

Singularity or Multiplicity of Aura, Atmosphere, and Environment/Place: Dialectic of Time and Space

Lukáš Makky*

University of Presov

ABSTRACT: The paper is based on the assumption that the relationship and interconnection between aura (Benjamin 1935) and atmosphere is more intense and complex than Böhme (2017) claimed. The aim of the paper is therefore to analyse, discuss, and define the relationship and structural connection between aura and atmosphere and to argue that the aura of multiple objects, situated in one place, is necessary to the ontology of the atmosphere. At the centre of this analysis will be a case study of the concrete industrial area of ŽPA Križik in Prešov (Slovakia), the identity of which was created by the statue of ‘Working Woman’ (1985). Later changes in the atmosphere of this environment were always tied to the destiny/actual situation of this statue. If we assume that this statue has an aura that was created with its origin (time and space of creation), we open the question of the relationship between the aura of this statue and the atmosphere of its environment. If there is one aura, how can there be more atmospheres of one place? Or, is there only one atmosphere, but we can interact/feel only some of its layers at a time? This question about the singularity and multiplicity of aura, atmosphere, and space, as an outcome of the dialectic of time and space, will be the main subject of the analysis. Therefore, the analysis is based on three premises: (1) aura (of an object) is a quality that we identify and feel when we interact (experience) with the object/or when we interact with a natural phenomenon; (2a) we need to be part of the atmosphere to be able to experience it; (2b) but we are not just perceiving atmosphere, we are shaping it; (3) the aesthetics of atmospheres is concerned with “spaces and spatiality” (Böhme 2017, p. 26), but the notion of aura is defined by space, but also by time (Benjamin 1935).

* Email: lukas.makky@unipo.sk

Atmosphere as a fundamental notion of modern aesthetics (Böhme, 2017) was of great interest through the last decades of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st Century. It is a key concept in the aesthetics of public spaces, everyday aesthetics, urban aesthetics and more. Besides Gerold Böhme (1995, 2017), a significant contribution was made by Tonino Griffero (2014, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2023) who understands landscape as a form of atmosphere and works with the human emotions and body in environment (emotional atmosphere), by Richard Shusterman (2019) who spreads its application in the area of somaesthetic, by Daniel Pavia (2023) who speaks of atmosphere and its significance for tourism, or more recently by Nicola Di Croce (2025).

Even if the “atmospheric” discourse is quite recent, the existence of atmosphere as such, and its philosophical identification, are defined by an older concept: Walter Benjamin’s (1969) concept of aura. This origin point of the concept is important, even if Böhme (2017, p. 14) understands it (only) as a notion/theoretical concept that preceded the concept of atmosphere, because the understanding and problematic nature of aura as such explains the most distinctive aspects of atmosphere. The paper will build its argument upon this close connection of aura and atmosphere through an analysis of concrete urban space: the former ZPA Krížik factory located in Prešov (Slovakia) on Solivar Street. This environment was a subject of great change in a span of just over forty years, and therefore can fundamentally show us different aspects and temporal layers of one place/space, and it can therefore be a challenge for the concept of aura and atmosphere.

The main focus will be on time and space as crucial aspects of both notions, but their ontological significance will play a different role and be of different importance in each. Time and space play an important role in any experience of a concrete place: time and space of the experience, time of the place, space of the time, and this space-time continuum can show us different aspects of one place, or rather, different places, even if the experienced environment is the same. It is almost as if there are more places at the same time and space, or, at least, it can feel this way to us.

The aim of the paper is to identify similarities and interconnections between both notions and define the ontological relationship between aura and atmosphere, and therefore, analyze why aura and atmosphere are different, but connected, concepts. This argument will lead us to the central issue of this paper: How many atmospheres and auras of one place are there? If the

atmosphere (or aura, or both) creates an identity of the place, can we say that people, by their interaction with and entrance into the atmosphere, create different places, or layers of them? If atmosphere is defined by the place and time of the experience of this place, does it mean that the atmosphere is immune to change, and that everything is in the eye of the recipient?

1. How many identities/versions can one place have?

The factory site of ZPA Križik as an object of analysis was chosen because of its history and different traceable patterns of the past. This location, a former industrial area of Prešov, is located between a road that connects the city's biggest housing estate with the rest of the city, yet, paradoxically, is situated in "nature". This relation, an oxymoron and visible dialectic of nature and factory site, was (and still is) responsible for the first impression of this site. The identity and, therefore, the atmosphere, is not created by the objects that are situated here, but by the context and the environment as a whole.

The site is a former factory from a former regime, with a representation of an art style from a former time, situated in a former abandoned factory, and a former construction site. Like everything that creates the origin of this place, this environment, and its emotional evaluation (emotional atmosphere), is connected with that time. Almost everything except the current design/situation is a thing of the past. Everything is visually taken out of context. However, when interacting with this public space, any recipient or inhabitant of the city will clearly recognize, or even feel, its identity. They will not be able to explain it, but they might feel it, and their experience will be shaped by this undeniable and inexpressible feeling.

The place was defined for most of its existence by the sculpture of the Working Woman by Ján Hučko from 1985 (fig. no 1). This sculpture from the late socialist period came to be a kind of confirmation of the past identity of the factory and a co-creator of the atmosphere of the place. However, because of frequent changes to this area, this atmosphere already belongs to the past and nowadays looks and feels totally different. But what has not changed is the feeling of the place created by the aforementioned sculpture. Even now, the atmosphere of the place is created by its absence (not entirely consciously). This may sound paradoxical because the first big change, except for the obsolescence and ageing of the factory building, happened in 2011 when somebody (during the night) (re)painted the sculpture, and the Working Woman started

to look like the mascot of the McDonald's fast food chain (fig. no. 2), which sparked heated reactions from the town's inhabitants.

We can find a symbolic shift in this change, or interpret it as a reaction from a capitalist point of view to the socialistic past, but what is more important is that the place, its identity, and atmosphere rapidly changed. What is particularly fascinating is the fact that if you looked at the sculpture from the street, you did not see the figure/its form, but the illusion of a sculpture that was nicely painted. When you came closer, this illusion, this painting, was surpassed by the structure and shape of the sculpture, and you were looking at a painted sculpture of the Working Woman. This "duality" seemed almost comical. The sculpture camouflaged its identity. At the same time, it subverts the atmosphere of the environment, which looks like a 'cut-out' from post-communist reality, like a still-life with a crumbling, exhaust-fume-stained statue, with a deteriorating and long-defunct building in the background. The new form of the statue, or its new layers, negates its own past, destroys its own aura, and is layered with a new being. However, at the same time, in combination with or in the context of the surrounding environment, this new version (alternation) of the sculpture created a new atmosphere, and slowly started to be part of the environment again. The sculpture returned to being in the middle of it all.

This environment underwent another transformation in 2024. In the spring, the long-awaited redevelopment and transformation of the entire area into apartments and a shopping center was announced. However, before the building process began, demolition works needed to start and, again, the sculpture was in the middle of the action. A frequent question in Prešov was: What will happen to the McDonald's/Working Woman statue in front of the old factory? Interest in the sculpture that had become an important part of public space in Prešov in just thirteen years is remarkable, but it shows, at the same time, how quickly something can be incorporated into a public space and become part of its identity. During the last one and a half years, the statue was removed (not destroyed), the shopping center was built, and the rest of the site is still in the process of being rebuilt (fig. no. 3).

Why is this situation interesting? From the perspective of the constant transformation of public space, it is like a generic story of every post-socialist country. But this environment is special, because one statue constantly changed its character, its atmosphere, and our understanding of it, and therefore one object with aura (as I will argue in the paper) was responsible for the

structure of the atmosphere of the examined space. The environment under study could therefore be defined by six time periods of an atmosphere, or rather by six atmospheres:

1. the original factory, before the installation of the statue of the Working Woman;
2. the original factory site with the statue of the Working Woman in the era of socialism, i.e. in the era when the site was functional;
3. the abandoned site of the factory with the statue of the Working Woman in the post-socialist period;
4. the abandoned and crumbling factory site with the statue of a Working Woman repainted as a McDonald's fast-food mascot, from 2011;
5. the transitional phase (2024 – 2025) during which the old atmosphere slowly and gradually disappeared, but the construction site did not offer a new atmosphere (except the atmosphere of a construction site, identical to other such sites);
6. the site with its shopping center and flats, still not completed and therefore only a matter of the future.

2. Atmosphere

The notion of atmosphere “implies a certain affective quality of (lived and non-geometrical) space” (Griffero & Tedeschini 2019, p. 2), and is often understood as an “emotional space that involves one’s body” (see Shusterman 2019), that we experience and “whose atmospheric resonances can only be described from our first-person perspective” (Griffero & Tedeschini 2019, p. 2). Everything is thus, from a somaesthetic point of view, based on bodily sensations, since atmosphere is the result of individual, intuitive, and direct experience. Atmosphere is a feeling that is separate from emotion or mood; it is not a private matter but is objectively layered in the environment and functions as a “qualitative-sentimental prius of every sensible [...] encounter with the world” (Griffero 2020, p. 264).

Atmospheres are “quasi-things” (Böhme 2017) which do not exist in physical form, but, as Di Stefano (2017) noted, they are identifiable, and therefore we can recognize them through perception. But we need to focus this perception on something. According to Griffero (2020, p. 265), Böhme understood his New Aesthetic (the central notion is atmosphere) as a “general theory of perception”, but in his “quasi-things” understanding of atmosphere, he cannot

completely exclude (material) objects from his thoughts. Atmosphere is related to persons, space, and nature (Ševčík 2024): it is “something between the subject and the object” (Böhme 2017, p. 25), yet neither of them in their fullest. Therefore, Böhme (2017, p. 25) explained the aesthetics of atmosphere as something that must “mediate between the aesthetics of reception and the aesthetics of the product or of production”, which caused the indeterminacy of atmosphere. It primarily concerns their “ontological status”: we are not sure whether we should attribute them to the objects or to the environments in which these objects are embedded, or whether we should rather attribute them to the subjects by whom these atmospheres are experienced (Ševčík 2024, pp. 119).

With his exclusion of the properties of aesthetic phenomena, Shusterman (2019) thinks about the notion of atmospheres in the somatic sense a little bit differently. Atmosphere as emotional space is more about our feelings of aesthetic phenomena, even if their properties and different aspects create the conditions for atmosphere to exist and to be visible. The question is whether we are able to feel some mood, some emotion, or experience some special space and therefore to identify and experience the atmosphere of this place, if we exclude the materiality and structure of the objects, and visible impulses of the place, from our perception. This is where the question about the role of auratic objects for the existence of atmosphere arises.

3. Aura

Aura is, in discourse, usually understood as a property of a work of art, but Benjamin (1969) actually connected it to (1) artefacts that were created by human hands in a certain place (here) and time (now) and to (2) natural phenomena that are experienced in a certain place (here) and time (now). In this second, but ontologically speaking, primary, example of aura, Benjamin talks about the uniqueness of our experience, and he is paradoxically speaking about experiencing natural phenomena like hills, wind, sunlight on a face, etc. Therefore, about phenomena that weren't created by human hands or minds, but were “just” experienced by them.

According to this understanding, aura does not reflect only the temporal horizon of the object, but rather the temporal and spatial horizon of perception itself. Here and now, as a spatial and temporal element, determines the originality, uniqueness, and non-repeatability of the aesthetic experience and is a kind of ‘guarantee’ of the originality and uniqueness of the created artefact

(not necessarily artistic uniqueness), which cannot be reproduced at another time and in another space; *ergo*, by anyone else. Aura, in this context, then possesses any object, artefact, or subject that is determined and ontologically defined by the identification of the place and time of its creation, or the experience in the case of a phenomenon that cannot be created but start to exist only the initial and nonrepeatable experience of it.

This processual/perceptual aspect of aura is often forgotten, but according to Benjamin's identification of the aura of natural phenomena, *this* aura is the original one. It is like we are trying to copy or materialize this process by creating some object with a stable and unrepeatable ontology. It is a little bit confusing, because different rules apply for natural aura (time and place of experience) and for artistic/objective aura (time and place of creating). Nevertheless, in the middle of it all is the same logic: the natural phenomena start to exist for people (recipients) when he/she can experience it, and, needless to say, they cannot exist without the conscious awareness of a recipient. Therefore, for both kinds of aura, the same applies: time and space are crucial for the creation/materialization of aura, or, stated otherwise, for the aura to be brought into existence. Any object/phenomena, therefore, is ontologically defined and axiologically profiled by the place and time of its creation.

Aura is not a real value of objects (or in the case of natural phenomena, not the real value of the experience itself), but it is the guarantee of their originality, unrepeatability, uniqueness, and unfalsifiability. It is simply the result and confirmation of individual existence. Originality is understood here as authenticity, as the quality that distinguishes the original from its counterfeit (see, e.g., Goodman 1976), or reproduction, or other imitation. "The here and now of the original creates the notion of its [the artwork's] authenticity" (Benjamin 2013, p. 66) or "[T]he presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" (Benjamin 1969, p. 3). The authenticity of a thing is the authority of a thing that cannot be repeated or copied.

Benjamin's account of aura did not define or distinguish artifacts from each other. The author never thought in this way, and therefore the aura cannot be considered as a defining criterion or a criterion for any axiological categorization. Even if aura is a guarantee of a certain value, it is not a value that can be quantified, and we certainly should not think about which aura is 'better' (Makky 2019).

4. Aura and atmosphere or the process of identifying the identity of a place

Gerold Böhme (2017) understands atmosphere as a fundamental concept of a new aesthetics that goes beyond our tendency for aesthetic judgment, beyond our tendency to evaluate any aesthetic phenomena. This lack of evaluation in a classical sense is crucial and shapes new aesthetics or aesthetic discourse itself. Böhme (2017, p. 14), in his understanding of atmosphere, refers to Benjamin's concept of "aura", which he understands as a theoretical concept that preceded the concept of atmosphere. He emphasizes the notion of natural aura (Böhme 2017; Ševčík 2024), and this broader, natural, primordial, understanding of aura (more productive for the aesthetics of everyday life) is crucial for the understanding of the relation between aura and atmosphere.

Aura is something that arises with the work and is ontologically intertwined with it. It is fixed in time but completed because of 'the distance of time and space' (Benjamin 1969), or (in the matter of natural aura) its uniqueness is created in the moment of experience. This experience will always be different, never the same, but that doesn't mean that it cannot improve, nor does it mean that different experiences in the future will be better or worse. They will be just different. In this differentiation lies the uniqueness of the aura. The awareness and setting of the recipient's mind change; their interactive skill and aesthetic grasp of the self are altered when they interact with the object that carries the aura, or when they are in the moment of the birth/awareness of the aura (but they do not create it).

Aura (of an object) is a quality that we identify and feel when we interact with the object as a recipient or (in the case of natural aura) when we experience natural phenomena in their authentic situation, but we are still recipients. In regard to atmosphere, it functions differently. One central aspect of the atmospheric approach is the nonphysical body that we feel and "whose atmospheric resonances we can describe only from our first-person perspectives" (Griffero & Tedeschini 2019, p. 2): we need to be present. We need to be part of the atmosphere (its inhabitant or dweller) to be able to experience the atmosphere. We need to enter it not just to look at it and this main difference is crucial. In comparing aura and atmosphere, from this perspective, it is a journey from recipient to (temporary) dweller of participant.

It can be assumed that the relationship between aura and atmosphere is based on this cooperative ability; however, the environment, and therefore the atmosphere, is not made up of just one object, but of a system and group of objects and connections concentrated between them in one place, including the affective circumstances of our interaction or perception of a given situation and place. Even if the aura is tied to these objects or to the experience of some special situations that carry it, the atmosphere is built up gradually and constantly based on different relationships and connections with the present, and therefore on materially existing thoughts and on felt and experienced emotions. It evolves naturally and forces the recipient to identify the nature or structure of a specific space that ‘possesses’ the atmosphere.

Aura is in existence from its inception and does not change through the transformation of external conditions; it is ontologically stabilized. This contradiction is present in Benjamin’s (1969) definition of aura itself, because it is different for objects and for natural phenomena (that also influence the atmosphere), as mentioned above. But for some reasons the aura of objects is superior to natural aura. Therefore, if we try to identify or experience the aura of human made objects, experience is not important, and cannot change anything. It can only confirm or reveal the aura (ontologically defined by the creation of artefacts). The criteria of experience as the moment when we identify aura applies only when we experience natural phenomena. Nevertheless, the combination of different objects in one place creates a frame for our participatory reception and concentration of the aura these objects create, which, in a special structural sense, is atmosphere as a potentially sensually perceivable time and space reality.

The idea of atmosphere always refers to the spatial sense of the environment. Atmosphere “fills space” and “emanates from things or constellations of things” (Böhme 2017, p. 24). It is based on the principle and system of natural aura, but consists of, and is built by, the aura of different objects. Aura, on the other hand, is defined by space but is specified by time. The specific time of a specific place creates the ontology of the object, which later co-creates the atmosphere of a specific environment. According to our analysis and chosen example, we need to find the answer to what happens to the atmosphere when a complex situation in an environment changes. Does it disappear and something completely new emerges, or is the new atmosphere just an extension or transformation of the old atmosphere?

5. Conclusion

How aura is responsible for the creation, or effect, of the atmosphere in an ontological issue. The process has already been analyzed. We can understand aura as the identity of the birth or situating of a work of art or any object made or experienced by humans, and atmosphere as the materialized mood of the environment which the recipient perceives. Aura, as an attribute of an object created by man (or as an attribute of experienced natural phenomena), creates, in the case of multiple objects, a structure of auratic resonance that we can identify as recipients. This resonance, merged together in one place, helps to create the atmosphere (atmosphere is not only the combination of different auras, or fragments of these auras) that we enter and identify: we identify it with some mood or feeling (or energy) according to our direct experience.

Therefore, what happens if there is something like a new atmosphere? Every time there is a change in the atmosphere, it means that the atmosphere works with the different layers of an existing structure, or that some new object/natural phenomena, realized in the experience environment, changed the structure, and influenced the atmosphere. New objects/natural phenomena with new auras can make this shift slightly. If there are more new situations and the old ones disappear, new layers of the atmosphere can be so visible and extreme that new atmospheres can be created. However, that does not mean that the old atmosphere will disappear. It just means that new situations and layers are more significant.

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Fig. no. 1: *The statue of Working woman by Ján Hučko (ŽPA Krížik, Prešov)*



Fig. no. 2: Crumbling factory site of ŽPA Krížik with the statue of a Working Woman repainted as a McDonald's fast food mascot, from year 2011



Fig. no. 3: Rebuilding of the ZPA Křížik factory (Left October 2024, right June 2025).