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Gesturing atmospheres

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Abstract. *From a phenomenological point of view only people exposing themselves directly to it in place and time can characterize an atmosphere. How can such characterization be “transported” to other people in other places and times in such ways that the atmospheric experience is somehow presented again? How can the description of atmosphere itself be atmospheric and what can atmospheric similarity mean? With a point of departure in Wittgenstein this paper proposes “gesture” as the concept for such processes. Further it employs an actor-network-theoretical approach to elucidate the gestural transport of atmospheres.*

Keywords: *atmosphere, gesture, actor-network, Böhme, Wittgenstein, Latour*

Introduction

From a phenomenological point of view, represented here by the work of Gernot Böhme, atmospheres can only be characterized if they are sensed in place and time. Atmospheres are sensuous experiences in which we feel the simultaneous presence of what is sensed and ourselves sensing it. It is an “undivided” feeling of “myself as a sensuous subject and the feeling of the presence of something”. Just think of the feeling of the buzz of a mosquito. Hence, “one can only determine the character of an atmosphere by exposing oneself to it” (Böhme, 2001: 41, 52). This intimate relationship between sensuousness and characterization, between emotion and description, gives rise to the question: can descriptions, which are inherently dependent on presence, be transported to absent people in such ways that the “presencing” of the atmosphere in other times and places somehow resembles the atmosphere of the *in situ* point of departure? How can descriptions of atmospheres presented in other times and places themselves be atmospheric, and what can atmospheric similarity mean?

With a point of departure in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s conception of gesture this paper proposes “gesture” as an adequate conceptualisation of such processes. For Wittgenstein gesture is in the tone of language and in our “word-feelings”. Further, gestural communication can be a guidance of others in the right direction by pointing to similarities in different media, e.g. by guiding the understanding of a piece of music by pointing towards similarities in a painting. Gesture thus seems appropriate to communicate atmospheres atmospherically. Following this, the paper employs an actor-network-theoretical approach to further understand the kind of mediation involved in the atmospheric transportation of atmospheres. Before approaching gesture a little more needs to be said about the *in situ* experience of atmosphere.

Atmosphere

To explicate the *in situ* experience and characterization of atmospheres Gernot Böhme, as the philosopher he is (*cf.* Deleuze & Guattari, 1994: 3-5), develops a network of concepts attached to the concept of atmosphere. First of all, atmospheres need attention. Often we

are inattentive to atmospheres; they may affect us (unconsciously) but without our notice due to many other everyday occupations (Böhme, 2006: 50). Therefore, sensing atmospheres requires our attention to which state we are in; how we sense ourselves in the surroundings we are part of (Böhme, 1993: 120). The German and Danish languages contain an expression that matches this double in-situ relationship, in German “sich befinden”, in Danish “at befinde sig”. They refer to both my being somewhere and to how I feel about being there (Böhme, 2006: 122).

“Befindlichkeit” then is one core concept for understanding the experience of an atmosphere. Attentiveness to Befindlichkeit cannot, however, be taken for granted; we can be more or less good at it, more or less well trained. Sensing atmospheres is a “competence” that can be developed, trained, and learned (Böhme, 2006: 50f).

As to the surroundings attentiveness concentrates on the “ecstasies” of things, on how they “tincture” the surroundings, how they show their presence in the environment (Böhme, 1993: 121). “Ecstasy”, then, is another core concept just as also is “constellation”, the concept for the location of things *related* to other things through distance and space, narrowness and breath and opaque volumes (Böhme, 1995: 168).

On the background of competent attention to our Befindlichkeit and the ecstasies and constellations of things we can undertake to put our experiences into words. Such “wordings” of atmosphere generally will search for the “character” or “physiognomy” of an atmosphere (Böhme, 1995: 53, 132ff), or make use “synaesthetic” constellations of words such as cold glass and steel, warm bricks, sharp or heavy tone, or refer to social character such as powerfulness (Böhme, 1995: 54, 85ff, 55).

Communicating atmospheres: presence and absence

Such a network of basic concepts at a general level helps to explicate the experience and characterization of atmospheres. It can also orient our attentiveness to atmospheres and our way of describing them: how am I affected in an ecstatic environment, which synaesthetic expressions do I find appropriate, which physiognomies and characters are distinctive for me?

Those present *in situ* are in a favourable position to assess the *affective* appropriateness of such descriptions, since they can compare them to their own Befindlichkeit in the same situation. This is not only an individual activity. Different people present can discuss the atmosphere and more or less agree on its character, provided that their sensibilities towards atmospheres do not diverge too much (Böhme, 2006: 25f). We can “communicate about them” if we are a socio-culturally sufficiently “homogeneous audience” (Böhme, 2011: 233). If the audience is not that homogeneous the “same” environment may bring about atmospheres of diverging “tonalities”. Thus for instance the tourist passing by, the interested costumer and the initiated participant in the market will experience and characterize the atmosphere of the Oriental Bazaar in different ways (Escher, 2008: 162). Still, these different audiences rely on the *in situ* experience when describing atmospheres in their own way.

But what about people in other times and places who were not present *in situ*? They cannot assess the *affective* appropriateness of the descriptions. They live other presences, outside the Bazaar, so to speak. Is it, despite this absence, possible to transport atmospheres in such ways that the atmospheric quality of the experience *in situ* somehow can be felt and experienced by the absent others? Let us take a look at the concept of gesture.

Gesture

I am not the only one to relate the concept of gesture to the context of atmosphere. Jean-Paul Thibaud employs the concept to explicate the *in situ* connection between atmosphere and human motility, emphasizing the dynamism of this relationship. Atmospheres are

“answered” directly by human action in the form of gesture and human gesturing *in situ* coproduces the atmosphere (Thibaud, 2004: 147f; Thibaud, 2011a: 209).

Such *in situ* gesturing is, however, not the issue here. The issue is *ex situ* gesturing of atmospheres. Further, the point of departure is taken in linguistic gesturing since the interlacing of sensuousness and words is an important channel for apprehending atmosphere. The sensible is a shifter of speech and local atmospheres motivate to verbalization (Thibaud, 2001: 82f). Again, the issue is not *in situ* verbalization, but *ex situ* linguistic gesturing. The point is that for Wittgenstein, as we shall see, such gestures merge sensuousness and meaning.

Human gestures are movements of the human body with a meaning (Lüdeking, 1990: 218). However, “(n)ot every [...] movement of the human body is a gesture”, not even every “purposeful” movement (Wittgenstein, 1980a: 42f). Moving my body purposefully while eating does not in itself make the movement a gesture. But I can eat in such a gesturing manner that the movements of my body signal, “don’t disturb!”

Also language can be gestural, but not every expression in words is a gesture. I can formulate a message to be understood literally in “purposeful” words without any gesturing, but I can also “colour” my wordings in such ways that the same words say something else. Language includes verbal gesture: tone, rhythm and the emotional meaning of words: “Verbal language contains a strong musical element (a sigh, the modulation of tone for a question, for an announcement, for longing; all the countless gestures in the vocal cadences)” (Wittgenstein, 1980b: §888).

Saying something in a certain tone of language relates to what Wittgenstein calls *experience (Erlebnis) of meaning*. If, for instance, the same word can have different meanings (the word “bank” can mean both money bank and riverbank) and the vocal cadence indicates if the meaning is one or the other, then meaning is experienced. Not *what* we hear, but *how* we hear what we hear, indicates the precise meaning (Albertsen, 2000: 71-72).

If the meaning of words are highly dependent on verbal gesture, we can get the *feeling* that the word contains its meaning in itself. It is as if it is “completely filled with its meaning”. In such cases meaning forces itself upon us (Wittgenstein, 1968: 215) through the “musical element of language” as well as our “feelings for words”. When we attach feelings to the sound of words, we make those word-sounds into gestures (Wittgenstein, 1990: 368-371, Albertsen, 2000: 78f).

Akin to the “music” in gestural language there is gesture in music: the expression of the tones – the “tone” of the tones – and the timing of (metronomical) time. “For me this musical phrase is a gesture. It insinuates itself into my life. I adopt it as my own” (Wittgenstein, 1980a: 73). Further, gesturing in music can seem like language. A theme can be heard to contain questions, answers and conclusions, and the music may even be heard as speaking. We hear such questioning in music not least due to the *tone* of questioning in our language (Albertsen, 2000: 87-89).

Gesture, then, is formation of meaning through sensuous experience and it is communicated to others as gesture. In a double sense. It is communication through experiential, sensuous meaning and a way of leading (gerere) the other, pointing her understanding in certain directions rather than other directions (Agamben, 1992: 9). Pointing towards or comparing with something else in another medium, e.g. the musical phrase with some dance steps or a painting, often accomplishes such gesturing (Albertsen, 2000: 91-96).

A semiosphere of gesture

Experience (Erfahrung) and familiarity to a great extent explain our ability to understand gestures as gestures. Thus for instance our feelings for words depend on familiarity with the mother tongue. We can understand a gesture and gesticulate our understanding to someone else in another medium because of our common life in a culture, a life form, in which there apparently exists a general “gestural semiosis” between different realms of meaning

(Bezzel, 1996: 101ff). This I call – with allusion to Yuri M. Lotman (1990: 123) – a “semiosphere of gesture”. In such semiospheres “gestural family resemblances” (my term) can exist between for instance language and music. The musical gestures of my language influence my understanding of music and the gestures of music operate in my language. That’s why it is meaningful to answer a musical gesture by a verbal, visual or other type of gesture, or to point towards a painting in order to understand the gestural meaning of a piece of music (Albertsen, 2000: 99-101). In this way, through the concept of gesture, “(a)ll human forms of expression become visible in their kinship: Acoustic, visual, tactile, mental gestures” (Bezzel, 1996: 105).

Gesturing atmospheres

Our questions were: How can descriptions of atmosphere themselves be atmospheric and “presenced” in such ways that absent others may feel the atmosphere? And: What can such atmospheric similarity mean? On the background of the above Wittgensteinian understanding of gesture some answers now come to the fore.

Firstly, it is quite evident that atmospheric affects are obvious entities for linguistic gesturing. In gestural language sensuousness and meaning merge into experience of meaning through the tone, the rhythm, the cadences of words and our feelings for them. To express a *Befindlichkeit* in such a way that other people in other places and times may get a sense of sensing it, one should not formulate sentences that as literately as possible transmit information. Rather, it is a question of finding the right constellation of gesticulating words that fit each other in an affective/emotional expression, which somehow is similar to the original emotions of the atmosphere. Such emotional similarity can occur in constellations of words that otherwise are totally incommensurate to the original *in situ* atmosphere.

Gernot Böhme senses this when saying about a characterization of a garden atmosphere as “gently melancholic” that these words themselves “conjure up” the atmosphere (Böhme, 1995: 37-38). Read the expression gesturally, feel it, say it, listen to its tonalities and the atmosphere may presence itself, sensually. Poets are good at that; they can “create atmospheres through words” (Böhme, 1995: 75) by employing them gesturally (Wittgenstein, 1980b: §888); atmospheres, which emotionally resemble atmospheres elsewhere than in the poem being read here and now. This is remarkably exposed in Böhme’s analysis of Goethe’s poem on the dawn, which convincingly shows how the changing atmospheres of dawn as experienced by Goethe (and us) are felt to be present in the poem itself (Böhme, 2006: 54-60). Read it!

Secondly, from such atmospheric constellations of words we can get the *feeling* that they contain their meaning in themselves, that they contain the atmosphere as we just have seen. This, it seems, is what Vilém Flusser has in mind when he – on the background of a distinction between mood (*Stimmung*) and “moodness” (*Stimmtheit*) – conceptualizes “*Gestimmtheit*” as mood transformed into gesture and ascribes to gesture the ability to decontextualise the atmosphere from its original context (Flusser, 1997: 14). Turning atmosphere into gesture makes it transportable to other places and times.

Thirdly, gestural transport of atmosphere can take place not only in linguistic gestures, but also in other forms of gesture, auditive, visual, tactile, or by pointing toward pieces of music, works of art etc. Thus for instance similar “cheerful” atmospheres can be generated in quite different ways: through the constellations of words in a poem, through the constellation of qualities of things (in a building for instance) or through the constellation of colours in a painting (Böhme, 1995: 77). This atmospheric similarity is gestural and the semiosphere of gestures constitutes the so to speak transcendental condition of possibility of the similarity, in the phenomenological sense of transcendentality. Which then, forthly, answers the question: What can atmospheric similarity mean? It can mean gestural family resemblance within a semiosphere of gestures.

Presencing atmospheres

Gesture may de-contextualize atmosphere and make it transportable to other times and places, but *how* are atmospheric gestures transported? An actor-network-theory approach (Latour, 2005) can help elucidate this question. To make atmospheres travel in time and space they, firstly, have to be transformed into some moveable state. Secondly, the mediation must have a specific character or type (Latour, 1998: 424). A contrast to scientific research can clarify this. During processes of scientific research information is transformed into material forms that are “completely different from the one it had when it was locally and materially present”. Such “in-formation” into different material can disturb or distort the information. It is therefore important that “constant features” are maintained through the transformation from one medium into the next. During transport the mediators should align in such ways that it is clear what is kept constant and what is discarded. The mediators should be “immutable mobiles” (Latour, 1998: 425f).

Gestures transporting atmospheres in an *atmospheric way* work differently. Rather than keeping an undistorted constant in different media, the key is the ability of the mediating chain to make the atmospheric experience present again, not in the sense of re-presenting it exactly as it once was, but in the sense of presenting it “anew”. Such kinds of “presencing” can be “person making” as when the expression “I love you [...] uttered rightly” – i.e. with the right “trembling of the voice” (Latour, 1998: 428, 435), with the “*gestures*” of “the words exchanged by lovers” (Wittgenstein, 1990: §712) – brings two persons “in the presence of one another *again* and *anew*”. This is not a report about something “I have already told you three times”, but a “redirection of attention” towards giving presence to each other (Latour, 428f). That is: gesture in both the sense of experiencing meaning and directing attention. Similarly, gestures transporting atmospheres in an atmospheric way is “atmosphere-making”, which presences the atmosphere “again and anew” in other times and places.

Human beings can undertake such presencing. They can travel to other places gesturing their remembrance of the experience of the atmosphere to others in language, by bodily gestures, by pointing toward similarities in the environment, toward pieces of music, toward pictures, toward sound recordings from the original site (as in Thibaud, 2011b¹). But the transformation can also take a lot of other transportable forms: into poems or just a couple of appropriate words as in “gently melancholic”, into pictures, soundscapes, odours, tactilities, or – not least – combinations of it all since atmospheres are multisensorial phenomena.

According to Latour a large part of our lives is spent in developing our skills of carefully detecting “(t)ruth and falsity, faithfulness and infidelity” in the presence giving of love (Latour, 1998: 429). Such skills, I would say, are performed in and contribute to the persistence of a semiosphere of gestures. Skills of similar kinds are performed in the presence giving of atmospheres. At the same time, however, one should also remember that gestural transport of atmospheres is not a keeping of constants. It is, therefore, “inherently unstable”. One cannot “put oneself in the presence of presence” and understand, “once and for all, the meaning of the message” (Latour, 1998: 438). Gestures gesturing atmospheres atmospherically can be sensed in the right way, but there is no guarantee.

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