



Experience in a New Key

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The Atmospheric Whereby: Reflections on Subject and Object

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Abstract: Atmospheres constitute an ordinary perceptual phenomenon that can become a new experience, as the former are more than the sum of single-sensory perceptual factors. Drawing on the terminological pair ‘subject’ and ‘object’ and its interdependencies, the atmospheric phenomenon can be approached in an essayistic fashion (and by means of applying an aesthetic focus in the broadest sense). In so doing, it becomes clear that the atmosphere serves as a condition for the emergence as well as actualization of special perception. Based on Gernot Böhme’s research and further studies, specific (ontological) determinants are identified and differentiated according to the definitional facets of the ‘and’, the ‘in-between’ and the ‘whereby’ or ‘in what way’. These considerations demonstrate to what extent perception precedes the separation of subject and object in that the atmospheric ‘whereby’ is responsible for creating tuned spaces and situations. Turning to the objects of perception and their concomitant ecstasies as well as to the subject of perception with its reception helps to clarify which components of an atmosphere work in what way. In this context, methods of exploratory involvement and participation (in the *Parcours Commenté* but even more so in the *Aesthetic Fieldwork*) gain in importance in order to explore atmospheres from a lifeworld perspective.

Keywords: atmosphere, aesthetics, subject, object, in-between, ecstasies, reception, phenomenology

1 Introduction: Lamp

For every music enthusiast, attending a live concert is a new or at least different experience compared to consuming the same music recorded on tape. Likewise, it also makes a difference for the artist or the music group whether their albums are recorded in the studio or whether they play their music live on stage to a large audience. Experiencing the effect of music has to do with how it is presented to the listener. What is perceived and thus what stimulates perception is not determined solely by acoustically perceived tone sequences in a certain decibel strength, different intensities of light of different wavelengths, the temperature in the hall, evaporation and emission of different scents or the crowdedness and tactile freedom. Rather, what must not be forgotten are personal feelings and one’s own mood or the material specificity of the interior design in addition to the classical five types of sensory impressions just mentioned. Given this, both the audience and the musician are surrounded by a special/an astonishing atmosphere. The latter has its own unique character, which is so memorable and clear that irritations of the overall impression are immediately noticed. If, for example, a lamp does not function or is set up unfavourably, neither the location, position or function of the lamp are discussed, but rather the role of the lamp for the overall impression – similar to Seel’s observation regarding the situational referentiality of a lamp: “And even in the case of a lamp that destroys the atmosphere of a room, we would hardly say: ‘I don’t understand

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the lamp'. We'd rather say, 'I don't understand how you can set up a lamp like that.'¹ In the movie 'The Truman Show' (1998), it is also a spotlight that has fallen from the artificial sky of the large studio, under constant surveillance, which disturbs the homely atmosphere of the scene and affirms the protagonist's doubts about being and appearance. Eventually, he escapes from the staged sphere of life he has grown accustomed to.² It may be the spotlight at a music event, the illuminated lifeworld (Lebenswelt), the world of goods, the home, everyday life: Atmospheres prevail wherever spaces are experienced – albeit with varying intensity and obtrusiveness. The aesthetic assessment here shares an overall atmospheric character with the (grammatical) object, rather than with individual (material) objects a subject could refer to analytically.

The atmosphere is defined as that 'something' that transcends the sphere of the individual perceiving subject and in doing so surrounds the enveloping qualities of perception. Just as a planetary atmosphere surrounds the habitat that is the earth and makes life possible in the first place, the term atmosphere in current (not only aesthetic) debates describes the conditions of creation and success of special perception as well as the ontological location of its description and the material-character address of its production. This will be explained in more detail below. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between subject and object. These considerations thus form a veritable basis for further questions, such as the role of the auratic radiation of individual objects or persons (and thus the potential of the atmosphere as an extension of the auratic emotion of the individual object to the entire environment), the affective background noise of the social or processes of intersubjective attunement and contagion. The discussion about the atmospheric phenomenon is widely diversified which sometimes leads to high didactic demands and strategies of economic exploitation being linked to the concept. Conceptual reflections help to clarify what is meant by 'atmosphere': A mere expression used in vague everyday language, a specific analytical concept for particular aesthetic cases, an interplay that in the course of designing becomes not only an object of perception but also an object of use. In the field of aesthetics, the atmosphere is not seen in the sense of the ornamental, but as a harmonious relation to the world that is produced in different qualities and perceived with different intensity.

Some of these reflective strands are discussed in detail below, while others can only be briefly touched upon. First, the research of the philosopher Gernot Böhme and his conception of the atmospheric phenomenon will be explored and supplemented by how it has been further developed in current research. These considerations contribute to an understanding of perception that precedes a separation of subject and object: the atmospheric 'whereby' that creates tuned spaces and situations. However, the basic dichotomy subjectively-objectively can also be used to explain the effective factors in the atmospheric total. Therefore, the mode of action of objects and the participating subjectivity will be discussed afterwards. Finally, it will be demonstrated how atmospheres, which have been defined as such, can be explored. In addition to various methods, the practice of Aesthetic Fieldwork will be explained in detail.

2 Definitions of atmosphere between subject and object

From the perspective of creative practice, the phenomenon of atmospheres is familiar, because it seems clear that atmospheres can not only be felt, but also formed – for example, through a corresponding stage design for musical events. Nevertheless, practice and theory collide, especially when it comes to questions of the ontological conception of atmospheres and their effect on a targeted manageability of atmospheric influence. In aesthetics, an area of the ephemeral has been rehabilitated by means of the atmosphere as a phenomenon of perception – even if this might seem mystical. Depending on the conceptual side from which one approaches a scientific object,³ a useful network of terms reveals itself that help to describe and make use of the intended perceptual phenomenon. In the discourse about the phenomenon, there remain several corresponding persistent questions such as: What exactly are atmospheres (question of substance)?

¹ Seel, *Ästhetik des Erscheinens*, 158, transl. AR.

² Cf. also Huizinga, "*Der Tru(e)man der Mediengesellschaft*", 163ff.

³ Cf. the reference to Goethe in Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, 12.

How can atmospheres be (adequately) described (question of methods)? How can particular atmospheres be deliberately produced (question of practice)? The felt-body-phenomenology (Leibphänomenologie) according to Schmitz and the ecological-natural-aesthetics according to Böhme have played a crucial role in the theoretical development of the atmospheric concept – not to be misunderstood “as fundamental ecology or as organicism”.⁴ Thanks to interdisciplinarity and the abundance of starting points that come with it, as far as possible, in the following the perspective of aesthetics will be adopted. In addition, the perspective of aesthetics, in the sense of the theory of perception, can form the basis for any occupation with atmospheres.

Particularly that part of Gernot Böhme’s research has been met with great interest in which he engages with the theme of the atmosphere conceptually in order to understand the affective and emotional influences of space on human life, and, moreover, to understand the use of the concept in various contexts (such as scenography, product aesthetics, advertising, architecture, art and design). The starting point is the sensing of certain environmental qualities. These are not mere causal factors that affect the human organism, but they generate sensitivities. In this context, the atmosphere is “what mediates objective factors of the environment with aesthetic feelings of a human being”.⁵ A short definition of atmosphere can be the ‘tuned space’, in which the human being is affected by moods he himself co-determines. Thus, for example, the aesthetic focus on the judgment of an image or the focus on the purely visual representation of architecture must be (re-)negotiated. The current demands on aesthetics do not stem from their traditional field, but reach them from outside through a progressive aestheticization of reality (in politics, economics and environmental issues). To Böhme, there are three major circumstances that made him think about conceiving a new aesthetic: firstly, the renunciation of a traditional aesthetic of judgement, since, according to Kant in particular, it had replaced sensuality and genuineness in aesthetics; secondly, the undermining of a communication imperative, which a semiotic understanding of art formulates by means of language dominance; and thirdly, the expansion of the aesthetic from a zooming in on art to a broad palette of all kinds of aesthetic work (cosmetics, advertising, interior design, design, and much more).⁶ Beauty therefore is something that we can perceive everywhere, because what is of aesthetic relevance today “is the quality of the impression emanating from a person, a scene, an object, a piece of architecture”.⁷ In terms of reception, the New Aesthetics is a theory of comprehensive and unabridged perception, while in terms of production, it is a theory of aesthetic work, i.e. the creation of atmospheres.

In the course of his deliberations, Böhme mentions several working definitions of atmosphere: “the experience of the presence”,⁸ “what are experienced in bodily presence in relation to persons and things or in spaces”⁹ and “spheres of the presence of something”¹⁰. Most emphatically geared towards the phenomenon of perception is a definition that aims at “the relation between environmental qualities and human states. This ‘and’, this in-between, by means of which environmental qualities and states are related, is atmosphere.”¹¹ With this ‘and’-definition, Böhme provides a didactically valuable description: The easily skipped and inconspicuous ‘and’ in relation to environment and human states is symptomatic of the ontological properties of the atmosphere. As a small ‘and’ between measurable object constellations and questionable subjects, the atmosphere is in danger of being ignored as an epi- or subsequent phenomenon. The atmosphere is this ‘and’ of environmental quality and one’s own sensitivities – it is thus not the sum of factors of only a constituent relation, but rather an entity, both mediating and mediated, which, through the ever novel constituent ‘and’ enables different perceptions/the changeful appearance ‘in a different light’. With the ‘in-between’ as an aesthetic point of reflection for perceptual relations, the atmospheric phenomenon undermines the separation of subject and object, because in-between a clear location of the

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., 1.

6 Cf. ibd., 12-14.

7 Ibid., 63.

8 Ibid., 13.

9 Ibid., 17.

10 Ibid., 19.

11 Ibid., 12.

act of perception as purely subjective or as object-centred is deliberately conceived as ambiguous. The act of perception is then a feeling of the atmosphere, in which one dives into the atmosphere or feels it in a clearly emotional distinction. Subjects and objects of perception come together in an intermediate state that represents the (ontological) site of atmospheric perception (and, following this, its description). Even more than the ‘and’ and the ‘in-between’ as part and particle of the definition of atmosphere just mentioned, the ‘by means of which’/‘whereby’ (in my translation) makes clear that the encounter of subject and object in perception refers neither exclusively to the condition of origin (‘and’) nor to the place (‘in-between’) of atmospheres, but also to their product: They are not only determined in a perceptual interplay, they do not only have an intermediate status between subject and object, but are also the medium through which a relationship from subject to object can first be developed. To an even greater extent than in the case of the ‘and’, the ‘whereby’ emphasizes the coming together of all perceptual components. Atmospheres are not something one refers to, but they are the relationship itself in the vanishing point of “a *common* state of subject and object”.¹² Thus atmospheres are rather an ‘as well as’ than a ‘neither nor’, a strange web of environmental qualities and sensitivities. The ‘whereby’ indicates the shortcut between mental and material reality that creates its own sphere of reality. The difference (also in terms of content) between meaning as something that is cognitively assigned to the object and felt-body perception as something that belongs to the subject from a physiological point of view is bridged. So the objects do not have meaning, they become meaning. Two facets of the ‘whereby’ of the atmosphere become distinguishable: On the one hand, the ‘whereby’ of the influence on the subject, which creates perception only through the relationship between environmental qualities and state of being, and, on the other hand, the ‘whereby’ of the effect on the subject, which influences perception and behaviour through the atmosphere, which is able to influence posture and movement style itself. Because of the ‘whereby’ in the definition of atmosphere, one can question the everyday pragmatic ontological understanding of the separation into subjects who perceive objects (sometimes more or less subjectively or objectively). Perceptibility becomes an ontological criterion, which is why descriptions of perception turn out differently. The discovery that ‘The campfire atmosphere is perceived because a perceiving subject is near burning objects’ becomes ‘The subject can only perceive the burning objects and himself because they are in a campfire atmosphere’. An additional definition of Böhme’s atmosphere helps to illustrate this: said definition considers atmosphere as “the common reality of the perceiver and the perceived”.¹³ From this common ground, created by the ‘whereby’, the constituents of atmospheres interlinked with the ‘and’ can be focused on in a detail: i.e., the objects of perception as self-revealing and the subjects of perception as affected.

With regard to aesthetic disciplines, it is important to note that Böhme not only emphasizes the receptive side of the atmospheric phenomenon (in the sense of a pathological observation) from the outset, but that he, primarily, stresses the productive side. Referring to the “aesthetic worker”¹⁴ he established a term for people who create the atmosphere, for professions with a focus on atmospheric design. Böhme himself draws on practical equipment when he cites examples of historical garden design or refers to the art of stage design, which he often uses as a prime example of the creation of atmospheres.¹⁵ Things are ‘put in the right light’, rooms are staged and moods are set in scene: The transferability and furnishing of environmental qualities is achieved by the implicitly learned use of all design elements available, such as light, sound, colour, objects, signs and materials.

Conceiving of the atmospheric perception as a holistic and emotional integration into the world, Tonino Griffero outlines the role of aesthetics for atmospheric research: “What interests us here is *how* and not *why* we feel (in the felt-body) the way we feel”.¹⁶ In this ‘how’ the atmosphere is noticed as “a something-more, a *je-ne-sais-quoi* perceived by the felt-body in a given space, but never fully attributable to the

¹² Böhme, *Asthetik*, 56, transl. AR. Atmosphere as relation itself: 54.

¹³ Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 73f.

¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 28, 183 and in detail 217.

¹⁶ Griffero, *Atmospheres*, 27.

objectual set of a space"¹⁷ – a definition which is aware of the vagueness of the atmospheric phenomenon and that understands it phenomenologically, neither merely as vagueness *de dicto* nor *de re*, but rather as epistemic vagueness.¹⁸ The ontological characteristics of the atmosphere – as already hinted at in the ‘and’, ‘in-between’ and ‘whereby’ – of course can cause reservations in the art world, for example, which expects art to have particular (ontologically oriented) powers of revelation. Griffero objects to this by pointing out that something that is atmospherically sensed links the contemplative to the artistic modes of perception and production precisely because of its mediating character. In addition, the atmosphere functions as the qualitative particularity of art’s appearance, as is the case, for instance, in Monet’s cathedral series or in Turrell’s light installations, works of art in which the *actual facts* dominate the *factual facts*.¹⁹

Especially the last considerations demonstrate that for pedagogy in general and art and cultural pedagogy in particular, atmospheres function as important components of educational processes (Bildungsprozesse), which take place in all kinds of social spaces and which, in the context of an aesthetically founded theory of perception and cognition, are tied to the basic material conditions of learning objects. Thus, the perceptible things and objects in atmospheric situations are in a special didactic relation to the present subjects and enable reflections on different levels. The specific (pedagogical and educational) relationship between environment and one’s own presence in this environment can then help to understand what learning atmospheres are and how education can succeed in them.²⁰ In this context, as already mentioned, the common pragmatic orientation towards or discrimination of subjects and objects not only serve as a guiding principle, but they also offer a didactic means to differentiate actors and actants, to structure consciousness and its contents, to reflect on intentionality, in which there are objects to which a subject turns. If one approaches the atmospheric phenomenon from an everyday point of view, it might be surprising at first to what extent a mood other than one’s own can prevail in the room – such as the exuberant mood at a concert, a tense or sad mood that is intended to have the ability to change the mood of the persons present. Concerning the question of different types of moods – simply subjective and quasi objective – the concept of atmosphere helps to describe the latter type of mood, which is ostensibly objective, as a mood detached from an individual sentient subject. This detachment from the subjective and the objective is summarized by another definition: “No subject, no object, nothing and yet not nothing: atmospheric.”²¹

3 Perceptual object pole: Ecstasies

If the concept of atmosphere is to undermine the separation into subjects and objects, how is the relationship between subject and object to be conceived of? In fact, the felt-body phenomenological orientation of many studies on the atmospheric concept proves that an analytical separation into subjects and objects is neither methodologically nor conceptually appropriate. The definitions mentioned above rather refer to ‘environmental qualities’ and ‘human states’, or sometimes to ‘perceptual subjects’ and ‘perceptual objects’ that are in a specific relationship, atmospherically mediated.

The subject-object-dichotomy, however, offers an interesting ontological perspective on the concept of atmosphere precisely because it is usually derived from an everyday understanding of individual subjects in objective spaces and object constellations. As already indicated, there is the question to what extent a mood can prevail in space and to what extent this effective power, which emanates from subjects but to an even greater degree from objects, has an impact on intentionally oriented subjects. How is it possible that something that is at least linguistically ascribed to the human interior diffuses into its surroundings and thus objectively confronts the subject? When does something become an object, especially when it is about arranging objects to create an atmosphere in subjects? Which factors can be expected and how? Regarding the design of department stores, for example, subjects and objects mingle because the other subjects

¹⁷ Ibid., 6.

¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.* 123, see also Rauh, *Die besondere Atmosphäre*, 186ff., and Rauh, “In the clouds”.

¹⁹ See Griffero, *Atmospheres*, 82f. with reference to the painter and art theorist Josef Albers.

²⁰ Cf. Pfrang and Rauh, “*Lernatmosphären*”, 783-792.

²¹ Böhme, *Atmosphäre*, 66, transl. AR.

become co-objective design features of the surroundings, the human factor becomes part of larger entity with its own unique orientation processes – think, for example, of a gathering of interested subjects around a staged object, which increases the object’s attractiveness despite unchanged objective characteristics. The subjects provide affective reactions to a place by means of their current felt-body perception in connection with the respective aesthetic background experiences.²² The affective reactions to a place can then become an affective background. By experiencing the atmosphere, the subject simultaneously gets to know his own sensations as well as the world and its tinge. Location and situation are also decisive for the thrownness of their actants and reactants: for the thrown back (das Entgegen-Geworfene, Lat. *obiectum*) on the one hand and the thrown down (das Darunter-Geworfene, Lat. *subiectum*) on the other, which arrange themselves differently in the ‘and’ of the atmosphere depending on perception. The atmospheres are thus “indeterminate with regard to the distinction between the subjective and objective. [...] And they are impersonal in that they belong to collective situations and yet can be felt as intensely personal.”²³ Seen from an atmospheric conceptual perspective and its access to situations in the lifeworld and the empirical world, in which moods condense to holistic and spatial atmospheres, the separation of subject and object is (pre-) consciously undermined in the perception of atmospheres. While it is then no longer possible to distinguish clearly who the subject and what the object of perception is in the context of perception, the enveloping of both and its mode of action becomes topical. The atmosphere is not any other thing that is just there as an extra. It is of an all-inclusive quality. Subject and object are mingled, blurred, and placed in a specific relationship. In this context, the atmosphere emerges as an arbitrary third, as a specifically perceptible network. Given this, it becomes questionable whether everything takes on the character of objects in the sense of an ontological category that also includes subjects and whether (and which) dividing line is drawn between subjects, which are classically understood in an active sense, and passive objects.

In the ‘and’-definition of atmosphere the terms ‘environmental qualities’ and ‘human states’ were used rather than the terms ‘object’ and ‘subject’. Certainly, *environmental qualities* are strongly influenced by objects – things, people, and events. Yet, qualitatively speaking, they describe them from the perspective of a non-neutral place. Consequently, a clear-cut subject-object dichotomy is dissolved and, within the framework of the relational-ontological conception of atmospheres, an ‘object’ is understood differently: Böhme describes a ‘thing’ as “a physical, sensually given being”, which in everyday language also refers to “something, in terms of index, that one cannot or does not want to call by its name, or, generally, the subject of speech or consideration”.²⁴ The notion of thing is thus extended from a narrow use of ‘object’ to a broader use of ‘object’, which includes not only objects but also other subjects, situations and events that the perceiving subject encounters as ‘non-own’, i.e. as extraneous, with which the subject can nevertheless be interlinked. Not only beings like objects of nature or art, but also beings such as wind, night or atmospheres should come into view. A thing is therefore not just characterized by its manageability and the possibility of being-kept-at-bay in practical contexts, wherefore it is both possible and necessary to think of the characteristics of an object in a functional way concerning their individuation as the delimitation of an interior and the delineation of an exterior. Likewise, the thing is shaped by the emergence and showing of the properties of the thing.

In order to name such ways of emergence, Böhme introduces the term “ecstasies of the thing”,²⁵ and “ecstasies are those qualities which articulate the presence of the thing”.²⁶ This does not only mean the traditional secondary qualities related to a recognizing subject, such as smell or colour, but also the traditional primary qualities, such as form and volume, which are much influenced by mathematical objectivity and which are perceived spatially so that their presence can be felt in space. Accordingly, the focus shifts from the objective properties of objects to their dramatic value, for the ‘ecstasies’ serve to “indicate the way

²² See Rauh, *Concerning Astonishing Atmospheres*, 78.

²³ Anderson, “*Affective atmospheres*”, 80.

²⁴ Böhme, *Atmosphäre*, 157, transl. AR.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 33 and 167, transl. AR.

²⁶ Böhme, *Asthetik*, 134 and 131, transl. AR.

things are radiating into space and thus contributing to the formation of an atmosphere”.²⁷ The experience of art, for example, changes from art historical, iconographic or semantic learning to experiencing and sensing affective qualities. The forms present themselves to the subject of perception as a contribution to filling the space with “tensions and suggestions of movement”,²⁸ the volumes as donors of weight and orientation. While a thing can have properties that cannot be perceived – the table top of an oak table could have the property of consisting largely of pressboard and a layer of imitation oak that is ultra-thin – the ecstasies of this thing are determined by their effect on the perception and thus the sensual presence of the object of perception – the table is present in the room because of the effect of form and colour of the solidity. The concept of ecstasies thus shifts its focus from the *predicate* to the form of *presence*. To illustrate the ecstatic form of presence, Böhme chooses the example of a blue cup whose existence (as a characteristic) is included in its being blue (as its articulation in space).²⁹ The blue is therefore not to be understood as a characteristic to distinguish it from other cups, but as a form of presence and spatial imprint. This radiance of the presence of something tones and shapes the atmospheric space and thus the mood of those present. The ‘whereby’ then indicates the relationship between environmental qualities and one’s own sensitivity, between object-based ecstasies and subject-based feeling. At the same time, Böhme repeatedly emphasizes that the atmospheres in a relational sense are unique, “conceived neither as something objective, namely qualities that things have, and yet they are something material, belonging to the thing, inasmuch as things articulate the spheres of their presence through their qualities – conceived as ecstasies. Nor are the atmospheres something subjective, such as determinations of a state of mind. And yet they are subjective, they belong to subjects, insofar as they are felt in felt-body presence by humans and this feeling is simultaneously a felt-body state of being of the subjects in space”.³⁰ In this context, the discussion of materiality and thus the effect of material on perception, thought and action is exciting. “Materiality is supposed to show itself, to come forward, to help shape the atmospheres in which we live.”³¹ Materials radiate their very own characters. Moreover, it is exciting to investigate to whom the perception of these characters is ascribed outside the atmospheric discourse: subjects or objects.

The subject-object-dichotomy therefore provides an interesting methodological perspective regarding the question to what extent the perceived atmosphere is subjective or objective, to what extent it must be conceived by means of intermediate forms such as quasi-objectivity, and to what extent a subjectively successful atmospheric design permits objectively successful atmospheric experiences. The malleability of the order of the thrown (*sub-* or *ob-icere*) is at disposal. How reliable are atmospheric designs with regard to their effect? The terms ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ themselves become confusable, especially in the light of the changing conceptual history. Because “originally these terms meant almost the exact opposite of their present content. ‘Objective’ referred to things as they present themselves to consciousness, ‘subjective’ to things by themselves”.³² Theory of perception and epistemology are pursued within a specific framework. The theoretical exploration of the atmospheric phenomenon and the practical work with the atmospheric concept must converge in a self that moves between two extreme poles: “At one pole [...] a scientific self that was founded on grounds of the lack of will, at the other pole an artistic self that revolved around the will of arbitrariness”.³³ The clear separation of subject and object is a self- or historically generated one. It is based on the assumed derivation from and transfer of grammatical structures to the reality of being, on the current state of scientific paradigms, on the theoretical field of reference and on the attribution of activity and passivity.

²⁷ Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, 5, also 18 and 95.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁹ See Böhme, *Atmosphäre*, 32, Böhme, *Asthetik*, 132, as well as Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, 18.

³⁰ Böhme, *Atmosphäre*, 33-34, transl. AR.

³¹ Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, 142.

³² Daston and Galison, *Objektivität*, 30, transl. AR, also 218ff.

³³ *Ibid.*, 41, transl. AR.

4 Perceptual subject pole: Re-ception

Just as there have been shifts in meaning in the history of the concept of objectivity, the history of the concept of subjectivity has never been a linear one either. From the wealth of historical conceptual aspects, the subject can be understood “ontologically [as] the underlying principle, as matter; grammatically, it is that to which predicates are applied while logically, it is the object of determinations; rhetorically, it pertains to the whereat, the concerns of arts, knowledge and representations”.³⁴ Additionally, it has a political dimension as an underlying principle as it could be liable to serve or be obedient to someone. Today it is generally understood as that essential that not only refers to others, but also to itself. When a musician works on a composition, he creates something that, in the course of its creation, materially solidifies and thus becomes the artist’s point of reference, his rhetorical subject. The musician can refer back to this point by means of reflection (bend back, Lat. *reflectere*) and thus can simultaneously be an enjoying and generating subject who has a gift and turns it into his task. As described earlier, however, it is the presentation of music that allows other connoisseurs to experience the effect of what the artist has created and to be affected by the music. If the author is again subjectively confronted with himself in this experience, the atmosphere has now become the author of the subjects rather than the individual subject as author of an experience. Only the description of personal feelings of pleasure as the joy of self-reference, of one’s own reactions to something one does not own, provides for an isolation of the subject, which sets itself apart from the object of the experience. The subjective and ecstatic interdependencies and relationships in an experience like the atmosphere of a concert, however, cannot easily be discriminated. The representation of something and the representation for someone prevents the contraposition of the subjective and the objective.³⁵ Whoever is in an atmosphere is not only there, but participates in it. Subjects and objects are parts of a greater whole and only by reflecting on the perception through isolation can be discerned as subjects and objects. They can be inferred from the atmospheric ‘whereby’, which in the ‘and’-definition of atmosphere designates a qualitative intertwining.

It is because of this interweaving that the terms ‘object’ and ‘subject’ have not been used for the constituents of the atmosphere, but rather the qualitative terms ‘environmental qualities’ and ‘human states’. While the environmental qualities characterize a non-neutral place, the *human states* characterize a non-neutral perception. The state of being is understood in a dual sense: On the one hand, as the (felt-body) presence of oneself in a place, on the other hand, the feeling of oneself in a certain way, i.e., for instance, feeling under pressure or being satisfied, a feeling of being affected.³⁶ Without the presence of a perceiving subject, perception of an atmosphere is not possible. If one asks whether a falling tree makes a noise when no one is around to hear it, the answer would be: It does not make a noise. It does not make sense to pose the question of the sensual impression of hearing in the absence of a hearing person. The ‘in-between’ and ‘whereby’ of the atmosphere depends on the presence of someone affected by something. Referring to the necessity of presence might appear trivial. However, it is necessary in order to avoid mistaking the state of being for a specific state of the perceptual subject. The state of being as a sort of affectedness, as the specific way someone feels, already indicates an understanding of perception that involves the perceptual subject and his state of being in the ecstatic environment that affects him: “De sujet à objet, de sujet à sujet, de corps à corps, l’empathie est notre façon première, naïve, irréfléchie d’être au monde.”³⁷ With this emphasis on the em-pathic, on the one hand, the necessary presence of the perceiving subject in its irreplaceability is again addressed, on the other hand a trans-subjective moment of the atmosphere is mentioned, which can also be felt by other perceivers in the interplay of ecstasies and sensitivities. This is particularly the case if one attributes one’s own feeling to a felt-body state rather than a mental one. In this felt-body state, which is structurally similar to the ecstasies on the side of the object of perception, the perceiver is not thought of as being oriented towards the inside but towards the outside.

³⁴ Menke, “*Subjektivität*”, 734, transl. AR.

³⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 781.

³⁶ Cf. Böhme, *Asthetik*, 78.

³⁷ Augoyard, “*La construction des atmosphères*”, 60.

This kind of feeling is the key to the subjective as well as the trans-subjective registration of the specific spatial tone of an atmosphere; the surrounding space becomes perceptible in the feeling, “sensing one’s own felt-body means while at the same time sensing how I find myself in an environment, how I feel.”³⁸ Atmospheric perception thus has two poles, namely ecstasies and human states: “On the one hand, the environment that *radiates* a quality of mood; on the other hand, I myself as I am participating in this mood in my sensing and ensuring that I am here now. Perception qua sensitivity is therefore perceptible presence. Conversely, atmospheres are the way things and environments *present* themselves.”³⁹ Presence and presentation, however, cannot be related to just one of these poles: Not only do objects have to be present and present themselves in their ecstasies, the subject or subjects must also present themselves in their presence. Feeling and sensing is therefore not purely passive and pathic, but also actively involved in the ‘and’ of the atmosphere. In atmospheric fields such as fashion, design, cosmetics and living, Böhme sees two basic aesthetic needs realised, namely not only “to live in an environment in which I feel at home, but also a basic need to *show* myself and to have an atmospheric influence on my environment through my presence.”⁴⁰ Atmospheres are an important topic in terms of both reception and production, precisely because the productive side has a political aspect, inasmuch as lifeworlds are staged and trimmed to certain sensitivities (of well-being). Communicating is supplemented by participation, whereby the interrelationship is effective in the common perceptual reality, beyond the subject-object division. Perception is a “process of simultaneous radiance [...] and of the perceptual activity of physical sensing. Only by considering that both aspects run concurrently in the perceptual process, a splitting into object-oriented and subject-oriented aspects, which is typical for perception theories, can be overcome.”⁴¹

Böhme also uses the concept of ecstasies to engage with the subjectivity of the felt-body appearance and self-expression.⁴² It would be interesting to amplify this concept of the conspicuous and protruding ecstasies (Lat. *ex-stare*), gained at the perceptual object pole, with a concept that, at the pole pertaining to the perceptual subject, refers to the particular absorption of the respective idiosyncratic ecstasies and their interdependencies. The concept of re-reception (Lat. *re-cipere*) is already well known, but it has to be newly contoured to allow for the acceptance of ecstasies on the part of the subject. The matching of ecstasies and reception then explains the ingression into, discrepancy to, or consonance with an atmosphere.⁴³ The prefix ‘re-’ could be interpreted as referring back to the different ways of being affected by an atmosphere, from the enjoying to the generating subject, from the pathic part of the ‘me’ to the dynamic part of the ‘I’. Subjective identity is formed in the interplay of these parts, an interplay that triggers experiences of varying intensity in relation to atmospheric spaces of varying intensity. Reflecting on this relationship brings about a social potential of atmospheric perception, insofar as the effect on one’s own subject and on other subjects can be tested by a perceptual reality encompassing subject and object. The prefix ‘re-’ could also be interpreted as referring back to the ‘whereby’ of the sensual experiences made possible by the atmosphere. Psychologically speaking, perception is an act of the subject that intentionally focuses on an object, which, in turn, is the relation between subject and object in atmospheric perception. The perception of the subject is thus necessarily a partial self-direction as a perceiving subject, which qua perception has an object, which qua subject, however, is not neutral. The attributions to the above-mentioned perspectives on the ontological, grammatical, logical or rhetorical are fluent to a certain extent. The atmosphere is the ‘whereby’ that then becomes an ‘and’ in the field of experience and the reflection of perception, conscious to whatever degree, that then makes clear to what extent subject and object were united in the ‘whereby’ and now appear relationally separated.

It seems to be new wine in old bottles when the descriptive poles ‘subject’ and ‘object’ are still used to describe atmospheric contexts – especially in view of the intersubjective claim of atmospheric perception.

³⁸ Böhme, *Atmosphäre*, 31, transl. AR.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 96, transl. AR.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 42, transl. AR.

⁴¹ Löw, *Raumsoziologie*, 195f, transl. AR.

⁴² Cf. Böhme, *Atmosphäre*, 200.

⁴³ Cf. Rauh, *Concerning Astonishing Atmospheres*, 50.

That it is a case of intersubjectivity can be explained by it being not merely subjectively constituted, but having objective parts in the sense of materiality with ecstasies all subjects can refer to. Consequently, they may exhibit only slight variations, which are subjectively conditioned qua personal moods and emotions. Perceptual peculiarities, deviating atmospheric characterizations and, above all, the staging of materiality allow the everyday pragmatic (and sometimes didactically meaningful) recourse to the dichotomy, which is conceptually undermined. How is the interrelation of environmental design and character of the atmosphere to be shaped structurally and repetitively? How does an atmosphere at a time (here and now) relate to an atmosphere over time (here and always)? When do subjects perceive a specific atmosphere, and when do they perceive something in a special light due to atmospheres? The question of the transitivity of atmospheres is also discussed by Griffero. It shows the potential of unfolding the ‘whereby’ of the atmospheric definition according to Böhme.⁴⁴ These ‘objective’ questions about the consistency of the atmosphere and these ‘subjective’ questions about the consistency of the perceiving subject are to be considered regarding the methods and practice of research in the atmospheric field.

5 Methodology: Participation

The subjective or objective understanding of an atmosphere falls short concerning the phenomenally adequate description of the mode of being and the way in which the atmosphere changes. As ‘and’ and, in ontological respects, ‘in-between’, it resists the anticipatory subject-object dichotomy and turns it into a subordinate, analytical artefact. However, the grammatical structure of language, the technical conditions of media as well as the pragmatic division into perceiving subjects and perceiving objects in mediation contexts justify the use of the dichotomy. This affects on how one can imagine field research in this atmospheric realm, which then utilizes everyday language and its separation into subjects and objects. Research on atmospheres – ideally a combination of theoretical reflection and practical field research – helps to better understand the phenomenon of the atmosphere in a hermeneutic process with field research as a kind of propaedeutic step. For it seems “not necessary to deny that a piece of unavailability belongs to every atmospheric reality”⁴⁵

Even though the experience of being affected by an atmosphere may seem diffuse and vague, at least its character can be named or circumscribed in a sophisticated way. In this context, the act of perception is a synesthetic one – not in the pathological sense, but in the transmodal sense of the simultaneous perception of sensory qualities of different sensory channels (e.g. that a sound is perceived as sharp). The act is performed as an atmospheric perception that eludes classical categorical operationalization and challenges the researcher and his perceptive faculties. From a grammatical point of view, the description of the act as one of re-ception and re-flexion of perception can be based on single-sensory descriptions of the environmental qualities and related sensual-modal connections as well as descriptions of the states of being in them – sometimes in the semantic field of only one specific sensual modality. Resulting from the description of things “is the *withdrawal* of their ecstasies.”⁴⁶ If the ecstasies were understood as forms of their presence instead of predicates of things, then it is necessary to predicate the presence in the description. The current descriptions written in relation to the present thing then belong “to the emergence of the thing itself, they are ecstasies that are detached, i.e. they are further articulated and elevated, but also isolated and immobilized.”⁴⁷ Thus, the descriptions can also summon and evoke the atmosphere. In accessing the atmosphere, the vocabulary can be less reflected, rich in metaphors and quite poetic when a desire to formulate and fable arises – which can be interpreted as an effect of the respective atmosphere on it. It remains to be seen what future field research holds. Whether in atmospheric descriptions, only one’s own mood is described as the subject pole of the atmosphere; whether and how exactly one can extrapolate from one’s own mood to the atmosphere; whether and to what extent the individual sensuality has an effect

⁴⁴ See Griffero, *Atmospheres*, 144.

⁴⁵ Böhme, *Atmosphäre*, 199, transl. AR.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 175, transl. AR.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 176, transl. AR.

on the atmospheric whole and thus reveals different degrees of relevance for atmospheric intensities.

Which methods can be applied to describe specific atmospheres in such a way that theoretical research can refine and apply its vocabulary, while practitioners can gain an advantage for the design context? Countering charges of a ‘Lucky Luke’ attitude, i.e. a premature research design that figuratively pulls faster than its shadow, it can be argued that Lucky Luke at least scored every time and did not wait until the delinquent was out of reach. In recent years, much research has been done and published on the topic of atmospheres. They range methodically from hermeneutic-reflexive studies to constructively prospective ones. To explore those factors of atmospheres that can be experienced rather than measured on site, some field research methods have been applied. The *Parcours Commenté*, for example, is an investigative technique *in situ* that explores being involved in an atmosphere by walking and talking together. The method pursues the following four steps:⁴⁸ First, observing (French: *observer*), in which the modes of perception and behaviour in the field are received. Second, the accompaniment (French: *accompagner*), in which the atmospheric impressions are described while walking. Thirdly, evocation (French: *évoquer*), in which sensory impressions are reactivated and recalled. Fourthly, the discussion (French: *s’entretenir*), in which a linguistic comparison of perception takes place. The *Parcours Commenté* is a deliberately open method that allows for a variety of variations – especially in terms of the number of researchers present and the way they communicate. In some studies, for example, field researchers should not exchange information in the field; their reports should mutually feed each other or involve passers-by and highlight specific individual aspects of the atmosphere. The research subject is characterized not only by its participation in atmospheric events, but also by its research-based participation.

Building on this method, the phenomenological-hermeneutic approach of ‘*Aesthetic Fieldwork*’ has been conceived.⁴⁹ It is an autopsy of one’s own perception in order to perceive how one is where one is. It is concerned with permitting open perceptions, recording them, and examining them for intersubjectively detectable atmospheric qualities of spatial situations. The method proves itself particularly helpful in the mode of comprehension. Yet, the term ‘method’ should not be misunderstood as a means of mental control of actions, but as a practice, an exercise, through which the perception (of a certain aspect) is enhanced. *Aesthetic Fieldwork* is characterized by the following three key points: firstly, the protocol of perception, secondly, the protocol of memory, and thirdly, one’s own evaluation. In the *perceptual protocol*, a recording of all perceptions takes place in the respective field of investigation. It records changes in atmospheric effects without resorting to a potentially deceptive memory. Holistic atmospheric impressions, individual ecstasies and receptions are circumscribed and orbited by means of linguistic expressions. The *memory protocol* then allows additions to the fieldwork report as a necessary enrichment of the perception notes even before their evaluation. The notes of the first step are supplemented by further descriptions (in retrospect), which allow for a broad reflection on all sensitivities and for the successively recorded partial aspects in the fieldwork report to be emphasised as simultaneous perceptions. One’s own *evaluation* focuses the vocabulary in the evaluation of the protocols deliberately on the one person who collected the data. Data collection person and evaluation person are united. In this way, a balance of linguistic peculiarities is achieved, and the fieldworker is acknowledged as the competent person who can most adequately evaluate the linguistic descriptive context with regard to the atmospheric perceptual context. The result are fieldwork reports that are a collection of word classes and sentence fragments. Based on the constellation of said word classes and sentence fragments, their unusual agglomerations or accumulations, conclusions can be drawn about the atmosphere. Accordingly, the relations of ecstasies and one’s own feelings and reception become recognizable. It is also possible to clarify which relevance perceptions have in relation to the character of the atmosphere, which ecstasies increase the intensity of an impression, and which diminish it. Other contemplations will inquire what ecstatic effects could have been expected and what new experiences they would have offered, what interferences occurred and could occur. Collected in a portfolio of advanced atmospheric research, a catalogue of questions could be compiled that helps to check one’s own perception in a hermeneutic way. This catalogue, this portfolio could also form a basis for the intersubjective comparison

⁴⁸ Thibaud, “*La méthode des parcours commentés*”.

⁴⁹ Cf. Rauh, *Die besondere Atmosphäre*, 203ff.

of experiences and findings on the atmospheric ‘whereby’. In this communication, the subject-object dichotomy could help to identify chances for influencing design practice in questions of attribution; for example, by asking which impression could be ascribed to the perceptual subject or rather the perceptual object concerning the effect and intensity of the atmosphere. Why does which element of perception stand out in a situation? Does this possibly have to do with a certain materiality or a particular mood?

Even though spelling out one’s own perception and the resulting analytical evaluation of the data enables the distinction from one’s own perspective as a participant, this does not compare to the usual ethnographic research practices. Given the aesthetic focus of the fieldwork method, taking notes of perception with the help of artistic means is promising here and is already being tested.⁵⁰ Artistic processes of perceiving atmosphere, its design and representation utilize natural, anthropogenic and social foundations of the atmosphere in addition to physical conditions. Constellations of the ‘and’ of human states and environmental qualities manifest themselves in the works of art. Atmospheres as characteristics of urban spaces are mapped in the *spacing model* that seizes on “quality as coherence in the development of the dimensions of the atmosphere, the atmospheric spatial themes and the patterns of the habitat design field, based on the peculiarities of the space owners, users and local history. Thus, a coherence is achieved by concordance, which requires a different basic attitude of the designers, however, closer proximity to the task and to the people, instead of [...] [a] distancing.”⁵¹ The way a place has to be designed so that pure functional fulfilment and aesthetic qualities come together is the task of spatial planners, architects and landscape architects. For the control and creation of atmospheric effects in landscape architecture, it is worthwhile to orientate oneself towards *design-based guidelines*.⁵² Different design phases create periods of conceptual comparison of design and location, of theory and practice. First, theses for the atmosphere to be created are sketched out in the form of metaphors, collages or small models. These sketches are then realized with the help of spatial means. The selection and arrangement of design elements can be checked for their atmospheric qualities. The atmospheric composition then develops by either discarding or refining the preliminary drafts. The person in the room as well as the movement stimuli conveyed by the room are the focus of a next planning phase, to ensure the integration of new and different behavioural offers and the intensification of immersion effects through effect-enhancing details based on experience. Talking about and discussing atmospheres is not only set in motion but also cultivated in such design processes.

Because of its fusion of subject and object, the atmosphere is a new experience, which is phenomenally perceived as ‘whereby’ preceding the dichotomy. This layer of experience is illuminated by the felt-body sensing of ecstasies in the here and now of the atmospheric presence of subjects and objects. In the atmosphere of music and its experience, in the reception and reflection of the static and processual activities of perception, temporal art becomes spatial art and vice versa. Even though a studio atmosphere offers the musician excellent laboratory conditions for composing and producing music, only the live atmosphere offers atmospheric experiences of the music that one would want to conserve for the studio atmosphere. The reception of atmospheres is a practical exercise that helps to produce atmospheres.

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⁵⁰ See Ulber, *Landschaft und Atmosphäre*, 83.

⁵¹ Pfister, *Atmosphäre und Ort*, 64, transl. AR.

⁵² Weidinger, *Designing Atmospheres*, 21.

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