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Hermeneutics of ambiance

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Abstract. *I wish to introduce interpretation into the debate on ambiance/atmosphere. Atmosphere is about becoming aware of sensorial and bodily components of our perception. These components cause a multiplicity of sensorial impressions and we respond to them differently according to our different backgrounds. When we share an atmosphere or ambiance we do it through sensorial elements, but what we share and how we do it relate to an interpretation of these sensorial elements – which in return affect the interpretation.*

Keywords: *perception, interpretation, aesthetics, philosophy*

Introduction – with a note on atmosphere and ambiance

When we talk about atmospheres we will often characterize them in sensuous, emotional and social terms (cf. Böhme, 2001, p. 89). An atmosphere can be light or bright; it can be gay, sad, or melancholic; and we can call it a bourgeois atmosphere, a baroque atmosphere or a Scandinavian atmosphere. For the latter examples we obviously include an element of interpretation.

My aim in the following is to discuss this role of interpretation. I cannot have any idea of an atmosphere as, for example, baroque without some knowledge or at least vague (perhaps false) idea of what baroque is, and how we respond to such an atmosphere will depend on our idea of baroque. For one person it could be something exotic and fascinating, for another something filled with memories of a hierarchical and claustrophobic culture.

The extent of interpretation in atmospheres like baroque, Persian, aristocratic, etc. is obvious. They all depend on experience or knowledge, a knowledge which may be full of prejudices and misunderstandings based on personal experiences as well as on literature, film, and multiple other sources. My concern in the following is not whether they are true or in any way reliable but only the element of interpretation. This is obviously the case concerning the social atmospheres, but it is also to some degree the case with the sensuous and emotional.

My approach to this is philosophical, i.e. I wish to reflect on some implications of this interpretative aspect of atmospheres. For characterizing atmosphere I follow Gernot Böhme's introduction of atmosphere as a general theory of perception (*ibid.*, pp. 29 ff.). Like Böhme, I will also take the concept of atmosphere as an important concept in aesthetics when we understand aesthetics similar to A.G. Baumgarten's interest in the cognitive aspect of sensations. Baumgarten suggests we should acknowledge how the extensiveness of the confused ideas we get from the lower faculties of knowledge like sensation is parallel to the intensity of the clear ideas of the higher faculties which leads to a conceptual understanding (Baumgarten, 2007, pp. 423 ff., pp. 560 ff.). Also at the level of sensation we find a cognitive element.

Perhaps a short comment on the terminology of atmosphere and ambiance is needed here. Both are related to something around us though I will suggest a difference to be found in the character of *how* it is around us. Ambiance surrounds us, we are *in* an ambiance. Although embraced by an ambiance we become more intimately shrouded or enveloped by

atmospheres. Atmosphere, strictly speaking the sphere of vapour, is perhaps felt to be more directly in the air than is the case with ambiance.

The use is metaphorical. The tense or sad atmosphere is of course not in the air in the same way as climatic elements. However, we feel the atmosphere in a room or in “the air”, and it is very important to emphasize how we encounter something which is not merely a psychological projection. Atmospheres are characterised as quasi objective; they are something we respond to as felt, a difference that becomes clear when we sometimes feel an atmosphere different from our own sentiment (Böhme, 2001, pp. 47 ff.). It is important to emphasize this: Atmosphere is not an object causing a response in a subject or a subjective feeling or experience. Atmosphere is about questioning this subject-object model by focusing on aspects of our perception usually ignored by our interest in identifying the cause of our perception as an object of a certain kind. Atmosphere adds to a phenomenological approach, which has traditionally had a primary concern with the legitimacy of our knowledge, an awareness of sensorial and bodily aspects which are of importance to how we perceive something.

This makes me suggest using atmosphere rather than ambiance when characterising perception. When we move from the perception to our environment, it may be more appropriate to use the term ambiance. This is however, a distinction difficult to maintain in practice and only meant as a technical suggestion.

Perception

When we perceive something we also perceive it *as* something. In a perception we never encounter simply a “this”; it will also be of a kind, or a “this-such” to use the terminology of Aristotle (*Met.* 1033 b 23). When we perceive something *as* something we omit what is not essential for determining it as something. Such distinctions are fundamental to how we talk about something. Our different ways of talking about things can be categorized in some general forms, a categorization made explicit by Aristotle. We say something is, for example, white; more general that white is a colour and most general that colour is a quality. What is important here is that there is a difference between the categories; substance is a category primary to the others as there has to be something the different things are said about. Substance is about the individual object, for example Socrates, and like before we can say more general about Socrates he is a man, a living being and most general a substance.

What Aristotle reveals is that some of the characteristics will have to be what he calls *in* a subject, like the colour white. It makes no sense to talk about white if it is not something that is white, thus white is in a body (*Cat.* 2 a 35 ff.). In the later terminology this is the difference between substance and accidents. The accidents, what is accidental, presupposes something which exists and our concern for determining something is for what this something is. In the example above with Socrates, we perceive, when meeting Socrates, a white man, and man is primary for determining what he is.

The accidents are what are omitted as not being essential for determining something. It is essential for Socrates to be a man rather than his colour, size, position, etc. The question we can ask is whether the omitted elements are always unessential or only unessential in a narrow sense, namely when we seek an answer to specific questions about what something is. It is true that the blue glass in front of us is a glass and it has the colour blue, but the blueness will also “colour” the perception and our response to it. The blueness does not influence the determination of the object as a glass but it influences us and our perception. We become affected by it.

Being affected is the connecting point between aesthetics and atmosphere. When aesthetics became established as a philosophical discipline in the 18th century by Baumgarten the intention was to investigate and legitimate the cognitive content of our sensorial faculties, something widely, and falsely the Rationalists would say, neglected by the culture of En-

lightenment from the 18th century with its world interpretation based on a scientific perspective (cf. Leibniz, 1925, §14). For Baumgarten there is no sharp separation of sensation and thinking, the difference is one of quality between what is clear and what is confused, a characterisation taken over from the Rationalist tradition he was himself a part of. What Baumgarten sought was a description of how the lower faculties would have a cognitive content parallel to the higher; a possible parallel between sensation and logic. Lower is what gives us a vague idea but is not developed into a conceptual understanding – like the *je ne sais quoi* debated by his contemporaries.

This historical digression should draw attention to how we have a habit of giving priority to the determination of something as a particular something in our perception at the cost of other aspects. This is exactly what is challenged by introducing the concept of atmosphere in which “[t]he concept of perception is liberated from its reduction to information processing, provision of data or (re)cognition of a situation. Perception includes the affective impact of the observed, the ‘reality of images’, corporeality. Perception is basically the manner in which one is bodily present for something or someone or one’s own bodily state in an environment” (Böhme, 1993, p. 125). By atmosphere the determination of an object is not the primary moment of the perceptions, it is the presence of something. This presence is, in our daily practice, soon to become the identification of an object, but before this identification we are in a state of presence in which we respond, sensorial and bodily, to what is present (cf. Böhme, 2001, pp. 35 ff.). Atmosphere is about including this presence into our understanding of something and recognizing how the elements, usually considered unessential and secondary, may be of importance.

The element of interpretation in perception

Atmosphere emphasizes the importance of the presence of something in the perception but perception is not simply about presence but about also having a comprehension of what is present. Perception, if we take the word etymological, has to do with collecting, especially at harvest, and what we collect is then not random but based on a selection. We will choose the red peaches and not the green, thus having an immediate and sensorial response to something we know about the fruits.

When we perceive, for example, a blue glass we may say we see the glass and secondary the colour because our perception is biased towards determining the object but this could be different, and very likely is different in many situations where we are more occupied with the blueness than with the glass. What we take to be primary and secondary seems very much to be depending on the situation and on the appropriate knowledge. Our perception is a complex process of selection between the different elements present; to perception belongs “such operations as active exploration, selection, grasping of essentials, simplification, abstraction, analysis and synthesis, completion, correction, comparison, problem solving, as well as combining, separating, putting in context” (Arnheim, 1997, p. 13).

The point I wish to emphasize is how the perception as a whole begins with a presence of something in which we then fixate upon some specific elements we take to be primary for our understanding. The glass and the blueness are both present and we favour then the glass to the colour due to a frame of interpretation. This frame is very broadly about giving the object priority over quality which is already a philosophical issue; another aspect is practical. My practical interest in, for example, the presence of something is not, if it is a human being, an interest in the determination of the object as object but an interest in perhaps, the ethical presence, or the erotic. The presence affects us in many ways and forms our approach to things – including places, situations and people.

To elaborate on this we can go back to the example with the red and green peaches. Knowing the red peaches to be ripe is a knowledge we may carry with us to other situations where the red colour can become significant of something delicious. Not by any automatic

association or based on explicit knowledge, but as an element in our perception that will add to our perceptual skills influencing how we respond to specific situations. We may have many different associations related to a colour like red. It may have to do with temperature, blood, politics, etc. A colour like red may provoke very different feelings whether one sees it as a colour related to working class values of a collective building a strong community of mutual interests and support, or it is seen as something politically dangerous threatening to undermine one's values – or it may give no such feelings or associations whatsoever.

This aspect of perception may also find its parallel in psychology drawing attention to how “we begin to respond emotionally to situations *before* we can think them through. [...] Without our realizing it, emotional response can then influence attitudes, thinking, and behaviour, allowing us to cognitively congratulate ourselves on our perceptive thinking, while all the while we are in fact being guided by emotionally laden perceptual judgments beneath the level of our awareness” (Barry, 1997, pp. 18 f., emphasis in original). As my interest is philosophical I will not discuss the interest in how specific elements like certain colours can have an influence on our behaviour (*cf. ibid.*, pp. 264 ff.). The philosophical interest is about the legitimacy and status of the cognitive aspect of our perception, and the implication to our interpretation of our situation in the world. One thing is to say we do respond to what is, for example, subliminal and also to describe some features of this response; another is a philosophical interest in the foundation of this response, a foundation I suggest to be found in our interpretative approach to all phenomena.

The interpretation and hermeneutics of ambiance

The perception begins with a presence of something in which we fixate what is needed for comprehending the phenomena. We are not simply seeing something white approaching, but, to use Aristotle's example, we see Diare's son (*De An.* 418 a 20). We decide which impressions are important and which to neglect, which is also a very basic interpretation of the impressions – the object approaching is prior to the colour of it, the posture, way of walking, clothing, etc., and the interest is to identify the object as a man in a specific relation to others, he is the son of Diare. Despite the desire to understand that we see a man, we must acknowledge how his posture, clothing, etc. are still of importance having a decisive influence on how we perceive the character of the man. We do say “don't judge a book by its cover” but we do it constantly and will have to rely on this form of judgement in a social context, which is the reason we put so many efforts into our bodily presence, behaviour and look.

Returning now to my initial question of the difficulties of talking about baroque, Persian, aristocratic, etc. atmospheres, an example can demonstrate both the effect of a particular ambiance as well as the importance of an interpretation. It comes from an anthropologist reflecting on what moments that would crystallize his “experience of Islam in its more specifically religious dimension” (Gilsenan, 2000, p. 265):

“When I first went to Cairo and began, week in, week out, to go to mosques and to sit in self-conscious jacket-and-tie piety while members of the Hamidiya Shaziliya performed the zikr, there was one intruding element that fundamentally disturbed all my efforts at perception and a feeling for the real meaning of the event. [...] One day I realized what the discordant phrase in the music was: Neon light. All around the interior of the mosque there were verses from the Quran in *neon* light. In green neon light, as it happens, but what matter the color? [...] For months neon light subverted my every solemn ritual attendance. Each time I glanced up at the Quranic verses, reading the Arabic, ‘knowing the meaning’ in a dictionary sort of way, the neon would interpose itself, the medium would dominate. Then, one day, perhaps eight or nine months after my first hesitant observations of the zikr, I turned unthinkingly away from the swaying bodies and the rhythms of the remembrance of God and saw, not neon, but simply greenness. Greenness, and letters that did not ‘stand for’ anything

but simply were powerful icons in and of themselves. No gaps existed between color, shape, light, and form. From that unreflecting and unexpected moment I ceased to see neon at all" (*ibid.*, emphasis in original).

Gilsenan himself is aware of what it is in his perception which changes and is recognized as an important feature of his experience, but for the Muslim visitor it will probably be something unrecognized because perceiving the green light as greenness is fundamental for creating the ambiance. It is not perceived as a light which happens to be green as the appropriate colour but it is a fundamental characteristic affecting people present having knowledge of the significance of the colour green in Islam though it is not a knowledge in any way made explicit; it is a knowledge embodied similar to knowing and choosing the ripe fruit in the example before. "It adds nothing much to know a history of 'green' as the color of the Prophet, of the angel Khudr, of life, and to follow it through the ages. It is the direct, self-creating, and re-creating experience of greenness that 'just is' for Muslims in a particularly ordinary way, both intimately the same as and distinct from our own, that is so vital" (*ibid.*, p. 266).

The explicit understanding itself does not create the experience, but without the knowledge of the significance of green it is not likely the atmosphere is created. How it is felt and experienced will be different among different people, in this case with a significant difference between Muslims and non-Muslims. The green light is a simple sensorial impression but how we respond to it and how we include or exclude it in our perception will depend on the background we have, similar to the example above with the colour red and the political or non-political connotation. This is the difficulty about atmospheres; we experience to a large extent the same phenomena but we do not necessarily respond to them in the same way, only if we share many of the same experiences due to a similar cultural and educational background.

When we describe or create an ambiance it will very much depend on the extent to which the people experiencing it have similar perceptual comprehension of the phenomena. Because atmosphere lies at the very beginning of our perception and not at the end of an explicit interpretation, our perception can never be neutral and we will be affected also by elements we take to be secondary or even without importance. We are always somewhere and can never have a neutral perception; it would require our being nowhere. The green colour from before "colours" the perception as an element present either of a specific significance in relation to Islam though not as object for attention, or as an element of a different significance: It could be part of the exotic experience for a visitor who is thrilled by the place and the event but not into it in the same way as the participants are; it could also be without any influence being overshadowed by many other elements present. The difficulty of creating ambiances especially when interpretation will be a constitutive element is apparent. Probably not everyone present will experience the same ambiance due to their different backgrounds which draws attention to two problems about ambiance. One is the element of interpretation and the need to take into account how we interpret differently; the other is how this interpretation is embedded in elements in our perception we may not even ourselves be aware of.

The practical problems about creating a specific ambiance thus open up for an interest in sensorial and bodily awareness and training together with a desire for cultural knowledge. We can talk about a baroque ambiance or the ambiance of a literary piece like the ambiance of Uncle Vanya which we will have to transfer to the stage for the production of the play by Chekov. The complexity becomes apparent as we will then have to deal with many elements like the ambiance of a Russian bourgeoisie in late 19th century, of the summer, of the house, perhaps some of the characters – elements of disillusion, erotic, etc. The theatre is a demonstration of the possibility to do this, but the theatre is also a controlled setting in a way public spaces are not. Creating an ambiance in a public place will be very much a matter

of demonstrating the highest sensibility towards the place and the situations of the place; it is a matter of annihilating one self and becoming prepared to question any expectations, ideas and understandings we carry with us.

The latter is my reason for discussing this as the hermeneutics of ambiance rather than simply interpretation. A sensible and open approach is the virtue of a hermeneutic approach, when hermeneutic is understood as philosophical hermeneutics in the tradition of Hans-Georg Gadamer. The issue is not a specific interpretation but how we are constantly, as human beings, interpreting our existence and our surroundings. The philosophical hermeneutics takes this to a large degree in relation to an intellectual tradition and emphasizes how we are products of a cultural heritage and always understand ourselves in relation to this which provides us with a frame for understanding. Atmosphere adds to this also the sensorial and bodily influence on our understanding. Being concerned with the presence of something atmosphere draws attention to how this presence attracts attention or slips under our attention but in any case affects us due to the frame of understanding we carry with us. We are permanently interpreting our relation to the world and what we encounter in it and this interpretation is both influenced by our embodied practices and influences our bodily and sensorial awareness. While dealing with atmosphere this is a fundamental issue to take into consideration; there is no atmosphere or ambiance without also a dimension of interpretation.

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