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ATMOSPHERE AS THE FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPT OF A NEW AESTHETICS¹

Gernot Böhme

1. ATMOSPHERE

The expression “atmosphere” is not foreign to aesthetic discourse. On the contrary it occurs frequently, almost of necessity in speeches at the opening of exhibitions, in art catalogues and in eulogies in the form of references to the powerful atmosphere of a work, to atmospheric effect or a rather atmospheric mode of presentation. One has the impression that “atmosphere” is meant to indicate something indeterminate, difficult to express, even if it is only in order to hide the speaker’s own speechlessness. It is almost like Adorno’s “more”, which also points in evocative fashion to something beyond rational explanation and with an emphasis which suggests that only there is the essential, the aesthetically relevant to be found.

This use of the word “atmosphere” in aesthetic texts, oscillating between embarrassment and emphasis, corresponds to its use in political discourse. Here too everything apparently depends on the atmosphere in which something occurs and where the improvement of the political atmosphere is the most important thing. On the other hand, the report that negotiations took place “in a good atmosphere” or led to an improvement of the atmosphere is only the euphemistic version of the fact that nothing resulted from a meeting. This vague use of the expression atmosphere in aesthetic and political discourse derives from a use in everyday speech which is in many respects much more exact. Here the expression “atmospheric” is applied to persons, spaces and to nature. Thus one speaks of the serene atmosphere of a spring morning or the homely atmosphere of a garden. On entering a room one can feel oneself enveloped by a friendly atmosphere or caught up in a tense atmosphere. We can say of a person that s/he radiates an atmosphere which implies

respect, of a man or a woman that an erotic atmosphere surrounds them. Here too atmosphere indicates something that is in a certain sense indeterminate, diffuse but precisely not indeterminate in relation to its character. On the contrary, we have at our disposal a rich vocabulary with which to characterize atmospheres, that is, serene, melancholic, oppressive, uplifting, commanding, inviting, erotic etc. Atmospheres are indeterminate above all as regards their ontological status. We are not sure whether we should attribute them to the objects or environments from which they proceed or to the subjects who experience them. We are also unsure where they are. They seem to fill the space with a certain tone of feeling like a haze.

The frequent, rather embarrassed use of the expression atmosphere in aesthetic discourse leads one to conclude that it refers to something which is aesthetically relevant but whose elaboration and articulation remains to be worked out. As my introductory remarks suggest, the introduction of “atmosphere” as a concept into aesthetics should link up with the everyday distinctions between atmospheres of different character. Atmosphere can only become a concept, however, if we succeed in accounting for the peculiar intermediary status of atmospheres between subject and object.

2. A NEW AESTHETICS

I first made the call for a new aesthetics² in my book *Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik* (1989). This call has been misunderstood as fundamental ecology³ or as organicism.⁴ It is true that one aim of my book was the introduction of aesthetic viewpoints into ecology. It is true that in this book what we perceive is also called a form of nourishment, and that aesthetic nature remains our goal.⁵ The call, however, goes much further. I quoted Goethe in order to recall that “it makes a great difference from which side one approaches a body of knowledge, a science, through which gate one gains access”. Aesthetics opens up as a completely different field if it is approached from ecology, something completely different from its tradition of presentation from Kant up to Adorno and Lyotard. The quest for an aesthetics of nature as an aesthetic theory of nature requires that we reformulate the theme of aesthetics as such. The new resulting aesthetics is concerned with the relation between environmental qualities and human states. This “and”, this in-between, by means of which environmental qualities and states are related, is atmosphere. What is new in this new aesthetics can be formulated in threefold form.

(a) The old aesthetics is essentially a judgmental aesthetics, that is, it is concerned not so much with experience, especially sensuous experience—as the expression “aesthetics” in its derivation from the Greek would suggest—as with judgments, discussion, conversation. It may have been the case that the question of taste and individual affective participation (under the title “faculty

of approval") in a work of art or in nature provided the original motive for aesthetics. With Kant at the latest, however, it became a question of judgment, that is, the question of the justification for a positive or negative response to something. Since then the social function of aesthetic theory has been to facilitate conversation about works of art. It supplies the vocabulary for art history and art criticism, for the speeches at exhibitions and prize givings and for essays in catalogues. Sensuousness and nature have in this fashion disappeared from aesthetics.

(b) The central place of judgment in aesthetics and in its orientation to communication led to a dominance of language and to the present dominance of semiotics in aesthetic theory. This situation gives literature precedence over the other kinds of art, which are also interpreted by means of the schema of language and communication. Aesthetics can be presented under the general heading "languages of art".⁶ It is not, however, self-evident that an artist intends to communicate something to a possible recipient or observer. Neither is it self-evident that a work of art is a sign, insofar as a sign always refers to something other than itself, that is, its meaning. Not every work of art has a meaning. On the contrary, it is necessary to remember that a work of art is first of all itself something, which possesses its own reality. This can be seen in the contortions semiotics engages in with the concept of the "iconic sign" in order to be able to subsume paintings under the sign. Iconic signs do not reproduce the object but "some conditions of the perception of the object".⁷ Through this use a painting of Mr Smith is to be understood as a sign for Mr Smith, even though it is in a certain way Mr Smith: "That is Mr Smith" is the answer to the question "Who is that?". Thus, for example, Eco declares "Mona Lisa" to be an iconic sign for Mona Lisa. Apart from the fact that the relation of the picture "Mona Lisa" to a person Mona Lisa is highly questionable, as Gombrich has shown in his essay on the portrait,⁸ nobody understands by "Mona Lisa" the person Mona Lisa but the painting and it is this which is experienced. The painting does not refer to its meaning as a sign (a meaning which could only be thought); the painting is in a certain sense what it itself represents, that is, the represented is present in and through the painting. Of course, we can also read and interpret such a painting but this means cutting out or even denying the experience of the presence of the represented, namely the atmosphere of the painting.⁹

(c) After its original orientation aesthetics very quickly became a theory of the arts and of the work of art. This, together with aesthetics' social function as background knowledge for art criticism, led to a strongly normative orientation: it was not a question of art but of real, true, high art, of the authentic work of art, the work of art of distinction. Although aestheticians were fully aware that aesthetic work is a much broader phenomenon, it was registered at best only marginally and disdainfully, namely as mere beautification, as craftsmanship, as kitsch, as useful or applied art. All aesthetic production was seen from the perspective of art and its measure. Walter Benjamin intro-

duced a change of perspective with his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproduction".¹⁰ On the one hand the possibility of Pop Art was envisaged before it actually existed, while on the other the aestheticization of the life world was thematized as a serious phenomenon under the formula of the "aestheticization of politics". The primary task of aesthetics is no longer to determine what art is and to provide means for art criticism. Rather the theme of aesthetics is now the full range of aesthetic work, which is defined generally as the production of atmospheres and thus extends from cosmetics, advertising, interior decoration, stage sets to art in the narrower sense. Autonomous art is understood in this context as only a special form of aesthetic work, which also has its social function, namely the mediation of the encounter and response to atmospheres in situations (museums, exhibitions) set apart from action contexts.

The new aesthetics is thus as regards the producers a general theory of aesthetic work, understood as the production of atmospheres. As regards reception it is a theory of perception in the full sense of the term, in which perception is understood as the experience of the presence of persons, objects and environments.

3. BENJAMIN'S AURA

"Atmosphere" is an expression which occurs frequently in aesthetic discourse but is not up to now a concept of aesthetic theory. Nevertheless there is a concept which is, so to speak, its substitute representative in theory—the concept of aura, introduced by Benjamin in his essay "The Work of Art". Benjamin sought through the concept of aura to determine that atmosphere of distance and respect surrounding original works of art. He hoped thereby to be able to indicate the difference between an original and its reproductions and thought that he could define a general development of art through the loss of aura, which was brought about by the introduction of technical means of reproduction into art production. In fact the artistic avantgarde sought to expel the aura of art through the reunion of art and life. Duchamp's ready made, Brecht's disillusioning of the theatre and the opening up of art to Pop Art are examples. They failed or their outcome is at least paradoxical. The very fact that Duchamp declared a ready made to be a work of art lent it aura and now his ready made display in museums as much distance and command the same respect as a sculpture by Veit Stoss. The avantgarde did not succeed in discarding aura like a coat, leaving behind them the sacred halls of art for life. What they did succeed in doing was to thematize the aura of artworks, their halo, their atmosphere, their nimbus. And this made it clear that what makes a work an artwork cannot be grasped solely through its concrete qualities. But what exceeds them, this "more", the aura, remained completely undeter-

mined. "Aura" signifies as it were atmosphere as such, the empty characterless envelope of its presence.

Nevertheless, it is worth holding on to what is already implied in Benjamin's concept of aura for the development of the concept of atmosphere as a fundamental concept of aesthetics. The genesis of aura is paradoxical; Benjamin introduced it to characterize works of art as such. He derives it, however, from a concept of nature. I quote the whole passage on account of the special significance of this genesis:

What is aura actually? A strange tissue of space and time: unique appearance of distance, however near it may be. Resting on a summer evening and following a mountain chain on the horizon or a branch, which throws its shadow on the person at rest—that is to breathe the aura of these mountains or this branch. With this definition it is easy to comprehend the particular social determination of the present decay of aura . . .¹¹

When Walter Benjamin speaks of the "appearance" of distance, he does not mean that distance appears, rather he is speaking of the phenomenon of distance which can also be discerned in things which are close. This is the unattainability and distance which is discernible in works of art. He has already introduced the "unique" and commits a *petitio principii*, since it is precisely through aura that the uniqueness of artworks is to manifest itself. The aura itself is not unique, it is repeatable. Let us now consider the experience from which the concept of aura derives. The examples show that Benjamin posits for the experience of aura firstly a certain natural impression or mood as background and secondly a certain receptivity in the observer. Aura appears in the situation of ease, that is, observation, in a physically relaxed and workfree situation. Following Hermann Schmitz we could say that "summer afternoon" and "resting"—Benjamin's example suggests that he observes mountain chain and branch lying on his back—imply a bodily tendency to privatize experience. The aura can now appear in relation to a distant mountain chain, the horizon or a branch. It appears in natural objects. Aura proceeds from them, if the observer lets them and himself be, that is, refrains from an active intervention in the world. And aura is clearly something which flows forth spatially, almost something like a breath or a haze—precisely an atmosphere. Benjamin says that one "breathes" the aura. This breathing means that it is absorbed bodily, that it enters the bodily economy of tension and expansion, that one allows this atmosphere to permeate the self. Precisely this dimension of naturalness and corporeality in the experience of aura disappears in Benjamin's further use of the expression, although in this first version his exemplary presentation of the experience of aura serves as its definition.

We retain the following: something like aura according to Benjamin is perceptible not only in art products or original works. To perceive aura is

to absorb it into one's own bodily state of being. What is perceived is an indeterminate spatially extended quality of feeling. These considerations serve to prepare us for the elaboration of the concept of atmosphere in the framework of Hermann Schmitz's philosophy of the body.

4. THE CONCEPT OF ATMOSPHERE IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF HERMANN SCHMITZ

When we stated above that "atmosphere" is used as an expression for something vague, this does not necessarily mean that the meaning of this expression is itself vague. Admittedly it is difficult, owing to the peculiar intermediary position of the phenomenon between subject and object, to determine the status of atmospheres and thereby transform the everyday use of atmospheres into a legitimate concept. In raising the claim that atmosphere constitutes the fundamental concept of a new aesthetics, it is not necessary to establish the legitimacy of this concept, since Hermann Schmitz's philosophy of the body already provides an elaboration of the concept of atmospheres. Schmitz's concept of atmospheres has a precursor in Ludwig Klages's idea of the "reality of images". In his early work *Vom kosmogonischen Eros* Klages set out to show that appearances (images) possess in relation to their sources a relatively independent reality and power of influence. This thesis of the relative independence of images derives in part from the disappointing experience that the physiognomy of a person can hold a promise which is not fulfilled.¹² Klages thus conceives an "eros of distance", which unlike the Platonic Eros does not desire closeness and possession but keeps its distance and is fulfilled by contemplative participation in the beautiful. Images in this sense have reality in that they can take possession of a soul. Klages developed these insights systematically in his *Grundlegung der Wissenschaft vom Ausdruck*¹³ (as well as in *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele*). What was termed the reality of images is now treated under the headings expression, appearance, character and essence. It is important to note here that these expressive qualities, especially those of living being, are accorded a kind of self-activity. "The expression of a state of being is composed in such a way that its appearance can call forth the [corresponding] state".¹⁴ Expressive appearances are powers of feeling and are therefore called at times daemons or even souls. The perceiving soul by contrast has a passive role: perception is affective sympathy. In his concept of atmosphere Schmitz takes over two aspects of Klages's idea of the reality of images: on the one hand their relative independence in relation to things, and on the other their role as active instances of feeling which press in from outside the affective power.

Schmitz's concept of atmosphere uncouples the phenomenon in question even further from things: as he no longer speaks of images, physiognomy plays no role. In its place he develops the spatial character of atmospheres.

Atmospheres are always spatially “without borders, disseminated and yet without place that is, not localizable”. They are affective powers of feeling, spatial bearers of moods.

Schmitz introduces atmospheres phenomenologically, that is, not through definition but through reference to everyday experiences such as those indicated above, the experience of a strained atmosphere in a room, of an oppressive thundery atmosphere, or of the serene atmosphere of a garden. The legitimacy of this use of atmospheres derives for Schmitz on the one hand from the phenomenological method which recognizes what is indisputably given in experience as real, and on the other hand from the context of his philosophy of the body. His philosophy of the body removes—at least partially—the insecure status of atmospheres, which we registered above against the background of the subject/object dichotomy. According to this dichotomy, atmospheres, if we accept their relative or complete independence from objects, must belong to the subject. And in fact this is what happens when we regard the serenity of a valley or the melancholy of an evening as projections, that is, as the projection of moods, understood as internal psychic states. This conception is certainly counter-phenomenal in cases where the serenity of the valley or the melancholy of the evening strike us when we are in a quite different mood and we find ourselves seized by these atmospheres and even correspondingly changed. Within the frame of his historical anthropology Schmitz shows that the projection thesis supposes a foregoing introjection. He shows how early in our culture, that is, in the Homeric period, feelings were experienced as something “outside”, as forces which actively intrude into the human body. (This is Schmitz’s reconstruction of the Greek world of the gods.) Against this background something like the soul appears as a “counter-phenomenal construction”. What is phenomenally given, that is, sensed, is the human body in its economy of tension and expansion and in its affectivity which manifests itself in bodily impulses. Schmitz can thus define feelings as follows: they are “unlocalized, poured forth atmospheres . . . which visit (haunt) the body which receives them . . . affectively, which takes the form of . . . emotion”.¹⁵

We can see here the possibility of a new aesthetics which overcomes not only the intellectualism of classical aesthetics but also its restriction to art and to phenomena of communication. Atmospheres are evidently what are experienced in bodily presence in relation to persons and things or in spaces. We also find in Schmitz the beginnings of an aesthetics, but one which draws only hesitantly on the potential of the concept of atmosphere. The initial steps are to be found in volume III, 4 of his system of philosophy. He remains traditional in that he does not abandon the restriction of aesthetics to art. Aesthetics appears as the subparagraph of the article art: the aesthetic sphere presupposes an “aesthetic attitude”, that is, an attitude which permits the distanced influence of atmospheres. This attitude presupposes on the one hand the cultivation of the aesthetic subject, and on the other hand the “artistic

setting”, that is, gallery and museum outside the sphere of action. Schmitz’s approach suffers above all from the fact that he credits atmospheres with too great an independence from things. They float free like gods and have as such nothing to do with things, let alone being their product. At most objects can capture atmospheres, which then adhere to them as a nimbus. In fact (for Schmitz) the independence of atmospheres is so great and the idea that atmospheres proceed from things so distant that he regards things as aesthetic creations (*Gebilde*) if atmospheres impress their stamp upon them. He then defines aesthetic creations as follows: “A sensuous object of a lower degree (for example, thing, sound, scent, colour) I designate *aesthetic creations* if in this way they absorb into themselves atmospheres, which are objective feelings, in a quasi-corporeal fashion and thereby indicate a corporeal emotion through them”.¹⁶ The impression or colouring of a thing through atmospheres must be interpreted according to Schmitz by means of the classical subjectivist “as if—formula”. That is to say, we designate a valley as serene because it appears as if it is imbued with serenity.

The strength of Schmitz’s approach, which is a quasi-aesthetics of reception, in that he can account for perception in the full sense as affective impression by atmospheres, is countered by its weakness in terms of an aesthetics of production. His conception of atmospheres rules out the possibility that they could be produced by qualities of things. This means that the whole sphere of aesthetic work is excluded from the perspective of his approach.

5. THE THING AND ITS ECSTASIES

In order to legitimate the idea of atmospheres and overcome their ontological unlocalizability, it is necessary to liberate them from the subjective-objective dichotomy. Schmitz’s philosophy of the body shows that profound changes of thought are required on the side of the subject. We must abandon the idea of the soul in order to undo the “introjection of feelings”, and the human being must be conceived essentially as body, such that his/her self-givenness and sense of self is originally spatial: to be bodily self-aware means at the same time the awareness of my state of being in an environment, how I feel here.

The same is now required for the object side. The difficulty here of forming a legitimate concept of atmospheres lies in the classical ontology of the thing, which cannot be fully developed and analyzed here. The decisive point is this: the qualities of a thing are thought of as “determinations”. The form, colour, even the smell of a thing is thought of as that which distinguishes it, separates it off from outside and gives it its internal unity. In short: the thing is usually conceived in terms of its closure. It is extremely rare that a philosopher emphasizes, as Isaac Newton for instance does, that perceptibility belongs essentially to the thing. Ontological counter-conceptions, such as that of Jakob Böhme, who conceives of things according to the model of a

musical instrument, exist only as a crypto-tradition. The dominant conception on the contrary is that formulated by Kant, that it is possible to *think* a thing with all its determinations and then pose the question whether this completely determined thing actually exists. It is obvious what a hostile hindrance such a way of thinking presents for aesthetics. A thing is in this view what it is, independent of its existence, which is ascribed to it ultimately by the cognitive subject, who “posits” the thing. Let me illustrate. If we say for example: a cup is blue, then we think of a thing which is determined by the colour blue which distinguishes it from other things. This colour is something which the cup “has”. In addition to its blueness we can also ask whether such a cup exists. Its existence is then determined through a localization in space and time. The blueness of the cup, however, can be thought of in quite another way, namely as the way, or better, a way, in which the cup is present in space and makes its presence perceptible. The blueness of the cup is then thought of not as something which is restricted in some way to the cup and adheres to it, but on the contrary as something which radiates out to the environment of the cup, colouring or “tincturing” in a certain way this environment, as Jakob Böhme would say. The existence of the cup is already contained in this conception of the quality “blue”, since the blueness is a way of the cup being there, an articulation of its presence, the way or manner of its presence. In this way the thing is not thought of in terms of its difference from other things, its separation and unity, but in the ways in which it goes forth from itself. I have introduced for these ways of going forth the expression “the ecstasies of the thing”.

It should not cause difficulty to think of colours, smells, and how a thing is tuned as ecstasies. This is already apparent in the fact that in the classical subject-object dichotomy they are designated as “secondary qualities”, that is, as qualities which do not in themselves belong to the thing except in relation to a subject. What is also required, however, is to think of so-called primary qualities such as extension and form as ecstasies. In the classical ontology of the thing form is thought of as something limiting and enclosing, as that which encloses inwardly the volume of the thing and outwardly limits it. The form of a thing, however, also exerts an external effect. It radiates as it were into the environment, takes away the homogeneity of the surrounding space and fills it with tensions and suggestions of movement. In the classical ontology the property of a thing was thought to be its occupation of a specific space and its resistance to other things entering this space. The extension and volume of a thing, however, are also externally perceptible; they give the space of its presence weight and orientation. The volume, that is, the voluminosity of a thing is the power of its presence in space.

On the basis of an ontology of the thing changed in this fashion, it is possible to conceive atmospheres in a meaningful way. They are spaces insofar as they are “tinctured” through the presence of things, of persons or environmental constellations, that is, through their ecstasies. They are themselves spheres

of the presence of something, their reality in space. As opposed to Schmitz's approach, atmospheres are thus conceived not as free floating but on the contrary as something that proceeds from and is created by things, persons or their constellations. Conceived in this fashion, atmospheres are neither something objective, that is, qualities possessed by things, and yet they are something thinglike, belonging to the thing in that things articulate their presence through qualities—conceived as ecstasies. Nor are atmospheres something subjective, for example, determinations of a psychic state. And yet they are subjectlike, belong to subjects in that they are sensed in bodily presence by human beings and this sensing is at the same time a bodily state of being of subjects in space.

It is immediately evident that this changed ontology of the thing is favourable to aesthetic theory, that it amounts to its liberation. Aesthetic work in all its dimensions comes into view. Even in the narrower sphere of art, for example, the fine arts, one can see that precisely speaking an artist is not concerned with giving a thing—whether a block of marble or a canvas—certain qualities, formed or coloured in such and such a fashion, but in allowing it to go forth from itself in a certain fashion and thereby make the presence of something perceptible.

6. THE MAKING OF ATMOSPHERES

Atmosphere designates both the fundamental concept of a new aesthetics and its central object of cognition. Atmosphere is the common reality of the perceiver and the perceived. It is the reality of the perceived as the sphere of its presence and the reality of the perceiver, insofar as in sensing the atmosphere s/he is bodily present in a certain way. This synthetic function of atmosphere is at the same time the legitimation of the particular forms of speech in which an evening is called melancholy or a garden serene. If we consider it more exactly, such a manner of speech is as legitimate as calling a leaf green. A leaf does have the objective property of being green. A leaf equally can only be called green insofar as it shares a reality with a perceiver. Strictly speaking, expressions such as “serene” or “green” refer to this common reality, which can be named either from the side of the object or from the side of the perceiver. A valley is thus not called serene because it is in some way similar to a cheerful person but because the atmosphere which it radiates is serene and can put this person into a serene mood.

This is an example of how the concept of atmosphere can clarify relations and render intelligible manners of speech. But what do we know about atmospheres? Classical aesthetics dealt practically only with three or four atmospheres, for example, the beautiful, the sublime—and then the characterless atmosphere or “atmosphere as such”, aura. That these themes involve a question of atmospheres was, of course, not clear and many investigations will have to be read again or rewritten. Above all the extraordinary limitation of

the previous aesthetics now becomes evident, since there are in fact many more atmospheres, not to say infinitely many: serene, serious, terrifying, oppressive, the atmosphere of dread, of power, of the saint and the reprobate. The multiplicity of the linguistic expressions which are at our disposal indicate that a much more complex knowledge of atmospheres exists than aesthetic theory suggests. In particular we may presume an extraordinarily rich wealth of knowledge of atmospheres in the practical knowledge of aesthetic workers. This knowledge must be able to give us insight into the connexion between the concrete properties of objects (everyday objects, art works, natural elements) and the atmosphere which they radiate. This perspective corresponds approximately with the question in classical aesthetics as to how the concrete properties of a thing are connected with its beauty, except that now the concrete properties are read as the ecstasies of the thing and beauty as the manner of its presence. Aesthetic work consists of giving things, environments or also the human being such properties from which something can proceed. That is, it is a question of "making" atmospheres through work on an object. We find this kind of work everywhere. It is divided into many professional branches and as a whole furthers the increasing aestheticization of reality. If we enumerate the different branches, we can see that they make up a large part of all social work. They include: design, stage sets, advertising, the production of musical atmospheres (acoustic furnishing), cosmetics, interior design—as well, of course, as the whole sphere of art proper. If we examine these areas in order to apply their accumulated knowledge fruitfully to aesthetic theory, it becomes apparent that this knowledge is in general implicit, tacit knowledge. This is explained in part by the fact that craft capacities are involved, which can scarcely be passed on by word but require the master's demonstration to the pupil. In part, however, the lack of explicit knowledge is also ideologically as a result of aesthetic theories. Although in practice something completely different is done, it is understood as giving certain things and materials certain properties. Occasionally however, one finds an explicit knowledge that aesthetic work consists in the production of atmospheres.

Since knowledge about the production of atmospheres is very seldom explicit and in addition distorted by the subject-object dichotomy, I will go back to a classic example. I am referring to the theory of garden art, more exactly the English landscape garden or park, as it is presented in the five volume work of Hirschfeld.¹⁷ Here we find explicitly indicated how "scenes" of a certain quality of feeling can be produced through the choice of objects, colours, sounds, etc. It is interesting to note the closeness to the language of stage settings. By scenes Hirschfeld means natural arrangements in which a certain atmosphere prevails such as serene, heroic, gently melancholic or serious.

Hirschfeld presents, for instance, the gently melancholic scene in such a manner that it becomes clear how this atmosphere can be produced: "The gently melancholy locality is formed by blocking off all vistas; through depths

and depressions; through thick bushes and thickets, often already through mere groups of (closely planted) thickly leaved trees, whose tops are swayed by a hollow sound; through still or dully murmuring waters, whose view is hidden; through foliage of a dark or blackish green; through low hanging leaves and widespread shadow; through the absence of everything which could announce life and activity. In such a locality light only penetrates in order to protect the influence of darkness from a mournful or frightful aspect. Stillness and isolation have their home here. A bird which flutters around in cheerless fashion, a wood pigeon which coos in the hollow top of a leafless oak, and a lost nightingale which laments its solitary sorrows—are sufficient to complete the scene”.¹⁸

Hirschfeld indicates clearly enough the different elements through whose interaction the gently melancholy atmosphere is produced: seclusion and stillness; if there is water, it must be slow moving or even almost motionless; the locality must be shady, light only sparse in order to prevent a complete loss of mood; the colours dark—Hirschfeld speaks of a blackish green. Other parts of his book, which are more concerned with means, are even clearer. Thus, for instance, in the chapter on water: “The darkness by contrast, which lies on ponds and other still waters, spreads melancholy and sadness. Deep, silent water, darkened by reeds and overhanging bushes, which is not brightened even by sunlight, is very suitable for benches dedicated to these feelings, for hermitages, for urns and monuments which sanctify the friendship of departed spirits”. Similarly in the section on woodland he writes: “If the wood consists of old trees reaching up to the clouds and of a thick and very dark foliage, then its character will be serious with a certain solemn dignity which calls forth a kind of respect. Feelings of peace possess the soul and involuntarily cause it to be carried away by a calm contemplation and gentle amazement”.¹⁹ The knowledge of the landscape gardener thus consists according to Hirschfeld in knowing by means of what elements the character of a locality is produced. Such elements are water, light and shade, colour, trees, hills, stones and rocks, and finally also buildings. Hirschfeld thus recommends the placing of urns, monuments or hermitages in the gently melancholic locality.

The question naturally poses itself as to what role these elements play in the production of the atmosphere as a whole. It is not sufficient to point out that the whole is more than the parts. With garden art we find ourselves in a certain way in reality itself. The same atmospheres, however, can also be produced through words or through paintings. The particular quality of a story, whether read or heard, lies in the fact that it not only communicates to us that a certain atmosphere prevailed somewhere else but that it conjures up this atmosphere itself. Similarly, paintings which depict a melancholy scene are not just signs for this scene but produce this scene itself. We could thus surmise that the components of a locality enumerated by Hirschfeld are not composed in just any fashion but that they conjure up an atmosphere.

Two aesthetic forms of production as different as that of the garden archi-

tect and the writer demonstrate a high degree of consciousness as regards the means by which particular atmospheres can be produced. A comprehensive investigation of the whole spectrum from stage designer to cosmetician would certainly throw new light on aesthetic objects, including works of art. Their “properties” would be understood as conditions of their atmospheric effect.

7. CONCLUSION

The new aesthetics is first of all what its name states, namely a general theory of perception. The concept of perception is liberated from its reduction to information processing, provision of data or (re)cognition of a situation. Perception includes the affective impact of the observed, the “reality of images”, corporeality. Perception is basically the manner in which one is bodily present for something or someone or one’s bodily state in an environment. The primary “object” of perception is atmospheres. 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.

The new aesthetics is a response to the progressive aestheticization of reality. An aesthetics, which is a theory of art or of the work of art, is completely inadequate to this task. Moreover, since it is confined to a sphere separated from action and to educated elites, it hides the fact that aesthetics represents a real social power. There are aesthetic needs and an aesthetic supply. There is, of course, aesthetic pleasure but there is also aesthetic manipulation. To the aesthetics of the work of art we can now add with equal right the aesthetics of everyday life, the aesthetics of commodities and a political aesthetics. General aesthetics has the task of making this broad range of aesthetic reality transparent and articulatable.

Translated by David Roberts

Notes

1. A lecture given in Wuppertal, June 1991 and in Basel, December 1991.
2. G. Böhme, *Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik* (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1985).
3. Review by J. Früchtel in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (14 November 1989).
4. M. Seel, *Eine Ästhetik der Natur* (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1991).
5. I refer to the cooperation with my brother Hartmut Böhme. See my interim report of 1989 “An Aesthetic Theory of Nature”, *Thesis Eleven* 32 (1992), pp. 90–102 and H. Böhme, “Aussichten einer ästhetischen Theorie der Natur” in H. G. Haberl (ed.), *Entdecken verdecken* (Graz, Droschl, 1991).
6. N. Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1968).
7. U. Eco, *Einführung in die Semiotik* (Munich, Frankfurt, 1972), p. 207.

8. E. Gombrich, "Maske und Gesicht" in E. Gombrich, A. Hochburg and M. Plack, *Kunst, Wahrnehmung, Wirklichkeit* (4th edition, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1989), pp. 10ff.
9. This denial is clearly evident in Eco's discussion of the advertising photo of a beer glass. "In reality", he writes, "when I see a glass of beer I perceive beer glass and coolness but I do not feel them. I feel rather visual stimuli, colours, spatial relations, the play of light" (ibid., p. 201). In this analysis the physiology of the senses gets in the way of the phenomenology of perception. The effect, in particular the effect of the advert, consists precisely in the fact that I really do feel "coolness" at the sight of the beer and that it is not simply a "period structure" which enables me to think of "icecold beer in a glass".
10. W. Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (11th edition, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1979).
11. W. Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit", 1st version (my translation), *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1991), p. I.2, 440.
12. L. Klages, *Vom kosmogonischen Eros* (7th edition, Bonn, Bouvier, 1972), p. 93.
13. L. Klages, *Grundlegung der Wissenschaft vom Ausdruck* (9th edition, Bonn, Bouvier, 1970).
14. L. Klages, op. cit., p. 72.
15. H. Schmitz, *System der Philosophie* vol. III (Bonn, Bouvier, 1964ff), pp. 2, 343.
16. Schmitz, *System der Philosophie* (Bonn, Bouvier, 1964ff), vol. III, 2, p. 343.
17. C. C. L. Hirschfeld, *Theorie der Gartenkunst* (5 vol., Leipzig, Weidmanns Erben und Reich, 1779–1785).
18. Hirschfeld, op. cit. (vol. I), p. 211.
19. Hirschfeld, op. cit. (vol. I), pp. 200 and 198ff.