



Affective atmospheres

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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.

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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

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(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)

'affectual tribes', we find an odd archive made up of scattered speculations on the nature of impersonal and transpersonal affects. Most recently, a range of work has focused on forms of somnambulistic imitation as a way of understanding how atmospheres become contagious (see Thrift (2008) on mimetic rays or Brennan (2004) on transmission). Whilst there are substantial differences between these literatures, all draw out the ambiguities that surround the term atmosphere, and linked terms such as aura, mood or ambience. In the following section I want to consider just some of these ambiguities by way of phenomenology, specifically: atmospheres as finished and unfinished; atmospheres as a property of objects and a property of subjects; and atmospheres as reducible to bodies affecting other bodies and yet exceeding the bodies they emerge from.

3. Atmosphere

To think the relation between atmosphere and life I want to turn to a somewhat unlikely source – the mid-twentieth century phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne (1973 [1953]). Dufrenne provides one of the few explicit reflections on the concept of atmosphere in his classic work on the phenomenology of aesthetic experience. Echoing the concern with corporeal experience in phenomenology, Dufrenne's interest was with aesthetic experience in the Greek sense of *aistēsis* – 'sense experience'. What I want to draw from his work is the unfinished quality of affective atmospheres. Atmospheres are perpetually forming and deforming, appearing and disappearing, as bodies enter into relation with one another. They are never finished, static or at rest. Dufrenne's account of the dynamism of affective atmospheres was developed as part of an attempt to distinguish aesthetic objects from other types of object, where aesthetic objects are a "coalescence of sensuous elements" (ibid, 13). For Dufrenne, the "irresistible and magnificent presence" (ibid, 86) of aesthetic objects establish the conditions for representation to occur. Rather than re-present a world, a perceived work of art expresses a certain bundle of spatial-temporal relations – an 'expressed world'. Atmosphere is the term Dufrenne uses for how the 'expressed world' overflows the representational content of the aesthetic object as "[a] certain quality which words cannot translate but which communicates itself in arousing a feeling" (ibid, 178). Throughout *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, atmosphere is used interchangeably with other terms – including luminescence of meaning (188), interiority (376), and the unconditioned (194) – as part of a conceptual vocabulary attentive to the affective qualities of aesthetic objects.

The classic aesthetic 'affective qualities' would be the sublime, tragic, comic or beautiful. But Dufrenne also gives numerous other examples of what, after Ngai (2005), we could call minor atmospheres, including the "grace, lightness and innocence" of dance (Dufrenne, 1973: 76), the "nobility, fervor, majesty, [and] tranquility" of architecture (179), the "indifferent cruelty" of a writer like Zola (178), or "the lightness of childhood" in Woolf's *The Waves* (183). Nobility, grace, heaviness and so on are all names for singular affective qualities that emanate from the aesthetic object as a whole. Here Dufrenne describes more formally what an atmosphere is and does:

"Thus it [atmosphere] is a matter of a certain quality of objects or of beings, but a quality which does not belong to them in their own right because they do not bring it about. The quality in question is like a supervening or impersonal principle in accordance with which we say that there is an electric atmosphere or, as Trenet sang, that there is joy in the air. This principle is embodied in individuals or in things. It is somewhat like the collective consciousness that governs individual consciousness at times of change. Whether or not it is a principle of explanation,

it is at any rate a reality that we feel keenly when we come into contact with the group from which it emanates" (ibid, 168).

Note how Dufrenne does not settle on a clear definition of what an atmosphere is, instead he offers a series of approximations in order to attend to the aesthetic object. What is common across these approximations is that an atmosphere is a singular affective quality. And through this affective quality, the aesthetic object creates an intensive space-time. One that exceeds lived or conceived space-time:

"The architectural monument has a grandeur or a loftiness incommensurable with its surface or its height. The symphony or the novel has a rhythm, a force, or a restraint of which an objective measure like the metronome gives only an impoverished image. We should realize that, in seeking to grasp expression, we disclose an unpopulated world, one which is only the promise of a world. The space and time which we find there are not structures of an organized world but qualities of an expressed world which is a prelude to knowledge" (Dufrenne, 1973: 183)

The atmosphere of an aesthetic object discloses the space-time of an 'expressed world' – it does not re-present objective space-time or lived space-time. It creates a space of intensity that overflows a represented world organized into subjects and objects or subjects and other subjects. Instead, it is through an atmosphere that a represented object will be apprehended and will take on a certain meaning. Examples abound in Dufrenne's writings; a feeling of emptiness communicated by a chilling verse, a tragic feeling in Macbeth, or the motionless opacity of Cezanne's landscapes.

The intensive space-times expressed through aesthetic objects are not self-enclosed. For Dufrenne, the 'atmosphere' of the aesthetic object elicits a feeling or emotion in a spectator, viewer or listener which 'completes' the aesthetic object and 'surpasses' it (ibid, 521). The singular affective quality of an aesthetic object is 'open' to being 'apprehended' through feelings or emotions. What is interesting about this account, for my purposes, is that atmospheres are unfinished because of their constitutive openness to being taken up in experience. Atmospheres are indeterminate. They are resources that become elements within sense experience. Dufrenne invokes the ineffable when describing atmospheres. He also stresses that an atmosphere exceeds clear and distinct figuration because they both exist and do not exist. On the one hand, atmospheres require completion by the subjects that 'apprehend' them. They belong to the perceiving subject. On the other hand, atmospheres 'emanate' from the ensemble of elements that make up the aesthetic object. They belong to the aesthetic object. Atmospheres are, on this account, always in the process of emerging and transforming. They are always being taken up and reworked in lived experience – becoming part of feelings and emotions that may themselves become elements within other atmospheres.

Whilst I remain cautious about aspects of his account, Dufrenne helps us think of atmospheres in terms of singular affective qualities that express a certain world. From his work, we can think through how those affective qualities are constitutively open to being differently expressed in bodily feelings of being and differently qualified in named emotions. Dufrenne's emphasis is on the affective quality of aesthetic objects. However, it is not clear why we should restrict the production of singular affective qualities to sculpture, music, architecture or other self-enclosed aesthetic works. Epochs, societies, seasons, couples, places, buildings and much more can be said to be atmospheric, in the sense that they are animated by singular affective qualities (and the resonances, interferences, and tensions between different affective qualities). Note how Jameson (1998), to give but one example, describes the

atmosphere of 1950s United States as expressed in *American Grafitti*, or the turn-of-the-century atmosphere of E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*. This expansion of the concept of affective atmosphere is the starting point of Böhme's (1993, 2006) ecological aesthetics. It is risky. To describe the characteristic affective qualities of a complex assemblage such as a society or even a city, risks reification of the inexhaustible complexities of affective life. Yet I think it is worth exploring because it enables us to think further about the intensive spatialities of *atmos-spheres*.

Like Dufrenne, Böhme notes the ambiguous status of atmospheres, but lays more stress on their in-between status with regard to the subject/object distinction. Atmospheres are a-objective and a-subjective:

... atmospheres are neither something objective, that is, qualities possessed by things, and yet they are something thinglike, belonging to the thing in that things articulate their presence through qualities – conceived as ecstasies. Nor are atmospheres something subjective, for example determinations of a psychic state. And yet they are subjectlike, belong to subjects in that they are sense in bodily presence by human beings and this sensing is at the same time a bodily state of being of subjects in space. (Böhme, 1993: 122)

Böhme's basic definition of atmosphere shares much with Dufrenne but he puts more emphasis on the spatiality of atmospheres, describing them as "spatially discharged, quasi-objective feelings" (Böhme, 2006: 16). Beyond the emphasis on atmospheres as diffuse, the definition is vague. Deliberately so. Elsewhere, Böhme stresses that atmospheres are ambiguous with regard to their location. It is difficult to say 'where' an atmosphere is since "[t]hey seem to fill the space with a certain tone of feeling like a haze" (Böhme, 1993: 113–114). Here Böhme returns us to the materialist roots of the word atmosphere touched on previously – *atmos* to indicate a tendency for qualities of feeling to fill spaces like a gas, and *sphere* to indicate a particular form of spatial organization based on the circle. Together they enable us to consider how atmospheres surround people, things and environments:

Thus one speaks of the serene atmosphere of a spring morning or the homely atmosphere of a garden. On entering a room one can feel oneself enveloped by a friendly atmosphere or caught up in a tense atmosphere. We can say of a person that s/he radiates an atmosphere which implies respect, of a man or a woman that an erotic atmosphere surrounds them. (Böhme, 1993: 113–114)

There are two different spatialities being hinted at in this passage. The first – and most general – is the spatiality of the 'sphere' in the sense of a certain type of envelope or surround. Note how an atmosphere 'surrounds' a couple or one finds oneself 'enveloped' by an atmosphere. The center and circumference of an affective atmosphere may, however, be indefinite or unstable. Especially if an atmosphere is taken not only to occupy a space but to permeate it. The second spatiality is again spherical but it is, more specifically, a dyadic space of resonance – atmospheres 'radiate' from an individual to another. They appear and disappear alongside the dynamics of what Sloterdijk (2005) terms "being-a-pair". In both cases we find that atmospheres are interlinked with forms of enclosure – the couple, the room, the garden – and particular forms of circulation – enveloping, surrounding and radiating.

Atmospheres have, then, a characteristic spatial form – diffusion within a sphere. Returning to Deleuze and Guattari, we can say that atmospheres are generated by bodies – of multiple types – affecting one another as some form of 'envelopment' is produced. Atmospheres do not float free from the bodies that come together and apart to compose situations. Affective qualities emanate from the

assembling of the human bodies, discursive bodies, non-human bodies, and all the other bodies that make up everyday situations (Stewart, 2007). This is well known by those arts and sciences that aim to shape and manipulate atmospheres, albeit often phrased differently. Indeed, it is precisely the circumvention and circulation of atmospheres that are acted upon when atmospheres become the 'object' of explication and intervention. Think of how atmospheres are sealed off through protective measures such as gated communities or certain types of building design. Or how atmospheres are intensified by creating patterns of affective imitation in sports stadiums and concert halls. Practices as diverse as interior design, interrogation, landscape gardening, architecture, and set design all aim to know how atmospheres are circumvented and circulate. By creating and arranging light, sounds, symbols, texts and much more, atmospheres are 'enhanced', 'transformed', 'intensified', 'shaped', and otherwise intervened on (Böhme, 2006). If atmospheres proceed from and are created by bodies, they are not, however, reducible to them. This is Dufrenne's point. The singular affective qualities that are atmospheres – homely, serene, erotic and so on – exceed that from which they emanate. They are quasi-autonomous. Atmospheres are a kind of indeterminate affective 'excess' through which intensive space-times can be created.

4. The ambiguity of affect

The vague sense of atmosphere as a 'more' seems an appropriate place to finish. For me, the concept of atmosphere is good to think with because it holds a series of opposites – presence and absence, materiality and ideality, definite and indefinite, singularity and generality – in a relation of tension. We feel this tension if we 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 meteoric bodies, 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. Which means that the term atmosphere presents itself to us as a response to a question; how to attend to collective affects that are not reducible to the individual bodies that they emerge from?

Atmosphere is an interesting concept, then, because it unsettles the distinction between affect and emotion that has emerged in recent work on emotion, space and society as one answer to the question of how the social relates to the affective and emotive dimensions of life. That distinction has been caught up in the subjective/objective problematic via two oppositions: narrative/non-narrative and semiotic/asignifying. The terms have fallen on one or the other of those divides – affect with non-narrative and asignifying and emotion with narrative and semiotic (see Ngai, 2005). Affect with the impersonal and objective. Emotion with the personal and subjective. Invoking one or the other term has come to signal a basic orientation to the self, world and their interrelation (as well as in some cases a particular politics and ethics). Atmospheres do not fit neatly into either an analytical or pragmatic distinction between affect and emotion. They are indeterminate with regard to the distinction between the subjective and objective. They mix together narrative and signifying elements and non-narrative and asignifying elements. And they are impersonal in that they belong to collective situations and yet can be felt as intensely personal. On this account atmospheres are spatially discharged affective qualities that are autonomous from the bodies that they emerge from, enable and perish with. 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.

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