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THE ART OF THE STAGE
SET AS A PARADIGM FOR AN AESTHETICS
OF ATMOSPHERES

1. Atmosphere. A familiar yet extremely vague phenomenon

The term atmosphere has its origin in the meteorological field and refers to the earth’s envelope of air which carries the weather. It is only since the 18th century that it has been used metaphorically, for moods which are “in the air”, for the emotional tinge of a space. Today this expression is commonly used in all European languages; it no longer seems artificial and is hardly even regarded as a metaphor. One speaks of the atmosphere of a conversation, a landscape, a house, the atmosphere of a festival, an evening, a season. The way in which we speak of atmospheres in these cases is highly differentiated - even in everyday speech. An atmosphere is tense, light-hearted or serious, oppressive or uplifting, cold or warm. We also speak of the atmosphere of the “petty bourgeoisie”, the atmosphere of the Twenties, the atmosphere of poverty. To introduce some order into these examples, atmospheres can be divided into moods, phenomena of synaesthesia, suggestions for motions, communicative and social-conventional atmospheres. What matters is that, in speaking of atmospheres, we refer to their character. With this term character we already bring our understanding of atmospheres close to the sphere of physiognomics and theatre. The character of an atmosphere is the way in which it communicates a feeling to us as participating subjects. A solemn atmosphere has the tendency to make my mood serious, a cold atmosphere causes me to shudder.

The scholarly use of the term atmosphere is relatively new. It began in the field of psychiatry, specifically in Hubert Tellenbach’s book Geschmack und Atmosphäre [Taste and atmosphere]. Here, atmosphere refers to something bordering on the olfactory — such as the climate of the homeland or the smell of the nest, that is, a sphere of familiarity which is perceptible in a bodily-sensuous way. Since then, atmospheres have been researched in detail by phenomenology. Talk about atmospheres plays a part today in interior design, town planning, advertising and all fields related to the art of the stage set that is, the creation of backgrounds in radio, film and television. In general, it can be said that atmospheres are involved wherever something is being staged, wherever design is a factor — and that now means: almost everywhere.

Now, this matter-of-fact way in which atmospheres are talked about and manipulated is extremely surprising, since the phenomenon of atmosphere is itself something extremely vague, indeterminate, intangible. The reason is primarily that atmospheres are totalities: atmospheres imbue everything, they tinge the whole of the world or a view, they bathe eve-

的一切在某种光线下，都会以一种多样的印象在单一的情感状态中。但是，我们不能真正地说“整体”，也不可少的“整体”；语言是分析性的，必须将自己限制于具体的事物。此外，气氛是像审美质量的一种场景或观点，对某些“更多的东西”而言，阿多诺指的是在某种程度上，决定一个工作，作为一种纯粹“作品”的区别；或者，正如海德格尔所提出的“敞”那样，它赋予我们通向其空间之物所显现的方式。根据这种方式，气氛拥有某些不合理性，其在一种感性的意义上：最终，气氛完全主观的：在试图说出它们为何以及更好，为了定义其特征，一个人必须把自己暴露给它们，一个人必须在一种的一种自有情感状态中体验它们。没有这种有感情的主体，它们什么都不是。

而且，作为主体，它们以“在那之外”，某种可以归因于我们的东西，我们被其占有的东西，如同我们被一种异己的力量。所以，气氛是客观的吗？事实是，气氛是一种典型的中介现象，一种存在于主体和对象之间的东西。这使它们，像这样，无形的，意味着这意味着至少在欧洲文化区域，它们没有一种明确的本体论地位。但正因如此，它值得我们从两个角度去接近它们，从主体的视角，从对象的视角，从接收美学的角度，从生产的美学的角度。

2. Reception aesthetics and production aesthetics

接收美学和生产美学的观念作为现象起源于接收美学。气氛被理解为一种力量，其影响的主体，他们具有在主体中引起一种特征性情绪的倾向。它们来自我们不了解的地方，如同某种不明确的，可能在18世纪可能被称为“I don’t know what”，它们被理解为某种妙不可言的，因此不理性。

这问题看起来不同，如果从生产美学的角度来看，它可能拥有一个理性化访问这个“无形”实体的可能。这是舞台布景的艺术，它解除了气氛的道德的气氛：这是问题，它是一个问题，它是一种生产气氛。这种努力，如果不认为气氛是某种完全主观的，它将是无意义的。对于舞台布景艺术家，它必须给更大的观众，他们将体验那个由舞台设置产生的气氛，由舞台设置引发的，即使在同样的方式下，它的目的，就是让布景为行动提供一个气氛背景，以及让演员在一个声音板前，提升他们。这种声音板的设置从而证明了从接收的角度，气氛是某种半客观的。这意味着什么？

气氛，如我们所知，不是东西。它们不在作为保持同一个实体；尽管如此，即使在一种时间的中止之后，它们可以被识别为相同的，通过它们的特征。此外，尽管它们总是被感知的主观经验 - 作为一种味道或一种气味，例如，返回到Tellenbach - 它是可能的。
to communicate about them intersubjectively. We can discuss with one another what kind of atmosphere prevails in a room. This teaches us that there is an intersubjectivity which is not grounded in an identical object. We are accustomed, through the predominant scientific mode of thinking, to assume that intersubjectivity is grounded in objectivity, that detection of the presence and determinateness of something is independent of subjective perception and can be delegated to an apparatus. Contrary to this, however, the quasi-objectivity of atmospheres is demonstrated by the fact that we can communicate about them in language. Of course, this communication has its preconditions: an audience which is to experience a stage in roughly the same way must have a certain homogeneity, that is to say, a certain mode of perception must have been instilled in it through cultural socialisation.

Nevertheless, independently of the culture-relative character of atmospheres, their quasi-objective status is preserved. It manifests itself in the fact that atmospheres can be experienced as surprising, and, on occasions, in contrast to one’s own mood. An example is when, in a cheerful mood, I enter a community in mourning: its atmosphere can transform my mood to the point of tears. For this, too, the stage set is a practical proof.

3. Phantastike technē

All the same, can one really make atmospheres? The term making refers to the manipulating of material conditions, of things, apparatus, sound and light. But atmosphere itself is not a thing; it is rather a floating in-between, something between things and the perceiving subjects. The making of atmospheres is therefore confined to setting the conditions in which the atmosphere appears. We refer to these conditions as generators.

The true character of a making, which does not really consist in producing a thing, but in making possible the appearance of a phenomenon by establishing conditions, can be clarified by going back to Plato’s theory of mimesis.

In the dialogue Sophist, Plato draws a distinction between two kinds of performing art, in order to unmask the mendacious art of the Sophists. There is a difference, he argues, between eikastike technē and phantastike technē. It is the latter which interests us here. In eikastike technē, mimesis consists in the strict imitation of a model. Phantastike technē, by contrast, allows itself to deviate from the model. It takes account of the viewpoint of the observer, and seeks to make manifest what it represents in such a way that the observer perceives it “correctly”. Plato bases this distinction on the practice of the sculptors and architects of his time. For example, the head of a very tall statue was made relatively too large, so that it did not appear too small to the observer, or the horizontal edges of a temple were curved slightly upwards, so that they did not seem to droop to the observer. This art of phantastike is perhaps not yet quite what we mean

3 Plato, Sophist, 235e3-236c7.
by the art of making atmospheres, but it already contains the decisive feature: that the artist
does not see his actual goal in the production of an object or work of art, but in the imaginative
idea the observer receives through the object. That is why this art is called \textit{phantastike techne}.
It relates to the subject’s power of representation, to the imagination or \textit{imaginatio}. We come
close to what concerns us through the \textit{skenographia} developed by the Greeks as early as the
fourth century BC. In his \textit{Poetics} Aristote ascribes this to the tragedian Sophocles. The classical
philologists believed that \textit{skenographia} already implied perspective painting, an invention
frequently attributed to the Renaissance\textsuperscript{5}. They claimed that the geometrical doctrine of propor-
tion, in particular the intercept theorem, as we find it developed in the \textit{Elements} of Euclid, was
derived from \textit{skenographia}. For in order to create spatial depth through painting, perspectival
foreshortening of the objects represented — buildings, trees, people — is needed. In scenog-
raphy, therefore, we have an art form which is now directed explicitly, in its concrete activity,
towards the generation of imaginative representations in the subjects, here the audience. It does
not want to shape objects, but rather to create phenomena. The manipulation of objects serves
only to establish conditions in which these phenomena can emerge. But that is not achieved
without the active contribution of the subject, the onlooker. It is interesting when Umberto
Eco\textsuperscript{7} claims precisely this for all pictorial representation: it does not copy the object, he asserts,
but only creates the conditions of perception under which the idea of the object appears for
the viewer of the image. That may be overstated, yet it is true for Impressionist painting, for
example. That painting does not aim to copy an object or a landscape, but rather to awaken a
particular impression, an experience in the onlooker. The most convincing proof of this is the
technique of pointillism. The colours the painter wishes the onlooker to see are not located on
the painted surface but “in space”, or in the imagination of the onlooker.

Of course, the art of the stage set has by now advanced beyond pure scenography. Wagners operas
seem to have given particular impetus to this development, firstly because they demanded a fanta-
astic ambiance in any case and, secondly, because they were intended to act especially on the feel-
ings, not just the imagination\textsuperscript{8}. But the breakthrough came only in the 20th century, with the ma-
stery of light and sound through electrical technology\textsuperscript{9}. Here, a stage art has now been developed
which is no longer confined to the design and furnishing of the stage space but, on the one hand,
causes the action on the stage to appear in a particular light and, on the other, creates an acoustic
space which \textit{tunes} the whole performance. At the same time, this has made it possible for the art
of the stage set to leave the stage itself and spill over into the auditorium, or even into space itself.
The spaces generated by light and sound are no longer something perceived at a distance, but some-
thing within which one is enclosed. This has also enabled the art of the stage set to expand into
the general art of staging, which has applications, for example, in the decor of discotheques and the
design of large-scale events such as open-air festivals, opening ceremonies of sports events, etc\textsuperscript{10}.

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\textsuperscript{5} Aristote, \textit{Poetics}, 1449a18.
\textsuperscript{7} U. Eco, \textit{Semiotik. Entwurf einer Theorie der Zeichen}, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München 1987, chapter
\textsuperscript{8} O. Schuberth, \textit{Das Bühnenbild. Geschichte, Gestalt, Technik}, Callwey, München, pp. 86f., pp. 95f.
\textsuperscript{9} N. Eckert, \textit{Das Bühnenbild im 20. Jahrhundert}, Henschel-Verlag, Berlin 1998, esp. the chapter: “Mehr
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The present dominance of light and sound design also enables us to discern in retrospect what the making of atmospheres consists of in the more object-related field. It becomes clear that what is at issue is not really visual spectacles – as was perhaps believed by practitioners of the old scenography – but the creation of “tuned” spaces, that is to say, atmospheres. The making, as long as it concerns a shaping and establishing of the geometrical space and its contents, cannot therefore relate to the concrete qualities possessed by the space and the things within it. Or, more precisely: it does not relate to the determinations of things, but to the way in which they radiate outwards into space, to their output as generators of atmospheres. Instead of properties, therefore, I speak of ekstases¹¹ – that is, ways of stepping-outside-oneself. The difference between properties and ekstases can be clarified by the antithesis between convex and concave: a surface which, in relation to the body it encloses, is convex, is concave in relation to the surrounding space.

We are concerned, therefore, with ekstases, with the expressive forms of things. We are not accustomed to characterising things in terms of their ekstases, although they are crucial to design, for example. In keeping with our ontological tradition, we characterise things in terms of their material and their form. For our present purpose, however, the thing-model of Jacob Böhme is far more appropriate. He conceives of things on the model of a musical instrument.¹² In these terms, the body is something like the sounding board of a musical instrument, while its outward properties, which Böhme calls “signatures”, are the tuning which articulate its expressive forms. And finally, what is characteristic of things is their tone, their “odour” or emanation – that is to say, the way in which they express their essence.

Tone and emanation – in my terminology, ekstases – determine the atmosphere radiated by things. They are therefore the way in which things are felt to be present in space. This gives us a further definition of atmosphere: it is the felt presence of something or someone in space. For this the ancients had the beautiful expression parousia. Thus, for Aristotle, light is the parousia of fire¹³.

4. Conclusion

What I, harking back to Plato, called phantastike techne, would no doubt today be called design. We have oriented ourselves here by a prototypical area of design: stage design. But for our purpose it is important to modify the traditional understanding of design, according to which design amounted merely to shaping or configuring. That understanding is already prohibited by the extraordinary importance of light and sound, not only in the field of the stage set but also in advertising, marketing, town planning, interior design. One might speak of a practical, or better: a poetic phenomenology, because we are dealing here with the art of bringing something to appearance. A term used by the phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz is very apt

¹¹ G. Böhme, Aisthetik. Vorlesungen über Ästhetik als allgemeine Wahrnehmungslehre, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München 2001, chapter IX.
¹³ Aristotle, De anima, 18b.
here: he speaks of a “technology of impression” [Eindruckstechnik]. Admittedly, this term is used polemically, being applied to the generation of impressions for propaganda purposes in the Nazi period, or what Walter Benjamin called the «aestheticizing of political life». Let us therefore speak more generally of the art of staging. On the one hand, then, we have preserved the connection to our paradigm, the art of the stage set, and, on the other, we have included in this expression the purpose for which atmospheres are predominantly generated today: the stage set is itself a part of the staging of a drama or opera. The art of atmospheres, as far as it is used in the production of open-air festivals or in the build-up to large sporting events such as the Football World Cup or the Olympic Games, is their staging. The role of the generation of atmospheres in marketing is that of staging commodities. The commodities themselves are valued, in the aesthetic economy where they now serve only relatively little to satisfy basic needs, for their staging-value, that is, they are valued to the extent that they help individuals or groups to stage their own lifestyles. And finally, in democracies, or more precisely media-democracies, in which politics is performed as if in a theatre, the generation of atmospheres has the function of staging personalities or political events.

If we review these examples, it emerges that the attention which is now paid to atmospheres in aesthetic theory has its material background in the fact that staging has become a basic feature of our society: the staging of politics, of sporting events, of cities, of commodities, of personalities, of ourselves. The choice of the paradigm of the stage set for the art of generating atmospheres therefore mirrors the real theatricalisation of our life. This is why the paradigm stage set can teach us so much, in theoretical terms, about the general question of the generation of atmospheres, and therefore about the art of staging. But in practical terms, too, there ought to be much to be learned from the great tradition of stage set design. That will indeed happen, but one should not expect that it will be possible to say very much about it. For the art of the stage set has been transmitted up to now, like traditional crafts, in master-pupil relationships, by collaboration and imitation. The guiding practical knowledge is tacit knowledge. It is all the more pleasing to find now and then, in the many books which exist on the subject of the stage set, something explicit about the craft. In conclusion, I will give an example of such knowledge from the praxis of the stage set. It is found in, of all places, a philosophical dissertation, Robert Kümmerlen’s book Zur Aesthetik bühnenräumlicher Prinzipien.

Kümmerlen writes about the use of light on the stage. He argues, we should note, that an atmosphere is created on the stage with light. He then defines the effect of the light-atmosphere more precisely by saying that a characteristic mood is imparted by it to the performance. As examples, he mentions sombre and charming moods – that is, moods with a synaesthetic and a communicative character. Finally, he also recognises the status of the “in-between existence” typical of atmospheres: «The lighting on its own generates a fluid

between the individual structures of the performance». But now, let me give the quotation in full:

The space to be contemplated is given its *brightness* by the lighting; stage performances are only made visible by light. The first function of lighting, the simple provision of light, creates, with the brightness, what might be called the atmosphere in which the space exists. The light-atmosphere, achieved in the most diverse ways, varies the space; through the lighting the performances take on a characteristic mood. The space creates an effect in its totality; the lights of the spatial representation produce a self-contained impression; the space stands in a unifying light. With the illumination of the whole scene a “unified character” is produced. A uniform mood emanates from the space; for example, the representation of space is subjected to a “muted” light. We find that three-dimensional objects “gleam” in a regular light; the space appears, for example, as “charming” or “sombre”. The lighting on its own generates a fluid between the individual structures of the performance. A specific mood is contained in the space represented through the ethereal effect of brightness.¹⁶

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