

## **Affect Theory and the Concept of Atmosphere**

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### **Abstract**

The concept of atmosphere is a way of emplacing affect and affect theory. Work in contemporary social geography has done much to demonstrate how elemental forces become enveloped in atmospheres. However it tends to under-theorise the role of historically structured socio-cultural forces and the modes of engagement of persons with the atmospheric. In this paper we identify core themes in the literature – the inbetweenness of atmospheres, tuning space, the folding space-times and modes of engagement. We then develop these themes further through an encounter with work in anthropology, architecture and ecological psychology. Reflections on fieldwork in a medium-secure forensic psychiatric hospital are then used to illustrate the application of atmospheric thinking to a particular setting. We conclude with a call for a renewed ‘ontographic imagination’.

### **Keywords**

Feelings; Gernot Böhme; attunement; tuned space; stimmung; forensic mental health services

### **Introduction: The affects of place**

The English academic, MR James, is now best known for his short ‘ghost stories’, the majority of which he published in the first decade of the twentieth century. The unifying theme of these stories, which typically feature characters drawn from the same bookish, privileged background as the author, is how minor transgressions, such as the removal of an archaeological artefact, or the desire to learn of hidden knowledge, can result in terrible consequences. The ‘ghosts’ in James’ work are often rarely seen directly – until, at least, the terrifying climatic moment – but typically manifest themselves as a progressive, rising dread, a fear that something from the past has returned to impress itself upon the living. What comes back into the present is not so much a named individual or creature but rather a set of relationships, grounded in place, that reassert their existence.

The setting of the stories is crucial. The Suffolk countryside, which James knew well, is the basis for many. In *Whistle and I’ll Come to You, My Lad*, the protagonist, Parkins, a university Professor, spends a break from his duties in the coastal town of Burnstow. On his first, fateful, day of exploration, the following description is given of the scene as Parkins returns to his accommodation in the Globe Inn from the ruins of a Templar-built church, now crumbling into the sea:

Bleak and solemn was the view on which he took a last look before starting homeward. A faint yellow light in the west showed the links, on which a few figures moving towards the club-house were still visible, the squat martello tower, the lights of Aldsey village, the pale ribbon of sands intersected at intervals by black wooden groynings, the dim and murmuring sea. The wind was bitter from the north, but was at his back when he set out for the Globe. He quickly rattled and clashed through the shingle and gained the sand, upon which, but for the groynings which had to be got over every few yards, the going was both good and quiet. One last look behind, to measure the distance he had made since leaving the ruined Templars' church, showed him a prospect of company on his walk, in the shape of a rather indistinct personage, who seemed to be making great efforts to catch up with him, but made little, if any, progress. I mean that there was an appearance of running about his movements, but that the distance between him and Parkins did not seem materially to lessen. So, at least, Parkins thought, and decided that he almost certainly did not know him, and that it would be absurd to wait until he came up. For all that, company, he began to think, would really be very welcome on that lonely shore, if only you could choose your companion.

Modern tourists, playing on the local golfcourse, populate the landscape taken in by Parkins. But there are other signs of habitation, from the village, with its own history that stretches way into the distant past, to the Martello towers, defensive forts built to resist invasion during the Napoleonic wars, to a decaying first millennium church. Cross-cutting and uniting these traces of human relations is the ever present noise of the North sea, and the 'bitter' coastal wind. Immersed in the landscape, Parkin then spies a figure, an 'indistinct personage' who curiously appears to be moving but without travelling closer. The figure seems to be a manifestation of the landscape itself, the 'lonely shore' incarnated in human form. It will be Parkin's ultimate meeting with this embodied emanation that forms the horrendous denouement to the story.

Social geographers have recently returned to the term 'atmosphere' to describe the grounding of social activity in place, or, more precisely the 'entanglement' of bodies in the elemental features of the spaces where they act or dwell (Adey, 2014; Martin, 2011; McCormack, 2018). Wind and sea are not incidental or background features of the story, they are, in effect, actors in their own right, who combine with the living and the dead communities to co-produce a palpable sense of place. Parkins enacts this atmosphere through his exploration, his body becomes a conduit through which a certain historical-elemental balance of forces becomes articulated. The past is rendered live through affects that attach to and envelop the living and spectral bodies as they engage with one another.

But in what sense can we speak of affect as something that is grounded in the environment itself? At a commonsense level, it is part of the everyday grammar of many languages to attribute feelings to the features of place – a deserted beach feels 'lonely', a rumbling sea is 'threatening', a ruined church 'ominous'. This form of attribution is so well established in the literary and visual arts that

John Ruskin was once moved to name it 'pathetic fallacy'. For Ruskin, it is fundamentally a mis-attribution, and an aesthetic failure, since it gives a power of expression to nature that belongs to human sensibility alone. Our emotions are a response to way we culturally perceive the world around us. They are an echo or reflection of our powers of thought that comes back to us as cultivated feeling.

This view of the landscape a backdrop on which human emotions are writ large has been itself the subject of critique for some time. The phenomenological tradition provides a whole lexicon of terms – 'lifeworld', 'dasein', 'stimmung', 'enactivism' – which aim to capture the intimacy of the relations between human activity and the lived, meaningful world in which it is immersed. For example, Edward Casey's work (2000) offers a rich account of place as 'inclusive' of the bodies that dwell within it. Casey describes how the primacy of place in ancient philosophy, where 'to be' is 'to be in place', was eroded by the hypostatization of time and space as universals that transcend any particular experience. Placing the 'lived body' firmly back in the constitutive relations it has with the world pushes back against this classical dogma.

Nevertheless something of the privileging of human sensibility that Ruskin promoted remains within phenomenology. Michel Serres, discussing Merleau-Ponty, points to the problem of seeing sensual relations to the world as mediated through language:

When I was young I laughed a lot when I read Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception. He opens it with these words: 'At the outset of the study of perception, we find *in language the notion of sensation ...*' Isn't this an extraordinary introduction? A collection of examples in the same vein, so austere and meager, inspire the descriptions that follow. From his window the author sees some tree, always in bloom; he huddles over his desk; now and again a red blotch appears – it's a quote. What you can decipher in this book is a nice ethnology of city dwellers, who are hypertechnicalized, intellectualized, chained to their library chairs, and tragically stripped of tangible experience. Lots of phenomenology and no sensation – everything via language (Serres with Latour, 1995: 131-132)

Serres brings the problem back full circle – in what sense can the world be recognised as sensuous *on its own terms*, generative of its own affects, without invoking human sensibility or language as the medium through which this can be made properly manifest? For Serres, and other proponents of what has become known as 'more-than-human' philosophies, what is required is a dynamic materialism, where the world is a ceaseless play of forces. Deleuze, for instance, speaks of a 'powerful nonorganic vitality' and 'inorganic affect' as 'the relation of the body to the imperceptible forces and powers that seize hold of it' (1998: 131). What he means by this are relations to forces that exceed the normative categories of the intelligible – moments of becoming overwhelmed by music, captured by the interplay of light and heat, carried off by the encounter with nonhuman affects of another creature, or, indeed a moving yet oddly static

shadow seen on a windswept shoreline. Here the affects that we associate with being human (i.e. those that fit within the grammar of the emotions) are a small sub-set of possible embodied relations to the broader environment.

Ought we then to conclude that the atmosphere that Parkins experiences is a matter of 'inorganic affect' derived from the combination of the forces of wind, light and sea? To do so would be to overlook the specific human and cultural relations that are woven into the landscape. The shoreline is not purely 'elemental' – it has been shaped by centuries of human activity that have contributed to its particular character. This activity, and the social relations through which it was conducted, persist in the extant and decaying built environment (i.e. village, towers, church), and in the archaeological traces that remain visible. Burnstow is an inhabited space, where the land bears the marks of those who have dwelled there. Social relations are, as Maurice Halbwachs (1980) once put it, 'engraved on the space'.

Moreover, Parkins has a particular vector to his own activities that renders him as available for certain kinds of affective attachments. His apparent arrogance and lack of respect for place and custom leads him to loot an artefact – what appears to be a whistle – from the crumbling churchyard. The whistle bears the inscription 'QUIS EST ISTE QUI VENIT', which Parkins translates as 'Who is this who is coming?', before deciding to blow the whistle as a summons. The 'who' referred to here is plural: it refers to both the spectral past that is awoken by the whistling, and Parkins as the person who has been 'summoned' by the artefact to engage with it. The atmosphere does not simply pre-exist Parkins, such that it might envelop any traveller who chose to venture to the shoreline in the same way. It takes a specific mode of engaging with the landscape and its features to 'summon forth' the affects that emerge within the atmosphere.

In this paper we will develop a treatment of atmosphere that emphasises these two crucial aspects of the mixing of historically structured social relations with non-human features of place and of the specificity of the modes of engagement with place that allow affects to attach to persons. Our aim to render the concept of atmosphere tractable through establishing specific lines of analytic enquiry within the overall domain marked out by the term. We proceed by reviewing some of the recent literature around 'affective atmospheres', identifying a series of 'intermediary concepts' (cf. Brown & Tucker, 2010) that orient to specific ways in which affects may be said to be in place, and ways in which they become relevant for persons. Following this, we contextualise these intermediary concepts through a set of reflections on fieldwork in forensic mental health settings. We conclude by setting out why a place-bound approach to affect is able to overcome some of the definitional and empirical problems that beset affect theory.

### **Atmosphere: A Feeling in Search of a Concept**

For the political theorist Teresa Brennan, the idea of an atmosphere can be readily grasped – 'Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and 'felt the atmosphere'?' (2004: 1). The palpable sense of a shared, collective

'feeling' that dominates a given space is a familiar experience for most people. How strange then, Brennan goes on, that so little has been written on this within the psychological and psychoanalytic literature. She argues that this is because the affects that constitute an atmosphere 'get inside' the individual through a variety of psychological and biological mechanisms simultaneously. But this 'outside in' way of viewing affect (cf. Ahmed, 2004) is complicated by Brennan's assertion that classical Cartesian views of the individual as a self-contained sovereign subject needs to be replaced since 'there is no secure distinction between the individual and the environment' (2004: 6).

Whilst Brennan's particular approach to atmosphere and affect, drawing equally on psychoanalysis and chemical entrainment, has been subject to critique (see Anderson, 2014; Ahmed, 2008), her key point - that atmosphere seems to be awkwardly 'there' in a space that is neither wholly within the environment, nor exactly within the person - is a common point of reference for the majority of the literature. For example, Tonino Griffero offers the following definition:

We have been saying this many times by now: atmospheres are feelings poured out into space. They are modes of a corporeal pre-dualistic communication that at times is supersubjective and superobjective - the calm before the storm, the fever of the limelight, the numinous, the wind etc - and at times is more dependent on the subject, or condensed into (or anchored to) preferential objects. In any case, they are quasi-things whose ecstasies are expressive characters of qualities and whose extraneousness to thingly dimension and to the predicative structure often lead to misleading projectivist explanations. (Griffero, 2014: 108-109)

In saying that atmospheres are 'quasi-things', Griffero tries to keep the term from being fundamentally bound to either subjective experience or judgment, or to environmental features and things themselves. And yet it is necessary that there is a relation to both to avoid the idea of feelings being simply projected onto the world (leading to a radical subjectivism) or as intrinsic to the world itself (and therefore a crude materialism). The key resource that Griffero uses is the phenomenological concept of mood (i.e. *stimmung*). Whilst this term has its own complicated history, as Wellbery (2018) outlines, the core idea associated with contemporary uses is that feelings reside in a layer of experience that comes before any clear distinction between subject and object. In this sense they are 'modes of being outside oneself' (Wellbery, 2018: 40-41). When Griffero describes atmospheres as 'feelings poured into space', he is referring to the phenomenological level of being in place and encountering objects outwith an elaborated notion of self, rather than begging the question of who or what is doing the pouring.

Gernot Böhme's work offers the most extensive development of a phenomenology of atmospheres. Building on the 'new phenomenology' of Hermann Schmitz, Böhme argues that the 'feel' of things primarily structures perception, such that we become disposed to the world through aesthetic impressions. Like Griffero, Böhme defines atmosphere as 'spatially extended

quality of feeling' which stands as an 'intermediary' between subject and world (2017a: 15). However, he adds to this an extraordinary account of how the world is offered up as feelings. He argues that rather than treat things as defined primarily by qualities such as their form or volume, we should examine the way they 'radiate' through space. For example, a tree growing on an urban street does more than just occupy a defined space, it has definite presence that imposes itself on the street, offering potentials (for shade, bird nesting, a sense of 'nature') that infuse or 'tincture' our experience of the street. Böhme refers to this radiation of qualities as the 'ecstasies of things' (from *ek-stasis* – being outside of oneself). Atmospheres are then to be analysed with respect to 'ecstatic' intertwinings between things, persons and environmental constellations (see Böhme 2017a).

This approach can, Böhme argues, be applied equally to the natural and the built environment. In both cases what is required is a knowledge and appreciation of the specific 'ecstasies' of which a thing is capable, and the arrangements that are then possible. However, it is particularly apposite in cases of 'staged' atmospheres, such as set designs, interior design or advertising. Here the work of combining arrangements of radiating properties (e.g. light, sound, warmth, surfaces) is readily apparent. Böhme (2017b) uses the phrase 'tuned space' to denote the ways in which properties are brought together to create overall atmospheric feelings, much like the collective musical tuning of an orchestra or the mutual orientation of dancers or a sports team. Note that here the feelings which are constituted may have a complex relationship to actual materials which are arranged – an atmospheric effect of 'warmth' can be created by things that are not actually warm, in the same way that there is nothing at all 'natural' about the way the tree which radiates nature came to be placed on an urban street.

The value of Böhme's work for social science is its focus on the arrangement of feelings. However, his concern with the aesthetic and with retaining a clearly phenomenological basis can be difficult to reconcile with a 'post-psychological' (cf. Nissen et al, 2016) approach to questions of subjectivity and affect. By contrast, Ben Anderson's (2014) begins with an explicitly post-structuralist treatment of 'affective atmospheres'. Using examples drawn from empirical work on training for emergency planning and responses, Anderson treats atmosphere as the affective envelopment of an 'ensemble' of bodies – both human and non-human – which act together in complex causal patterns. Whilst Böhme sees an atmosphere as inherently spatialised, Anderson treats atmosphere as the process of constituting a very specific emergent space-time:

Atmospheres are a kind of indeterminate affective excess through which intensive space-times are created and come to envelop specific bodies; sites, objects, people, and so on, all may be atmospheric or may feel and be moved by atmospheres. (2014: 160)

Of particular concern to Anderson is the 'anticipatory' quality of atmosphere – the feeling that something is about to happen or has just happened – which acts to create both coherence and tensions within the bodily ensemble. Recalling the meteorological origins of the term (*atmos* = exhalation/vapour; *spharia* =

globe/sphere), Anderson emphasises the changeable and variable nature of atmosphere. He also speculates as to whether analytically it is possible to identify a singular atmosphere or whether the ensemble of bodies may diverge into various distinct atmospheres, depending on the how the overall atmosphere unfolds.

In a similar vein, Derek McCormack's *Atmospheric Things*, explores the concept of atmosphere as a process where an 'elemental' space-time is constituted that can be felt, to varying degrees, by bodies when they are 'enveloped' or 'folded' together. Drawing in part on the work of Peter Sloterdijk, which aims to restore a history of the spatialisation of human relations to philosophy, McCormack argues that an immersion in feeling requires an act of enclosure, where a boundary is drawn to create a specific atmosphere. Using the figure of the balloon as his central trope and object of investigation, McCormack raises the question of whether to treat an atmosphere as a set of relations between entities, or as process where such distinctions are not primary, but rather become attributed after the fact. In this way, a helium balloon becomes a 'thing' rather than a relation between gaseous and denser forces on the moment of its inflation. McCormack draws a parallel with the process philosophy of AN Whitehead, where the fleeting emergence of a subject through the affective gathering of relations ('prehension') does not require any clearly defined 'entity' to pre-exist this moment (see Brown & Stenner, 2009).

Considered together, this rich and diverse body of work delivers a number of core themes: 1) Atmospheres exist between subjects and objects. They depend on both the features of the environment and that of the persons who engage with them, but cannot be reduced to either; 2) Atmospheres are produced through a process of 'tuning' or 'arranging'. However we do not necessarily need to attribute this process to a specific agent or entity; 3) Atmospheres occur through an 'envelopment' or 'folding' together of bodies and forces. Rather than say that atmospheres are 'in' space or time, envelopment constitutes its own specific 'space-time'.

Taken together, these core themes allow us to begin an analytic description of atmospheric encounters, such as that experienced by Parkins at Burnstow. But in themselves, the themes still lack sufficient reach to analyse the specific ways in which historically structured socio-cultural activity becomes folded together with more elemental forces, and leave the question of how persons orient to the atmospheres in which they find themselves enveloped requiring further elaboration. We now turn towards work from anthropology and architecture to build upon the core themes.

### **Grounding Atmosphere in Socio-Historical Settings**

There are very few places around the world where it is not possible to see visible signs of human activity. If one adds to this the capability to measure rising temperatures, air pollution and the spread of plastics and heavy metals then there is, properly speaking, no 'nature' that is not marked by 'culture'. The aim of wanting to speak of the sociocultural in relation to atmospheres is not driven by

a desire to return to hopelessly outmoded dualisms, but rather to understand better the complex lamination of human and non-human forces. Tim Ingold's (2013) work on 'making' provides a good point of entry. Ingold seeks a way of exploring the creation of things that would be equally applicable across art, archaeological artefacts and contemporary architecture and design. A central part of the project is to dethrone the idea of a creator who impresses form on matter (what is classically called 'hylomorphism') in favour of an analysis of 'form-generating' processes that emerge from a 'confluence of forces and materials' (Ingold, 2013: 22). For example, the process of making a flint hand-axe can be described as the interplay between muscular forces of the hand that hold the material and deliver hammer blows and the forces of compression within the stone that create fracture patterns as they are released. Making such an axe does not require a detailed plan, but rather the calibration of the forces.

The idea of 'form-generating' as a correspondence between forces can also be applied over vastly long time frames. Ingold discusses the example of a 'mound', a heaped bump of earth in the landscape found in many countries which apparently bears the mark of ancient human activity, often for reasons which are currently unknown. One way to think of the mound is as a 'thing' made for a specific purpose which is now lost to us, but which nevertheless grants it a particular identity. Ingold argues to the contrary, that the identity of the mound is gained through its ongoing processes of geological, ecological and social transformation:

The mound, we could say, exists in its *mounding*. This is to think of it not as a finished object, standing on its foundations as set over and against its surroundings, but as a locus of growth and regeneration where materials welling up from the earth mix and mingle with the fluxes of the weather in the ongoing production of life. (2013: 78)

The mound's identity is *perdurational* – disclosed by its ongoing transformations or becomings rather than granted in its constitution. The forces which are intertwined around and through the mound, which include the human activities over its long history that have rendered the site of matter of social concern, give the mound and those human and non-humans who dwell around it, its particular life. To use Böhme's phrase, the mound 'tinctures' the surrounding landscape. The specific atmosphere it created embeds not only the acts that led to its initial rising from the earth, but all of the subsequent play of forces that have shaped it. To be enveloped by the atmosphere of the mound is to become part of a perdurational folding of forces and materials that remains connected to a distant historical past. Hence, perhaps, the uncanny feelings that are typically associated with such sites.

Bernard Cache (1995) approaches architectural design in a similar way. He analyses the historical development of the Swiss city of Lausanne using Deleuze's (1993) concept of 'the fold'. A fold is produced by one or more points of inflection in a curve (such as in the figure S). The inflection raises questions about what constitutes interiority and exteriority. The upper and lower curves of S, for instance, may be thought to partly enclose the space exterior to the



figure to produce an interiority. But we may equally well think of the outside of the space as expressing the dynamic tension of the inflection point, such that it is the force of the interior projected outward. Lausanne has long been considered a peculiarly organized city, where urban design has had to respond to the complicated topography of the region. Cache shows to the contrary that if the city is mapped as a series of folds, the points of inflection gather competing forces in complex ways, such that rather than see the city as modeled on the landscape, its form can be seen to be continuously materially modulated, much like the mound which Ingold describes.

The forces that are folded together through inflection are highly distinct. Böhme (2017a) notes that the 'sound atmosphere' of Lausanne is the product of the unique urban design of the city, along with the forces of Swiss cultural life. To use Cache's terminology, the sound atmosphere arises from the 'inflection image' formed by these forces. This suggests that the overall atmosphere of a place could be approached through multiple modalities (e.g. sound, light, smell, warmth etc), exploring the interplay of specific forces and materials, and the ways in which they radiate affects. For example, analyzing how the use of a given architectural strategy in tension with the topology of place then shapes the acoustic properties of public life, which envelop persons as a certain kind of atmosphere.

The example of Lausanne also demonstrates that it is often not possible to establish a clear causality in relation to atmosphere, since it emerges from the 'confluence' of forces and materials as a whole. Ingold (2013) uses the phrase 'meshwork' to describe this whole. A meshwork is formed of a series of 'lines' of activity that are folded together in such a way that they form a loose assemblage. Ingold draws a contrast with how 'networks' are usually understood:

Where the network has nodes, the meshwork ... has knots. Knots are places where many lines of becoming are drawn tightly together. Yet every line overtakes the knot in which it is tied. Its end is always loose, somewhere beyond the knot, where it is groping towards an entanglement with other lines, in other knots. (Ingold, 2013: 132)

The crucial distinction here is that the lines which form a network ultimately connect together to form an enclosed whole, whereas in a meshwork they do not, meaning that as a form it is perpetually open and unfinished (like the mound mounding, or the city over time). Each of the knots is like Cache's points of inflection, where forces become entangled without any kind of synthesis. Ingold uses the example of kite flying, where the elemental force of the wind is tangled up with the material of the kite, which is in turn attached by string to the hand of the person flying. These three forces – wind, material flows, human kinaesthetic awareness – are arranged together such that each 'modulates' (cf. Simondon, 1992) the other. Just as the gesture of the human hand is converted into the movements of the kite, so the meteorological variation of the wind is expressed in turn back to the flyer. Kite flying is, Ingold claims, a delicate 'dance of agency' as the respective human and non-human forces come together with and through materials to create the flight.

We can draw these ideas – confluence of forces, perduration, point of inflection, meshwork, modulation – together in returning to Parkins’ encounter. The shore at Burnstow is a perdurational site, whose identity over time reflects the efforts of human communities to enclose and protect themselves against the sea, which offers both a source of sustenance and ever-present danger. The shore feels ‘lonely’ because it is the threshold where fragility of the human community is opened out to the vastness of the elements, and correspondingly the provisional nature of the persistence of this enclosure is demonstrated by the decaying church. This is also dramatised in the distance of the lights of the village disappearing into the darkness. To walk along the beach is to make one’s body a point of inflection where this tensions between forces – wind, sea, stone, human affairs – is modulated. Parkins traces one of the lines in the meshwork, seemingly unaware that the line does not necessarily turn back on itself. It is only when he looks back and sees the mysterious figure on the beach that his ramifications of his own actions on the perdurational character of the place begin to unfold.

### **Modes of Engaging with Emplaced Atmospheres**

Our focus so far has been on thinking through the range of forces that constitute atmosphere and the corresponding emergence of affects. There is a danger that in describing the ‘quasi thing-like’ character of feelings ‘poured into place’ atmospheres can seem to be ‘just there’ awaiting the person who experiences them. Yet clearly the way in which we engage with an atmosphere is crucial to what it is we feel. We now turn towards delineating some of the modes of engagement with atmosphere.

Atmospheres are not neutral. They attract and repel, amuse and horrify, enchant and become unbearable. These feelings are not so much responses to an atmosphere, but rather behavioral possibilities that are disclosed within the atmosphere itself. JJ Gibson (2015) famously developed the notion of ‘affordance’ to describe the manner in which the environment directly impinges on perception, bypassing cognition. An affordance is a relational possibility between an organism and its environment that is perceived through its invariant features – water, for example, affords drinking, being poured, used for washing etc. Gibson developed the idea of affordance from the term *Aufforderungscharakter* (‘invitation character’) used by Kurt Lewin (see Gibson, 2015: 130). For Lewin, this marked the capacity of the environment to either attract or repel to person to behave in one way or another. ‘Invitation character’ could be represented as a vector plotted in psychological space (‘life space’) - a postbox, for instance, draws the person toward it to engage in letter posting. However, Gibson argues that Lewin, along with other psychologists of the Gestalt School, such as Kurt Koffka, treated invitation character as a purely phenomenal matter:

For Koffka it was the phenomenal postbox that invited letter-mailing, not the physical postbox. But this duality is pernicious. I prefer to say that the real postbox (the only one) affords letter-mailing to a letter writing human in a community with a postal system. (Gibson, 2015: 130)

For Gibson, by contrast, affordances directly ‘summon’ persons towards engaging with them in a particular way. But the solicitation depends on a range of relations being in place – the invitation character of the postbox requires there to be a functioning postal system in place which is shared by a literate community to engage in writing letters to one another.

The elements that make up an atmosphere can then be mapped in terms of their affordances. The affordances of the whistle clearly play a central role in James’ story. Its invitation character is premised on the idea of a literal summons, that there will be a response to the ‘call’ of the whistle. The act of blowing the whistle is akin to completing an electrical circuit – Parkins breath is modulated into the atmosphere in a way that realizes certain possibilities within it. To become enveloped by an atmosphere is then follow the invitation of the affordances that are arrayed within the elements through which it is constituted and to become part of the relational possibilities that it may express.

The capacity to ‘hear’ the call of affordance may vary considerably depending on the atmosphere. It is Parkins’ ‘rusty’ Latin language skills in deciphering the inscription that draw him fatefully towards blowing the whistle. The anthropologist Kathleen Stewart refers use the term *attunement* to refer to what she terms the ‘commonplace labor of becoming sentient to world’s work, bodies, rhythms, and ways of being in noise and light’ (2011: 445). Although the term is loosely derived from Heidegger’s (1962) *Befindlichkeit*, Stewart uses it to refer to a practiced sensibility for feeling the relational possibilities within an atmosphere. As example, she cites a passage from a novel by Andre Dubus:

It was September, the low season, but the place was filling up, and he leaned back against the bar with his ginger ale and scanned the club for pockets, those dark human spaces in the room where something has just changed: above the music a man lets out an appreciative yell when before he was quiet; one of the dancers out on the floor laughs a little too hard or steps back too fast; a chair leg scrapes the carpet – something Lonnie can’t hear, just feels, a shift of objects in the space there, this change of air, a pocket of possible trouble (Dubus, cited in Stewart, 2011: 446)

Lonnie is a bouncer in a strip club, employed to watch over and ensure order amongst the customers. He is highly ‘tuned in’ to the atmosphere in the club. He can pick out noises or movements that signify potential trouble before it occurs. Lonnie can feel events in their very emergence. For Stewart the capacity ‘getting into things’ through attunement is fundamental to ‘atmospheric life’. The ordinary is rarely disclosed in its entirety – we spend much of our lives attempting to make sense of events in the midst of their occurrence, continuously ‘responding to something not quite already given and yet somehow happening’ (Stewart, 2007: 127). Some forms of attunement are highly practiced and draw upon considerable skill and experience, whereas others are a matter of a refined receptivity, being open to envelopment by what Stewart calls the ‘charged atmospheres of everyday life’ (2011: 445).

Attunement and affordance may be thought of as complementary terms. To be attuned is to be able to 'hear' the summons of the invitation character contained within an atmosphere. This raises the question of what happens when one is either unable to 'tune in' or else becomes temporarily 'dis-attuned'. Consider the following example provided by Lee & Brown:

In 1996 the three-year-old boy Morris, his grandmother, parents, and six-year-old cousin Chloe went to see a performance of the play. Grandma had booked the tickets early for her sixty-first birthday treat. We have seen how the play sounds scary. This production in particular capitalized on scariness. Peter Pan wore a dramatic cloak of black feathers. Wolves circled the stage. A crocodile character was huge and imposing. Morris was scared and, within minutes of the curtain going up, sobbed 'Get me out ... Get me out!'. According to his mother, Morris was 'absolutely petrified'. This was bad enough in itself. One would hope that once his parents had gotten Morris out, Morris would be able to leave his terror behind him. But the family's troubles continued. Morris did not leave his terror behind him. He had nightmares about the play. The events also distributed relationships within the family: 'My own grandson now calls me 'Nasty Granny' for taking him to the theatre ... I'm distressed that I took him to see something so frightening. (Lee & Brown, 2002: 262)

A theatre production is by definition a 'staged atmosphere' that depends on a range of elements and techniques, including costume, lighting and sound. To be attuned here is to 'go along' with what is happening on stage, what we colloquially call 'being into it'. However, the young boy, Morris, becomes too attuned, absorbed into the events in such a way that becomes terrified. We might say that he follows the felt 'line' of fear that is constituted in the atmosphere to its fullest conclusion and becomes convinced that he is in danger. A critical part of being attuned is then to be aware of how things may turn out. Paradoxically become too attuned then leads to dis-attunement, as Morris' cries lead to him being removed by his parents from the theatre. The atmosphere is then 'stopped' or 'cut' through disattunement, not only for Morris, but also for those around him.

Stewart (2007) also refers to processes of attachment as part of engaging with atmospheres. Her usage deliberately blurs the distinction between attachment as psychological investment in object and others, and attachment as a literal connection to materials. This blurring is also found in Gibson's (2015) work, where he makes clear that affordances give rise to meanings and values directly without need for representation or reflection. Water means life because it is drinkable, and to find it when one is thirsty is a good thing. We can moderate this somewhat to argue that attachments create points of inflection around which different flows of activity can be loosely knotted together. Take, for instance, the famous example from Bateson (1973) of the blind person with a cane, tapping their way as they walk along a pavement. Bateson argues that the cane does not extend perception or thinking, but rather the whole system of person-cane-pavement becomes a system where the tapping itself enacts a form of thinking. In this way, an attachment like the cane is not added on to some existing

capacity, but is rather a means by which the alignment of two or more different forces creates what Simondon (2009) calls an 'operative solidarity' that realizes a newly emergent function. The kite that takes flight, for example, brings wind and hand together to create a form that does not resemble either. The literal attachment to the string generates a new form. We might think of the history of various sociocultural practices as being that of the knotting together of such points of inflections to invent new capacities.

We may then speak of attachments to individual elements within an atmosphere or, in a more holistic manner, of attachment to the atmosphere as a whole. Attachments are fundamental to creating alignments in 'confluences of forces'. Although Parkins feels the shore at Burnstow as a whole particular kind of atmosphere, it is timber barriers ('groynings') that he has to jump which afford a sense of being confronted with the elements, and, ultimately, the whistle around which the atmosphere finally comes to turn. Attachment is what provides the link between attunement and affordance, hearing and invitation. If being enveloped by an atmosphere is to 'become outside of oneself', then this in part because we cannot properly feel without the attachments that modulate the forces of the world through us, and provide the means for our own forces to be modulated in turn. The practiced sensibility of attunement and relational knotting of forces that is attachment are principal modes through which we enact our situated engagement with the atmospheric affordances of settings. The modulations of these modes, including their potential disruption, provide a key focus for analysis.

### **Exploring the Atmosphere of a Secure Psychiatric Unit**

In this penultimate section, we will illustrate the development of the concept of atmosphere by discussing some images taken from a study of service user experiences of medium-secure forensic psychiatric care. The photographs were taken by patients who were detained ('sectioned') in a newly built secure unit. Here we use the images as the way into describing the very particular kind of atmospheres that are experienced on the unit.

#### *Atmospheric Boundaries*



A large fence topped with an anti-climb feature surrounds the unit. This a mandatory requirement for a hospital unit of this kind. Many patients have either been transferred from prison or are familiar with other kinds of detention. The fence creates a boundary between inside and outside; it demarcates both the space of hospital and the time to spent on a section. Visitors to the unit are immediately confronted with a sense of what 'security' means. Accessing the unit always takes time and requires passing through a number of procedures in which links to the world – mobile phones, books, pens – have to be temporarily surrendered. The atmosphere of the unit is perceptible from the moment one finally gains entry. It has a very specific 'feel'. But it is difficult to say exactly what it is that affords this feeling. It is as though the atmosphere attaches itself to you. At the end of one of the first substantive research visits, some of the researchers felt the need to eat large amounts of junk food - to do everything possible to mask the feel of the place which seemed to be still attached to their bodies.

Time feels stretched on the wards. In general, nothing happens very quickly. Appointments are often delayed. Patients walk idly, sometimes repetitively pacing, since they have nowhere in particular to be. It feels that staff and patients alike talk at a slower pace and with a more deliberate emphasis. Occasionally this is interrupted by an alarm, an interruption, followed by sudden bursts of activity. This happens more when the atmosphere on a ward is 'unsettled', meaning that there is a shared sense that something is wrong, that something may be about to happen. There are spaces where 'flashpoints' tend to occur. Around the nurses station, where staff spent time in a locked room attending to administrative duties, it is common to see patients banging on the windows with requests: Can I see my social worker? Can I use an iron? Can I get a cup of tea?

Sometimes you become aware that the banging is becoming a little too firm, the voice is quivering a too little much. You guess that the staff inside the nurses station hear that too, that despite the appearance of ignoring the patient, they are tuned into what is going on, ready to act if things escalate too far.

There are outside spaces attached to every ward on the unit. The idea is to provide access to 'green space', such that patients can feel the warmth of the sun, the scents on the breeze, observe the changing of the seasons. But we rarely ever see any patients in the outside spaces. We wonder if it because seeing the boundary that holds them detainment is difficult to bear. Patients are amused by this idea. No, one says, I just can't be bothered, there is nothing to do out there, you can't smoke outside any more, I'd just rather lie down in my room. We learn that the fence is not experienced as a boundary. It is a variable point of inflection, sometimes keeping the inside enclosed, but more often tensing the forces of the outside. It is also highly porous. The world finds it way into the unit in myriad ways, from televisions and music to phone calls. Contraband items are often thrown over fence. Patients with ground or community leave come back with stories of what they have been up to. The unit is bit of the wider community turned back in on itself. We were just confused about which way it folded.

### *Atmospheric Effects*



Two of the research team enter a ward. We have been through a number of security checks and several locked doors to arrive at the ward to conduct our interviews on this very hot summer's day. The ward is a fairly calm space, with

large windows, high ceilings and glaring white walls. Before we move through the air-locked space onto the ward, the member of staff who accompanies us stops suddenly, with a sharp movement of the hand. "Wait there, please". She moves into the ward to discuss something with another member of staff. We wait in the airlock, anxious about what is going on. The atmosphere is tense. The staff member returns and explains there is a patient lying on the floor near the doorway. She instructs us to enter the ward, and to not pay any attention to the woman who appears to be sleeping. Why doesn't she just sleep on her bed in her bedroom? Nobody asks: we are told to move slowly round her. The member of staff jokes that the woman just needs a little rest - nothing to worry about. We walk round the woman, confused by this whole episode. When we return to exit the ward later on, the woman has gone.

Another member of staff explains a ritual we have observed around entering a ward. First, the airlock door is locked. Then the actual door to the ward is opened just a crack. The staff member then turns their head and pauses for a few moments. Then the door is opened slowly. Finally you enter, locking the door behind. Why the pause? The doors are solid and heavy to meet fire and security specifications. You cannot see onto the ward before entering. So you listen. You are tuning into the acoustic aspects of the ward atmosphere. Too loud means you are walking into trouble. But even worse is when it is too quiet. It means that something is about to happen, and you do not know what it will be. These things you learn very quickly. Don't rush to meet the summons of the atmosphere, think about how you are being drawn in.

But there are problems on this newly built unit. What was wanted was natural light on as many walls as possible. So you need windows. But windows are risky – too many opportunities for absconding or for self-injury through ligature points. So the solution is to put them in the ceiling. This means the ceilings have to be high, to prevent access. High ceilings are bad for acoustics. The noise echoes round the unit, especially since the shared common areas are large with few dividing walls. At night there are particular problems. The doors make significant banging sounds and staff walk around with large bunches of keys. From inside patient bedrooms these noises appear amplified further. Staff are required to do regular checks on patients during the night. Sometimes this means entering their rooms, accidentally waking patients with a start. But worst of all, the walls have made tuning into the sounds of the ward difficult for staff. We've been let down by the build, one staff member says, the corridors echo so much its difficult to know what's really going on when you're at the door. The building has disattuned the staff.

### *Atmospheric Changes*





If you talk to patients about what they want in the future life after they are discharged from detention, they will often tell you a similar sounding story. I'd like a nice apartment all to myself, close to my family, and I want to cook my own food whenever I like. Food plays a large role in the patient imaginary. Food affords comfort, sociability, choices in life. Food makes you feel good about yourself. But food is not good on the wards. Decades of efficiency drives in the National Health Service means that the amount spent per patient on food is pitiful. Food preparation and cooking is normally outsourced. It is only brought to the ward to be heated through immediately prior to being served. This happens in a small kitchen behind a metal shutter. Meal times are announced by the clatter of the shutter being raised from the inside.

Staff hate mealtimes. It's always the same, on every unit, they say. The patients will argue that they didn't order the food they're given, that someone else is being favoured with a bigger portion. They try to barter their food with each other. There will be an argument, someone will kick off about something. You can see the staff visibly tensing as mealtimes approach. They start to gather together and before you are properly aware of what is happening, they form up around the ward. Cutlery is carefully observed. Patients are encouraged to eat up. On some wards, the only way to get through mealtimes without conflict is to give each patient a number and call them up in turn. So eating becomes atomized, an exercise in ensuring nutrition is provided quickly and safely.

We start to become interested in the shutter. It seems like another point of inflection for the atmosphere, but if anything, one that is even more variable than

the outside fences. Whilst the shutter is down, the pace of the ward is different. Food is a fantasy, something to be looked forward to. To be savoured. A break that punctuates the day. But the moment the shutter goes up, the atmosphere changes. Food is a risk. Food is a source of conflict. Food needs to go from the kitchen to the stomach as efficiently as possible. The shutter seems to attach to different kinds of flow. Shutter down: flows of care, flows of hope, flows of sensuous sociality. Shutter up: flows of risk and security, flows of capital, flows of atomized individualism. The alternation between the two happens so quickly, and the atmosphere changes so rapidly.

### *Atmospheric Tunings*



James has been a patient on the ward for some time. He has made a fireplace. Someone gave him some long strips of cardboard and the idea came to him. He painted some of the flames and made the others out of cardboard. The coal is made of screwed up black paper. In fact, this is his second fireplace. The first one looked so good that it was placed on display elsewhere in the hospital. James likes moving the fireplace around. Its difficult, because it is quite wide, but you can move it to different parts of the bedroom. It changes the feel of the place. One of us asks James if the fireplace makes his bedroom feel more homely. He's not having that. Some other people feel it does, he agrees. But me? It just makes me feel like I'm not in a hospital.

The fireplace tinctures the bedroom. In fact it tinctures the whole hospital. Everyone seems to know about James and his fireplaces – you really need to have a look at what he's done. James does quite a lot of painting and art work. He seems very attached to all his pieces and likes to talk through them all. We imagine him as someone who is retuning the space, changing the feel of the

hospital piece by piece. But there seems to be something else going on here. James enjoys talking about the reaction of patients and staff to his work. He thinks very carefully through the colours and the overall scale. The best of his work, he says, has a real 'wow factor'. So the point of his work is not just to retune the space, but also to retune social relations on the unit. The art plugs him into different kinds of relationship with other people. He talks about it as work, as a kind of job that he has here, as opposed to his leisure time, spend in his bedroom, moving his fireplace around.

There's a pool table on the ward. James tells us that if you look at it carefully, the balls moving around the table are like the motion of planets on their astral courses. It reminds one of us of a song by the singer Ani DiFranco:

In the back room there's a lamp  
That hangs over the pool table  
And when the fan is on it swings  
Gently side to side  
There's a changing constellation  
Of balls as we are playing  
I see Orion and say nothing  
The only thing I can think of saying

There's a universe there on the pool table, James says. He has found a way of getting into it, of being part of the movements of another world whilst staying right where he is meant to be. He has found a kind of wormhole right in the middle the atmosphere, and with sufficient practice, a way of following it.

### **Conclusion: The Ontographic Imagination**

Affect theory is a notoriously diffuse area of study. Lacking any generally agreed definition of the central object, the field has grown into a diverse set of approaches where the most varied human and nonhuman phenomenon can be treated as 'affective'. In this paper, we have argued that putting affects in place, studying their emergence and transformation in a particular setting, provides some orientation. We have considered the concept of 'atmosphere' as a means to take this forward, and have identified what we take to be the core themes which may be developed further. As we have proceeded, atmosphere has become a way into thinking more specific processes: the tincturing or tuning of space; the knotting together of forces; the invitational character of atmospheres; the capacities to be solicited and the modes of engagement through which these are relationally enacted. We have also tried to show how these processes may play out in one very specific site, a forensic psychiatric unit.

To conclude, we return to MR James. Parkins, the unfortunate protagonist of the Suffolk ghost story is decribed by James as a 'Professor of Ontography'. The origins of this term are somewhat obscure, but may once have referred to a branch of geographical studies of human responses to the environment. In recent times 'ontography' has been seized upon in debates around the so-called 'ontological turn' in anthropology and other social science disciplines (see Holbraad & Pederson, 2016). Its value there is as a contrast term. If 'ontology' is

classically defined as the establishing the nature of being, then 'ontography' might be proposed as providing contextual descriptions of the emergence of this or that being. For instance, in the MR James story, the difference would be between establishing whether or not ghosts can be said to exist versus describing the relational world in which the dead come to be experienced as intervening in the lives of the living. In this paper, the issue might be parsed as the difference between defining what exactly atmosphere is and the attempt to provide a rich description of the features that emerge following atmospheric envelopment. In a sense, ontology 'takes care of itself' the more we are able to describe the practices through which 'feeling an atmosphere' occur. The great sociologist C. Wright Mills once called for a renewal in how social science was enacted through appeal to a 'sociological imagination'. A corresponding form of imaginative enquiry is no doubt required to explore the potential of an ontographical approach to atmospheres.

An ontographical approach is, by definition, grounded in the particularities of place. As Anderson (2014) asserts, atmospheres are excessive, they form distinct envelopments of space-time that cannot be clearly indexed to a here and now. But, following Ingold (2013) we may say that place itself refers not to some clearly defined spatial location, but rather to a perdurational knotting together of forces where space-times are folded together around particular points of inflection. For example, the histories, architecture, communities and topographies of Lausanne are drawn together around the feel of a particular street. In the same way, the fence and the shutter at the psychiatric unit are variable points around which a wide range of social, political and historical forces are drawn together and modulated. These points are felt directly by patients as they become attuned and attached to atmospheric fluctuations. The value of ontography is to offer a rich account of settings that makes it possible to trace the ways atmospheres draw in what might be thought of spatially and historical remote forces, and to specify the precise moments at which they are articulated. Moreover, it does so by taking seriously the experiences of the persons who engage with the atmosphere, and with a close attention to the practices through which they are moved by and act back upon these conditions. We may then begin to move beyond the acknowledgement of the 'inbetween' character of affective atmospheres to a fully realized analysis of the modes through which they are experienced and modified.

### **Note on Methods**

The photographs and commentary are drawn from a research project conducted in a large purpose-built medium-secure forensic psychiatric unit located in a large city in the South of England, to which all five authors contributed. The story of patient lying down in the corridor is adapted directly from fieldnotes. The project explored the experiences of secure care amongst currently detained mental health service users and staff, with a particular concern for the design of the built environment and how this facilitated and constrained care practices. The research itself consisted of 40 interviews with staff and patients, augmented with observations recorded during fieldwork. Interviews with service users (we use this term rather than 'patient' because it is the preferred terminology

amongst many who have lived experience of mental health) adopted a 'photo-production' methodology where participants were asked to take a series of digital photographs of places and objects around the unit that held importance for them. The photographs were then printed and brought to the interview, where they formed part of the basis of the conversation. The data from the interviews was subsequently analysed using a 'thematic decomposition' technique. Fuller methodological details are contained in Reavey et al, 2019 and Tucker et al, 2019. All names and identifiers are pseudonyms.

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