Phenomenology of atmospheres. The felt meanings of clinical encounters

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Summary

Operational criteria and structured interviews had a positive impact on psychiatry as they contributed to cleanse the profoundly unscientific and irrational attitude towards systematic assessment and diagnosis. The technical approach to the psychiatric interview focuses on the search for specific symptoms. Yet, it is blind to the essential aspects of the clinical encounter. Subjective and intersubjective features are dismissed even if they have psychopathological meaning. It is this same objectifying intention that compromises the attention needed to notice the aesthetic properties of the clinical encounter and restricts linguistic contexts risking tautology. Atmospheres are examples of such phenomena that should be salvaged to allow in-depth psychopathological assessment. In this paper, we focus on a phenomenological definition of '"atmospheres". First, we review the ontological polarities that make this phenomenon so difficult to be grasped conceptually. Next, we describe the clinical encounter as an aesthetic experience and explicate the relevance of the role of tact in sensing atmospheres and the role of metaphors in articulating them. Herein resides the need to bring aesthetics into the clinical encounter: one must dodge scientific rationalism in order to preserve the phenomenological understanding and achieve an understanding of the meaning of a clinical situation as felt, rather than simply assessing objective signs and symptoms.

Key words

Aesthetics • Atmosphere • Diagnosis • Interview • Phenomenology • Understanding

"What was it – I paused to think – what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion that while, beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression".

Edgar Poe, The Fall Of The House Of Usher

Introduction

The concept of atmosphere has been extensively addressed in philosophy, particularly in the field of aesthetics. Until recently, its use in psychiatry has been restricted to some heretic contributions that have few implications in today's diagnostic systems and interview methods. These only assess psychopathological elements in the third person perspective, which has been shown to be insufficient in clarifying the personal meaning of being mentally ill. Subjective and intersubjective features are dismissed in standard psychiatric interviewing even if they seem to have psychopathological meaning. Atmospheres are examples of such phenomena that should be salvaged to allow in-depth psychopathological assessment. The technical approach to psychiatric interviewing is based on a rationalistic paradigm that is classificatory and explanative in nature as its main aims are to establish diagnosis and look for the causes of a given disordered mental state. The conceptual haziness that clouds the idea of atmosphere is claimed as good enough reason for its exclusion from scientific paradigms and clinical diagnosis. Yet, the power to appreciate atmospheres may disclose territories of psychopathological understanding that would otherwise remain off-limits. This power, as we will show herein, is based on the capacity to achieve an understanding of the *meaning* of a clinical situation as *felt*, that is, on *knowing through feelings*, rather than simply assessing objective signs and symptoms.

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Towards the definition of atmosphere: ontological polarities of atmospheres

We begin by reviewing some etymological precepts that are the foundations of the word atmosphere. Next, we will expose its ontology by going through the same polarities that make us doubt its true existence. These include subjective *vs*. objective, permanent *vs*. transitory, pre-reflexive *vs*. reflexive and passivity *vs*. activity.

The etymology of the word atmosphere can be traced to the Greek *atmos* "vapour, steam" and *spharia*, "sphere". The Greek *atmos* derives from the proto Indo-European *awet-mo-*, from base *wet* – "to blow, inspire, spiritually arouse". In everyday language, the word atmosphere is used interchangeably with mood, feeling, ambience, tone and other ways of naming collective affects. Tellenbach introduced this concept in the field of psychiatry to account for "a sphere of familiarity which is perceptible in a bodily-sensuous way" [1]. Atmospheres are more easily felt than talked about, as features of an atmosphere cannot be readily described in terms of any particular domain of experience. Boehme suggests that atmospheres are "difficult to express, even if it is only in order to hide the speaker's own speechlessness" [2]. Furthermore, the haziness of the definition of atmosphere stems from its "veiled existence" as it dwells in the cracks of the dichotomies we use to organise our concepts. For understanding purposes, the word atmosphere is used here as the elusive and almost indefinable "air" that imbues and envelops a given situation and participates in the global awareness of that situation.

Objective vs. subjective

The experience of atmospheres informs the subject about himself (subjectively) and about the world (objectively). The subjective appraisal of atmospheres suggests that they are similar to the experience of emotions. However, much like the conception of feelings in the Homeric Greeks, which were described as existing out of one's body, pressing upon it, and invading it, atmospheres are felt as affects originating from outside the subject's boundaries. Considering their objective appraisal, atmospheres are not experienced as concrete qualities belonging to objects, environments or other subjects; nonetheless, they are felt in an object-like, quasi-concrete way. With that in mind, Boehme introduced the term *ekstases* to describe affective qualities that radiate from things persons or places dyeing the in-between or the intermediate space between them and the experiencing subject [2]. Both subjective and objective appraisals seem short in the understanding of the ontological status of atmospheres. They are therefore to be regarded as intermediate phenomena that resist the subjective-objective dichotomy.

Interior vs. exterior

The polarities subjective *vs*. objective can also be discussed in terms of interior *vs*. exterior. These concepts refer to the spatial properties of atmospheres. To assess the spatiality of atmospheres one must question the idea of interiorising feelings. Atmospheres resemble Stern's "vitality affects" and their dynamic qualities of feeling that convey a basic emotional tone [3]. This includes, for instance, a "calming", "relaxing", "comforting", "tense", "heavy", or "light" tone that animates or dampens the background sense of life. These are "spatially diffuse" feelings [4] that are not experienced as enclosed inside the subject's body. For Schmitz, for instance, atmospheres are not exactly feelings, rather they are the condition of the possibility of having feelings. He considers them "spatial bearers of moods (…) which visit (haunt) the body which receives them" [2]. In the sentence "the ambience in the room was tense", one is referring to both an interior private phenomenon and to an exterior collective one. One has the experience of a vibration that pervades space and is therefore exterior, but is also bodily experienced and therefore interior. It is this loosened line between interiority and exteriority that characterizes the spatiality of atmospheres.

To portray the complexities of the spatiality of atmospheres, we draw on the concept of "aura", not because of their resemblances but to shed light on their differences that clarify some of the polarities we are referring to in this section. In common language, the concept of "aura" portrays an objective property that belongs to a person, thing, or place and emanates from them (e.g. the aureole of a saint). Historically, this idea is included in its coining by Benjamin epitomised in his well-known description: "[r]esting on a summer evening and following a mountain chain on the horizon or a branch which throws its shadow on a person at rest - i.e. to breathe the aura of these mountains or this branch" [2]. Whereas the mountains' aura radiates from them, the atmosphere arises elsewhere, in the space between a person (or a sentient being) and a setting (person, thing, or situation) and cannot be traced back to any of them.

Permanent vs. transitory

Another difference between auras and atmospheres refers to their temporality. Auras are not transitory while belonging to the object and are lessened by repetition – e.g. reproductions as in serigraphy diminish the aura of a work of art. The atmosphere, on the other hand, can also rely on such changes to increase or decrease – as if atmospheres included the phenomenological properties of auras but outrun them into a more inclusive concept.

A striking example of the temporality (transitory nature *vs*. permanence) of atmospheres is ballet. In ballet it is

the atmosphere that emerges as a result of the affective movements at different speeds and directions hitting the stage, the other dancers and the experiencing subject. The spectator is not expected to experience the aura of the dancers, instead it is the atmosphere itself that arises as the object of contemplation while the dancers perform. Such transience was described by Dufrenne in his idea of atmospheres "perpetually forming and deforming, appearing and disappearing, as bodies enter into relation with one another" [4]. Following this statement, one could say that the fragility of atmospheres is permanent due to their ever-unattainable stability of form. The atmosphere of a cave, for instance, is vulnerable to the presence of visitors. Chauvet, the recently discovered cave from the Palaeolithic, will never be opened to the public as a means to preserve its atmosphere. A replica is nevertheless being built for visitors aiming to stir the emotions generated by the original. This example serves the purpose of illustrating the double temporality of atmospheres. Atmospheres are ever-changing "constantly seek(ing) renewed completion" [5] and yet some of their features are intransient as they can be repeated or recreated. In Werner Herzog's film *Cave of forgotten dreams* the French Perfumer, entrusted with the task of recreating Chauvet as it was when our ancestors inhabited it, embodies the ability of the sense of smell to bring forth the singularity of an atmosphere, while allowing its recreation and re-experience.

Deleuze's concept of *haecceity* provides further insight on the nature of this in-between that constitutes atmospheres. Haecceities "consist entirely of relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles, capacities to affect and be affected", but are nonetheless "concrete individuations that have a status of their own and direct the metamorphosis of things and subjects" [11]. Atmospheres resemble haecceities in the sense that they are different from entities (for instance persons, bodies, things or substances) that have an actuality on their own. They rather exist fleetingly as a nomadic crisscross or network of qualities. They fill the space, changing the intervenient, while having no concrete origin or destination.

Pre-reflexive vs. reflexive meaning

The understanding of reality was long considered through an "estranged epistemology" as if the subject cognitively delved into his experience. Recently, Gibbs discusses an "engaged epistemology" which portrays two types of meaning in any given situation – a pre-reflexive (which is already imbued in experience) and a reflexive meaning (much like the cognitive interpretation of raw experience) [6]. Through this epistemology, experience itself is not "raw", that is meaningless and in need of being understood, but already imbued with meanings. *Felt* meanings are already present while experiencing a given object or situation, earlier than the appearance of cognitively appreciated meanings. This type of tacit meaningfulness has clear links with the idea of atmospheres. Minkowski uses the verb *aspirer* (breath in) to portray this distinct mode of being in the world, i.e. the mode of experiencing an atmosphere [7], which is close to what Tellenbach calls the "atmospheric mode of being human" [8]. When a subject is assessing an atmosphere he is apprehending an emotional significance in an immediate and self-evident way. Atmospheres are readily meaningful. The relation between pre-reflexive and reflexive meaning is not straightforward as reflexive effort cannot replace pre-reflexive meaning and yet a subject can reflexively elaborate on his pre-reflexive meaning. Yet the latter is only accessible through active effort as in our everyday performance it is embedded in such a way that it remains hidden (psychiatrists must actively undertake such effort). The pre-reflexive meaning is a pre-conceptual assemblage of the assortment of all sensorial inputs available to the subject. Two consequences arise from the nature of this type of meaning. First, there is a threshold before which sensorial inputs from the body and from world are merged as if they were one and the same. As Merleau-Ponty points out, it is as if there was a continuum between the objects being sensed in the sensing body: "[t]here is an objective sound which reverberates outside me in the instrument, an atmospheric sound which is between the object and my body, a sound which vibrates in me as if I had become the flute or the clock" [9]. The atmosphere is indeed immediately perceived as an affective tonality that pervades space and simultaneously permeates the subject's body. "I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all" – Edgar Poe writes in *The fall of the house of Usher*. Hence atmospheres inhabit what Strauss named the "pathic" moment of perception [10], where subject-object distinction is fuzzy and so the sensorial domains are inchoate. The merged and pre-conceptual meaning is the integration of different sense modalities, where one sense mode automatically elicits other sensorial modalities. In this moment there are no mono-sensorial experiences, only a synesthetic experiential waltz. As an example: understanding pre-reflexively Marcel Duchamp's "musical sculpture" or some of Stockhausen's pieces entails more than an acoustic experience – a kind of visual-tactile experience is at play, where sounds are felt as sculpting silence.

The second consequence of this pre-reflexive and pre-conceptual appraisal of the meaning of an atmosphere is that the pre-reflexive meaning ultimately accounts for the global awareness of reality as the subject is moved by this bodily felt transformation. For instance, the scent of a perfume assaults us with images and forces us to

experience the ineffable tonalities of the place or situation exceeding the accessible meaning and guiding us to an overall understanding. Tellenbach stresses this in the remark that "in nearly all sensory experiences there is a surplus which remains inexplicit" [8].

Passivity vs. activity

The importance of a passive impression is expressed in Tellenbach's idea of atmospheres where taste and smell are the most "atmospheric" senses as they are more passive than the others (the subject cannot easily divert from what he is sensing) [8]. Yet, the subject is not only passively impressed (and changed) by atmospheres. His active participation in the creation and propagation of atmospheres is imprinted in: (1) the permanently incomplete status of atmospheres (see 3.2. concerning the temporality of atmospheres), which invites participation and (2) the idea that though he is always potentially embedded in an atmosphere, he must first welcome it so that it can emerge to his awareness. The subject's intention is expressed in the necessary predisposition as an *aesthetic attitude*, i.e. the ability to locate oneself at the right distance to allow the emergence of an atmosphere. The agency of the subject is key to understanding what it is like to experience an atmosphere as the subject has to actively predispose himself to the aesthetic experience (hinting that it is voluntary) to then passively surrender to the event that will take place. The feeling of an atmosphere is therefore a paradoxical experience as the subject feels he is an active intervenient and yet also passively impressed.

The clinical encounter as an aesthetic experience

In order to grasp atmospheres in the clinical practice, one must predispose to receive them. According to Schmitz, this predisposition is what allows the distanced influence of atmospheres [2] and atmospheres are themselves the aesthetic objects to be phenomenologically experienced. The idea of predisposing oneself to aesthetically experience the clinical encounter is not farfetched. In 1907, Husserl wrote a letter to Hofmannsthal, comparing Hofmannsthal's theory of aesthetics to the phenomenological method, which as he wrote "requires us to take a stance that is essentially deviating from the 'natural' stance towards all objectivity, which is closely related to that stance in which your art puts us as a purely aesthetical one with respect to the represented objects and the whole environment" [12]. Husserl appears to be referring to the suspension of the natural attitude that would come to sustain the phenomenological method. The potential inclusiveness of an *aesthetic attitude* in the phenomenological method resides in two features that portray the aesthetic object and are also identifiable in the phenomenological object, which are: (1) the aesthetic properties of an object can only appear if one allows the object's detachment from one's intention; (2) the aesthetic properties only arise when the object is stripped of its ordinary meaning. The former resembles the "disinterestedness" that Kant, and more recently Stolnitz, found essential for the "aesthetic judgment" and the *aesthetic attitude*, respectively [13]. The latter implies that in order to experience any object aesthetically one must first adopt a stance that presupposes the predisposition of the subject and the displacement of the aesthetic object from its everyday setting. Duchamp's ready-mades like *The fountain* or the *In advance of the broken arm* are examples of this, for they appear to us aesthetically as soon as they are exposed in a gallery and consequently stripped out of their utilitarian everyday meaning. Even Dickie, who rejects the need of the concept of "aesthetic attitude", admits there is an essential feature of the aesthetic experience, which is *attention* [14]. Although the art critic or collector might have a professional intention or a purpose that risk to undermine the experience of aesthetic objects, in the moment of aesthetically experiencing an object his intentions must be put aside, otherwise his attention would simply be dislocated from the aesthetic properties of an object and the aesthetic experience would not take place. Neuroscientific research also supports this observation. Having found that aesthetic experiences are qualitatively different from everyday experiences, it seems that at the upmost of aesthetic experiences attention is fully focused on a particular object and the object is stripped of its usual purpose, so that "the person is self-transcending, self-forgetful, and disoriented in time and space" [15]. Likewise, in the phenomenological method, the clinician has to learn how to dodge his intention of finding symptoms in order to allow the appearance of atmospheres.

The relevance of aesthetically experiencing the clinical encounter

The atmosphere's significance in clinical diagnosis has long been recognized. Tellenbach considered that during the interaction with a patient, the clinician is led to feel certain atmospheric qualities that exceed the factual, but nevertheless permeate the process of diagnosing. This led him to develop the concept of *diagnostic atmosphere* [8]. Minkowsky used a similar term *diagnostique par penetration* [16] to refer to the importance of intuition (the non-cognitive grasping of the meaning of an object) in the process of diagnosing, particularly referring to diagnosis of schizophrenia. These concepts are evidence to the fact that the two authors acknowledged the partaking of atmospheres in the understanding of phenomena. In the arts, particularly in the art of the stage, atmospheres are present from

the beginning and are essential to the global understanding of the work "the first scenes directly instil in us a certain emotion, which orients our entire comprehension. It is not sufficient that a problem be posed or an intrigue outlined, for it is also necessary that there be communicated to us a certain world-quality within which the problem or intrigue takes on meaning" [17]. No different than in theatre, in the encounter with a patient it is also through the atmosphere into which the clinician is initially thrown that he apprehends the "world quality" that will guide his comprehension. While the quest for objectivity might serve as an excuse to perform the over-detached positivistic act of collecting symptoms, this purpose compromises the entire understanding. The objectivity of atmospheres depends on the possibilities of feeling of the participants in the encounter. The clinician's "being-in-the-world" is not cancelled in the event, neither is his participation in the global awareness of the situation.

Heidegger's concept of *Befindlichkeit* [18] seems useful to further clarify the idea of understanding through atmospheres. Befindlichkeit comes from the irregular and reflexive verb *sich befinden* (to find oneself). In his *Commentary on Being and Time*, Dreyfus relates the concept of *Befindlichkeit* to mood, rather than a state of mind, that is neither subjective nor objective and is itself a source of attunement to the world, constituting "the way we find ourselves" in situations [19]. Accordingly, while accounting for the global awareness of a situation, atmospheres have the ability to place us in that same situation through a sense of proportion and distance that takes into account the position of the other. This sense allows us to find ourselves while attuning to the other is tact.

Sensing atmospheres – the role of tact

Tact is what Gadamer depicts as "a special sensitivity and sensitiveness to situations and how to behave in them for which knowledge from the general principles does not suffice (…) One can say something tactfully, but that always means that one passes over something tactfully and leaves it unsaid (…) and it is tactless to express what one can only pass over" [20]. The relation between understanding and tact can be traced to Aristotle. For Aristotle *phronein*, which means understanding the environment, comes from the senses, particularly from the sense of tact [21]. Unlike other senses, tact needs tangibility, the medium is (in) our body. Thus, through a sense of tact one simultaneously senses an object (a thing or another sentient being) and one's sensing body. Accordingly, tact embodies both ipseity and alterity, and it is only through the dialectics of the two that sensing is possible [21].

Phenomenologically, tact is the sense that is present in the moment of apperception when limits between body and world arise just before the differentiation of all other senses. When Merleau-Ponty tells us "through vision, we touch the stars and the sun" he is showing us how the sensuous quality of the exterior captured through a single sense mode travels through a synesthetic continuum eliciting other sense modes [22]. The relevance of atmospheres in the clinical encounter is ascribed to their ability to dislocate the limits between body and space while traveling through this sensorial continuum eventually meeting its haptic foundation as the statement by Merleau-Ponty suggests. In this sense, the space of atmospheres is experienced as a tactile space. Meanwhile, the changes in bodily feelings of the receiver are felt as a shared awareness of the situation placing him at the right distance, a tactful distance that is tacitly agreed. Like the sense of touch, atmospheres exist in a dialectic space of resonance between self and other, allow for the tacit/inexplicit understanding of a situation and are also a prelude to knowledge. If on the one hand the whole that is experienced through atmospheres is perpetually irreducible to the concepts we use to understand a situation, the ineffability of the experience shelters a latent relevance, which invites the creation of metaphors that may bring about the disclosure of a new understanding.

Understanding atmospheres – the role of metaphors

The leading role of metaphors in the process of understanding atmospheres reflects the pre-reflexive nature of the experience. The embodied transformations impressed by atmospheres are not directly accessible by existing concepts, which means that they can only be indirectly made sense of by a process that is metaphoric in nature. This process brings experience to the reflexive realm, but will perpetually remain unfinished, as metaphors do not pin down atmospheres. On the contrary, they enhance atmospheres, amplifying them and enchaining other metaphors. In the attempt of getting closer to the truth of the experience, they enable a self-sustaining process of "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another", which has been considered by Lakoff and Johnson as the basis of our everyday conceptual system [23].

In addition to the main role of metaphors in the process of understanding and experiencing atmospheres, they are also essential to the constant process of understanding phenomena and the corresponding psychopathological concepts used to refer to them. One could say that psychopathologists also make use of metaphorical concepts to refer to abnormal phenomena that exceed common understanding. For instance, flight of ideas or derailment of thought are metaphorical in nature in the fact that two conflicting ideas collide – thoughts don't flight or derail, because they are not beings or things, yet the union of the two brings us closer to the understanding of the original experience.

Despite the frenzied concern for reliability that has expanded into the privacy of the clinical encounter declaring the third person paradigm and its outlined preconceived interviews as the representatives of objectivity, mental symptoms have not been and cannot be fixed in time. They are neither strictly objective nor subjective, and rely on a constant negotiation of meaning that forcibly takes place during the clinical encounter [24]. It is through the clinician's engagement in the process of understanding that the accuracy of psychopathology is preserved. This is due to the fact that the basic process by which meaning is constructed is linguistic and prior to any *Denkstill*, including the scientific *episteme*.
Interview techniques designed according to the third person paradigm, focus the clinician's attention on the search for specific symptoms. It is this same intention that compromises the attention needed to notice the aesthetic properties of the clinical encounter and restricts linguistic contexts risking tautology. If one learns how to experience atmospheres one could dodge the bias of this intention. Here resides the need to bring aesthetics to the clinical encounter: one must dodge the scientific dogmatism through Kant's "desinterested pleasure" in order to preserve the phenomenological understanding.

Conclusions

Gadamer reminds us that the Greeks had a word for "that which brings understanding to a standstill". This word was *atopon*, which in reality means "that which cannot be fitted into the categories of expectation in our understanding and which therefore causes us to be suspicious of it" [25]. In this article, we have tried to unveil the complexities of the concept of atmospheres that have led us to neglect their clinical relevance. Atmospheres are difficult to grasp because they exceed the dichotomies that usually serve the purpose of understanding. Atmospheres arise through the actively endorsed aesthetic attitude adopted in aesthetic experiences, which shares the detachment from common sense and any preconceptions (including scientific preconceptions) with Husserl's *epoché*. Phenomenologically, they belong to the pathic moment of perception, the moment when self and world/other are merged. Yet their presence is felt to interpose a tacitly agreed distance, between self and other. This apparent paradox is peacefully embodied by the sense of tact. Tact is the sense that is present when self finds his limits in the limits of the other, the moment of apperception. Hence, atmospheres are haptically experienced, driving the senses to a past, where the limits between self and other are constantly being defined and redefined according to the present situation, while hinting on the global awareness of that situation and anchoring the process of understanding. Although the experience of atmospheres belongs primarily to the pre-reflexive realm, it can be brought to the realm of the reflexive through the creation of metaphors. Metaphoric thinking generates and regenerates meaning in a permanently unfinished task of describing and redescribing that which is truthful to the unfinished nature of atmospheres, bringing us closer to the original phenomena. The acceptance of atmospheres as clinically relevant phenomena is ultimately related to the acknowledgement of the ambiguous nature of the clinical encounter. The clinical encounter is an event suspended between the pathic and the linguistic domains of experience, an open event that invites participation, and must remain so in order to preserve the phenomenological precision. Operational criteria and structured interviews brought some benefit to psychiatry as they contributed to cleanse the profoundly unscientific and irrational attitude towards systematic assessment and diagnosing. Yet, they are blind to essential aspects of the clinical encounter. The inclusion of aesthetics to the clinical encounter might be the means to preserve its nature.

Conflict of interest

None.

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