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Edited by Dan-Eugen Ratiu and Connell Vaughan

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# *'Atmosphere' as a Core Concept of Weather Aesthetics*

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ABSTRACT. The development of weather aesthetics is based on the reflection of the art-centered aesthetic tradition and of the human-nature relationship under contemporary conditions. Starting from a fundamental understanding of aesthetics as a theory of general perception which was first expounded in the 18th century by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, the focus of weather aesthetics is not on the formal properties of weather-related objects, but rather on the interaction between perceiving individuals and perceived weather phenomena as well as the wide-ranging sensuous experiences generated from this interaction. This article aims to clarify how the aesthetic concept *atmosphere* developed by contemporary German philosophers provides a vital contribution to a better understanding of the complexity of weather's spatial-temporal structure and rhythm as well as the corresponding perceptual properties.

## 1.

Weather plays a significant part in our daily life. When people meet each other, they often exchange information about weather conditions: it is warm or cold, bright or cloudy, windy or calm... Weather is “a subject that shapes the script of everyday life ... a subject that touches everyone” (May, 2003, p. 22). Usually, weather research is considered as a branch of natural science. We obtain the information about weather from daily weather forecast which, by means of quantitative and/or experimental methods, concentrates on the factual existence of weather events. Weather conditions are thus preordained by various parameters before we experience them with our own bodies. Consequently, our immediate, tactile sensation is relegated to a symbolic level through various weather data and weather signs.

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As a recently developed topic of aesthetic of nature, weather aesthetics is dedicated to exploring weather-related conditions from an aesthetic point of view and thus provides an alternative approach to the science-oriented weather research. Starting from a fundamental understanding of aesthetics as a theory of general perception which was first expounded in the 18th century by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, here, special attention is paid to the wide-ranging human sensual experiences of weather events and processes. The development of weather aesthetics can be attributed to the reflection of the art-centered aesthetic tradition. In the modern Western context, aesthetic experience is mostly identified with art appreciation. In this case, little attention was paid to the wider range of non-artistic experiences<sup>2</sup>. The art-centered approach led to a narrowing of the aesthetic field of vision and is subject to wide-spread criticism from contemporary aestheticians. As Arnold Berleant pointed out explicitly, different areas of the living world are interconnected. Our ultimate freedom lies not in underestimating or denying certain areas in order to favor others, but in acknowledging and understanding all of them. This does not mean that all areas have equal value, but means that all activities, processes and participants constituting nature are equally important and should be taken seriously (Berleant, 1992, p. 9). Against this backdrop, non-artistic experiences which cannot be categorized as aesthetic objects in the sense of traditional aesthetics of art, including the experience of weather, gradually attracted the attention of aestheticians.

In the ground-breaking article *The Aesthetics of Weather*, Yuriko Saito discusses the unique properties of weather as an aesthetic object as well as the corresponding aesthetic experience. In her point of view, as an object that everyone has to perceive and experience, weather is not a stationary object, but a constantly changing process which surrounds and interacts with our whole body. Correspondingly, the perception of weather is essentially a multi-sensorial experience, along with various practical

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<sup>2</sup> Contrary to the modern Western aesthetics focusing on art-related objects and activities, the aesthetics in East Asia has long regarded the non-art practices as an integral part. For example, in the traditional Chinese and Japanese discourses, the objects and activities of everyday life occupy a significant position.



interests (Saito, 2005, p. 156). From this it can be deduced that weather aesthetics concentrates on the embedding of man into weather-related natural processes and is primarily concerned with the interaction between perceiving individuals and perceived weather conditions. The focus is thereby not on the formal properties of weather-related objects, but rather on the sensuous experience generated from this interaction.

In the following, I will argue that the concept *atmosphere* (Atmosphäre) developed by contemporary German philosophers is of crucial relevance for deepening the understanding of the above-mentioned issue. With this concept, weather aesthetics can provide a better explanation as to how to improve human sensitivity of weather's spatial-temporal structure and rhythm.

The first step is to give an overview of its development and then clarify three representative research approaches.

## 2.

Etymologically speaking, the term *atmosphere* referred to “gaseous mass emanating from celestial bodies and surrounding them” (Schultz, 1996, p. 454) Later it designated “the air layer around a planet, the gases enveloping a planet or a star, and especially the aerial envelope of the earth” (Schultz, 1996, p. 454) Since the middle of the 18th century, this concept went beyond the physio-meteorological scope to describe the smell from someone or something (Schultz, 1996, p. 454) In the past decades, the subject of atmosphere has been attracting more interest among aestheticians. This transformation is based on the fact that since the second half of the 20th century, social scientists and humanists have turned attention to vague, ambiguous and invisible phenomena. Moreover, — perhaps more significant for the aesthetic investigation in this field — bodily sensuousness, which is considered as an essential prerequisite for atmospheric experience, has been placed in the foreground of the contemporary philosophical aesthetics.

The German psychiatrist Hubert Tellenbach is a pioneer in the socio-scientific research of atmosphere. The focus of his study is on the role of oral senses in treating psychopathological diseases. According to

Tellenbach, oral sensual perception is essentially a kind of cognitive process which contributes to revealing the essence of the world (Hauskeller, 2014, p. 50). The meaning obtained from this process is atmospheric. An atmospheric attunement is crucial for developing harmonious interpersonal relationship. Otherwise, people may face the risk of suffering mental illness. The pioneering position of Tellenbach's investigation is mainly characterized by the tentative exploration of the following aspects:

- a) Atmosphere is fundamental for developing the communication between man and the surroundings;
- b) Atmosphere cannot be objectified. On the contrary, it exists exclusively in bodily perception;
- c) Atmosphere is inexpressible and hence an atmospheric communication is essentially non-verbal.

Hermann Schmitz, the founder of the New Phenomenology, has been dedicating himself to integrating the exploration of atmosphere into his philosophical considerations of emotions. Contrary to conventional thoughts which considered emotions as private psychological states, emotions in Schmitz's context transcend the subjective boundary and manifest themselves as spatially outpouring atmospheres (Schmitz, 2009, p. 79) which are characterized by the following points:

- a) Emotions are atmospheres which can be objectively perceived, without necessarily being internalized;
- b) As atmospheric ambiances, emotions are corporeally poignant forces.

According to Schmitz, although subjective correlation is a necessary precondition for atmospheric emotions, the focus is laid on their objective quality. In this respect, atmospheres manifest themselves as free-floating phenomena having a high degree of independence (Böhme, 2013, pp. 30). However, Schmitz ignores the fact that the so-called objectively existing emotions are also the results of the sensual experience from the external

surroundings. The way of their existence actually depends on how experiencers perceive them.

Gernot Böhme's studies are recognized as the most influential contribution to the integration of atmosphere into aesthetics. According to Böhme, atmospheres are ubiquitous phenomena which exert far-reaching influence on our lives. Starting from this point, he dedicates himself to studying the relation between objective properties (everyday objects, artworks, elements of nature) and atmospheres they radiate (Böhme, 2013, p. 35). Special emphasis is placed on atmospheric reception and production in various situations. Böhme never gave a single definition of atmosphere. Instead, he describes the features of this phenomenon from several dimensions:

- a) Atmosphere is an indefinitely diffused, emotionally poignant power whose ontological status is vague and inexpressible;
- b) Atmosphere is a tuned space affecting and even modifying human moods;
- c) Atmosphere is neither a purely subjective state, nor an objective thing, but essentially a quasi-object constructed by both perceiving subject and perceived object.

Based on the current discussions, the meaning of atmosphere can be interpreted as follows:

*As a sensuous reality constructed by perceiving subject and perceived object, atmosphere is neither a purely subjective state, nor an objective thing, but essentially a quasi-object pervaded by a specific emotional quality. In this manner, human situation and external conditions are corporeally brought together.*

In this connection, particular attention should be given to the following aspects:

- a) Atmosphere is the first object that is perceived. In other words, what is primarily given or experienced, is not thing-in-itself, but

atmosphere. The experience of atmosphere is usually characterized by synaesthetic effects arising from the interaction of different senses;

- b) As sensuous reality, atmosphere is primarily corporeally experienced. In this aspect, the role of lived body (Leib) moves to the foreground. As the access to atmosphere, lived body contributes to a situation where on the one hand the meaning of atmosphere is conveyed in a sensuously ascertainable, holistic manner, and on the other atmospheric manifestations are variable, unpredictable and uncontrollable;
- c) Despite the diversity of atmospheric phenomena under different circumstances, a specific atmosphere radiates a single emotional quality pervading the whole space. Furthermore, this single quality is not constant and unchangeable, but finds itself in a dynamic process composed of different phases – emergence, strengthening, weakening, disappearance.
- d) Although the existence of atmosphere is based on individual corporeal experience, it may have the same meaning for several perceivers in the same situation because of the quasi-objective qualities of atmosphere, as well as the common biophysiological, sociocultural and psychological structures of perceivers. In this case, atmosphere is communicable.

### 3.

The introduction of the concept *atmosphere* in the field of weather aesthetics makes it possible for us to rethink the aesthetic relation between man and weather-related events in a widely cultivated, humanized world. Here, I try to scrutinize this issue through three aspects.

First, the concept of atmosphere offers a multidimensional approach towards the aesthetic human-weather relationship. As previously described, the prerequisite for experiencing atmosphere is the full-body immersion into the environment, or the corporal integration into the whole situation. In this regard, there is a connection to the concept of aesthetic engagement

developed by Berleant. As an alternative to the Kantian aesthetic notion *disinterestedness* which focused on a contemplative, distancing attitude towards aesthetic appreciation, aesthetic engagement concentrates on active participation in the appreciative process which concerns the contextuality of aesthetic experience, the complete perceptual involvement and the interplay of different sense modalities. In this sense, aesthetic engagement prioritizes a holistic, participatory approach to understanding aesthetic appreciation which is essentially “perceptually active, direct, and intimate.”(Berleant 2013). Both the concepts of atmosphere and aesthetic engagement emphasize that man is primarily not an extra-worldly, rational being, but an inner-worldly corporeal being. As the intersection between the self-experience and the experience of the surroundings, the body - primarily the lived body - forms an immediate, sensual connection between man and his environment, which basically determines the state of Being-in-the-world.

So in atmospheric experiences, we meet weather sensually. The natural scenes which we experience, such as sunshine, wind, rain, thunder or lightning, are not purely objective reality, but atmospheric phenomena which can only be grasped through a co-present body-being. In atmospheric experiences, the body embeds man, together with his multifarious ways of perception and sense experiences, into weather processes so that perceiving individuals and perceived weather conditions are interrelated with each other and merged into a unified whole. Correspondingly, an infinite range of perceptual possibilities, such as cheerful, inspiring, serious, melancholic, oppressive, awesome will enter into the field of weather aesthetics.

Particularly to be highlighted here is the affective dimension. The concept *affective involvement* (affektive Betroffenheit) has become a hot topic in relation to the aesthetic research of atmosphere. Affective involvement concerns an emotional state which is simultaneously linked with the experience of the existence of space and substance and of the awareness of the presence of our own body. If the perception is always connected with the feeling of a particular environment, this is largely characterized by an emotional association with this environment. For example, weather changes usually exert impact on the rhythm and the preservation of our life. In the process of observing weather phenomena, the

emotional factors can be integrated into the observing behaviors as well. Therefore, in describing weather conditions, we often use expressions which also show our corresponding emotional states, such as brilliant sunshine, gentle wind and bitter cold. Moreover, we can even perceive our emotional fluctuations resulting from weather changes. In this regard, a specific correlation between emotions and weather phenomena develops.

Second, with the concept of atmosphere, weather aesthetics can effectively transform the aesthetic approach based on the thing-ontology (Ding-Ontologie). The thing-ontology has dominated the European philosophy since ancient Greek times (Böhme, 2001, p. 55). On this basis, "the actual being" (Böhme, 2001, p. 55) was defined as "a thing, a substance or something between the substances" (Böhme, 2001, p. 55). The differences between things are characterized by various objective qualities such as size, shape, weight, temperature, texture, color, etc. For instance, Kant's aesthetics was dedicated to the study of the forms of things. In his studies, he often used the examples of flowers, insects and birds essentially belonging to the collection of things (Böhme, 2001, p. 55). The domination of the thing-ontology led to a situation in which little attention was paid to the interaction between feelings and environmental factors.

Currently, there are still some aestheticians trying to integrate scientific knowledge into the analysis of aesthetic experience of nature and concentrating on objective qualities of natural objects. Such research ignores the fact that the so-called purely objective world is an abstract entity which contains countless spatiotemporal possibilities for its manifestation. Actually, our relationship with the environment in a certain place and at a particular time primarily exists in a sensually perceptible way, and this existence is essentially atmospheric. Correspondingly, the emphasis of the weather-related aesthetic research should be laid upon the immediate sensual experience of a certain weather phenomenon in the here and now. Take a rainbow as an example. From the perspective of the natural sciences, the rainbow is undoubtedly a material object whose information is passively absorbed by human organs. However, this point of view neglects the interaction between the objective qualities and the subjective conditions. In order to appropriately perceive the rainbow, there should be a corresponding

relationship between the angle of the sun-drop-observer and of the drop-observer-antisolar point. In this case, the manifestation of the rainbow cannot be independent of the position of the observer. Furthermore, the same rainbow may manifest itself differently for several adjacent observers due to their biophysical, psychological and spiritual disparities.

Third, the concept of atmosphere contributes to promoting transcultural studies in the field of weather aesthetics. As mentioned above, the atmospheric experience is not solely limited to the individual sphere. Instead, it is often influenced by sociocultural conditions. The sensory impressions can thus be intensified by a specific historical and cultural framework. The actions of perceiving individuals in the same socio-cultural context can correspond to each other and eventually form a common style. In this sense, Thibaud points out that each atmosphere is related to a certain action style which can be found in all perceivers under the same conditions (Thibaud, 2003, p. 289).

Likewise, the atmospheric experience of weather phenomena is not in an unmediated way. Rather, it is influenced by the particular cultural context in which we live. The atmospheric experience of weather in the traditional Chinese culture is cited here as just one example among many others. In China, the close correlation between man and weather conditions relied on its longstanding cultural tradition which, to a large extent, was shaped by the agricultural lifestyle. On the one hand, weather phenomena affected the formation of the Chinese sociocultural lifestyle, on the other hand, the Chinese sociocultural factors influenced the way of perceiving weather events. In this context, traditional Chinese artists showed the high regard for the interaction between weather phenomena and bodily perception and were devoted to depicting various weather-related atmospheres, primarily through landscape paintings. In this regard, negative weather was a particularly popular topic among Chinese artists. Negative weather events, such as rain, snow, fog, haze, smoke and mist, obscure the clarity of the sky, reduce the visibility of the surroundings and convey the impression of blurring and uncertainty. This enables perceiving individuals to participate more actively in atmospheric-aesthetic experiences.

In his representative monograph "The Lofty Message of Forest and Streams", the Chinese landscape painter Guo Xi (ca.1020–1090) wrote the following words, "The clouds and vapors of real landscapes are not the same at the four seasons. In spring, they are light and diffused, in summer rich and dense, in autumn scattered and thin, in winter dark and solitary." Guo intended to describe the interaction of clouds and water with the four seasons. The cycle of the seasons causes the regular changes of clouds and vapors and, in turn, the changes of clouds and vapors endow the four seasons with different atmospheric properties (spring: light and diffused, summer: rich and dense, autumn: scattered and thin, winter: dark and solitary). Based on this analysis, Guo made a short summary, "When such effects can be seen in pictures, the clouds and vapors have an air of life." On this basis, what is crucial for a landscape painter is not to exactly imitate the natural world, but to create an atmospheric effect which is related to a resonance space resulting from the perception of the interplay between mountains, rivers, vegetation and weather events.

## **Conclusion**

Currently, weather aesthetics is still in its infancy. But, as a subject area of aesthetics of nature, it has considerable potential. The development of hi-technology has led to the situation that the sphere of cultivated nature is being incessantly expanded. In this connection, weather can be considered as an exception among natural objects and phenomena, for the reason that today it is still difficult for human beings to accurately predict weather conditions and effectively influence weather processes. Weather therefore displays the limits of human possibilities and reminds us that not every aspect of the natural world is subject to our control and can be changed at our will. In this regard, weather aesthetics plays a significant role in deepening our understanding of the human-nature-relationship under contemporary conditions. As Saito points out, "Accepting and submitting ourselves to a natural force that cannot be tamed by humans does not necessarily have to be a disappointing or frustrating experience. It can be a source of aesthetic pleasure, if we learn to humble ourselves to gratefully



receive and celebrate the positive aspects of its gift to us" (Saito, 2005, p. 172).

In the weather-related aesthetic research, special attention should be given to the concept of atmosphere. In fact, at least in the European cultural world, the aesthetic investigation of weather phenomena has largely evolved out of the aesthetic research of atmospheres. In a sense, the former constitutes an essential part of the latter. The concept of atmosphere reminds us that at different times, in different places, a thing may manifest itself differently. This manifestation is connected with the wholeness of what is being experienced at this moment, at this location. A decisive factor is not what we perceive, but how we perceive something. With this concept, we know that different ways of perceiving weather conditions may produce different forms of atmospheres. "Our experience of weather is thus thoroughly intertwined with and entrenched in our particular circumstances and activities, affecting and being affected by where we are and what we do" (Saito, 2005, p. 160). In this sense, the concept of atmosphere provides a vital contribution to the development of further perspectives of the sensual relationship with weather conditions.

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