

Review: Philipp Brunner, Jörg Schweinitz, & Margrit Tröhler (eds.) (2012) *Filmische Atmosphären*. Marburg: Schüren Verlag.

Stephen Lowry

Stuttgart Media University

A collection of essays on ‘cinematic atmospheres’ could give reason to fear that they will be as nebulous as the object of study. Luckily, however, the book *Filmische Atmosphären* approaches the topic analytically, historically, and theoretically. The authors conceive of atmosphere, mood, or aura as the connection between the subjective experiences of the audience and objective factors in films or in the medium. They cover a wide range of topics, from the atmosphere of the movie theatre to films viewed on mobile phones or in public places, from early cinema to popular movies or experimental films, from historical accounts to theoretical approaches.

The publication takes its lead from a conference held in 2009 at the University of Zurich. Its aim was to introduce the topic of ‘atmosphere’ as a way of opening up a new theoretical field and of approaching well-known objects from an original perspective. These two directions also structure the book, which bundles diverse issues into complexes focusing on ‘dispositives, materials, and formats,’ ‘aesthetic and narrative effects,’ ‘experiments: film – art – world,’ and ‘atmospheric correspondences.’ While the first two sections are primarily theoretical, developing ideas of what atmosphere is and how it can be created through stylistic elements or the viewing situation, the last two look at specific forms – experimental films and a flipbook project.

The central impulse underlying most of the articles and linking them, despite the diversity of individual topics, is the search for a concept of atmosphere as a key to the interaction between audience and film, and to the cinema as an emotional form of experience. Thus atmosphere can be induced by stimuli including light, sound, colour, space, architecture or landscapes, as elements within the film or of the medium, be it the classical cinema or newer forms and/or media such as mobile devices. A point of reference for many of the 18 articles (all in German), particularly the more theoretical ones, is a notion of atmosphere developed by Gernot Böhme. He introduced this idea in an attempt to re-define aesthetic theory to centre on aspects of experience that are neither purely subjective nor purely objective, but result from the perception of reality and art. Accordingly, we attribute atmospheres to objects or environments as a way of describing how they elicit feelings. For Böhme, ‘Atmosphere’ is the primary object of perception, in regard to art as well as reality, and it includes an ‘affective impact’ on the viewer: ‘What is first and immediately perceived is neither

sensations nor shapes or objects or their constellations, as Gestalt psychology thought, but atmospheres, against whose background the analytic regard distinguishes such things as objects, forms, colours etc.’ (Böhme 1993: 125).

Hans J. Wulff builds on Böhme’s work to develop categories that can be used to analyse the elements of film that lead viewers to perceive a particular filmic atmosphere. These run from *mise-en-scène* to conventionalised situations or scenes, audio ‘soundscapes’ and music. The combination of such elements in ‘registers’ is particularly effective, according to Wulff. He uses this term in analogy to the registers of a pipe organ to refer to conventionalized groups of formal qualities or tonal values that create certain feelings (121-122). If effective, film style can induce the feeling of a ‘dense’ atmosphere, a trope that Britta Hartmann finds in film criticism from Bela Balázs and Lotte Eisner to today. She looks at reviews of Michael Mann’s movie *Collateral* (USA, 2004) as an example, providing a close reading of the film in order to show how lighting, colour, long takes, the photographic qualities of digital cinematography, sound design, music, tight shots in a taxi, and the cityscapes of Los Angeles at night combine to create an atmospheric quality that at times predominates over the story (125-140). Other articles in the section on aesthetic and narrative effects investigate techniques, motifs, and structures. Tereza Smid shows how pulling the image out of focus can create feelings about the fictional world and empathy with diffuse emotions of the characters. Franziska Heller investigates the motif of rain as an atmospheric element in the films *Dark Water* (Walter Salles, USA, 2005), *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, USA, 1960), *War of the Worlds* (Steven Spielberg, USA, 2005), and *Stalker* (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR, 1979) (159-176), while Michael Wedel analyses the basic structures in Tom Tykwer’s films to isolate ‘rhythm,’ ‘resonance,’ and ‘recursivity’ as basic elements of their atmospheres (177-189).

The section on ‘dispositives, materials, and formats’ covers a wide range from film stock through abstract concepts that draw on 1970s theories of cinema as an ‘apparatus’ or ‘dispositive’. This still rather opaque term is used to emphasise the *relationship* between audience and medium. Thus the cinema is not just a place to show films, but its architecture plays a role in the atmosphere as well, and the same movie can induce different feelings if viewed on different screens.

A historical description of ‘atmosphere’ – in a literal sense – is to be found in Anne Paech’s piece on the smell of movie theatres, including everything from gimmicks like Odorama to the stench of popcorn, beer, smoke, the audience itself, or perfumes sprayed during intermission (25-38). The material quality of film as an influence on feelings is the topic of articles by Jörg Schweinitz, who looks at the perceptual effects of viewing historical movies (39-52), and Barbara Flückiger, who examines mixed materials such as the use of a video look in films (73-90). Margrit Tröhler

focuses on the effects of three ‘dispositives’ – the living room, the museum, and the cinema – and how they shape the viewing atmosphere (53-71), while Alexandra Schneider questions how mobile devices have historically changed reception, including the haptic quality of using a smartphone to watch a movie (91-106).

The third section of the book deals with experimental films and might seem unbalanced in regard to the volume as a whole, being given almost as much space as the first two sections. However, the articles show that experimental films have specific strategies to create feelings of atmosphere or mood, even if they differ from the more widespread ones of popular movies. The articles – too broad in range to discuss in detail here – cover experimental films from 1910 through to the 1980s. The final section of the book deals with an artist’s flipbook project and seems tacked on, hardly relevant to cinema or atmosphere.

The breadth of perspectives is the strength of the book, which for the first time applies the concept of atmosphere to central issues of film theory as well as a wide range of historical examples. Searching for the sources of atmosphere provides a new take on familiar objects, and beyond that the book shows that even such an apparently fuzzy concept can be a productive starting point for thinking about the relationship between audience experience and cinema or film.

Bibliography

Böhme, G. (1993) ‘Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics’, *Thesis Eleven*, 36, pp. 113-126.