

Understanding Atmospheres

Culture, materiality and the texture of the in-between

University of Aarhus, March 16th and 17th 2012

Program with abstracts

Friday, March 16th

9.35-10.35: Prof. Gernot Böhme, Technische Universität Darmstadt

The art of the stage set as a paradigm for an aesthetics of atmospheres

This paper will dwell on the general theory of atmospheres via discussing a basic paradigm for both

- the producing of atmospheres and
- the perceiving of atmospheres.

For sure, the aesthetics of atmospheres is now pervading all realms of life. This is because of us living in the aesthetic economy. But it sheds a specific light on this situation when we remember that stage set is the very oldest and most elaborated art of arranging atmospheres.

10.45-11.20: Jean-Paul Thibaud, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique

Ambiances at stake: a pragmatist approach

Environmental and urban issues are key challenges in the contemporary world. To cope with them effectively, new conceptual tools and methodological frameworks have to be developed which foster original ways of dealing with day-to-day situations. From this standpoint, the notion of atmosphere (or ambiance) implies a particular conception of situated perception that helps us to introduce and take on board the sensory, affective, practical and material dimensions of the built environment. The aim of this paper is to explore the possibility of a pragmatist approach of ambiances. In what frameworks and by what processes do ambiances take effect? In what respect do ambiances contribute to transforming the sensory environment and changes in the contemporary urban world? Instead of trying to formally define the notion of ambiance, the objective is to test its operational character. From this perspective, the notion of ambiance can be understood three ways: as a domain of intervention in urban public places, as an analytical tool that reveals the evolution of the urban environment, as a specific mode of transforming the sensory ecology of everyday life.

11.20-11.55: Prof. Niels Albertsen, Aarhus School of Architecture

Transporting atmospheres by gesture

The character of an atmosphere, Böhme (2001: 52) insists, can be determined only if you expose yourself to it. It cannot be determined by a neutral spectator but only if you are affectively taken by it. If this is correct, it raises the question of how atmospheric experiences and characterisations are transported and communicated to others in other places and times. How can atmospheric experiences be 'deterritorialised' and transported to others in such ways that the atmospheric character of the experience in some sense is preserved through the process of transportation? Poets can "create atmospheres through words" (Böhme 1995: 75); wouldn't they also be able to transport atmospheres to be experienced in other times and places through atmospheric descriptions of atmospheres? Should researchers into atmospheres develop similar skills or should they, as researchers, precisely refrain from this?

11.55-12.30: Ulrik Schmidt, University of Copenhagen

Atmosphere and ambient space

This paper explores the relation between atmosphere and ambient space. Atmosphere and ambient space share many salient properties. They are both ontologically indeterminate, constantly varying and formally diffuse and they are both experienced as a subtle, non-signifying property of a given space. But from a certain point of view, the two concepts also designate quite dissimilar experiences of space. To be 'ambient' means to surround. Accordingly, ambient space is that space, which surrounds something or somebody. (Gibson 1987: 65) Since space is essentially of a surrounding character, all space can thus be described as having a fundamentally ambient character. So what precisely is an ambient space, then? As I will argue in my presentation, ambient space is a sensory *effect* of spatiality when a space is experienced as being particularly surrounding: a 'space effect' or 'surround effect'. To make an ambient space is to produce a sensation of being surrounded by highlighting the very spatial properties of a given space. Ambient space is space as a surrounding ubiquity, space as 'world'. Despite often being used almost synonymously, the concepts of ambient space and atmosphere thus have quite different connotations. As I will argue, this not only includes the difference between place and non-place and between space as dwelling and transitory space. It also concerns, on a more general level, differences between particular and generalized space; between spatial involvement and detachment; between allocentric and idiocentric space; and between space as social and sensory experience.

13.30-14.30: Prof. Chris Gosden, University of Oxford

The feeling of what happened: changing sensory modes of engagement with landscapes and artefacts

At the start of the middle Bronze Age (around 1500 BC) the English landscape was enclosed for the first time, setting out a dense network of fields, track ways and settlements, as opposed to a more open earlier landscape of monuments and ephemeral settlements. These changes could be thought about in many different ways (as changes in modes of agriculture and subsistence, as a move towards land ownership etc.). Whatever other factors were involved, there is no doubt that this would have changed people's experience of landscape, in terms of movement, lines of sight or hearing and patterns of practice. People's relationships with artefacts, such as metalwork, also shifted through the Bronze Age and into the Iron Age, changing and challenging both sensory and emotional responses to the material world.

In this paper I shall report briefly on two projects, the first on the long-term history of the English landscape and second on the form and decoration of metalwork to explore general theoretical questions of senses and emotions, as well as the methodological challenges in such work. Some challenges are particular to archaeology, while others confront material approaches in the social sciences more generally.

14.30-15.05: Mads Daugbjerg, University of Aarhus

Sensing Gettysberg: Atmospheres, experience and things in battle re-enactments

To the average historical reenactor, dressing up to restage and re-invigorate this or that period or event in history, the issue of atmosphere is utterly crucial. So is the role of objects, regarded as central in bringing about particular atmospheres and "magic moments", as the points of intense temporal resonance with the past are known in reenactor jargon. During ethnographic fieldwork in Gettysburg, USA, I was struck by the close connection between reenactors and specific objects and ensembles of objects (i.e. their weapons, gear and uniform, or their "kit", as it was known). These material connections, and the sense in which you as a reenactor can touch, don and literally "inhabit" and give life to the materials, is at the heart of the experience of reenactment. The fact that the objects and instruments affording these transformations are most often relatively recently produced copies and reconstructions (as opposed to original or "authentic" pieces from the 1860s) does not seem to detract substantially from the changes and experiences brought about. I argue that in order to understand notions of "atmosphere" and "experience", we need to pay close attention to the materialities involved in the make-up of such atmospheres and experiences.

15.15-15.50: Benjamin Morris, The Open University

Air today, gone tomorrow? Local atmosphere as heritage sites

In 2004, the American artist Amy Balkin established a public park within the earth's atmosphere, an ephemeral site called Public Smog that, according to its manifesto, was "constructed through financial, legal, or political activities that open it for public use." The park served as a basis for legal recognition for the earth's atmosphere: its inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The park was last 'opened' in 2007, but the questions that Balkin's work raises linger: how are atmospheres imagined and constructed? In this presentation, I propose a threefold investigation: first, into how local atmospheres are constructed; considering through archival, literary, and art-historical analysis how air quality becomes a marker of local identity, place, and belonging. Case studies abound, from the humidity in New Orleans to the sand-soaked air in Cairo to the cloud of pollution besieging Mexico City—examples which will inform this research—but to ground this work in a local context I will focus on a single atmosphere: *the haar*. I will research the history, formation, and function of *the haar* in cultural and natural domains, giving an account of its role both in national (Scottish) and regional (North Sea basin) contexts.

15.50-16.25: Peter Bjerregaard, Museum of Cultural History, Oslo

Dissolving objects: exhibitions, dis-connecting and atmosphere

Atmosphere constitutes a central problem to museums, which has only received rather little attention in museum literature. While most museum staff will readily recognise the importance of atmosphere in exhibitions, it seems hard to link this to other museum practices such as collecting and documentation. It is notoriously difficult to collect and store atmospheres.

Thus, collectors and curators often have to struggle with the spirit lost when working with objects of the past or distant. Where is the smell, the noise and the liveliness of the Indian market that turned everyday baskets and bundles of herbal medicine into attractive collectibles? Where is the spirit of the place through which the archaeological object was first experienced in the excavation?

In this paper I will argue that such atmospheric elements can never be transferred from the field to the museum. Instead, the task of the exhibition is to dissolve object qualities in order to create new site-specific atmospheres. Thus, somewhat counter-intuitively, exhibitions are about dis-connecting rather than connecting.

Saturday March 17th

9.00-10.00: Ben Anderson, University of Durham

Atmospheres of Emergency: Speculation and the Reality of Atmospheres

In this paper I focus on two theoretical and methodological questions that follow from considering atmospheres as real ‘objects’ rather than exclusively a property of human phenomenal experience or an effect of non-human forces and things. First, how do multiple atmospheres coexist alongside one another in and across sites; some residual, some emergent, some dominant? Second, how do different atmospheres resonate together to temporarily form something like a shared affective condition that enables and limits how experience takes place and is organised? I will address these questions through a case study of the atmospheres of emergency generated in security related ‘exercises’: rehearsals of the UK State’s future response to disruptive events, including acts of terror. By presenting scenes from a number of exercises, I will argue that an analysis of the ‘reality’ of atmospheres requires that we experiment with practices of speculation as a means of attending to both the ongoing composition of atmospheres and their strange, ambiguous, causal powers.

10.15-10.50: Dacia Viejo-Rose, University of Cambridge

Constructing an ‘atmosfear’ in post-Civil War Spain

In post-Civil War Spain fear became like a gaseous mass enveloping the country as the Francoist regime set about what historian Paul Preston has termed a ‘politics of revenge’. Through policies of repression and reconstruction, through acts of performance and the creation of material memory markers as well as acts of deliberate silencing and disappearing, the regime created an atmosphere of fear: an *atmosfear*. How was the sense of a pervasive threat communicated? This paper will explore how this atmosphere was created. First it will examine the regime’s selection of what to make visible and what to make invisible. This will be illustrated through concrete examples of the re-writing of history and the reconstruction of the country. Second, it will look at the visual representations of ‘them’ – the defeated Spaniards represented as a contaminated by the ‘disease’ of communism. The empirical material for this will be drawn from official propaganda as well as popular media (i.e. films and comic books) and publicity. Third, it will look at that which was made invisible by the regime by addressing the use of ruins and the treatment of ‘the defeated’. Finally, an analysis will be posited of how this *atmosfear* continued to permeate Spanish society well into the period of political transition and how it is being countered today. This analysis will contribute to an on-going research project on the topic of ‘cultural violence’.

10.50-11.25: Marie Kolling, University of Copenhagen/Wageningen University

Atmosphere and ambiguity of danger

In this paper I will explore the complexity of interpreting atmosphere and how this complexity provides analytical insights into security dynamics in a field of shifting socio-spatial insecurities. The relation between the complexity of interpreting atmosphere and the ambiguity of danger will be analyzed taking an onset in ethnographic accounts of specific situations in which my interpretation of the atmosphere, that was connected to sensing and accessing danger, conflicted with the interpretation of the interlocutors I was with or the knowledge I had or later gained about that particular place and/or the people who were there. In this context, there was no atmosphere of a singular affective quality that simply filled a space. It demanded interpretation as I quickly learned that the atmosphere I would sense, walking around in the community, did not necessarily correspond with the experiences or opinions of others or my own for that matter as it changed over time and thereby atmosphere crystallised the cultural encounter between the fieldworker and the field. Reflecting upon these situations, the ambiguity of interpreting atmosphere points to what security means and how it is contested and negotiated in the community in which I conducted fieldwork. The ethnographic accounts draw on 4 months of fieldwork undertaken in a low-income community in Recife, Brazil in 2010. The area was undergoing urban upgrading, which was the overall topic of investigation.

11.25-12.00: Rose Parekh-Gaihede, Independent researcher, performing artist

Atmosphere of the safe space

What does it take to create a *safe space*? Which atmosphere is a safe space characterized by? How can atmosphere be designed intentionally to facilitate open and empathic interaction between people – particularly in settings that may otherwise be characterized by e.g. awkward formality, expectation or unease? How does the safe space relate to the *unsafe space*? The concept of safe space has been used within educational settings and women's' movements referring to a zone free of prejudice, homophobia, discrimination etc.. While embracing some of these connotations, I will here use safe space broadly to describe a space in which people are able to *be, act* and *express* themselves freely (without fear of judgement, harassment or abuse). As an academic and performance artist I am researching the theoretical implications and practical manifestations of empathic encounters with the *other*. Emmanuel Lévinas' ethical concept of the face-to-face encounter describes the meeting with the other as a paradoxical movement between approaching and staying distant. My goal has been to establish a distance that enables closeness – to create safety through an atmosphere that places the participants in-between performative practices, midways between reality and fiction, between well-known and unexpected sense impressions. In my presentation I will employ the concept of safe space as a key for discussing the instrumental role of atmosphere in facilitating and challenging our sense of empathy.

12.45-13.45: Inge Daniels, University of Oxford

Kutsurogu - Feeling at Home: Atmosphere and intimacy in contemporary Japan

This paper explores atmosphere as a mode of action that encapsulates a complex understanding of self, society and cosmos. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in urban homes in contemporary Japan, I aim to demonstrate how through engaging in a range of material, social and spatial practices the participants in my study create a 'homely atmosphere' that merges the need for bodily intimacy amongst the family group and individual yearning for relaxation. My paper will thereby make a contribution to the growing literature that questions the supposed distinction between people, things and places. However, Japan offers such an interesting example because it also forces us to reconsider the duality between reason and ritual, internal and external causation and I will argue that by revisiting concepts developed in the study of religion such as 'praesentia' and 'participation' we can broaden our understanding of atmosphere.

13.45-14.20: Anne Line Dalsgaard: University of Aarhus

Affective continuity: The role of atmospheres in anthropological knowledge production

Fieldwork is per definition *taking place*. Even the most digital, virtual, multi-sited fieldwork must, by way of the fieldworker's physical body, be placed. A place, however, is not just a geographical location. Places not only *are*, they *happen* (Casey1996: 26-27). They allow time and space to unfold in the interaction between the initiatives of its occupants, the ecstatic quality of material forms, and habitual dispositions embodied in both. The fieldworker is inescapably part of this merging of agencies. We do our best to reflect upon the effects of this complicity, trying to objectify our own affects and the way we affect the place. Most often, however, our aim with this reflection is to establish an unaffected place, from which we can observe the world. This is a hopeless endeavour; objectivity is not reached through withdrawal. Yet most academic texts are marked by a stubborn belief in disengagement.

Sitting in the heat of a tropical morning with my feet on a cool floor, which a gecko crosses on its way to a darker corner of the room, and with cars passing by outside the open house, noisily, just a few meters from me, I certainly do not feel unaffected by the place I am part of. Men working on the house next door, a woman talking impatiently to a child, somebody whistling, a dog barking. The sensation of life is overwhelming, when I zoom out from the hypnotizing screen of the computer. I cannot say where I end and the heat begin, nor if the whistling is inside or outside my body. My skin and the plane of the floor are surfaces, to be true, but there is nothing exterior or superficial about them. No truth beneath them. The atmosphere of the place includes everything in its undeniable presence. The question is, if this presence has a place in the written result of my fieldwork.

14.20-14.55: Vidya Ravi, University of Cambridge

Narrating nature and its baggage

'Nature' is a problem word. Scholars from different disciplines have sought to expand and explain the tensions that surround this word, and one issue that emerges from contemporary discourse is to do with the phenomenology of nature. When looking in particular at the narratives about nature in American art and literature, 'natural' places are purported to have a distinct atmosphere or aura. Henry David Thoreau expresses this experience when writes in his journals that 'Nature is full of genius, full of the divinity'; and John Muir's oft-quoted declaration, that 'Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees' captures the feeling he has when he finds himself in places like the Yellowstone National Park. Starting from the widespread idea that 'natural' places have a distinct atmosphere, this paper argues that alternative narratives of nature emerged in the post-War period. In this paper, I look at representations of 'natural' places in the short stories of John Cheever and the *Maximus Poems* of Charles Olson. Many of Cheever's stories reduce the experience of nature into a mediated response to image repositories that constitute pastoral America. Olson's poems, on the other hand, sublimate what Lawrence Buell calls 'place-sense' through the act of narration, generating an ur-response to nature.

15.10-15.45: Prof. Rainer Kazig: Ludwig Maximilians Universität München

Typical atmospheres of urban spaces

Empirical atmosphere research has hitherto often focused on striking locations (e.g. Rudesheim's Drosselgasse (Germany) or the Louvre pyramid in Paris). This paper, by contrast, looks at atmospheres of everyday places. It relates to a completed international research project on the dynamics of urban atmospheres. In this framework, the project in Germany aimed to record the dynamics of urban atmospheres, using a typology of atmospheres. The assumption was that despite their slight variability, typical atmospheres could be found that go beyond the individual case. In my paper, I wish to present the underlying theoretical understanding of atmospheres, the empirical approach, and selected results. Conceptually, the project builds on the understanding of atmospheres as a medium in the sensory relationship between people and environment. It is assumed here that because of their sensory skills, humans are permanently in touch with their environment. Changes in the environmental constellation that can be experienced through the senses affect people's bodily state (*Befindlichkeit*) accordingly. For empirical atmosphere research, this presents the task of describing and analysing the interplay between the environment that can be experienced through the senses and the bodily state. In order to achieve differentiated access to bodily state, we distinguish between emotional state, mode of attentiveness, and human motricity as forms of expressing bodily state.

15.45-16.20: Tim Flohr Sørensen, University of Aarhus

The aesthetics of vagueness: Being materially-affective

Whether we define atmosphere as located in the build environment, in the mood of the individual perceiver, in the co-presence of subjects and objects, or in social encounter between things and people, they seem to be slippery and only vaguely definable: what atmospheres are in themselves seems to remain elusive. This paper stipulates that part of the problem with understanding atmosphere is that the concept is approached as a noun, rather than an adjective. If we understand atmosphere not so much as conceptual entity, but as an effect, atmosphere may be appreciated as texturing the world and the perception of the world. This does not mean that atmosphere becomes easier to pin down; on the contrary, atmosphere fundamentally makes the boundaries between people, places and things fuzzy. But if atmosphere rests on a production of vagueness, then the academic challenge is to understand to what extent humans can share atmospheric effects, and how we can approach this vagueness analytically. To grasp this, the paper proposes a discourse on the materially-affective in order to appreciate the aesthetics of vagueness.