

In Search of Atmospheres: Directions, Methods, Perspectives

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Sergei V. Sokolovskiy

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Article abstract

The interview touches upon the diversity of traditions (including national ones) of atmospheric research, on the correlation of the concepts of (affective) atmosphere with the concepts of mood (*Stimmung*) and *ambiance*, on research methods and ways of conceptualizing atmospheric phenomena by the German phenomenologist, Hermann Schmitz, and the specialist in aesthetics, Gernot Böhme, and, finally, on the prospects of using the methods and approaches under consideration in social sciences.

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In Search of Atmospheres: Directions, Methods, Perspectives

An interview with Tonino Griffiero

Sergei V. Sokolovskiy
*Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology,
Russian Academy of Science*

Tonino Griffiero
Tor Vergata University of Rome

Abstract: The interview touches upon the diversity of traditions (including national ones) of atmospheric research, on the correlation of the concepts of (affective) atmosphere with the concepts of mood (*Stimmung*) and *ambiance*, on research methods and ways of conceptualizing atmospheric phenomena by the German phenomenologist, Hermann Schmitz, and the specialist in aesthetics, Gernot Böhme, and, finally, on the prospects of using the methods and approaches under consideration in social sciences.

Keywords: atmospheres; pathic aesthetics; felt body; affordances; Hermann Schmitz; Gernot Böhme

Résumé: L'entretien aborde la diversité des traditions (y compris nationales) de la recherche atmosphérique, la corrélation des concepts d'atmosphère (affective) avec les concepts d'humeur (*Stimmung*) et d'*ambiance*, les méthodes de recherche et les manières de conceptualiser les phénomènes atmosphériques du phénoménologue allemand Hermann Schmitz et du spécialiste de l'esthétique Gernot Böhme, et, enfin, les perspectives d'utilisation des méthodes et des approches considérées dans les sciences sociales.

Mots-clés: ambiances; esthétique pathique; chair; affordances; Hermann Schmitz; Gernot Böhme

Tonino Griffero (Asti, 1958) is an Italian philosopher-phenomenologist, professor of aesthetics at the University of Rome “Tor Vergata,” and leader in the field of (affective) atmosphere studies. He received his philosophical education at the University of Turin, graduating under the supervision of Gianni Vattimo in 1982. He then conducted postdoctoral research at Heidelberg as a Humboldt Fellow (1998 to 1999). Since 1999 he has been teaching and doing research at the University Tor Vergata, where, in 2002, he was promoted to full professor. He is the editor of the journal “Lebenswelt. Aesthetics and Philosophy of Experience” and of the book series “Atmospheric Spaces,” as well as the coordinator of the blog of the same name (<https://atmosphericspaces.wordpress.com/>) and the author and editor of numerous works in the fields, first, of hermeneutics, German Idealism (Schelling especially) and theosophy (Oetinger, transitive imagination, spiritual body), and then of aesthetics of perception, body phenomenology, and atmospheres, including such books as “Atmospherology. The Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces” (2010; English translation 2014); “Quasi-Things. The Reality of Feeling” (2013; English translation 2017). His books “Il pensiero dei sensi. Atmosfere ed estetica patica” (2016) and “Places, Affordances, Atmospheres. A Pathic Aesthetics” (2019) suggest an aesthetic-phenomenological interpretation of the notion of atmosphere, focussing not so much on works of art, but rather on the feelings that are present in our everyday life and that capture us in such spheres as education, architecture, politics, etcetera. His analysis extends to atmospheric phenomena as collective feelings [see his book “The Atmospheric ‘We’. Moods and Collective Feelings” (2021)] and the phenomenology of felt body (*Leib*) (“Being a Lived Body. From a Neo-Phenomenological Point of View” (2023).

In early February 2024, Professor Griffero, during his visit to the Institute of Atmospheric Research at the University of Kobe, Japan, kindly agreed to an interview, the full text of which appears below.

1. There is a plethora of terms that are used in the studies of “ecologically extended” feelings, among them (affective) “atmospheres,” “*Stimmung*” and “*ambiance*.” It seems that some of these terms are associated with a particular national research tradition (as “*Stimmung*” in the case of the German tradition, and “*ambiance*” predominantly in the case of the French one). Do you see any substantial differences among German, French and Italian traditions of atmosphere studies (I have not mentioned here the rather special case of Sloterdijk, as I am not sure whether to consider his work as a part of the “atmospheric turn” and would be interested to know your opinion)?

“There is something in the air,” “I feel like a fish out of water” or “at home,” etcetera: these and many other everyday sayings express the qualitative and vague “something-more” of a certain situation in a very precise way, that is, its atmosphere, even without being able to define it more precisely (let alone rationally to explain it). Although this term—along with some forerunners (*milieu*, *aura*, *Stimmung*, *genius loci*) designed to cover a body of ideas—has been used metaphorically since the eighteenth century and had already become particularly significant as long as a century ago, especially in the period between the two world wars, its use in the humanities has boomed only recently. Never wholly detached from its climatic meaning of immersion in the weather world, “atmosphere” is first and foremost a colloquial word meaning what one is feeling “in the air” (in a certain space or situation). Its “career” could be explained, in brief, by both the a) aestheticization in advanced capitalist economies and b) the interdisciplinary “affective turn” in disciplines increasingly focused more on the vague but expressive *qualia* of reality (its pathic “how”) than on its quantified materiality or defined semantic value (its gnostic¹ “what”).

Nonetheless, this may not be sufficient to explain the surprising ubiquity of the concept beyond a single linguistic area. The notion of “atmosphere,” therefore, appears today to be perfectly at home in many scientific fields, especially in all those dealing with human—and not strictly measurable—behaviours and habits. Crucially, it appears to be ever more necessary whenever there is greater emphasis on a) felt-bodily (*leiblich*)² and affective experience than on meanings, b) emotionally arranging an environment than on narratively representing something, c) appreciating phenomenal and involuntary experiences’ nuances than on quantified phenomena. Furthermore, the notion could be an innovative heuristic approach in all the research areas that, without an exclusively thingly orientation and strictly functional parameters, pay more attention to vague “entities” that—while being neither full things nor mere *qualia*³ but quasi-things⁴ (Hermann Schmitz) and set of affordances⁵ (as I would add)—exert on us a more direct and immediate power than things proper.

But above all: the concept of “atmosphere” aims at much more, that is, at claiming, philosophically, that there is no state of life where man is not already somehow sentimentally tuned and therefore that probably no situation is totally deprived of a certain atmospheric charge; moreover, that atmospheric feelings are really there and not just projected from inside out, thus pretending to give to the “outside” just the colour and mood of our (alleged) very private

state of mind. For me, only this most philosophically (ontologically, even metaphysically) salient point really qualifies the novelty of this approach.

For this and other reasons—I now come more directly to your question—I believe that atmospheric studies offer something more, in philosophical terms, of course, than a) studies on *Stimmung*, which are often confined to literature⁶ and the predominantly subjective nuance of feelings experienced environmentally (a bit like the English *mood*), even if already a century ago German culture spoke, for example, of the *Stimmung* of a city or of neither-inside-nor-outside *Grundstimmungen* (Martin Heidegger)⁷ exactly as one would today speak of “atmosphere.” I also think that “atmosphere” cannot be reduced b) to *ambiance*, which, not surprisingly, refers more, sociologically, to the environmental (and predominantly urban) context and especially, implies the always relational character of affectivity, which is, however, usually considered refractory to the neo-phenomenological hypothesis that sentiments are external powers to the human interior that are only later introjected (thus differently “filtered”) by the percipient. In Italian culture, then c), although “atmosphere” is a term in current use, no theoretical attention has ever been paid to what this vague term means and implies (“atmosphere” was often the translation used for the German *Stimmung*). As for Russian culture, of which I know too little, the existence of such a notion as *prostor*⁸ or, for example, Lev Nikolaevich Gumilev’s notion of *passionarnost*,⁹ and, more generally, of such a deeply passionate culture as the Russian one, would seem really promising for the comparative research of atmospheric phenomena.

Nevertheless, what I call an “atmospheric turn” is obviously part of a broader “affective turn” in humanities. This is born a) from the ashes of the linguistic one (and its hermeneutic and semiotic ramifications-exaggerations)—according to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, today’s relevance of “effects of presence (and, among them, atmospheres and moods)” marks definitively the crisis of “constructivism” as well as of the “linguistic turn”—and b) from the failure of both the deceptive cognitivist primacy of affective life, and c) the omni-explicative model of data processing. But it also results from the crisis of d) utopian philosophies, which have been replaced, and also on the background of the so-called spatial turn, by philosophies more oriented to spatial and temporal presentness, as well as of e) genial-subjective arts with their semantic and representational contents, as such now replaced by a-subjective and more immersive aesthetic experiences, lastly f) from the crisis of rational social ways of life, now replaced by forms

of well-being and community, giving new emphasis to pre-reflexive-affective experience also in opposition to today's otherwise dominant social isolation.

The inescapable question is, then, "where" were atmospheres before they had been theoretically "discovered" in philosophy by Hermann Schmitz (1969), in psychiatry by Hubertus Tellenbach (1968), and in aesthetics by Gernot Böhme (1995)? Today's boom of atmospheres appears to be, at least in part, just the attempt to express the same old thing in other terms, that is, the omnipresence of basic feelings that, by opening to the world and pre-structuring any experience (affective and cognitive), influence everyone's situatedness as well as type and degree of their well-being. There are basically two answers. 1) The experience of atmospheres has always existed, but only at a certain point did scholars bring it to light, thereby clarifying a confused semantic sphere and building a new field of investigation. 2) It remained only implicit until now and has been made fully possible only by today's economic-political situation (late-capitalist, image- and information-based economy, affective regimes).

Taking this second option seriously, and answering your dubious evaluation of spherology, I think that Peter Sloterdijk's non-phenomenological spherology may also suggest something interesting for atmospherology. He underlines the present need for an (onto)atmospheric explication of current and multifocal forms of immunity from mimetic contagion. In the nineteenth century, the metaphysical all-encompassing monospheres, with their only imagined immunological nature (bubbles and globes), collapsed and were replaced by more chaotic foams. He thus outlines an onto-climatology that can consciously look at the milieu and the being-in-the-world only after the ecological crisis and the rediscovery of ephemeral and no longer monothematic *Erlebnis*- and scene-societies (in general pushed now to a levitation atmosphere). He thinks in an anthropogenetic context that is still unfortunately projective (human beings "create" both their place and atmospheres, developing outside the protective maternal inside environment!) and therefore, in a sense, frankly incompatible with neo-phenomenological emotional externalism. But his thesis is nevertheless very interesting: modernity theoretically focuses on atmospheres only when it makes explicit the implicit, that is, when it becomes aware that the atmosphere (also in the literal sense) may be manipulated or become unliveable (atmoterrorism, alarmist weather reports and breaking news, etcetera). Modernity would thus replace the lifeworld (so beloved by phenomenologists) with a climatic technique (air-conditioning). One would have to accept this shift without anachronistic regrets for a naïve perceptual dimension and for an

alleged natural unification of experience, but, on the contrary, bravely joining the “experimental age” based on “climate control” and on mixing humans and non-humans together. One less known but, for me, more intriguing quasi-sociological statement by Sloterdijk is that today’s attention to atmospheres and the lived space is part of the attention to the vegetative sphere (one’s moods, skills and even diseases) only made possible by a surplus of waking time. This surplus would really enable not only luxury and everyday aesthetics but also atmospheres understood both as lived experiences and as possible subjects of analysis. It is interesting to note that, whereas Heidegger’s phenomenology of boredom as a basic *Stimmung* “conservatively” aimed at overcoming modern levitated life—according to Heidegger characterized by the inability to be really moved and triggered by something as a new “mission” (more soberly, by “rooting situations” according to Schmitz 2023: 64–65)—Sloterdijk suggests looking at today’s central role of moods and atmospheres as the unavoidable result of the “comfort greenhouse” that affluent society is based on, of its contagious demand for superfluous, and of a privileged access to “where” and “how” one feels oneself.

Anyway, more than seeing the career of atmospheres as another (controversial today) “great narrative”—the growing evidence of something of which we have long been unaware—I content myself to argue that atmospheres became both a thematically perceived experience and a topic worthy of consideration when, according to the historical-cultural logic of a pendulum movement, something in the “air” has changed, in the overall historical *Affektkomplex* (to use Leo Spitzer’s term¹⁰). In a sense, it could be said that it was the new sociocultural atmosphere that led to atmosphere’s theoretical boom!

2. Hermann Schmitz has sketched his three-stage (descriptive, analytic and combinatorial) methodology of the atmosphere and felt-body research by analyzing everyday discourse and its topoi, then isolating repetitive and standard tropes—the material for more exact phenomenological terminology (what I would call first-order generalization), and then combining thus derived notions for more nuanced phenomenological analysis that could truthfully catch the body resonances (mostly from the first-person perspective) as material evidence of atmospheric influence (please, forgive me for my very simplified rendering of Schmitz’s much more detailed procedure). Does your own method deviate from this methodology? Do you see any inconsistencies in it? Would you recommend some additions, alterations, or improvements, particularly for those social scientists

who plan to include the “atmospheric dimension” in their field research observation programs?

Indeed, I have not attached too much importance to the strictly phenomenological methodology proposed by Schmitz, merely agreeing with his a) rejection of *epoché*,¹¹ which he considers impossible and to which he substitutes a personal and spatial-temporal perspectivism much closer to hermeneutic approaches, his b) limitation of the role traditionally attributed to intentionality, which only applies to clearly directed emotions and which in many cases derives from the confusion between, said gestaltically, the anchor point and the condensation zone of a quasi-objective feeling, c) the importance of the indisputable evidence (first affective) of what, can only be defined as a phenomenon, d) finally the absolute priority of “subjective facts” opposed to the objective-neutralized ones, that is of what is expressed in the first-person perspective.

That said, I developed a more comprehensive form of atmospherology (Griffero 2014, 2017, 2019, 2021), that I hope can be usefully applied in the different fields of the humanities and elaborates Schmitz’s idea that the (almost prescriptive) atmospheric power is not only social and/or cultural. Consider the ingressive and prototypic atmosphere that you feel when entering a space pervaded by an affect that is completely different from your subjective mood and, for this reason, exerts authority over your mood, whether by deciding to adapt to or resist it. A similar affect can also be produced outside of social scenarios. For example, when the sky darkens because of a fleeting cloud and turns gloomy, thus tonalizing the surrounding environment in a specific way, it exerts an affective power that cannot be explained as an unconscious projection of a purely subjective emotion. Contrary to what is often claimed by sociological approaches to collective emotions, the power and authority of an atmospheric feeling cannot be reduced to the need or desire to correspond to social-emotional norms or social practices, because even though it has powerful social (inclusive, excluding, etcetera) effects, the segmentation of reality generated by the atmospheric experience cannot be sufficiently explained by social conventions (even if introjected).

Now, a (physicalist and/or culturalist) reductionist approach must be used to explain the undoubted experience of living in a sentimentally impregnated space as a subjective and, at most, intersubjective projection on a physical-objective constellation previously deprived of any affective significance. Such a view would surely stigmatize the neo-phenomenological perspective, seeing

in it an undue theologization, thus overestimating the undeniable influence exercised on Schmitz by Rudolf Otto's conception of the holy as the numinous,¹² and a crypto-metaphysicization of the simply contextual-cultural character of the felt authority. This objection is, for me, extremely inadequate to prototypic atmospheres (see below): in fact, as quasi-things, they grasp the percipient without being truly owned by it. Incidentally, it would be really reductive to see atmospherology only as a chapter of theological emotivism. In fact, the numinous is at best just the example of a specifically religious atmosphere, as such surely just a little more demonic than that created by the eros, by the *genius loci* and perhaps even by the Kantian *Gewissen*,¹³ which works almost as an inner courtroom. All these atmospheres, however, could be called "divine" (according to Schmitz), not because they refer to theological transcendence, but merely because they exercise a serious and absolute authority over those who feel them; it does not matter if people obey or resist them as, precisely by doing so, they demonstrate atmospheres' quasi-objective reality.

On the other hand, there are limits to the applicability of Schmitz's theory to the wider sphere of the humanities. Starting from his theory of the power of atmospheres: a) Even if atmospheres are affects permeating a lived and pre-dimensional space,¹⁴ one must never forget the role of the local-metrical space with its boundaries, as exemplified by the fact that sometimes you no longer feel the oppressive atmosphere of a certain room as soon as you leave it and go outside. b) Even if the prototypic atmosphere exerts authority, one must never forget that even such a powerful social feeling like charisma, sometimes able to mesmerize large masses, is so fragile that it can be instantly dissolved by a simple *faux pas* (the king is naked!), whose felt-bodily resonance consists in changing the previous antagonistic one-sided incorporation (for a vast survey on *Leib*-phenomenology from a neo-phenomenological point of view and Schmitz's felt-bodily "alphabet" see: Griffero 2024). In less serious cases, this incorporation becomes alternate, and the mimesis of the charismatic person weakens; in the most serious cases, it remains unilateral but turns inside out, and the masses slaughter the leaders they previously idolized. c) Finally, the prototypic atmosphere is, initially, cognitively impenetrable. The funeral's sadness, for example, is not really mitigated simply because we know that every biological organism must die. Yet one should not forget that if the beautiful evening sky turns out to be caused by pollution, it only loses (at least a little) its atmospheric beauty later. So, the precise knowledge and location of what generates an atmosphere often trigger a relatively non-affective distancing, just like when one is not really persuaded by a speech whose

rhetorical structure is too obvious: like money, an (atmospheric) affect ceases to function (better: to involve affectively, not to be observed) at the very moment when one ceases to believe in it!

But things are perhaps more complicated than that, because sometimes a situation radiates an atmosphere “despite” what one knows (an atmosphere might please and gratify, for example, even if it is only accidental), while at other times it radiates an atmosphere “only if” one knows something (a place may have an *aura*, for example, only if one knows that an important person lives there, etcetera). Therefore, the relationship between the cognitive and the affective is a very contentious issue and can never be unilaterally resolved. What can be said is that an atmosphere is not affected by what one knows (for example, that its generator is just an illusion) only at first, when one perceives the initial and involuntary impression that its appearance suggests.

For these and other reasons I would like to briefly recall here the three main extra-Schmitzian developments of what I called “atmospherology.” First 1) I reserve the status of absolute non-intentionality only to the atmospheres that I have defined as prototypical (objective, external and unintentional, and sometimes even with no precise name), as such distinguished from derivative-relational (objective, external and sometimes also intentionally produced) and spurious ones (subjective and even projective). In non-pathological conditions, these three kinds of atmosphere are distinguished by decreasing objectivity and intensity and increasing dependence on the subject.

Secondly, 2) I also sketched a theory of “critical-atmospheric competence” based on learning a) how to immerse yourself in the atmosphere in order, when desired or necessary, to become attuned with the environment, but also b) to distinguish, as far as possible, toxic atmospheres (whether stressful or calming) from beneficial ones; also c) to seek to alternate immersive atmospheres (artificial, natural, etcetera) in order to benefit from their “separation of powers” (in this case atmospheric), and d) hopefully, to foster the immersive atmospheres in which the immersive phase not only does not prevent but actually stimulates a subsequent (re)-emergent (more critical-reflective) one.

Finally, 3) while I suggest that an atmosphere is certainly not affected by what one knows initially when one experiences the first and involuntary impression of an “appearance,” it is true that sometimes it may happen afterward, when a theoretically interesting but existentially embarrassing micro-conflict between pathic and gnostic might be usually generated.

For this reason, I also developed a comprehensive phenomenology of possible “atmospheric encounters,” according to a typology I gradually enriched and problematized (for the latest version, see Griffero 2021, 29–66), which can be a breeding ground for more subtle phenomenological analysis that could be useful in all humanities. In summary: an atmosphere can 1) be so *dystonic* as to overwhelm us; 2) find us *in tune with* it, to the point of not being recognized and felt; 3) be *recognized* without being felt; 4) elicit a *mood of resistance* that pushes us to change it or to oppose to this (felt as) manipulative atmosphere (think of experiences that are transgressive or at least freely randomized in opposition to what the disciplinary power wants); 5) concretize itself even in “materials” or components that normally express the opposite, giving life to a *reversed* atmospheric feeling (the sadness projected on sufferers by intolerable beauty or the restlessness produced by situations so orderly as to arouse the impression of a *mise-en-scène*); or 6) be *perceived differently over time* after the first impression. The first atmospheric impression of an image of a beautiful landscape, for example, may be pleasing, yet turn to melancholy once you realize that it no longer exists. Consider also the interesting interaction between buildings that seem narrow from the outside and in whose interior the architect has managed to create an unexpected vastness, all the more atmospherically suggestive the more unexpected it is in contrast with the first (outside) impression. Here, I can even imagine layered niches of atmospheric feelings.

Of course, the phenomenology of these atmospheric “games” could and should be further complexified by also taking into account that each experience of an atmosphere can be considered a specific intersection of the ontological plane (that is, its being a prototypical, derivative-relational, or spurious atmosphere) with the *phenomenological plane* (its being dystonic, syntonic, non-involving, resisting, reversed, or time-varying).

3. In your analysis of the ontological differences between things proper and quasi-things (atmospheres), you seem to reconcile or at least suggest a compromise between Gernot Böhme’s and Hermann Schmitz’s conceptualizations of atmospheres. At the same time, we know that there is a well-substantiated critique of Böhme’s position (cf.: Blume, Demmerling 2007; Runkel 2018; Slaby, von Scheve 2019; Wellbury 2003) that deviates from phenomenological approach in favour of a more speculative and theologically inflected (his “ecstasies” of things) one, thus opening the road to a more practical (and even commercial) approach to atmospheric phenomena (including the alleged possibilities of their “construction” or

“installation”). The ontology that is presupposed in his approach restores the subject-object dualism and much of the abstract and reductive thought that negates first-person phenomenological methods. Would you like to further comment on the possibility of reconciling two such mutually inimical conceptualizations? On what level (practical, theoretical, etcetera) does such a reconciliation seem possible?

I do not believe that Böhme’s approach (including his idea of “ecstasy of things”) can be configured as a crypto-theological turn. I would even say the opposite, since Böhme did not fail to remember (even in my opinion) that Schmitz thought (too much) of atmospheres as demonic entities floating in space, where he instead tried to root them and see their pervasiveness in our daily experience.

You are, however, right on the fact that I believe the approaches of Schmitz and Böhme must be reconciled within what I have called a more “inflationary” theory of the types of atmospheres. Schmitz’s radicalism works very well, especially for those atmospheres I have defined as prototypical, much less for the other types, in which the role of society, history and subjective nuances of perception is absolutely greater. Gernot Böhme developed an aesthetics of atmospheres from the 1980s onward which emphasizes the extraordinarily rich atmospheric competence of today’s aesthetic work (including architecture, interior design, light design, art, sound engineering, scene painting, music, advertising, and marketing research). He claimed that atmospheres understood as an “in-between”—mediating subject (lived-bodily feeling) and object (environment) and attesting their co-presence—are involved wherever something is being staged. They are generated by what he calls “generators of atmosphere” (movement impressions, synaesthesia, scenes, and social characters). For Böhme, however, the skills that architects and other aesthetic workers know well, although often tacitly, are confined to setting the conditions in which the atmosphere appears; in other words, to just establishing settings of the generators through which atmospheric phenomena “could” emerge. There are no prescriptions here for the (possibly vague) settings and combinations of the values of the generators that will make it likely that members of a specific population will experience a particular (albeit vague) atmosphere.

However, the idea that one can intentionally generate atmospheres led to an interesting philosophical dispute between the philosophers Hermann Schmitz (1998; 2023, 123–137) and Gernot Böhme (1995). For Böhme, atmospheres also are the at least partially predictable result of the “ecstasies of things,” depending on

the materials, colours, and shapes in which they are presented. If, as for Böhme, atmospheric perception is, in most cases, an “in-between,” that is, a relationship between a percipient and the environment in which they stay (its atmospheric generators included), it might be of some interest to researchers to apply my typology of atmospheres (prototypical, derivative-relational, and spurious) and atmospheric games (dystonic, syntonic, non-involving, resisting, reversed, and time-varying) to the field of design and staging (in a broader sense) to carefully evaluate the extent to which a certain atmospheric staging already makes use, more or less explicitly, of the atmospheric generators that Böhme investigates.

On the contrary, according to Schmitz, full-fledged atmospheric feelings are neither intentionally producible nor intentionally experiential, and consequently, it is senseless to investigate their assumed “generators” (even less if you think of them as single things). Intentionally producing and sensing a feeling is impossible because atmospheres belong to a preconscious and pre-dualistic sphere that one can, therefore, not produce but can, at most, only “awaken.” And it is dangerous, because intentional producing/sensing implies manipulating feelings and only producing a sentimentalist subjectivism, resulting in an unethical instrumental emotional hygiene or at least a kitsch effect. This stance does not literally claim, however, that the producibility is “impossible,” nor does it explain enough if intentionally produced atmospheres are fake atmospheres, or even non-atmospheres. Schmitz underlines that the making of atmospheres a) is nothing but a fundamentally rhetorical-propagandistic technique of impressions (*Eindruckstechnik*), that b) pushes a segmented situation into an impressive one, characterized by accentuated artificial pathic-semantic contours, thus leading c) to the illusion that single things can generate an atmosphere when they are, at most, the occasional place of its condensation.

Now, Schmitz is certainly right to remind us that the media world and the so-called (totalitarian and democratic) affective regimes spread artificial feelings and false illusions, making us believe that everything can be produced (even affective life). However, this criticism of the socially irresponsible instrumentalization of affects runs the risk of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. It actually underestimates that everyone generates atmospheres without wanting to and knowing it, and especially—which matters most in the present context—makes the atmospheres-based social and cultural life something inexplicable; it surreptitiously introduces some normative-axiological (existential and/or aesthetic) parameters into a phenomenological

approach programmatically supposed to be mainly descriptive, and identifies too much producibility with manipulability. In fact, the atmosphere's absolute authority is never an infallible criterion of demarcation between what is manipulation and what is not, and, in turn, the implied dualism between a manipulative-unethical agency and a hetero-managed receiver really seems an oversimplification. Is Schmitz's admission that atmospheres can non-manipulatively be cultivated in certain privileged closed situations (dwelling, garden, church, tea house, etcetera), as he often acknowledges, so different from recognizing that at least atmospheres' preconditions can be made (designed, planned)? Your question gives me the opportunity to show more broadly what differentiates an atmosphere as a quasi-thing from things in the proper sense.

Developing to some extent a neo-phenomenological quasi-thingly ontology, it could be said, in summary, that atmospheres, unlike things, a) are not edged, discrete, cohesive, solid, perduring in time, normally inactive, without concealed sides, and for this reason, they coincide with their appearance. b) Not having inherent real tendencies, they have no history (they do not get old), are radically eventual, and not merely a trace of something other. c) Without being the property of something or universally predictable genera, they coincide with their own phenomenal and "actual" "character" (not with their subjective-personal resonance, however). d) More immediate, intrusive, and demanding than things, they arouse encorporation and excorporation by virtue of an authority that is sometimes so absolute as to be irreducible to culturally emotional norms and to win any critical distance. e) They have an intermittent life, in the sense that they come and go, without there being any point in asking what they did in the meantime. f) But along with transient atmospheric qualities there are also more persistent atmospheric qualities: the sublime atmosphere of an alpine landscape, for example, is relatively stable despite changing weather conditions. g) They do not act as the separate causes of the influence but are the influence itself, exactly like the wind, which does not exist prior to and beyond its blowing. h) Although they do not properly have a whence or a where, they "occupy" surfaceless lived spaces characterized by blurred boundaries. i) They are relatively (perceptually) amendable, if only on the level of common sense. l) They must have some kind of identity, as is shown by the fact that one can be mistaken in producing them, for example, by trying to and arousing an atmosphere of euphoria on a dreary day, or rightly imagine the (even counterfactual) conditions under which it could be produced. m) If they never properly exist as purely potential (thinkable) states, this does

not mean that an atmosphere, especially the prototypical one, depends in all respects on its subjective perception. n) There are things and situations that stably arouse certain atmospheres, and others that occasionally take charge of them, as happens when a wild atmosphere, for example, ceases to be such, sensorially perceived components being equal, when its origin is ascertained to be artificial. o) They are mostly an “in-between” made possible by the (felt-bodily but also social and symbolic) co-presence of subject and object and, in rare but important cases, transcendently prior to this co-presence.

As I said, with reference to a theory of atmospheric competence, I believe that the next step in atmospherology, without abandoning the phenomenological and (why not) even metaphysical foundations of its origin, must be to develop a critical theory of atmospheric. And it is on this level, political in the sense of trying to combine descriptivism with some more normative instance, that Schmitz and Böhme (and others) can and must find a ground for discussion that is fertile for every human science, emancipated (at least in part) in this way by entirely culturalist-constructional hypotheses.

4. My final question: what prospects, if any, do you see for the “atmospheric research” in social sciences, particularly for social/cultural anthropologists? Is there some kind of gap they could close or some niche they could effectively take to advance atmospheric research? What kind of ontology and particular conceptualization of an atmosphere do you find especially relevant for such research? This, I admit, is a very forthright question, and I ask it only because I see the current anthropological endeavours as not very different from phenomenological: see, for instance, the recent books by Tim Ingold (2015, 2022).

As already mentioned in the previous answers, I believe that atmospherology research has many potentials that can be useful. Indeed, it has already demonstrated this, especially in the fields of architecture, human geography, sociology, psychopathology, media studies, etcetera I myself, in trying occasionally to create points of contact between New Phenomenology and applied humanities (Francesetti and Griffero 2019; Griffero and Moretti 2018; Griffero and Tedeschini 2019), verified how much the notion was strongly involved in many fields, even without being specifically themed.

Apart from this terminological-theoretical contribution, however, many differences remain. In all these fields the most classic objection concerns the risk of reifying feelings because of the neo-phenomenological hypothesis, thus

tending more to adopt the soft version by Böhme (however, in its turn largely “simplified”) according to which the atmosphere is “only” the relation, variable and historically-culturally-linguistically conditioned, between a percipient (or culture) and its perception. But one thus loses sight of the experience of feelings I call prototypical, feelings that are devoid of an identifiable origin-cause and whose strength is such as to subvert any state of mind of the percipient; one loses sight of the fact that sometimes one can recognize an atmospheric feeling without being involved (which further demonstrates its externality); one forgets that any design of atmospheres is always likely to fail, unless it is content to create the “condition of possibility” in which they can—perhaps, only possibly, hypothetically—condensate themselves (which further demonstrates their original independence from occasional localization both in the subject and in the object); one also underestimates that things and situations get immanent qualities (not projected on them by subjects or even entire cultures) that invite, sometimes very aggressively, the percipient to feel something. That is why I have introduced the Gibsonian notion in atmospherology, albeit removed from its exclusively pragmatist context of “affordances” (Griffero 2023), of which the percipient is not master and without whose contribution her/his affective life would be much poorer. And so on.

I am, of course, far from disregarding the importance of the theoretical contributions that each field of application can in turn provide to the philosophy of atmospheres, such as its application to the weather-world by Tim Ingold (2015, 2022), to the phenomenon of light by Mikkel Bille (2015, 2017), to urban life micro-phenomenologically explored by Jurgen Hasse (2014, 2018, 2019), to psychopathological disorders by Thomas Fuchs (cf.: Fuchs 2011), to cinema by Julian Hanich (2018) and Steffen Hven (cf.: Hven 2015), to urban arrangements by Jean-Paul Thibaud (2014, 2015) and many others, to aesthetic education by Andreas Rauh (2018), to social situations and sports by Robert Gugutzer (2023), to architectural perception by Juhani Pallasmaa (2014), to nursing by Charlotte Uzarewicz (2023)—and certainly others, who would deserve to be mentioned here. I myself continually learn from these (and other) disciplinary areas; for example, I am currently learning from the philosophy of *ki* and *ma*, widely rooted in Japanese atmospherological studies.

However, in what I could call the soft version of atmospherology, one must not arrive hastily at conclusions that completely disregard the neo-phenomenological (Schmitzian) system (atmospheres as feelings permeating a lived space and resonant into the perceiver’s felt-bodily dimension) as well as

from Böhme’s “Aisthetics”¹⁵ (atmospheres as focal points of a pathic dimension, the right evaluation of which would help to resize the Enlightenment-modern apology of the autonomy of the subject, which proved as illusory as a harbinger of negative outcomes). A dialogue between philosophy and the humanities? Sure, a continuous dialogue that does not look for irenic points of compromise, but finds its outcome—critically, polemically—in that vertigo of thought (anti-statistic, anti-quantitative, anti-reductionist, anti-definitive in short!) that a philosophy worthy of the name must not cease to seek and feed.

Sergei V. Sokolovskiy

*Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology,
Russian Academy of Science,
SokolovskiSerg@gmail.com*

Tonino Griffiero

*Tor Vergata University of Rome,
t.griffiero@lettere.uniroma2.it*

The Interviewer’s Comments

Notes

1 My interlocutor employs here, as in his other publications, the term *gnostic* (Griffiero 2020, 2021), which takes some proto- and early Christian associations by referring not to knowledge *per se*, but to sacred, secret, or mystical knowledge. Professor Griffiero has kindly pointed out in his reply to my query that he is using the term in the sense given to it by Erwin Strauss (Strauss 1956), a German-American psychiatrist and phenomenologist (1891 to 1975), who contrasted the *gnostic* with the *pathic* (*gnostisch—pathisch*). The latter term is also widely used by Griffiero, who emphasizes that the content of the relevant notion refers to *pathos*, that is, to the affective-preconceptual perception of the “how” and not the “what” of phenomena; to the way one feels herself due to such perception – cf. Ratnapalan, Reggio 2012). Strauss, in particular, notes: “Es gibt zwei Arten des Lernens. Ein erweiterndes gnostisches und ein einengendes pathisches Lernen. Jenes beruht auf der Macht des Geistes zur Reflexion, zur schöpferischen Negation, die es dem Menschen ermöglicht, die Grenzen des einfachen Daseins zu transzendieren. Der Mensch lernt, insofern er aufhört, unmittelbar zu reagieren. Er vermag zu lernen, weil er als Teil das Ganze, als Umfasstes das Umfassende *denken* kann.” (Ibid., 198) [There are two types of learning. An expanding gnostic learning and a constricting pathic learning. The latter is based on the power of the mind for reflection, for creative negation, which enables man to transcend the limits of simple existence. Man learns insofar as he ceases to react directly. He is able to learn because he can *think* as part of the whole, the comprehensible as the

comprehensive]. In another passage contrasting the pathic and the gnostic, he writes: “Wir haben uns bisher gehütet, von einem Hören der Stille zu sprechen. Wir wollen auch jetzt nicht behaupten, dass wir sie so hören, wie wir Klänge und Geräusche hören. Aber, ob wir sie als peinigende- oder beglückende Stille vernehmen, pathisch gehört sie gleichwohl zu den akustischen Phänomenen, wenn sie auch gnostisch unausgefüllt bleibt.“ (Ibid., 108). [So far, we have been careful not to speak of hearing silence. Nor do we now want to claim that we hear it in the same way that we hear sounds and noises. But whether we hear it as an agonizing or exhilarating silence, pathically it still belongs to the acoustic phenomena, even if it remains gnostically unfulfilled.]

- 2 We are talking about a directly perceived body, a living, a felt body (*Leib*), the topology of which does not coincide with the physical body (*Körper*).
- 3 The Latin term *qualia* denotes “emerging” (supervenient) qualities, that is, not reducible to their carriers (substrates) and sometimes even independent of them as free-floating qualities that emerge prior to their ontological-regional classification. For example: the bitterness before it becomes concrete (or “specializes,” as in the bitterness of a certain sentence, of a cup of coffee, or of a situation that has disappointed us, etcetera). This allows “analogical” thinking based on a priori qualitative eidetics, rather than on associational processes of a purely psychological type.
- 4 It should be noted that Schmitz uses the term *half-things* (*Halbdinge*), whereas Griffero employs in his works the term *quasi-things* (cf.: Griffero 2017).
- 5 A term introduced by American psychologist James J. Gibson (Gibson [1979] 2015), the content of which can be conveyed by such phrases as “(hidden) opportunities,” “potential,” “potentiality.” Gibson significantly influenced not only the research of the so-called “extended mind” in contemporary cognitive sciences, but also the use of ideas from the ecology of mind in field ethnography (cf.: Hutchins 1995).
- 6 My interlocutor refers here to a significant number of literary studies that analyze feelings and atmospheres (see, for example, Meyer-Sickendiek 2005, 2014; Gumbrecht 2011; Chambers 2015).
- 7 “Basic moods” (fear, boredom, anxiety) have been analyzed in detail by Martin Heidegger (see, for example, Part I, Chapter 6 in any edition of his work “Being and Time”).
- 8 A Russian idiom, combining the senses of expanse and liberty.
- 9 Lev Gumilev, the son of two Russian poets, Nikolay Gumilev and Anna Akhmatova, historian, geographer and ethnologist, the author of the heterodox theory of ethnogenesis, elaborated on this term in his book *Ethnogenesis and the Biosphere of Earth*

- (1978). The term *passionarnost'* in his theory of ethnic communities as “organisms” denotes a physiological quality that controls the absorption and conversion of (cosmic) energy and thus determines its level in individuals and entire groups (cf.: Bassin 2009).
- 10 See Leo Spitzer’s famous analysis of the history of the term and concept of *Stimmung* (Spitzer 1944, 1945), which still retains its relevance.
 - 11 The term and concept of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology, a part of the procedure of phenomenological reduction, which is expressed in the suspension of “naive-realistic” postulates of science and philosophy concerning the world.
 - 12 The reference is to the classic work of the Lutheran theologian Rudolf Otto, who coined the term “numinous” and defined it as “a non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling, whose primary and immediate object is outside the person.” Otto’s work has had a profound influence on such diverse thinkers as Paul Tillich and C.S. Lewis.
 - 13 Conscience (*Gewissen*) is mentioned infrequently in Kant’s works and is similar in its action to an atmosphere mostly with respect to the strength of its authority or its coerciveness. Kant mentions *Gewissen* in the context of his reflections on religion (see his “Religion within the limits of reason alone”) and in his discussion of certain biblical subjects (the parable of Job) in the “Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals,” as well as in his essay “On Pedagogy,” and his *Gewissen* acts as an internal judgment of critical reason on one’s own behaviour in relation to duty. In particular, Kant writes: “The realization of the inner judgment in man [...] is conscience. Every man has conscience, and feels that an inner judge watches over him, threatens him and generally keeps him in fear (respect is associated with fear), and this power which watches over the laws within him is not something he does to himself (arbitrarily), but is included in his being” (Kant 1969: 400). In the course of correspondence with professor Griffero, it became clear that the key point here is Kant’s consideration of justice as a feeling (rather than an idea in the sense of reason). Schmitz, in his book “The Realm of Norms”, draws on Kant’s relevant considerations, viewing feelings with a moral dimension (he terms them *Gewissensgefühle*), while remaining within the framework of his consideration of feelings as “spatially outpouring atmospheres” (Schmitz 2012, 141, 149ff.). He also published a book on conscience as a subject of European philosophy (Schmitz 2007). I express my sincere gratitude to Tatiana Karatchentseva (Jerusalem University) for her consultation on Kant’s relevant arguments.
 - 14 The space as it is perceived from the first-person perspective, not the standard three-dimensional space of physical representations.

15 The use of the old orthography in this case emphasizes Böhme's aspiration to reconstruct aesthetics, aimed not only at the study of the beautiful or sublime but as a discipline that studies perception in general.

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