hope. Nevertheless, what intrigued me about Marx's comments when I first read them was how they resonated with the strange, puzzling, use of the term atmosphere in everyday speech and aesthetic discourse. It is no surprise that a society is taken to possess a certain atmosphere – qualified as 'revolutionary'. As a term in everyday speech, atmosphere traverses distinctions between peoples, things, and spaces. It is possible to talk of: a morning atmosphere, the atmosphere of a room before a meeting, the atmosphere of a city, an atmosphere between two or more people, the atmosphere of a street, the atmosphere of an epoch, an atmosphere in a place of worship, and the atmosphere that surrounds a person, amongst much else. Perhaps there is nothing that doesn't have an atmosphere or could be described as atmospheric. Marx's comments hint to the ambivalent status of atmospheres. On the one hand, atmospheres are real phenomena. They 'envelop' and thus press on a society 'from all sides' with a certain force. On the other, they are not necessarily sensible phenomena. Marx has to ask if his audience

'feels it'. He assumes not. Nevertheless atmospheres still effect with a certain force – albeit in a way that may be only tangentially related to the subject.

Perhaps the use of atmosphere in everyday speech and aesthetic discourse provides the best approximation of the concept of affect – where affect is taken to be the transpersonal or prepersonal intensities that emerge as bodies affect one another (Massumi, 2002). If we turn to Deleuze's explicit discussion of the concept of affect, we find that intensities take on the dynamic, kinetic, qualities of the atmos; "affects are no longer feelings or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 164). Since "affects are becomings" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 256) that are "experienced in a lived duration that involves the difference between two states" (Deleuze, 1988: 49). Moreover, and to take us back to Marx's turbulent materialist imagination, when discussing the spacing and timing of intensities Deleuze attends to meteors across a set of literary and everyday examples: in the conditions of rain, hail, wind and air favorable to the transport of affects in demonology; Charlotte Brontë's description of love, people, and things in terms of wind; the affect of white skies on a hot summer day; or wonder as clouds and rainbows form in *Les Météores* by Michel Tournier (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 288–289). The link between affect and meteoric bodies of air should come as no surprise. As Tiffany (2000) shows, when reflecting on clouds, winds, rainbows and other atmospheric phenomenon, the atmosphere has long been associated with the uncertain, disordered, shifting and contingent – that which never quite achieves the stability of form.

What do these links between Marx's material imagination, meteors and Deleuze's translation of Spinoza's affectus tell us about affective atmospheres? Perhaps, the links hint to how atmospheres may interrupt, perturb and haunt fixed persons, places or things. Atmospheres would, on this account, be spatially diffuse versions of the 'vitality affects' that the child psychologist Daniel Stern writes about – dynamic qualities of feeling such as 'calming', 'relaxing', 'comforting', 'tense', 'heavy', or 'light' that animate or dampen the background sense of life (Stern, 1998: 54). Perhaps, thinking affect through the ephemerality and instability of meteors reminds us that intensities may remain indefinite even as they effect. Perplexingly the term atmosphere seems to express something vague. Something, an ill-defined indefinite something, that exceeds rational explanation and clear figuration. Something that hesitates at the edge of the unsayable. Yet, at one and the same time, the affective qualities that are given to this *something* by those who feel it are remarkable for their singularity. Think of the breadth of qualities used to describe affective atmospheres: serene, homely, strange, stimulating, holy, melancholic, uplifting, depressing, pleasant, moving, inviting, erotic, collegial, open, sublime, to name but some of an inexhaustible list (Böhme, 1993).

By linking the term to a certain material imagination we reach a first approximation of atmospheres as collective affects that are simultaneously indeterminate and determinate. Affective atmospheres are a class of experience that occur *before* and *alongside* the formation of subjectivity, *across* human and non-human materialities, and *in-between* subject/object distinctions (after Seigworth (2003); see Anderson and Wylie (2009)). As such, atmospheres are the shared ground from which subjective states and their attendant feelings and emotions emerge. Yet the idea of affect as transpersonal or prepersonal has been subject to numerous prohibitions, silences and bans amid the many attempts to link affectivity to human species-being (Seigworth, 2005). With the consequence that reflections on subjectless affects have formed a secret, subterranean, current in theories of affect and emotion. From reflections on the panic and hatred of crowds in turn of the century crowd psychology (Brennan, 2004), through to Maffesoli's (1996)

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/946793>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/946793>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)