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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].<sup>1</sup> 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-

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1 H. Tellenbach, *Geschmack und Atmosphäre*, Otto-Müller-Verlag, Salzburg 1968.

rything in a certain light, unify a diversity of impressions in a single emotive state. But one cannot actually speak of “the whole”, still less of the whole of the world; speech is analytical and must confine itself to particulars. Moreover, atmospheres are something like the aesthetic quality of a scene or a view, the “something more” that Adorno refers to in somewhat oracular terms in order to distinguish a work of art from a mere “piece of work”; or they are “the Open” which, according to Heidegger, gives us access to the space in which something appears. Seen in this way, atmospheres have something irrational about them, in a literal sense: something inexpressible. Finally, atmospheres are something entirely subjective: in order to say what they are or, better, to define their character, one must expose oneself to them, one must experience them in terms of one’s own emotional state. Without the sentient subject, they are nothing.

And yet: the subject experiences them as something “out there”, something which can come over us, into which we are drawn, which takes possession of us like an alien power. So, are atmospheres something objective after all? The truth is that atmospheres are a typical intermediate phenomenon, something between subject and object. That makes them, as such, intangible, and means that – at least in the European cultural area – they have no secure ontological status. But for that very reason it is rewarding to approach them from two sides, from the side of subjects and from the side of objects, from the side of reception aesthetics and from the side of production aesthetics.

### 2. *Reception aesthetics and production aesthetics*

The conception of atmospheres as a phenomenon has its origin in reception aesthetics. Atmospheres are apprehended as powers which affect the subject; they have the tendency to induce in the subject a characteristic mood. They come upon us from we know not where, as something nebulous, which in the 18th century might have been called a *je ne sais quoi*, they are experienced as something numinous – and therefore irrational.

The matter looks different if approached from the side of production aesthetics, which make it possible to gain rational access to this “intangible” entity. It is the art of the stage set which rids atmospheres of the odour of the irrational: here, it is a question of *producing* atmospheres. This whole undertaking would be meaningless if atmospheres were something purely subjective. For the stage-set artist must relate them to a wider audience, which shall experience the atmosphere generated on the stage in, by and large, the same way. It is, after all, the purpose of the stage set to provide the atmospheric background to the action, to attune the spectators to the theatrical performance and to provide the actors with a sounding board for what they present. The art of the stage set therefore demonstrates from the side of praxis that atmospheres are something quasi-objective. What does that mean?

Atmospheres, to be sure, are not things. They do not exist as entities which remain identical over time; nevertheless, even after a temporal interruption they can be recognised as the same, through their character. Moreover, although they are always perceived only in subjective experience – as a taste or a smell, for example, to return to Tellenbach – it is possible

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 set 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* techne

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<sup>2</sup>.

In the dialogue *Sophist*, Plato draws a distinction between two kinds of performing art, in order to unmask the mendacious art of the Sophists.<sup>3</sup> There is a difference, he argues, between *eikastike techne* and *phantastike techne*. It is the latter which interests us here. In *eikastike techne*, mimesis consists in the strict imitation of a model. *Phantastike techne*, 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<sup>4</sup>. This art of *phantastike* is perhaps not yet quite what we mean

2 Cfr. my book *Platons theoretische Philosophie*, J.B. Metzeler Verlag, Stuttgart 2000. Edition published under licence, WBG, Darmstadt 2004, Chapter III, 2: "Theorie des Bildes".

3 Plato, *Sophist*, 235e3-236c7.

4 C. Lamb/L. Curtius, *Die Tempel von Paestum*, Insel-Verlag, Leipzig 1944, p. 17.