

Atmosphere (sensu Gernot Böhme)

Gernot Böhme

This article deals with what today can be called the theory of the atmosphere. The focus is on the concept of atmosphere, which Gernot Böhme (1993; 1995; 2006; 2017) developed as the fundamental concept and central object of his “new aesthetics”, following on from his “ecological aesthetics” (1989). In it he defines atmospheres as a typical intermediate phenomenon. In the following descriptions of the concept of atmosphere, reference is made from the outset to its potential application – in two main fields, namely aesthetics and art appreciation on the one hand and aesthetics of nature or environmental aesthetics on the other.

Citation and license notice:

Böhme, Gernot (2021): Atmosphere (sensu Gernot Böhme). In: Kirchhoff, Thomas (ed.): Online Encyclopedia Philosophy of Nature / Online Lexikon Naturphilosophie. ISSN 2629-8821. doi: 10.11588/oePN.2021.1.80607
This work is published under the Creative Commons License 4.0 (CC BY-ND 4.0).

The concept of atmosphere has been used as a scholarly term outside the natural sciences for about half a century. However, the term has been present in the general and poetic language of almost every European language since the 18th century, as a metaphor originating from the field of meteorology. There, it continues to refer to the upper air level of the earth. The word “atmosphere” derives from the ancient Greek words *ἀτμός* (*atmós*), which can be translated as steam, haze or breath, and *σφαῖρα* (*sphaira*): sphere. As a metaphor, the expression was then used more and more to describe *moods that were in the air*. The link that mediates the use of the term atmosphere in these senses is the experience of weather. It must be emphasised that this is not a matter of the weather conditions determined by natural science, but of weather as a subjective fact. As such, weather is always associated with a mood or a tendency to attune the mind in a certain way. A thunderstorm is threatening and frightening, stormy weather by the sea is refreshing, spring weather is cheerful.

Against this background, we can state: atmospheres are in every case something spatial. Thus they can also be described as mood-defining spaces or, conversely, as spatially extended moods. Apart from this characteristic, namely that atmospheres are always something spatial, the relationship to *moods* is already evident in the definition. Both terms have a close relationship, which, however, finds its limit precisely in the spatiality of atmospheres: moods, by

contrast, are more a characteristic of human inwardness. In a certain sense, however, the concept of mood is broader. We can very well speak of a mood that prevails in a ballroom or the mood of forest solitude. But in this case, more than with the concept of atmosphere, what we call a mood (*Stimmung*) that is in the air is so characterised because it has the tendency to attune (*stimmen*) the mind in a certain way.

As a technical term to designate spatially extended feelings, the term *atmosphere* – as already mentioned – has only been used since about 1950. Notabene: a number of other, related terms historically precede this usage, such as *Dunstkreis*, or *aura* in Walter Benjamin’s work or *Geist* in the sense of *spiritus* (see Hisayama 2010).

In the so-called New Phenomenology, atmospheres were subjected to extensive analysis by Hermann Schmitz (born 1928). The New Phenomenology sets itself the task of making human thought capable to conceive of involuntary life experience, i.e. that which perceptibly happens to the individual without them having deliberately planned it (Schmitz 2012: 39; cf. Schmitz et al. 2011). Schmitz thereby defines the concept of atmosphere as “indeterminate powers of feeling poured out into the expanse” (Schmitz [1969] 1988; cf. Schmitz et al. 2011: 243–245). Thus spatiality of feelings is key for Schmitz, because he deplors feelings’ *introjection*, namely their being located as determinations of the mind, an idea which can already be found in Democritus and Plato and is particularly

consistently elaborated in Kant, for whom feelings of pleasure and displeasure do not denote anything at all about the object (Schmitz 2000: 44 f.; cf. Schmitz et al. 2011: 247 f.). Schmitz calls this one of the *great failures of the European spirit*. In this, he is very much influenced by the investigations of Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) into *the numinous*, the central concept of Otto’s theory of religion (Otto [1917] 1923/2014). From this, Hermann Schmitz explains that his first broad application of the concept of atmosphere consists in an interpretation of the Greek world of the gods, specifically as *captivating powers* (Schmitz [1966] 1987), and it explains a certain resistance on his part to the idea that atmospheres could not only be experienced, but also *made or produced*.

A second source of the concept of atmosphere, in the technical sense given it by Gernot Böhme, can be found in the work of Hubert Tellenbach (1914–1994) – namely in the field of psychiatry. For Tellenbach (1968), the primordial phenomenon of atmosphere is the smell of the nest, that is, the smell that tells animals where they are at home and where they may feel secure. This second source is extraordinarily important because it addresses, as it were, a natural basis of atmospheric experiences or makes it clear that these are by no means limited to the human realm. From a phenomenological point of view, it is only natural to regard atmospheres as phenomena of consciousness. According to Tellenbach, by contrast, atmospheres are a thoroughly sensual phenomenon, not to say a physiological fact. For Tellenbach, paradigmatically, odours that impregnate a room are atmospheres.

Tellenbach’s concept of atmosphere is situated in the field of psychiatry, which means that it also finds its primary fields of application there. It is concerned with neuroses related to disorders of the olfactory region, olfactory idiosyncrasies and disorders in self-perception insofar as this is mediated by odours (Böhme 2020).

A third source of Gernot Böhme’s theory of atmospheres can be found in Christian Cay Lorenz Hirschfeld’s (1742–1792) *Theorie der Gartenkunst* (Hirschfeld 1779 ff., *Theory of Garden Art*, 2001). The term “atmosphere” is not used here, but Hirschfeld speaks of “natural scenes” in the English Garden that put visitors in particular frames of mind. According to

Hirschfeld, the natural scenes of the English Garden should be designed specifically in this sense, since they are not primarily sights but rather atmospheric spaces.

Hirschfeld already establishes a relationship to theatre with his use of the notion of *scene*. This continues when he defines the what-ness of atmospheres in terms of *characters*. The character of a natural scene is designated according to the direction in which it steers the mood of a spectator: a serene scene puts the visitor in a cheerful mood, a gentle melancholic one puts him or her in a melancholic mood. With the concept of the *character* of atmospheres, Hirschfeld has provided an important term for describing or classifying atmospheres, which should make it clear that they are not something purely subjective, projected by the spectator onto nature (e.g. the English Garden), but something objective that is able to influence the spectator – precisely to set the mood. In addition, Hirschfeld is significant as a historical source for the theory of atmospheres because of his turn to the practical. Although his book is called *Theorie der Gartenkunst (Theory of Garden Art)*, he is essentially concerned with how a garden or park should be designed so as to create the desired atmospheric scenes of nature. In doing so, he goes into great detail, e.g. indicating what kind of trees should be chosen for a particular natural scene, how the paths should be laid out, how attention should be paid to prospects, the distribution of light and dark, the role of ponds or watercourses and their sounds. He thus introduces a variety of *generative elements* with the help of which the garden artist can create scenes with a certain character (a certain atmosphere). For example, Hirschfeld gives detailed instructions on how to create a garden scene with a melancholic character: “A gently melancholic scenery is formed by the obstruction of all prospects; by depths and slopes; by thick bushes and copses, often by mere groups of tall, heavily leafed trees crowded close together, in the tops of which a hollow sound hovers; by still or dull murmuring waters, the sight of which is hidden; by foliage of a dark or blackish green, by low-hanging leaves and shadows spread everywhere; by the absence of anything that could announce life and activity. In such a region, sparse lights fall through only to protect the influence of darkness from the sad or fearful. Silence and solitude have their

home here. A bird fluttering about unsocially, an incomprehensible buzzing of unknown creatures, a wood pigeon singing in the hollow summit of a defoliated oak, or a lost nightingale lamenting its suffering in the wasteland – is already enough to set the scene apart” (Hirschfeld 1779: 211 f.¹). In this way Hirschfeld connects to the millennia-old art of stage design, to which he has already implicitly referred through his terminology (natural scene, characters).

Looking back on Hirschfeld, Gernot Böhme (born 1937) has described the art of stage design or skenography as a paradigm for the study of atmospheres (Böhme 2013: 101–111). This ancient art, which according to Aristotle’s testimony was already practised by Sophocles, deals with how to create a certain atmosphere in the stage space as a background or sounding board for the performance of a drama, by designing or painting the stage – hence the name *skenography*. Stage designers today do not use the term *atmosphere* but rather *climate*, an expression that is closely related to atmosphere as a metaphor. With the help of the paradigm of *stage design*, a second, productive perspective is developed for the study of atmosphere, in addition to the receptive approach favoured earlier. In this perspective, atmospheres are not determined by analysing the experiences they convey but rather by the generative factors through which they can be *produced*. In this context, however, the term “producing” is to be understood in inverted commas, since it is not a matter of making things but of setting conditions under which a spectator, or more generally a person who is present, gets the impression of a mood that prevails in a space. The generators are thus quite objective factors, such as

- light and colour
- spatial structure or objects with a specific suggestion of movement

- sound and noise
- synaesthesia, i.e. factors, especially surface structures, that allow synaesthetic qualities such as softness or warmth to be felt
- conventional generators, such as symbols, insignia and typical objects that stand for a certain era or style (1920s, cosiness, elegance, etc.).

Here, it must be emphasised that the generators have a thoroughly material and objective character but are not the building blocks of atmospheres. Instead they are merely conditions under which a subject can have the experience of an atmosphere of a certain character. The atmosphere is, in fact, a typical intermediate phenomenon, a phenomenon that occurs *between* object and subject. The objective generators are only the conditions under which a person who is bodily present in a certain space can have the experience of an atmosphere of a certain character.

Here, of course, the theory of atmosphere faces the problem of its intercultural validity and the question of whether different people can have different atmospheric experiences in one and the same space, for example a landscape or a park. These problems will not be dealt with in detail here. This much can be said, though: if one states that atmospheres are something subjective in their character, what is actually much more impressive is the fact that different subjects can perfectly well agree on what atmosphere prevails in a space. The art of stage design would be quite pointless if it did not convey the same or at least comparable experiences to a larger audience – admittedly of a certain cultural homogeneity. There is obviously a certain enculturation involved in the experience of atmospheres – this is classically referred to as the *formation of taste*.

¹ The German original reads: „Eine fanft-melancholifche Gegend bildet fich durch Verperrung aller Ausficht; durch Tiefen und Niedrigungen; durch dickes Gebüch und Gehölz, oft fchon durch bloße Gruppen von hohen ftarkbelaubten nahe an einander gedrängten Bäumen, in deren Gipfel ein hohles Geräufch fchwebt; durch ftillftehendes oder dumpfmurmeldes Gewäffer, deffen Anblick verfteckt ift; durch Laubwerk von einem dunkeln oder fchwärzlichen Grün, durch tiefherabhängende Blätter und überall verbreitete Schatten; durch die Abwefenheit alles

deffen, was Leben und Wirkfamkeit ankündigen kann. In einer folchen Gegend fallen fparfame Lichter nur durch, um den Einfluß der Dunkelheit vor dem Traurigen oder Fürchterlichen zu befchützen. Die Stille und die Einfamkeit haben hier ihre Heimath. Ein Vogel, der ungefellig umherflattert, ein unverftändliches Gefchwirre unbekannter Gefchöpfe, eine Holztaube, die in dem hohlen Gipfel einer entlaubten Eiche girrt, oder eine verirrte Nachtigall, die ihre Leiden der Einöde klagt — ift zur Ausftaffung der Scene fchon hinreichend“.

In the theory of atmosphere, then, there are two approaches, one reception-aesthetical, the other production-aesthetical. The first approach, pursued by Hermann Schmitz, analyses the experiences that a person physically present in a certain space can have, i.e. his or her bodily sensing of emotional impressions. The other approach analyses the creation of an atmosphere from the standpoint of objective factors and their constellation, which are regarded as the conditions of these subjective experiences. In each case, the reality of atmospheres presupposes a bodily present human being who *senses in his or her state of mind what kind of space he or she is in* (Böhme [1989] 1999). “Atmosphere is the common reality of the perceiver and the perceived. It is the reality of the perceived as the sphere of its presence and the reality of the perceiver insofar as he, sensing the atmosphere, is bodily present in a certain way” (Böhme 1995: 34).

From this arises the field of application of the theory of atmosphere for the development of an aesthetics of nature or environmental aesthetics. This was Böhme’s original motive for developing the concept of atmosphere in aesthetics.

Since the term *atmosphere* originated in meteorology, it is particularly suited to capturing the subjective, i.e. aesthetic, experiences of our environment: weather – a natural phenomenon – can be characterised by atmospheres insofar as it is subjectively experienced: as thundery, as autumn weather, as cheerful or depressing weather. This is why the concept of atmosphere is the central concept of an aesthetics of nature and the environment. It is particularly suitable for determining environmental experiences. The environment is not an object, let alone a mental image, but the nature or the built environment *in* which one is. Thus *landscape* as a topos of aesthetics of nature and environmental aesthetics denotes neither a sight nor an image: it is the subjectively experienced environment, given by the affective character it conveys to the environment’s inhabitant. Accordingly, a valley, for example, is not called serene because it resembles a serene person in some way, but because the atmosphere that the valley radiates is serene and this can put a bodily sentient person in a serene mood (Böhme 1995: 34). (For more detail, see Böhme [1996] 2019, especially the chapters “Das Wetter in der Sprache

der Gefühle”/“Weather in the Language of Feelings” and “Umweltästhetik”/“Environmental Aesthetics”).

In the end, one wonders why it was necessary to categorise the concept of atmosphere under the heading of a New Aesthetics. At that time, i.e. in the late 1980s, aesthetics was still essentially shaped by the ideas of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), that is, it amounted to an aesthetics of judgement, specifically a theory of the judgement of taste. Although the term aesthetics goes back to Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* (Baumgarten [1750/1758] 2009; see Gregor 1983), aesthetics had never really been, as Baumgarten intended, a theory of sensual cognition. With the concept of atmosphere, the fundamental object of sensual cognition was finally identified: atmosphere is that which is primarily given to the senses (see Böhme 2001).

Basic literature

- Böhme, Gernot [1989] 1999: Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik. [Towards an Ecological Aesthetics]. 3. Auflage. Frankfurt/M., Suhrkamp.
- Böhme, Gernot 1993: Atmosphere as the fundamental concept of a new aesthetics. In: Thesis Eleven 36 (1): 113–126. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/072551369303600107>.
- Böhme, Gernot [1995] 2013: Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik. 7., erweiterte und überarbeitete Auflage. Frankfurt/M., Suhrkamp.
- Böhme, Gernot 2017: The Aesthetics of Atmosphere. Edited by Jean-Paul Thibaud. London/New York, Routledge.

Literature

- Baumgarten, Alexander Gottlieb 1750: Aesthetica. Latin. Frankfurt/Oder, Kleyb.
- Baumgarten, Alexander Gottlieb 1758: Aestheticorum pars altera. Frankfurt/Oder, Kleyb.
- Baumgarten, Alexander Gottlieb [1750/1758] 2009: Ästhetik. Lateinisch-deutsch. Übersetzt, mit einer Einführung, Anmerkungen und Registern herausgegeben von Dagmar Mirbach. 2 Bände. Hamburg, Meiner.
- Böhme, Gernot [1989] 1999: Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik. [Towards an Ecological Aesthetics]. 3. Auflage. Frankfurt/M., Suhrkamp.

- Böhme, Gernot 1993: Atmosphere as the fundamental concept of a new aesthetics. In: *Thesis Eleven* 36 (1): 113–126. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/072551369303600107>.
- Böhme, Gernot 1995: *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*. Frankfurt/M., Suhrkamp.
- Böhme, Gernot [1995] 2013: *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*. 7., erweiterte und überarbeitete Auflage. Frankfurt/M., Suhrkamp.
- Böhme, Gernot 2001: *Ästhetik. Vorlesungen über Ästhetik als allgemeine Wahrnehmungslehre*. München, Fink.
- Böhme, Gernot [2006] 2013: *Architektur und Atmosphäre*. München, Fink
- Böhme, Gernot 2017: *The Aesthetics of Atmosphere*. Edited by Jean-Paul Thibaud. London/New York, Routledge.
- Böhme, Gernot 2019: *Leib. Die Natur, die wir selbst sind*. Berlin, Suhrkamp.
- Böhme, Gernot 2020: Geruch und Atmosphäre. In: Wolf, Barbara/Julmi, Christian (eds): *Die Macht der Atmosphären*. Freiburg/München, Alber: 33–40.
- Gregor, Mary J. 1983: Baumgarten's "Aesthetica". In: *The Review of Metaphysics* 37 (2): 357–385. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20128010>.
- Hirschfeld, Christian Cay Lorenz 1779–1785: *Theorie der Gartenkunst*, 5 Bände. Leipzig, Weidmanns Erben und Reich.
- Hirschfeld, Christian Cay Lorenz [1779–1785] 2001: *Theory of Garden Art*. [Abridged Edition]. Edited and Translated by Linda B. Parshall. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Hisayama, Juho 2010: *Magie als Inszenierung der Atmosphäre? Eine Interpretation des "spiritus"-Begriffs von Marsilio Ficino im Hinblick auf den philosophischen Atmosphärenbegriff und das japanische Alltagswort "ki"*. In: Ogawa, Akio/Tamura, Kazuhiko/Trauden, Dieter (eds): *Wie alles sich zum Ganzen webt. Festschrift für Yoshito Takahashi zum 65. Geburtstag*. Tübingen, Stauffenburg: 45–59.
- Otto, Rudolf [1917] 1923: *The Idea of the Holy. An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*. Translated by John W. Harvey. Second Edition. London, Oxford University Press.
- Otto, Rudolf [1917] 2014: *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*. München, Beck.
- Schmitz, Hermann [1966] 1987: *System der Philosophie, Band I, 2. Teil: Der Leib im Spiegel der Kunst*. 2. Auflage. Bonn, Bouvier.
- Schmitz, Hermann [1969] 1988: *System der Philosophie, Band III: Der Raum, 2. Teil: Der Gefühlsraum*. 2. Auflage. Bonn, Bouvier.
- Schmitz, Hermann 2000: *Die Verwaltung der Gefühle in Theorie, Macht und Phantasie*. In: Benthien, Claudia/Fleig, Anne/Kasten, Ingrid (eds): *Emotionalität. Zur Geschichte der Gefühle*. Köln/Weimar/Wien, Böhlau: 42–59.
- Schmitz, Hermann 2012: *Gefühle als Atmosphären*. In: Heibach, Christiane (ed.): *Atmosphären. Dimensionen eines diffusen Phänomens*. München, Fink: 39–56.
- Schmitz, Hermann/Müllan, Rudolf Owen/Slaby, Jan 2011: *Emotions outside the box – the new phenomenology of feeling and corporeality*. In: *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 10 (2): 241–259. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-011-9195-1>.
- Tellenbach, Hubert 1968: *Geschmack und Atmosphäre. Medien menschlichen Elementarkontaktes*. [Taste and Atmosphere]. Salzburg, Müller.