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ON THE ETHICAL-AESTHETIC POTENTIALS OF SPECIAL ATMOSPHERES

Introduction

A quick Google search can help to illustrate the etymological background of the term 'atmosphere': atmosphere is primarily understood in a *meteorological* sense as the misty sphere of a planet, a blanket that envelops the earth, provides the air we breathe and thus is a precondition for organic life. This type of atmosphere is an area of research for scientists whose study helps to understand weather phenomena and which can potentially improve the *weather*-forecast: if or when it will be sunny or rainy. The search results also point to another meaning of the word 'atmosphere'. The term has found its way into the field of *aesthetics*. It stands for the feelings and moods that are floating in the air, virtually concrete and manifest, providing a room with a certain character. This type of atmosphere is an area of research for philosophers and a lot of cultural scientists that helps to understand how one's own feelings are influenced and affected by the surrounding space. This might eventually result in an improvement of the *whether*-forecast: whether one feels comfortable or uncomfortable.

In recent years, this second definition has grown out of the first, more tangible meaning, since these days the term 'atmosphere' is a common tool used to describe the spatial diffusion of a certain mood. Nonetheless the meteorological atmosphere implies two characteristics that correspond to an aesthetic atmosphere: it surrounds the subject (and all objects) and it has an effect, an impact on the sensual perception.

The discourse about atmosphere is easy and difficult in equal measure. On the one hand it is *easy* because it is a known phenomenon. The term 'atmosphere' is used wherever design and staging contribute to our perception of a given environment – so virtually everywhere. In the areas of consumption and marketing especially, atmospheres surround us all the time and everywhere; we only need to consider the time and effort that's been put into

arousing particular moods in shopping centres by means of light, sound, smell and spatial organisation. We must not forget that in everyday life atmosphere plays an important role: politicians strive for discussions in a 'constructive atmosphere', pupils try to improve themselves in a 'supportive atmosphere', and we create a 'comfortable atmosphere' in our living-rooms.

On the other hand it is *difficult* to talk about atmosphere when it comes to scientific descriptions. The atmosphere is not an object of research that is particularly objective. It is merely a hard-to-grasp phenomenon that requires all of a researcher's sensual awareness and her or his *Leib*, 'the living body'. In a scientific community that could be characterized by a materialistic cultural matrix, the focus lies on the *Körper*, 'the physical body' and the interaction between bodies. The difference between the terms *Leib*, 'living body', and *Körper*, 'body', indicates that when the living body becomes merely the body something is lost. In order to talk and think about atmosphere a person must be sentient, and that is a fact that some scientists refuse to accept as a genuine requirement of research.

This gap between easy and difficult discussions recurs within an academic context: as it is very hard to describe and thus justify the phenomenon, how might we answer questions such as: *can* we create atmospheres? *How* can we create atmospheres? Can we be *sure* we will create what we want to create? The architect Mark Wigley states:

At the same time, those who embrace effect cannot approach atmosphere directly – cannot point to it, cannot teach it. Atmosphere escapes the discourse about it. By definition, it lacks definition. It is precisely that which escapes analysis. Any specific proposal for constructing atmosphere, no matter how changeable or indeterminate, is no longer atmospheric.¹

More recently, architectural academic Achim Hahn has made similar remarks, noting for example that «the claim that atmospheres (especially one's experiences of landscapes) can be created in the

¹ M. Wigley, *Die Architektur der Atmosphäre*, in G. Auer - U. Conrads et al. (Hrsg.), *Konstruktion von Atmosphären. Constructing atmospheres*, Gütersloh, Bertelsmann, 1998, p. 27.

process of conception or can be structurally anticipated must be criticized and rejected»².



Fig. 1. Advertisement from «Manager Magazine»: amicable agreement

As to cast further doubts about the validity of atmospheres as a phenomenon: when we look at the advertisement from «Manager Magazine» we can clearly see that the atmosphere is neither friendly nor constructive. The text-bubble says: «In the press conference they will say that they reached an amicable agreement». This reminds us of the politicians we mentioned earlier, carrying out their discussions in a 'constructive atmosphere'. Which brings us to the question: could the idea of 'atmosphere' simply be a rhetorical phenomenon – a weasel word, a concealing phrase?

² A. Hahn, *Erlebnis Landschaft und das Erzeugen von Atmosphären*, in A. Hahn (hrsg.), *Erlebnislandschaft. Erlebnis Landschaft? Atmosphären im architektonischen Entwurf*, Bielefeld, transcript, 2012, p. 85. (my trans.).

Despite all these issues, how can it be explained that in a lot of creative fields (such as theatre, architecture, marketing, design, art and art education...) atmosphere is referred to, not only as a speculative concept, but as an enormously important term to describe moods and feelings in a given surrounding? How does the hard-to-grasp phenomenon differ from the product of someone working in the creative sphere, who deals with atmospheres every day when making design decisions? The gap between the theory and the practice of the concept of atmosphere may have one of its sources in the theoretical desire to fully comprehend a given idea. This always raises philosophical questions of language that go along with different ontological conceptions. For the existence of atmosphere as a phenomenon to be justified, it must be affirmed by means of everyday experience.

While I am aware of the substantial problems that may result from the atmospheric, I will focus on the special relationship that has given its name to this symposium – the relation between ethics and aesthetics. In the following I will tentatively explore some of the potentials that atmospheres (especially those of special atmospheres) provide in respect of this relationship. This will not create a new concept, but may lead to a more specialised understanding of phenomena and disciplines. Firstly, I will touch on atmospheres in aesthetics, adding a few notes on atmospheres in ethics. Then, I will briefly explain what a special atmosphere is. And, finally, I will make some concluding points about ethical-aesthetic potentials.

Atmospheres in aesthetics

What is the meaning of atmospheres in aesthetics? The Hendrik Christian Andersen Museum – where the colloquium took place in which I first presented this paper – could serve as evidence of the existence of atmospheres. In an article about the question of whether sculptures are atmospheres, Siegfried Mack considers the existence of an atmospheric void. «No, not completely. For an atmosphere prevails and comes into existence for the beholder all the time, and everywhere and all the more when it comes to art»³.

The whole of the art world deals in atmospheres: the artist brings atmospheric values into her or his works of art. Curators

³ S. Mack, *Sind ATMOSPHERE(N) eine Skulptur? Versuch einer fachdidaktisch motivierten Sachanalyse*, in S. Graupner - K. Herbold - A. Rauh (hrsg.), *Gretchenfragen: Kunstpädagogik, Ästhetisches Interesse, Atmosphären*, München, kopaed, 2010, p. 189. (my trans.).

and managers of exhibitions try to detect the atmospheric properties of artworks and arrange them in an exhibition room to the best advantage. The exhibition room itself exudes history and is designed in a specific architectural style. Mack focuses on sculpture and its surroundings when he remarks:

As everybody knows, sculptures in the typical sense originate from raw materials via the removal of parts of the same, which becomes rubbish and therefore part of the surroundings of the work. [...] Every new installation and exhibition of a sculpture – regardless of location – reiterates the original polarity between the artefact and its surroundings. In this context both are givers. An aesthetically attractive atmosphere emerges from this interaction.⁴

In the conceptual history of the term ‘atmosphere’ this interaction was treated as the interaction between artwork and spectator, especially the decline of that interaction when it comes to technical reproducibility. A lot of literature deals with the previously established term for atmosphere: the ‘aura’. Walter Benjamin defines it as a «strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be»⁵. Thus he describes the special kind of perception and cognition that is strongly linked to the presence of artifacts and one’s own presence. The space that surrounds both the object and the subject of perception regains an important role. The space matters: «For none of the conceivable preconditions for sculpture are as unmistakable as ‘space’»⁶. This space helps establish an attitude of perception and expectation. Two modes of perception stem from the concept of aura: to *inhale an aura* («Auraatmen») and to *return a gaze* («Blickbelehrung») ⁷, a passive and an active mode of perception. These two provide the basis for an understanding of the concept of atmospheres.

Gernot Böhme’s definition of atmospheres states that they «constitute the ‘in-between’ between environmental qualities and human sensibilities»⁸. It’s about the relationship between, on the

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 190 (my trans.).

⁵ P. Osborne - M. Charles, *Walter Benjamin*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/benjamin/#ArtTec>, 2011.

⁶ S. Mack, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

⁷ See A. Rauh, *Die besondere Atmosphäre. Ästhetische Feldforschungen*, Bielefeld, transcript, 2012, p. 58.

⁸ G. Böhme, *Acoustic atmospheres. A contribution to the study of ecological aesthetics*, «Soundscape» 1 (2000), 1, p. 14.

one hand, you being around 'here and now' and feeling in a certain way and, on the other hand, how the surroundings start to interplay with the sentient subject and thus become a repository for moods. Atmospheres may not be intrusive and fully distinct, but they exist as the small and easily overlooked 'and' that connects and interweaves 'environmental qualities' with 'human sensibilities'. In this way, atmospheres are not only the effect but the basis of the way we perceive things.

By taking into account the phenomenon of atmospheres we can discern an emphasis shift: from aesthetics as a theory of beauty and judgements about art to a broader understanding of aesthetics as a theory of sensual perception. The specific question 'What is beautiful?' develops into the general question 'What can be perceived?'.

This new view of aesthetics is established as a concept of 'aesthetic' reality – based on the Greek term *aisthesis*, which means 'sensual perception'. The idea of 'aesthetic' emerged from Böhme's earlier concept of the so called Ecological Nature Aesthetics – in which atmospheres had already become a primary focus. The main question addressed here was how one feels in one's environment, how one is «sensual and emotionally affected by one's environment»⁹. Answering this question leads to certain demands for a new aesthetic education: «The development of a person's sensory consciousness, to which art can also be a contributory factor, at the same time requires of a person that they reintegrate their natural being into the way they see themselves, as demanded these days by the environmental issues a person faces»¹⁰.

⁹ Id., *Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1989, p. 45 (my trans.).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15 (my trans.).

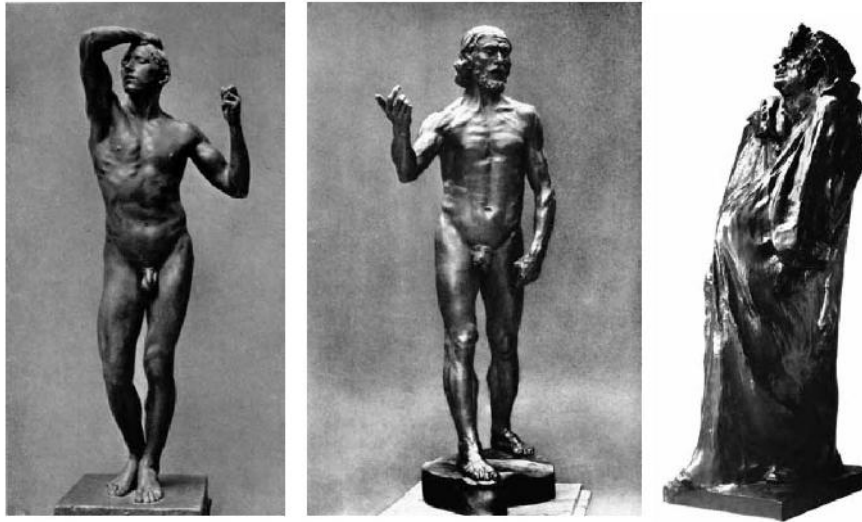


Fig. 2. A. Rodin (from left to right), *The age of bronze*, *St. John the Baptist*, *Monument to Balzac*

Atmospheres are vital not only in the field of art but also affect a person's daily routines. Despite art only being one of many areas where atmospheres are relevant, it can clearly depict atmospheres, meaning that it remains a useful tool when exploring atmospheric values. As an example, Martin Zenck considers Rilke and his ideas about Rodin's sculptural works in this quote:

What does Rilke mean when he talks about 'atmosphere' with reference to Rodin's *Monument to Balzac*? First of all: the sculpture of the *Monument to Balzac* is surrounded by a dense and charged mantle of air, whereas the statue *The age of bronze* remains statically enclosed in its space. The latter lacks the dynamism of the radiance of the sculpture *St. John the Baptist*, which, like an aura, causes the surrounding 'fog' to recede since this radiance has become so intense.¹¹

Like the airy sphere around the planet the atmosphere of an artwork is dynamic and floating and it can have different degrees. The development from *The age of bronze*, via *St. John the Baptist*, to *Monument to Balzac* «results in a dynamically conceived expansion of the sculpture's volume which matches that of the space

¹¹ M. Zenck, *Atmosphäre – eine ästhetische Kategorie der Unbestimmtheit? Überlegungen zu Arnold Schönberg, Rainer Maria Rilke, Auguste Rodin, György Ligeti, Claude Debussy und Paul Cézanne*, in R. Goetz - S. Graupner (Hrsg.), *Atmosphäre(n) II. Interdisziplinäre Annäherungen an einen unscharfen Begriff*, München, kopaed, 2012, p. 120 (my trans.).

exactly»¹². Given the way identity of atmosphere and space is expressed here, and how vagueness plays a part, it is clear why atmospheres can be so difficult to describe.

But against all theoretical and semantic odds, people personally experience atmospheres every day, everywhere. To give an example from outside the art world, let's turn our attention to the marketing sector. Philip Kotler started to explore atmospheres as a marketing tool back in 1973. He realised that

One of the most significant features of the total product is the *place* where it is bought or consumed. In some cases, the place, more specifically the *atmosphere* of the place, is more influential than the product itself in the purchase decision. In some cases, the atmosphere is the primary product. Businessmen, however, have tended to neglect atmosphere as a marketing tool. This is due to two factors. First, men of business tend to be practical and functional in their thinking; if they were poetic they probably would not be businessmen. Therefore they have tended to neglect the aesthetic factor in consumption. Secondly, atmospheres are a 'silent language' in communication.¹³

He then concludes that – with respect to atmospheres – there are three main art forms that ensure a product is attractive to consumers: architecture, interior design and window dressing.¹⁴

Atmospheres are no longer neglected when it comes to marketing or aesthetics. This is due to a change in people's self-image, to the partial rejection of functional ideology and a tendency towards a more poetic approach to perception, thought and description. It is also due to more people becoming involved in a discourse about atmospheres and breaking the silence. As a result, atmospheres are relevant to the performance and success of marketing or curating strategies. This success lies in the fact that atmospheres are feelings and communicate feelings.

Atmospheres in ethics

What is the meaning of atmospheres in ethics? Whereas aesthetics is an area concerned with passive experience and contemplation, ethics is thought of as an area of action, of acting in respect of what is good. Though a common understanding of the disciplines of ethics and aesthetics depicts them both as being concerned

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ P. Kotler, *Atmospherics as a marketing tool*, «Journal of Retailing» 49 (1973), 4, p. 48.

¹⁴ See *ibid.*, pp. 62-63.

with values, it's become more customary to study their differences rather than their similarities:

Ethical judgements are said to be made by reference to general rules and principles whereas aesthetic judgements are made by reference to the particular features of what is judged. In an ethical matter we act towards some ends whereas in an aesthetic matter we experience something for its own sake.¹⁵

So these disciplines might be seen to be mutually exclusive. However, artists do place importance on such values and seek to establish a relationship between ethics and aesthetics. The central artistic question in this respect is whether the aesthetic value of an artwork affects its moral value or vice-versa. There has been a lot of discussion on the contribution of art to moral education. Art may move us to become aware of the misery of some people and visualise what action we might feel led to take as a result. This belief in art's ethical potency was also shared by Hendrik Christian Andersen: «Central to the work was Andersen's belief that art, more specifically monumental Beaux-Arts architecture, could bring about world peace and international harmony»¹⁶. For him, working as an artist meant changing humanity and bringing about perfection.

It's worth noting that Andersen sees architecture as being key to 'guiding' people atmospherically. For the architect Gottfried Semper – who built the Neues Hoftheater in Dresden known as the Semperoper – atmosphere is the art of theatrical frontage:

A long tradition of architectural theory suggests that architecture is never more than such a theatrical effect. [...] Gottfried Semper insisted that the 'true atmosphere' of architecture is 'the haze of carnival candles'. Architecture is but a stage set that produces a sensuous atmosphere. Semper argued that the full force of architecture is to be found in its outer surface, the decorative layer through which the atmosphere seemingly percolates. Architecture is indistinguishable from *décor*. To construct architecture is simply to prop up a surface that produces an atmosphere. Architects are special effects experts. The test of their craft is in the thinnest layer of paint, texture, or wallpaper.¹⁷

¹⁵ D. Collinson, *Ethics and aesthetics are one*, «The British Journal of Aesthetics» 25 (1985), 3, p. 266.

¹⁶ *Hendrik Christian Andersen*, from Wikipedia:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hendrik_Christian_Andersen.

¹⁷ M. Wigley, *Die Architektur der Atmosphäre*, in G. Auer - U. Conrads et al. (hrsg.), *op. cit.*, p. 20.

From this perspective, atmospheres are viewed as the surface of the tangible world. Talking about surfaces can lead us to think of the word 'superficial' and the idea of disguise. The juxtaposition of ethics and aesthetics gives rise to moments of suspicion. In politics, atmospheres seem to function like a mask, like the front of a building, like a façade.

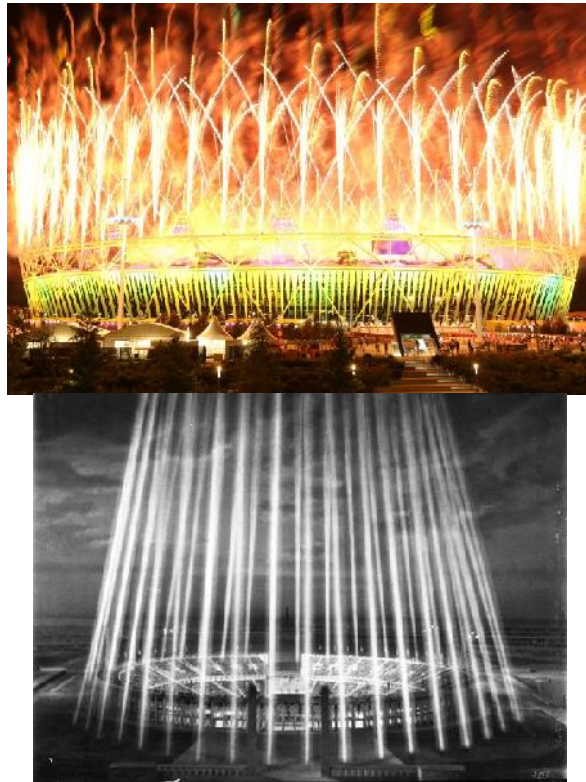


Fig. 3. Olympic arrangements in 2012 and 1936

But is an atmosphere really masking, really hiding something? For instance: the 2012 Olympic ceremonies relied on aesthetic arrangements that did not differ a great deal from those used in 1936. It's all about emotions and overwhelming the senses of all who experience the ceremony. The Olympics enables people to participate not only in a sport meeting but also to socialise and bond with kindred spirits¹⁸. The attendant crowd is caught by the

¹⁸ See for example C. Heibach, *Manipulative Atmosphären. Zwischen unmittelbarem Erleben und medialer Konstruktion*, in C. Heibach (hrsg.), *Atmosphären. Dimensionen eines diffusen Phänomens*, München, Fink, 2012, p. 261.

'in-betweenness' and is not required to act as an individual; it is seen as a new entity created solely for the purpose of the event. But as aesthetic transformation increases its hold on everyday life and the design of the environment, it is hard to evaluate the influence and ethical impact of atmospheres. Atmospheres have a certain range between ethics and aesthetics, their borders are undulating and vague. Taking into account the definition of atmospheres given above, it's almost impossible to avoid being part of the creation and reception of atmospheric values. There are parallels with the meteorological atmosphere here: It surrounds us and affects us to a certain extent (the *weather*). Now we have to decide what effect the aesthetic impression of the atmosphere will have, what ethical conclusion we will derive from it and what our actions might be (the *wheather*). Let's apply this to global warming or global events: as long as aesthetics only refers to the in-betweenness, and to the pursuit of the beautiful by perceiving something in the 'right' way, and as long as ethics only refers to the effect, and to the pursuit of the good by acting in the 'right' way, it is virtually impossible to bridge the gap between these disciplines. Subsequently we have to deal with the terms 'surface' and 'coverage', 'right' and 'wrong'. This results in a black and white mode of thought.

When it comes to atmospheres in ethics there is also an emphasis shift: from ethics as a theory of the good action to a broader understanding of ethics as a theory of the good life. This implies the acceptance and appreciation of atmospheres. The question 'What is good for everyone?' initially becomes the question 'What is good for me?' and then 'What I am capable of doing?'. This shift may seem to denote a decrease in ethics. But it is intended to help to avoid impracticable ethical rules. On the contrary, it should result in the awareness of the importance of reacting to certain situations. These situations emerge from the atmospheric pressure that takes hold of a person. In other words: one's own well-being – as one has come to understand it from the aesthetic impression of the atmosphere – is what teaches us to have concern for others. In her article *Aesthetics as a guide to ethics* Sherri Irvin similarly argues that

attention to aesthetic values may promote moral motivation; that aesthetic values should be regarded as constraining moral demands; and that the pursuit of aesthetic satisfactions may itself have positive moral

value. These arguments suggest that moral thinking should be aesthetically informed to a much greater degree than has been typical.¹⁹

The emphasis shift results in the awareness that ethics is not only about moral standards but about character and *personality*: how should one behave in any given situation; how should one act or react in various atmospheres; what is the character of the atmosphere, what is my personality? Consider for example a traffic light. The rule of conduct is clear if it is red or green: stop or drive on. But if it is amber it's up to your personality: stop early or floor the accelerator? Just like an atmosphere, the amber traffic light is characterised by the in-between: between the distinct 'stop' and the distinct 'go'. This is comparable to atmospheres, which are not as definite as signs in the world of traffic. They are seldom located in a semiotically-explicit terrain. So atmospheres alone do not induce a certain type of behaviour like a red traffic light would. The way atmospheres in ethics and aesthetics are created and perceived relies on both a person's perception, and what they contribute to atmospheres. This one person does something good with regard to intersubjectivity because of her or his own subjectivity, which is atmospherically involved in the situation. That is to say because of an obviously sensed atmosphere that encloses not only the subject but everything around.

The special atmosphere

To pinpoint the exact moment a person becomes aware of the phenomenon of atmosphere I have introduced the term «special atmosphere»²⁰. Before we can identify the specific character of an atmosphere in any given space, we initially sense that there is some force of attraction. For instance, when we enter a museum or set foot in a bank, we are struck by a sense of something that can't be reduced either to our subjective conditions of perception or to the objective conditions of the surrounding space. We might simply describe this something as 'special'. At this point in our perception we don't make recourse to our sensory or atmospheric background knowledge, or try to hone our judgement. We won't knowingly remember previous occasions when we were exposed to certain atmospheres that can be compared to the current one.

¹⁹ S. Irvin, *Aesthetics as a guide to ethics*, in R. Stecker - T. Gracyk (eds.), *Aesthetics today: a reader*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2010, p. 376.

²⁰ See A. Rauh, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

So the *special atmosphere* defines the specific moment when we perceive an atmosphere, when we recognise the enveloping effect of surroundings that have a certain tinge to them. It's the point where the qualitative characteristics of the phenomenon are retrieved and one is able to bridge the 'conceptional' gap between the subject and the object. We are in-between. And the atmosphere reveals a dual existence: the *well-being* – how we feel, including the ethical sense – and the *where-being* – where we are, above all in the aesthetic sense. It should be noted that the 'special' atmosphere is not the same as a 'particular' atmosphere. There is a slight difference: the particular atmosphere is attributed to a specific place and is a once-off. A special atmosphere can occur in any number of places, but it must be recognised by a person, i.e. someone who is sentient. It exists whenever a person is suddenly aware of an atmosphere – in relation to their 'well-being' and their 'where-being'. When we sense a special atmosphere we not only perceive, but also have an idea of what is happening with us. In this way we can be aware of how we participate in the creation of the atmosphere and the potential actions that are available to us. It gradually becomes clear that the atmospheric phenomenon is not merely sensory, but an attitude, a mind-set: what we perceive will influence the way we perceive, and how we will perceive things in the future. In a stressful atmosphere our perception of things is coloured by stress. If we are used to atmospheric spaces, if we are familiar with the concept of atmospheric spaces, then we can recognise the effect that an atmosphere is having on us at a particular point in time, and try to escape its impact or at least make it a subject of discussion. The special atmosphere occurs when we become aware of atmosphere as a phenomenon *per se*. The way our surroundings appear is affected by the way we appear and vice versa. The potential for ethics and aesthetics to interact also lies in our awareness of the 'in-between' of atmospheres.

Concluding ethical-aesthetic potentials of special atmospheres

We have already dipped into the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, and taken a brief general look at these two areas of thought. We looked at them in the context of the problems of scientific discourse and the gap between easy and difficult discussions about atmospheres. Now I will propose three potentials of

atmospheres where the juxtaposition of ethics and aesthetics is concerned.

Commonly aesthetics strives for betweenness and consequently for a specific kind of perception, whereas ethics strives for a specific kind of effect and action. Broadly speaking it is like the *vita contemplativa* in contrast to the *vita activa*. Each of these terms represents a vision of how life should be lived – whether focused on perception and aesthetics or focused on action and ethics. If we want to demonstrate the common understanding of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, we just have to listen to Wittgenstein saying: «In all great art there is a *WILD* beast: *tamed*»²¹. Something has to set boundaries for the wild and impetuous. And, if art does this, then we can enjoy the wild. The beast is trapped in the weave of space and time: we can inhale its aura. Without the aesthetic boundary we would be affected by the beast in another dimension. The ethical field is also more associated with emotions than with rational argumentation: «This feeling that something is wrong, [...] is an authentic, aesthetically grounded moral experience»²².

The emphasis shift has shown that other questions emerge when we sense an atmosphere. Actions stem from moods embedded in atmospheres and also aim to influence the moods embedded in atmospheres. Here the disciplines start to converge. In parentheses, Wittgenstein states: «Ethics and aesthetics are one»²³. This sentence doesn't imply that one discipline equates the other, rather it implies a mutual relation – as can be seen if we look at a synopsis of Aristotle's concept of ethics and Moritz Geiger's concept of phenomenological aesthetics, a synopsis of harmonic life and the combination of internal and external focus²⁴. Wittgenstein's oneness of ethics and aesthetics has a transcendental basis and derives from a

²¹ L. Wittgenstein, *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, in Id., *Werkausgabe*, Band 8, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1984, p. 502 (my trans.).

²² M. Hauskeller, *The relation between ethics and aesthetics in connection with moral judgments about gene technology*, http://www.academia.edu/2895795/The_Relation_between_Ethics_and_Aesthetics_in_Connection_with_Moral_Judgements_about_Gene_Technology, p. 11.

²³ L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, in Id., *Werkausgabe*, Band 1, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2006, p. 83, 6.421: «It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed. Ethics are transcendental. (Ethics and aesthetics are one.)».

²⁴ See A. Janik, *Das Ästhetische im Ethischen und das Ethische im Ästhetischen*, in W. Lütterfelds - S. Majetschak (hrsg.), «*Ethik und Ästhetik sind Eins*» *Beiträge zu Wittgensteins Ästhetik und Kunstphilosophie*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 2007, p. 12.

sub specie aeternitatis attitude: an attentive seeing that is unimpeded by any manifestation of the empirical self. Aesthetically speaking this stance enables us to see and know another person or object as a whole world, as a sovereign. Ethically speaking it enables us to see and know that each one of us belongs with the world as a whole, where everybody is on the same level.²⁵

This mind-set is reminiscent of the impact atmospheres have on us.

So the *first* potential of atmospheres exists in the *in-between-ness*. In an atmosphere there is no gap between the internal and the external, between subject and object and – furthermore – between ethics and aesthetics. *In-between* there is no *neither-nor* but an *as-well-as*. And that helps to reverse the antagonism of ethics and aesthetics. Value-based feelings and moods shape our personalities and are also stimulated by art and other aesthetic arrangements. The in-betweenness of an atmosphere leads to actions and reactions with reference to human sensibilities as well as surrounding qualities – especially when we are faced with a special atmosphere. Is this different to previous concepts of ethics or aesthetics? Certainly. Not least because the theory of atmospheres emphasises the weave between the parameters of perception and thus highlights that the subject-object-nexus is obsolete in an *as-well-as* situation. We can gain a playful insight into the interaction between subject and object, so to speak, the interplay between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*. «It is the task of Ecological Nature Aesthetics to insist that for a healthy, if not a good life, the environment must be experienced with reference to certain aesthetic qualities»²⁶. New forms of entities come into existence, for example ‘semi-objects’, as conceptualised by Hermann Schmitz and further explained by Tonino Griffero in his new book *Quasi-cose*, in which he refers to such semi-objects as distress, embarrassment, the glance and the glimmer. Given a semi-object there is no need to ask where it was when it wasn’t here – for example: where was the wind when it wasn’t blowing?

In-betweenness was the first potential. The *second* potential of atmospheres is the *development of aesthetic interest*. The special atmosphere leads to heightened interest in a particular situation. From this initial aesthetic interest, an increasingly advanced in-

²⁵ D. Collinson, *op. cit.*, p. 271.

²⁶ G. Böhme, *Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik* cit., p. 92 (my trans.).

terest might be developed²⁷. The interest is geared towards aesthetic and ethical values that ensure a relationship between the interested person and her or his individually chosen issues. The aesthetic value serves as a basis for the ethical. «The aesthetic is a central dimension of a good life, and a life's being good for the person living it has considerable moral weight, both in itself and because of the positive consequences for others that stem from it»²⁸. The aesthetic interest originates from personal well-being (*Befinden*) and radiates outwards, i.e. the affected person develops an ethical interest. Moral agency depends on «integration and interweaving, an essentially creative process that involves the application of aesthetic criteria among others»²⁹. A person with an aesthetic interest not only arranges her or his living-room in an aesthetic-atmospheric sense but also takes an interest in, and perhaps even takes action that is beneficial to the meteorological-atmospheric living room. Provision and prevention are aesthetically acquired attitudes that are comparable to the earth's atmosphere, i.e. it provides us with the air we breathe and prevents the air from disappearing into outer space. In Wittgenstein's convergence of ethics and aesthetics these attitudes are brought together:

Just as the aesthetic object is the single thing seen as if it were a whole world, so the ethical object, or life, is the multiplicity of the world seen as a single object. In aesthetic contemplation the single object is 'my whole world'; in ethical contemplation the multiplicity of the world is seen as a whole and is 'my whole world'.³⁰

This means that ethical and aesthetic values are one. In the same way that an evaluation of the situation takes place in a special atmosphere, a re-evaluation can take place in a well-known atmosphere.

This brings us to the *third* potential of atmospheres: the *re-evaluation*. Since all perception is specific, every form of perception consists of particular constituents, which result in a framework of perception that necessarily exclude other constituents. Above all, the special atmosphere indicates *well-being* and *where-*

²⁷ See R. Goetz, *Atmosphäre und ästhetisches Interesse*, in R. Goetz - S. Graupner (hrsg.), *op. cit.*, p. 250.

²⁸ S. Irvin, *op. cit.*, p. 377.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 375.

³⁰ D. Collinson, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

being and is thereby able to induce an aesthetic interest that questions the paradigm of perception, what it shows or what it hides. This is not meant in a contemplative but in an active sense: we are also responsible for the atmosphere that surrounds us. «If one understands sensuousness as a bodily presence, there's a duality in this idea from the start: our surroundings become perceptible in our well-being [*Befinden*], and we radiate an atmosphere in our surroundings»³¹. So the perceiver and the creator are one and the same. This shows a disparity that is primarily relevant to people who work in the creative sector, where atmosphere is a factor. One has to be aware of the gap

between the *intended atmosphere* and the *perceived atmosphere*. The *intended atmosphere* is the set of sensory qualities that the designer of the artificial environment sought to imbue in the space. [...] On the other hand, the *perceived atmosphere* may vary for different customers. One's reactions to colours, sounds, noises, and temperatures are partly learned.³²

This gap may be closed if a person expands her or his aesthetic interest via atmospheric engagement and consequently acquires atmospheric background knowledge. As a result the atmosphere provides a «role model for a new type of subject»³³ and installs aesthetic justice as a justice towards the heterogeneous. But this is not simply a re-evaluation of perception and action using atmospheres. It is also a re-evaluation of the atmosphere itself. Philip Kotler, for whom atmospheres serve as a marketing tool, advises us «that implemented atmospheres must be periodically re-evaluated in relation to new possibilities and competitive developments. Atmospheres exhibit a strong wear-out effect over time»³⁴. It is impossible to perceive an atmosphere without being a sentient subject that is wholly present. By perceiving and producing atmospheres, this subject has the opportunity to perpetually re-evaluate the present atmosphere. And even if the atmosphere in an Olympic arena resembles a previous production, the force of attraction doesn't necessarily exert the same influence on a person's action: this is because of re-evaluation. And finally there is a re-evaluation of disciplines as already mentioned. Aes-

³¹ G. Böhme, *Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik* cit., p. 34 (my trans.).

³² P. Kotler, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

³³ W. Welsch, *Grenzgänge der Ästhetik*, Stuttgart, Reclam, 1996, p. 127 (my trans.).

³⁴ P. Kotler, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

thetics and ethics expand and form an alliance of relevance for the relationship between sensibilities and surrounding qualities, between the good life and aesthetic qualities.

Google search results are essentially links to other parts of the Internet, which itself can be characterised as a space without physical presence. So the search results only point to our understanding of atmospheres as feelings and moods that are floating in the air. A real sense of an atmosphere cannot be found in the Internet but must be cultivated and exercised – all the more so where ethical-aesthetic potentials of atmosphere are concerned. A museum location may serve as a basis for discussion on atmospheres as it contains art. And art deals with atmospheres and it may guide the whether-forecast: whether one feels comfortable or uncomfortable in an aesthetic or ethical way.