Atmospheres

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Atmospheres are the overall feeling of a situation that people experience individually and collectively. They are created by the affective relationships between the human and non-human, material and immaterial bodies that comprise a situation. Yet an atmosphere is at the same time more than the sum of its parts. People often experience atmospheres as something that cannot be put into words easily; nevertheless, atmospheres enable or disable certain behaviours in situational and sometimes unpredictable ways. This entry outlines what atmospheres are, what they do, and how they can be analysed from an anthropological perspective. The entry shows that the study of atmospheres has significant explanatory power that anthropology should continue to explore.

Introduction & social science antecedents

Every situation has an atmosphere: a general feeling, tonality, or vibe that people experience collectively and individually. When we enter a room, or any other social space, its atmosphere makes us feel something: at ease or uneasy, comfortable or uncomfortable, included or excluded. Atmospheres contribute in important ways to meanings, feelings, and behaviours. They circumscribe what we can say, how we can move, or even which behaviours we consider appropriate. But atmospheres are never quite clear to us; they feel—at least to some extent—fleeting, indeterminate, and difficult to grasp.

There is an intuitive importance of this kind of affective in-between captured in the term ‘atmosphere’. Despite this, it is remarkable how late anthropologists began to theorise atmospheres more thoroughly. Instead, they have used a series of closely related concepts in the past to make sense of them. One good starting point for understanding atmospheres is the ancient Greek etymology of the term and its early uses. The word atmosphere comes from *ἀτμός* (atmós), ‘vapour, steam,’ and *σφαῖρα* (sphaîra), describing a ‘sphere’ produced by it. In line with these meanings, scientific writings of the sixteenth century used the term in two different ways: to describe the gaseous envelope of a celestial body (e.g., the Earth) and to refer to emanations of the human body. In relation to humans, these effluvia and material airs were perceived to vary with social categories, including gender, age, race, and class. Social emanations were the forces that influenced relationships and led to attraction or repulsion between people (Corbin 1982). Even in these early uses, however, the term ‘atmosphere’ referred not only to the emanations of a particular

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person but also to the totality of 'atmospheres' created by all kinds of bodies interacting in situations and places.

These ideas entered social science debates about a century ago but were not yet named 'atmosphere'. To clarify the relationship between experiencing and knowing, Georg Simmel (1917, 130), for example, stipulates that we know that something is alive because a living being is surrounded by an *ultramateriellen Wirksamkeitsumkreis* (literally 'ultramaterial sphere of influence') that touches us immediately. Accordingly, we grasp our environment in its entirety before we can reduce it to specific sensory impressions, such as seeing the entity's movements, smelling its vitality, and cognitively categorising other sensory impressions as belonging to a living organism. Simmel goes on to show that in situations where multiple beings are present, they form an atmosphere that can become characteristic of a particular place, like a city or even a country, foregrounding the spatial and situational meaning of the term.

In a related manner, Émile Durkheim's notion of a 'collective effervescence' captures the affective in-between a situation describes. In his theory of shared affectivities in ritual, Durkheim argues that rituals contribute significantly to the solidarity that helps maintain social order in a group (1995). While rituals are salient, he says, they are threatened by individualistic interests. Therefore, rituals must produce a shared collective feeling, which he referred to as the 'effervescence', something which goes beyond the sharing of meanings and categories. It gives the ritual its power and ultimately enables it to maintain social representations and thus the social order of a group (von Scheve 2012).

The study of atmospheres as a force which emanates from bodies can also be linked to the early anthropological study of gift giving, as part of which Marcel Mauss (1925) argues that gifts may have their own power that makes them circulate. Drawing on ethnographic writing on property understandings among late nineteenth and early twentieth century Māori of Polynesia, Mauss discusses the Polynesian concept of the *Hau* (lit. wind, soul, power) as an object-centred force said to accompany gifts and drive people to reciprocate them. The *Hau* aligns with the term atmosphere as a force that emanates from a person and extends to objects. Moreover, the *Hau* is similar to atmospheres in that it has a spatial component, being linked to the gift-giver as much to the soil and the territory where it originates (Mauss [1925] 2016, 70–1). In his methodological reflections, Mauss also refers to the situational meaning of the term atmosphere. To describe the 'tonalité morale' ('moral tone') that prevails among a group of people he uses the French term 'atmosphere' (Mauss [1926] 2002, 282).

In the middle of the twentieth century, concrete situations became more central to social research. Ethnographers tended to study specific 'encounters' in which people interact 'face-to-face' (Goffman 1961). Thus, several researchers focused on the ways people produce their cultural (and emotional) worlds through everyday interactions (Garfinkel 1967). In face-to-face encounters, people communicate in a variety of ways and in constellations that involve human and non-human participants (Murphy 2023). For

example, people may empathise with other species that are part of their world, as Michael Schnegg and Thiemo Breyer (2024) demonstrate with Damara pastoralists in Namibia. Here, embodied empathy creates a multi-species world that incorporates the perspectives of elephants, tricksters, and livestock. This world is distinct from any world in which these perspectives are absent.

Influenced by this focus on micro-situations and their affectivity, anthropologist Clifford Geertz distinguishes 'ethos' from 'moods'. He understood an ethos to be the general aesthetic or moral style of a culture (1973, 89). A people's ethos may feel universal and objective to them, but it stems at least in part from the specific ways in which people adapt to their lives' circumstances. Moods, on the other hand, were more temporally- and spatially-bounded phenomena: 'Like fogs, "moods" just settle and lift; like scents, suffuse and evaporate. When present moods are totalistic: if one is sad everything and everybody seems dreary; if one is gay everything and everybody seems splendid' (Geertz 1973, 97). Moods also distinguish themselves from an ethos, in that they are made meaningful with reference to their sources, rather than being explicable through the ends they may serve (Geertz 1973, 97).

Two important dimensions of atmospheres are already apparent in these early sets of atmosphere-adjacent concepts. First, atmospheres can describe what is 'in the air' at very different scales. On a smaller scale, atmospheres are relevant to concrete situations: face-to-face encounters in which all kinds of bodies, human and non-human, material and immaterial, create an atmosphere. On a larger scale, atmospheres can also characterise situations: a city, a country, a community, a generation, and so on can come with specific atmospheres. Secondly, an atmosphere is usually experienced as a totality, as a sense of a whole in which people cannot immediately identify all the individual elements that make it up.

Affect studies and phenomenology

It is only recently that anthropologists have begun to explicitly theorise atmospheres. Two major theoretical developments may be responsible for this: Affect studies—an interdisciplinary field in the social sciences and humanities which explores the fundamentally relational character of feeling and emotion—has broadened scholarly attention to include more subtle, elusive and intangible affective dynamics, such as atmosphere. Secondly, phenomenology—an approach which pays close attention to people's experience of concrete situations—has developed a particular focus on atmospheres (Schnegg 2023).

The 'turn to affect' in the social sciences and humanities since the late 1990s (Clough and Halley 2007) has been part of a broader movement to rethink feeling, emotion, and subjective experience in terms of the material constellations of bodies in space, rather than as internal feelings. This approach has also gained prominence in anthropology. From an affect perspective, atmospheres are primarily 'out there', generated in relational arrangements of bodies, even if they are subjectively felt by individuals.

An important precursor for this understanding of atmosphere is the social science scholarship of emotions

beginning in the late 1970s, strongly influenced by feminist and queer studies. These scholars explicitly challenged the assumptions of mainstream psychology, which conceptualised emotions primarily as the internal states of individuals. Instead, they argued that emotions are the result of processes of social construction in culturally specific situations and performances—through everyday interactions and encounters (Hochschild 1983; Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990). From the 1990s, scholars began to move away from the idea that emotions should be understood merely as cognitive concepts that people construct in everyday interaction and began to explore that material bodies also play an important role in the experience of feeling (Leavitt 1996). From then on, queer-feminist scholars in anthropology and beyond began to use the term 'affect', which seemed to denote a stronger connection to bodies, while still arguing that affect is primarily shaped by society, culture, and history, rather than biology (Stoler 2002; Sedgwick 2003; Ahmed 2004).

Since the late 1990s, scholars began to introduce a much wider understanding of the body as a basis for the study of affect (Massumi 2002, Thrift 2007), including human and non-human, material and immaterial entities: 'a body can be anything; it can be an animal, a body of sounds, a mind or an idea; it can be a linguistic corpus, a social body, a collectivity' (Deleuze 1988, 127). Affect, then, emerges from such a relational constellation of all kinds of bodies that form an 'affective arrangement' (Slaby, Mühlhoff and Wünschner 2017). These arrangements in which affect comes to the fore shape how people experience a situation.

Early phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger developed the term *Stimmung* (often translated as 'mood') to capture how we shape situations affectively and how they in turn shape us. Following their conceptual lead, the term 'atmosphere' was further developed with the aim of rethinking human emotionality (Tellenbach 1981, Schmitz 2019; Schmitz, Müllan and Slaby 2011; Schnegg 2023). Hermann Schmitz (1974), a central figure in recent phenomenological debates, argues that emotions (and feelings) have long been misconceived as something located in the individual psyche. Instead, they are not private but rather 'out there'. In Schmitz's reading, emotions *are* atmospheres, also ontologically, and largely beyond the individual's control—something that overcomes or befalls us. The feeling body (*Leib*) is the medium through which we resonate with them and feel them subjectively (Eisenlohr 2024, Schnegg 2024).

In recent years, Schmitz's radical ontological approach has been further developed (and, some might say, watered down). While he theorises that atmospheres are epistemic wholes that include the subject and cannot be reduced to their parts, Gernot Böhme introduces a 'constellationalist perspective' (Riedel 2018, 173), claiming that atmospheres are constituted by the elements present in a situation even as they transcend these elements. As such, atmospheres can be curated and transformed by changing the elements that constitute them, including the built environment, the arrangement of objects, their material makeup, symbolic nature, light, smells, etc. Churches and public spaces in cities are prime examples that

demonstrate what constitutes atmospheres and to what extent atmospheres can be constructed, manipulated, and experienced.

Both of these traditions of affect studies and phenomenology use slightly different terminologies, and scholars have debated the distinctions between the concepts of feeling, emotion, and affect. When it comes to the study of atmosphere, it is possible to understand 'feeling' as denoting the realm of subjective experience, like a single person or a collective feeling something in their bodies. 'Emotion', then, refers to culturally formed and semantically expressible subjective experiences, for which people also normally have words to describe and qualitatively differentiate them – for example love, hate, shame, or joy. The term 'affect' is broader and also cross-cuts these categories. In the terminology of affect studies, feeling and emotion can be described as affective phenomena. The concept of affect, however, proposes a strictly relational perspective, understanding feelings and emotions as emerging in-between bodies within a constellation rather than as properties of individual subjects. Over the past three decades, these theoretical resources from affect theory and phenomenology have increasingly been used not only in anthropology, but also in sociology, geography, and other disciplines to theorise atmospheres (Anderson 2009; Gugutzer 2020a; Trigg 2022; Stewart 2011).

Thereby, the notion of atmosphere we discuss here is only one of the several concepts used to describe shared affectivities (Thonhauser 2021). Related terms include 'affective spaces' (Navaro-Yashin 2009), 'Stimmung' (Borneman and Ghassem-Fachandi 2017), 'attunement' (Stewart 2011; Throop 2020; Zigon 2014), and 'moods' (Throop 2018; 2014; 2020). Given the range of definitions for all these terms, it is impossible to separate them neatly. It will be one of the major challenges for the larger field to work this out more clearly. However, some tendencies can be discerned. Whereas *Stimmung* and mood tend to focus more on internal states that frame our experience of the world while simultaneously acknowledging that we are framed by them, atmospheres are thought to be primarily out there, happening to us and thus leading to the feelings we have. In this sense, one comes to a classroom with a particular mood, which has its atmosphere, and while one changes the atmosphere by being present, it also changes one's mood. When leaving the classroom, however, one takes the mood along while leaving the atmosphere behind. Furthermore, whereas *Stimmung* and affective spaces describe shared affectivities with some temporal duration, atmospheres also refer to a shorter temporal scale. Finally, compared to affective spaces and atmospheres, *Stimmung* and moods place less emphasis on the non-human bodies, materialities, and networks of affective relations that constitute them.

In the following, we narrow the focus to anthropological discussions of atmospheres. Building on previous work (Schroer and Schmitt 2018a), we describe what atmospheres are, what they do, and how they can be analysed ethnographically.

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What atmospheres are

Atmospheres are the overall feeling of a situation that people experience individually and collectively. They are created by the affective relationships between the human and non-human, material and immaterial bodies that comprise a situation, yet an atmosphere is at the same time more than the sum of its parts. People often experience atmospheres as something that cannot be put into words easily; nevertheless, they enable or disable certain behaviours in situational and sometimes unpredictable ways. Didier Eribon's autobiography *Returning to Reims* offers a vivid case. On his return and to explain what it meant for him to leave home, Eribon invokes his family's conflictual constellation: 'the atmosphere was a harsh one, painful on a daily basis, even unbearable. This constant climate of conjugal warfare must have counted for a lot in producing my will to flee both my family and my circumstances' (2013, 83). Eribon thus underscores, first, that situations are suffused with atmospheres that shape how people feel; and second, that atmosphere is an affective layer that enables some actions while constraining others. In this view, atmosphere—alongside individual aspiration and structural constraint—becomes a further analytic for understanding the behaviour of persons and groups.

The anthropology of atmospheres has also suggested that atmospheres may be neither subjective nor objective. While an atmosphere may already be there when we enter a room, or any other social space, our presence changes it. At the same time, the atmosphere changes us, and as subjects, we are partly constituted by it. It is therefore difficult to describe atmosphere as either a purely objective or a subjective phenomenon. Rather, several scholars have insisted that atmospheres transcend this distinction. An example can illustrate this: During a recent fieldwork stay in Namibia, I (Michael Schnegg) went to a neighbour's house to ask for a tool. The absence of people outside already signalled that something was amiss. Inside, the room was quiet; no one spoke. I was immediately solicited by an atmosphere of grief. On asking gently, I learned that a close relative had died in an accident only hours before. The situation's affective intensity rendered me out of place; with limited language, I offered condolences. My presence, I sensed, altered the shared atmosphere, even as that atmosphere altered me—producing a felt mixture of sorrow, disconnection, and misfit.

Such atmospheres are synaesthetic, meaning they may stimulate various senses or cognitive pathways at the same time. It may be this multisensory experience of an atmosphere that makes us feel it as a whole before we can distinguish particular sensory impressions of sound, smell, and touch (Eisenlohr 2024, 40; Schmitz 2016, 18). For example, visitors to an art installation in Denmark complained about its strong smell although no chemical or material sources could be found in the environment. But as the overall tonality of the installation—its walls, its colours, its light—was reminiscent of a hospital floor, the arrangement was experienced synaesthetically as an atmosphere with odour (Stenslund 2018). Such findings suggest the existence of an embodied capacity to store atmospheres and their memory, which are then triggered when a similar arrangement is experienced again.

Atmospheres have also been shown to contain suggestions of movement. Being immersed in an atmosphere can literally move us in ways over which we have little control. This is most obvious with atmospheres that are largely created by sound, which we often experience as shaking and moving the body in particular ways. The musical recitation of devotional poetry (*na't khwan*) among Mauritian Muslims is a good example for this. Consisting of hymns and poems that are usually recited in Urdu, this form of poetry stirs feelings of religious affection and creates a desire for prayer among devout Muslims. It does this both through its meaning, but also very much through the mode and style of its vocal rendering and through the sonic nature of the voice involved in it. The latter creates an atmosphere that envelops and suffuses the body and changes its sense of being in space. It 'grips you powerfully', 'makes you vibrate', and 'directly enters your soul', as people put it (Eisenlohr 2018, 2024, 8). The sound and resulting movements become all the more meaningful insofar as they are part of ritual practices that incorporate the discursive and iconographic dimensions of a religious tradition (Eisenlohr 2022, 2018).

A final major aspect of atmospheres that the anthropological literature has insisted on is that they can be shaped or curated. For instance, by arranging the lighting in a way that fosters a sense of community, solitude, and 'security', a feeling called *hygge* ('feeling home') can be induced in Denmark (Bille 2020; 2015; Bille, Bjerregaard and Sørensen 2015). In a similar manner, urban spaces can be designed to make people feel particular ways, when, for example, the high ceilings in Christian churches are intended to make people feel small in the presence of God (for more examples, see Stenslund 2023). This possibility to craft and design atmospheres has also been demonstrated for experimental theatres (Gatt 2018), pharmacies (Liu 2023), churches (Gregersen 2021), commercial settings (Kolehmainen and Mäkinen 2021), courtrooms (Bens 2018), or even aquariums where enthusiasts create an atmosphere with water, air, and light (Schmitt 2018, 96).

What atmospheres do

We are only beginning to understand that in addition to individual motives and structural possibilities and constraints, atmospheres are a third layer that shape both meanings and behaviours. As such, atmospheres can create, for example, belonging. To this end, anthropological research has shown that people actively create the atmosphere in the Night Church, held in a cathedral in Copenhagen, through the arrangements of both human and non-human bodies, making it a special place for worship and belonging. To theorise this, Andreas Melson Gregersen (2021) introduces the term 'atmosphering' and demonstrates how this act involves creating a sense of being in a church without being in a traditional one, and how people perceive this atmosphere.

Similarly, to 'feel at home' in Japan means to create an atmosphere where practices that create intimacy (often referred to as 'social heat') such as sleeping, eating, and bathing are balanced with household members' desire for autonomy and distance (Daniels 2015). In related ways, white, urban, upper-middle-

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class American women use ‘ethnic’ objects such as Malian bògòlan candles and cloth to create domestic spaces, which in their words, are full of ‘atmosphere’ and ‘life’ (Bodil Birkebæk Olesen 2010). They feel that exoticised objects can help them overcome the ‘coldness’ of other materials and bring life, and ultimately social relationships, into their homes. In certain British pubs the atmosphere immerses people in the essence of the place not only to make them feel at home, but primarily to encourage consumption (Shaw 2018).

While this sounds mostly positive and inclusive, atmospheres may just as well limit or exclude people in various ways. In *Black skin, white masks* (2008), Frantz Fanon analyses what it feels like to be Black in mid-century French society. In a much-quoted scene, he describes sitting at a table and contemplating reaching for matches. He feels inhibited and describes how the gazes of others (whether they are in the room or not) create an ‘atmosphere of certain uncertainty’ (Fanon 2008, 83) that hinders him. This atmosphere is not just something that imposes itself on him in the moment. Rather, it has become a ‘definitive structuring of the self and the world’, part of a dialectical relationality. Because of the oppressive and dangerous atmosphere in which Fanon lived, it is impossible for him to move freely and without fear. His analysis has inspired a vast literature on how the gaze of dominant groups of people can create atmospheres that inhibit or exclude others (Magrì and McQueen 2023).

Sara Ahmed (2007) is one of the most prominent contributors to this literature. In her analysis of whiteness, she shows how certain atmospheres can be created in such a way as to exclude non-white bodies. To explain how these atmospheres are formed, she extends Fanon’s account of living under a hostile, white gaze. Ahmed describes the limited scope of action of people of colour in a white world through the notion of ‘orientation’, understood as the different directions people can take in any given moment, which determine what is and is not within their reach (2007). Reflecting on the political dimension of atmosphere more generally, Janis Jenkins (2025) recently added that within any political ethos, the constitution of political subjectivity takes place at the nexus of and orientation and the atmosphere in which we orient.

The stifling effects of atmospheres that Fanon developed with respect to ethnic and racialised limitation and exclusion have been extended to other social categories such as gender, age, and class. Take, for example, outreach events by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in northern Uganda in the late 2010s. Here, ICC staff aimed at curating a ‘transitional justice atmosphere’ which included foreign media audiences but excluded in-person audiences in the village through linguistic and spatial regimes. The constellation of material arrangements contributed significantly to this exclusion: monitors displayed proceedings from The Hague in English, accessible to media representatives but incomprehensible to most local attendees who lacked adequate translation. The small screens and language barrier generated an atmosphere of boredom and restlessness among the physically present audience, yet this remained invisible to distant viewers. Television cameras and photographers transmitted a carefully curated visual

atmosphere that suggested engaged participation, while the actual bodily experience of confusion and exclusion felt by local attendees was systematically filtered out of the mediated representation (Bens 2022, 46–71).

Recent scholarship on the political dimension of atmospheres also explores whether some emotions and feelings might not only be shaped by atmosphere but, in Schmitz's sense, *be* atmospheres. In this line of theorising, Schnegg (2024) describes boredom in rural Namibia as an atmosphere that grows in a space created by a longing for a different future. At the same time, people experience the path to this future as being blocked—by the environment, by political and economic marginalisation, by their own bodies, and by others. This atmosphere grips people who describe boredom as 'riding on their backs'. It can only be lifted if the determining structures change. Here, emotions as atmospheres are intertwined with the political processes responsible for materiality and its lack. In a similar manner, historical, material, and political processes, as well as the routines of the school day, contribute to an atmosphere of boredom in a Berlin *Hauptschule* (Wellgraf 2018). The particular school is attended by the less privileged children in a part of the city characterised by increasing ruin and decay. The feeling of boredom grows in this environment of high unemployment where students experience education as having no future.

Political atmospheres of violence have equally been observed in the afterlife of environmental disasters and armed conflict in Kashmir, for example. These atmospheres have developed in the militarised, ecologically fragile borderlands of Pakistan and India, shaping the lives of people in the two mountain valleys described ethnographically by Omer Aijazi (2024). At the same time, Aijazi convincingly demonstrates how people overcome these violent atmospheres through everyday micro-practices such as sharing and fostering friendships with Allah. This situation compares very well to the ways in which narco-stories within the Mexican and U.S. governments' militarised war on drugs in a Mexican prostitution zone contribute to a violent atmosphere. Here, rumours about how violent narco-criminals are contributed to an affective atmosphere of terror and vulnerability. This atmosphere in turn rendered the public more passive and ultimately led sex workers and other local residents to stop working in the area and move away (Luna 2018).

While the study of atmospheres foregrounds the importance of affect, feelings, and emotions, it also matters for rational deliberation. At the ICC judging on Uganda's past conflicts, actors such as prosecutors, defence lawyers, victims, witnesses, and judges compete to influence the atmosphere in these 'legal spaces' (Bens 2022, Philoppopoulos Mihalopoulos 2015). They shape the atmosphere to establish specific historical truths about Uganda's violent past, 'moral truths' about who is responsible for this violence, the plausibility of both, the guilt or innocence of individuals, and the justice and legitimacy of whole legal systems, such as international criminal law. To influence these atmospheres, actors try to rearrange bodies in an 'affective arrangement' (Slaby et al. 2017), for example by bringing human and non-human witnesses into the courtroom (Bens 2022, 92–110). These atmospheres inside and outside the courtroom serve as 'affective

frames' for assessing the plausibility of narratives about the past, present, and future (Bens 2022, 71–91).

Beyond rationality, atmospheres help us create meaning. A comparative analysis of museum exhibitions has revealed how atmospheres make things appear to the visitor, as in the case of the exhibition *Villa Sovietica* which ran from 2009-2010 at the Ethnographic Museum of Geneva and focused on Soviet objects of everyday life. These objects can never simply be seen. Instead, they require movement of the perceiving body to reach them. This arrangement dissolves the Soviet nature of these objects and opens up other perspectives on them, focusing for example on their materiality, which is similar to that of other objects in the room (Bjerregaard 2015). Similary, it has been argued that the special atmosphere of live recordings of ritual mourning taking place in a Pakistan neighbourhood emanate the *mahaul*, a moral atmosphere of the ritual. When the consumers of Shia Islamic media listen to these live recordings, they contribute to the atmosphere of the public spaces in which they are played (Cooper 2022; 2024). *Mahaul*, here, is the Urdu articulation of atmosphere, a category of knowledge and experience, with interesting ethnographic stakes. Importantly, *Mahaul* is not only the affective background that gives meaning to things, but also a 'container' that holds and frames a situation, as well as the human and non-human entities within it (Cooper 2024).

Studying this interplay of atmosphere, rationality, and meaning-making shows that atmospheres are powerful social forces that shape collective and individual behaviour (Bille and Schwabe 2023). This is evident in the atmosphere created during the temple festival in a Badaga community in southern India (Heidemann 2021). The rituals manifest and reproduce the social order and the positions of groups within it—not unlike in Durkheim's effervescence, mentioned above. They are also experienced as a tremendous relief by devotees and visitors. In a similar manner, unmarked religiosity has been shown to exist in secular Ukrainian society before the war. Theorising this form of religiosity as an atmosphere allows us to show how, in moments of crisis, the religious atmosphere becomes an important resource for political projects, such as the popular uprising of 2013–14 (Wanner 2020).

Sporting events are prime example of how atmospheres connect, but studies can also show the ambiguous dynamics of such connections. The 'atmosphere' of the 2012 London Olympics, for example, embraced and fostered a nationalism that made it difficult, and at times impossible, to express a critical perspective, for example by pointing out that the Olympics were the most expensive security operation in recent British history (Stephens 2016, 183). The impact of atmospheres was particularly evident when, during the Covid-19 pandemic, fans were not allowed into football stadiums and the 22 players played in front of up to 80,000 empty seats. This atmosphere clearly affected the players' vitality. While many lacked motivation, some reported feeling more secure and relaxed (Gugutzer 2020b, Edensor 2015). These findings point to an open challenge in atmospheric studies: explaining how an atmosphere can affect different people in different ways.

While many studies of atmospheres focus on the relationships between humans and their built environments, non-human beings can become part of the atmosphere as well. Pigdogging—an Australian form of recreational hunting—relies on close collaboration between people and dogs to locate and catch wild pigs. Hunting with dogs extends human perception into the animals' extraordinary olfactory range. In this partnership, scent appears not as a mere trace but as atmosphere: an enveloping field that signals where pigs have moved, rested, or turned. The hunt also transforms the landscape's atmosphere: Human, canine, machine, and terrain become frictionally enmeshed in an embodied, unfolding practice that makes—and remakes—the landscape through a multisensory chase (Keil 2021, Schroer and Schmitt 2018b).

In a related manner, recent scholarship mobilises the idea that atmospheres are an underlying dimension of our connection to all entities we find in this world. Currently, climate and environmental changes are drastically altering these entities. As a result, the soil dries out, and the grasses and eventually the livestock die, which changes the overall environmental atmosphere (Schnegg 2025). To describe this atmosphere, Damara pastoralists in Namibia use the term *!Ūke-ai*, which translates as 'collective loneliness'. Similarly, in the Pontine Marshes in Italy, an atmosphere emerges from everyday agricultural practices, like burning reeds, and becomes part of the environment itself (Gruppuso 2018). The marshes are both extremely productive and a breeding ground for mosquitoes and malaria, the Italian contraction for *mal'aria* (*aria cattiva*, or 'bad air'). As such, the atmosphere connects to the environment (here also meteorologically), with breathing playing an important role in the process. Exploring the atmospheric links we create to other species and to post-humanist mixtures of life and technology remains a major research gap for the years to come.

How atmospheres can be analysed and studied

Given that atmospheres, by their very nature, defy precise description, they pose significant challenges for anthropological analysis. One of the first systematic attempts to address the methodological challenges that atmospheres raise came with the productive distinction between 'knowing in atmospheres', 'knowing about atmospheres', and 'knowing through atmospheres' (Sumartojo and Pink 2019). Thereby, 'knowing in atmospheres' names the researcher's in-situ attunement as an atmosphere unfolds: staying with its contingencies, rhythms, and micro-shifts through go-alongs, recordings, and sensory notes. 'Knowing about atmospheres' is a reconstructive, after-the-fact account that draws on interviews, elicitation, and traces to parse how spaces, media, bodies, and histories configured what was felt. Finally, 'knowing through atmospheres' treats concrete episodes as engines for concept-building, connecting atmospheric experience to broader social and material formations.

Understanding people's feelings as lying 'in the air' makes them more accessible (and less deterministic) than placing them in the inner psyche and the minds of our interlocutors. However, it poses another salient

challenge: how can we explain that individuals can sometimes experience the 'same' atmospheres quite differently? Some describe feeling in one way, while others feel differently. Some seem to be completely immersed in an atmosphere, while others merely notice it. Fully understanding and theorising this is still an outstanding theoretical challenge (Seyfert 2012, 29). Recently, the notion of 'resonance' has been proposed to explain such individual variation (Schnegg 2025). In this view, people have different ways of resonating with an atmosphere. At least two dimensions may influence how people experience or resonate with a given atmosphere: affective dispositions and symbols.

Affective dispositions can be defined as 'an individual's repository of affective traces of past relationships, events, and encounters. These function in the present as potentials to affect and be affected' (Mühlhoff 2019, 119). Experiencing atmospheres, like other experiences, leaves traces in the subject. Having experienced the exuberance of a festival, the collective excitement of a sports team's victory, or the wind before the long-awaited rain become part of an individual's disposition that can be triggered in certain situations. These dispositions are likely to shape how to (re)experience an atmosphere. However, other, even more personal experiences can become part of one's affective disposition and influence how the atmosphere is felt. Someone will respond differently to the atmosphere of a funeral if they have recently experienced death. Similarly, a herdsman who depends on cattle and rain will resonate differently with an atmosphere that announces rain than a teacher who does not depend on rain at all.

The study of symbols is equally important to understand whether and how atmospheres resonate with us. Atmospheres are, to a certain extent, pre-reflective, but they still require the interpretation of symbols which contribute to them. Consider walking past a group of noisy football fans, which might feel uncomfortable to some but perfectly normal to people who are used to it. At the same time, it may feel different again to those who can read the symbols on their skin and clothing, which in Germany, for example, sometimes refer to extreme right-wing movements. The symbols may thereby co-create an atmosphere, and they take on meaning through it (Bens 2022, 71–90).

How seriously one takes the role of affective dispositions and symbols in the study of atmospheres depends on the degree to which one believes that experiencing atmospheres is pre-reflective. The ethnographic record seems to show that atmospheres can not only be consciously curated, but also that people can 'learn' or 'be socialised' to resonate with particular atmospheres by becoming familiar with their symbols (Schnegg 2024, 2025).

Methodologically speaking, atmospheres can, first, be successfully studied through participant observation. This enables an ethnographic description of the situations and affective arrangements in which atmospheres emerge. It allows us to grasp in detail how human and non-human bodies relate to each other—what sounds, smells, lights, and other diverse components form the building blocks of a given situation. To explore their saliency, ethnographers can ask themselves which components of an

arrangement cannot be omitted without significantly changing the atmosphere: this could be a person, a landscape, a view, a smell, a story, and so on. They can also ask about the specific sequence of events that brought an atmosphere about, as people often only become aware of them when people, landscapes, views, smells, stories, or anything else shifted (Riedel 2019, Bens 2019).

These observations usually trigger atmospheric experiences that the readers themselves have had: affective dispositions evoke a feeling in which similar atmospheric experiences were embedded. Of course, there are several methodological problems with this, including the presumption that the audience of an ethnography has experienced similar atmospheres in order to imagine and reexperience them. For this reason, atmospheric descriptions should be complemented by interviews with participants in the field as well as by autoethnographic reflection.

A second promising method to study atmospheres are phenomenological interviews that explore how our research participants understand and feel in certain situations. Phenomenological interviews ask people to re-experience a particular situation (Schnegg 2023). They begin by eliciting a moment in which an atmosphere, such as eeriness, was felt. In a second step, the interviewees are asked to describe the situation in which something happened as precisely as possible and to mentally reposition themselves in this experience. In the final step, the ethnographer asks the interlocutor to recall the atmosphere and, to some extent, to re-experience it and describe how it felt, without using categories that are too abstract. This elicits an experiential description (Levy and Hollan 1998). In such interviews, ethnographers avoid naming and categorising the atmosphere in advance. Sometimes atmospheres may have names that are not easily translated into English, in which case interviewees can be invited to use non-English terms for them. While phenomenological interviews are typically conducted for moments that the anthropologist has not experienced, they can also be used to describe atmospheres that are known to all participants in the conversation, allowing the data to be triangulated with the descriptions made as described above.

A third method is autoethnography, i.e. describing how an individual themself has experienced a certain situation. Imagine the boredom of waiting with people for a bus, the sadness of a funeral, the excitement of a wedding. Researchers are affected by these atmospheres to varying degrees, and reflecting on these experiences can become a powerful methodological tool, as, for example, Fanon's work demonstrates. It makes the ethnographer's own affects and emotions a starting point and an 'epistemic resource' for analysis (Stodulka et al. 2018). Ethnographers may also experience liminal moments of change, when constellations in the situation change and atmospheres shift. These affective dissonances in the atmosphere can be an important starting point for ethnographic analysis. All three of these methods—participant observation, phenomenological interviews, and autoethnography—broadly align with approaches generally subsumed within sensory ethnography (Vannini 2024).

Conclusion

Atmospheres are the overall feeling of a situation that people experience individually and collectively. They are created by the affective relationships between the human and non-human, material and immaterial bodies that comprise a situation, yet an atmosphere is at the same time more than the sum of its parts. Anthropologists have begun to conceptualise this affective in-between. Most of them agree that atmospheres are situational, that they are formed by the affective forces emanating from bodies present, and that they encompass the sensory impressions left by these bodies, including appearances, smells, views, touches, sounds, lighting, and more. This entry has shown how atmospheres shape how things are perceived, how they become meaningful, how we feel, and what behaviours are appropriate and likely to happen next. As such, atmospheres have significant explanatory power that anthropology should continue to explore.

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