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Atmospheres and Authenticity

The Example of Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia (USA)

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Abstract. *Taking the designated ‘Revolutionary City’ of Colonial Williamsburg as a case study, this paper suggests a theory that brings together the concepts of atmosphere and authenticity. On a conceptual level, this paper draws upon the new phenomenology by Hermann Schmitz, on more-than-representational, and on praxeological notions of atmosphere. Authenticity is viewed in an experiential manner as dynamic and relational. The analysis shows that the process of atmospheric immersion takes place in five phases and that the immersion in situationally rooted and place-based atmospheres can lead to an atmospherically produced feeling of authenticity.¹*

Keywords: *ambiance, atmosphere, authenticity, heritage, situations, USA*

History, Heritage and Horse Manure

In the 1920s, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and Reverend W.A.R. Goodwin laid the cornerstone for what is considered the world’s largest living history museum: Colonial Williamsburg. The so-called Historic Area or Revolutionary City of the museum is part of the Historic District of the small town of Williamsburg, Virginia (USA). The site is not walled off by fences or alike; the boundaries of old and new, of exhibition and daily routine are blurred. In the reconstructed town of the 1770s, visitors can sojourn on one of the benches and witness the daily routines or feel encouraged by the horse droppings to ponder upon the time of this place. They can visit the local blacksmith or discuss the recent endeavors for American independence with Thomas Jefferson. The effort to portray national cultural heritage has often been questioned with regard to accuracy and authenticity. Huxtable (1997, p. 15), for example, declares Colonial Williamsburg to have paved ‘the way for the new world order of Walt Disney Enterprises’ by showing history ‘the way it never was’ (ibid., p. 12). However, according to Lynch (2001, p. 65), ‘the way it was’ is always linked to ‘the way it is’: ‘The heart of our sense of time is the sense of “now”.’ In Colonial Williamsburg, the temporalities of ‘then’ and ‘now’ are connected

1. The research presented in this paper is part of a larger PhD dissertation that has been submitted in March 2016 and that also contains a more detailed analysis of the framing of the atmospheric of Colonial Williamsburg through the so-called supply-side of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Parts of this paper have been submitted for publication in the anthology “A Reader in Themed and Immersive Spaces” which is edited by Scott A. Lukas and which will be published by the Entertainment Technology Center of Carnegie Mellon University.

through the atmospheric which, for visitors and critics alike, seems to be closely linked to the authentic.

Thinking Atmospheres and Authenticity Dialogically

Atmospheres affect the lived or felt body (*Leib*) and are themselves affected by that 'holistic exchange of corporeal dynamics' (Schmitz, Müllan & Slaby, 2011, p. 244): ecstasies (*Ekstasen*, Böhme, 1993, p. 63) of things and subjects lead to either an expansion or a contraction of this 'felt space in the region of one's body' (Schmitz, Müllan & Slaby, 2011, p. 245). Other essential fields of corporeal communication are: feelings, corporeal stirrings (*leibliche Regungen*, *ibid.*, p. 251), senses, thoughts, suggestions of motion (*Bewegungssuggestionen*, *ibid.*, p. 254) and synesthetic characters (*synästhetische Charaktere*, Schmitz, 2014, p. 28). However, we are not sensing an atmosphere itself, but perceiving a situation according to the atmosphere that our lived body is immersed in (cf. Thibaud, 2003, p. 293). This relational quality of an atmosphere gives rise to an affective 'field of pre-personal intensity' (McCormack, 2008, p. 414). When affects are registered in the individual's lived body they evoke feelings that can eventually transform into an emotion. Such 'socio-cultural expression of that felt intensity' (*ibid.*, p. 414) can be understood as the enduring outcome of an individual's involvement with the atmospheric and as a new state of being.

Situations are the key to understanding the links between the atmospheric and the individual (cf. Hasse, 2014, p. 215). While situations of a current moment (*aktuelle Situationen*) are subject to momentary change, permanent situations of a state (*zuständliche Situationen*) are more enduring situations that can, over time, be generated through encounters (Schmitz, 2003, p. 92, 2014, p. 63). A situation of a current moment can also be seen as the smallest organisational unit of the lifeworld. All situations are cohesive and meaningful (Schmitz, 1980, p. 17), but the situational conditions which allow for an atmosphere to emerge can be influenced. Apart from the individual's personal background, a specific atmosphere is thus also experienced according to an atmospheric potential that can be explored by every individual.

Authenticity, the second key concept of this study, is viewed in an experiential manner as 'a potential existential state of Being' (Wang, 1999, p. 352). This phenomenological understanding of authenticity ties in with dynamic constructivist thoughts that suggest to take fictional qualities seriously as well because they affect our lives (Zukin, 2010, p. XIII). The notion of authenticity is thus linked to the 'primitive present' (Schmitz, Müllan & Slaby, 2011, p. 249). By defining authenticity as a 'relational quality attributed to something out of an encounter' (Knudsen and Waade, 2010, p. 13) it becomes evident that authenticity gains its power through an individual's affective and, consequently, emotional engagement in situations and atmospheres.

If authenticity is considered a feeling rooting in place-based experiences (*ibid.*, p. 5), two conclusions can be drawn: first, authenticity is produced in the present by immersing oneself in the atmospheres that arise from experiencing situations of a current moment. By emerging as a powerful emotion, the feeling of authenticity can then become a permanent situation of a state that is significant for future actions (figure 1). Second, the connotation of that felt authenticity as well as the probability to evoke this emotion can be influenced when framing the situational settings and

arranging the elements of the atmospheric: the interests/desires of the audience, the interests/desires of the authors/actors in charge and the factual background of the subject matter have to be balanced for that (cf. Pfister, 2008, p. 51).²

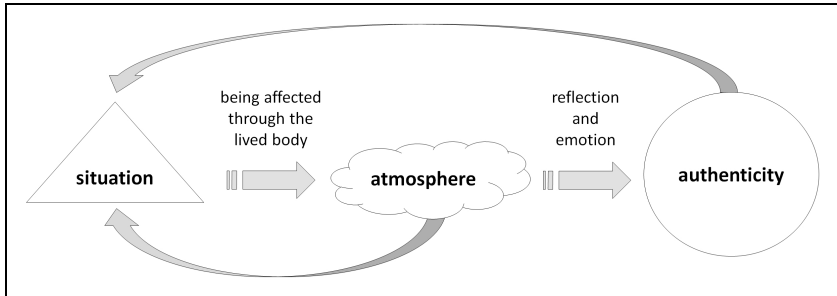


Figure 1. The construction of authenticity through the atmospheric

Experiencing Colonial Williamsburg Atmospherically

Atmospheres can be understood as dynamic processes that are characterised by different phases (Thibaud, 2003, p. 287). Five phases of the process of atmospheric immersion could be isolated from this empirical research. There is no fixed time frame for the phases and instead of being closed entities, the stages resemble fluid sectors that intertwine. A specific situation can unfold the atmospheric potential of one stage while at the same time allowing another person to reach a different stage.

Phase 1: ‘And then I came over there because he seemed friendly.’

In the first stage of atmospheric involvement, the atmospheric affects the visitors by gripping them: ‘Resistance is futile,’ as one interviewee describes the encounter. There are several fields that provide such a space for atmospheric involvement. One is the realm of personal preferences that visitors find echoed in the Historic Area. Very often a sense of place that is connected to a visitor’s imaginations of the past is experienced in this phase. But it is also ‘the other’ that demands attention – and that can be anything from newborn lambs to the ‘live fire’ from the cannon. The olfactory is another field that connects visitors to the atmospheric: ‘As soon as I can smell the place I have that feeling. It’s just the whole place: it smells old, I guess.’

Phase 2: ‘Everything around just brings this sense of calm.’

Even though the whole process of atmospheric involvement can be considered an immersive experience, the second phase is best described as ‘becoming holistically immersed.’ The vital drive is gaining momentum and the visitors are opening up

2. The conceptual framework also influences the methodology, which, in this study, is coined by what Vannini (2015, p. 320) refers to as “becoming entangled in relations and objects, rather than studying their structures and symbolic meanings.” The research methods applied include qualitative interviews with visitors and staff members, observation and participation as a visitor and as an interpreter in period costume, extensive field notes of various forms (written and recorded field notes, photos, drawings) and different foci (auto-ethnographic, situations, surroundings). The quotes in the following chapter are excerpts from interviews with visitors.

towards the momentary; they feel safe to 'take a deep breath and go back in time.' This corporeal expansion is often connected to a 'lackadaisical feeling' and to impressions of tranquility and freedom that are caused, for example, by ecstasies rooting in the sounds of the Fifes and Drums or the lack of any 'loud advertisement.' Familiar elements and conveniences can serve as orientation devices that facilitate the visitors' involvement.

Phase 3: 'It is every street in America, it is your street.'

In the unfolding stage, visitors experience the Historic Area as 'the center of [their] universe' and are fully (caught) in the moment: 'It's almost like a spiritual high.' The deep immersion also makes visitors experience a sense of community when walking the main street of the Historic Area: 'When you walk the Duke of Gloucester Street, it is every street in America, it is your street.' The intense feelings revolving around questions of identity and belonging that are atmospherically mediated here make the experiences become ever more relevant to the visitor's personal lifeworld.

Phase 4: 'OK, men wear pink, I didn't think that!'

Visitors now begin to connect their experiences in the Historic Area to existing archives of emotions and knowledge: '[W]hen they say they were fighting for their freedoms, they were really fighting for their freedom! They weren't going to a ballot box, they weren't creating a Facebook page.' New regimes of orientation are formed; the feelings become more permanent. Visitors are 'ok with things being fuzzy.' They also learn about issues one can only figure out by engaging in the atmospheric of the Historic Area. Such discoveries include finding out about the majority of lower class Virginians that is not portrayed, or that there were between 10 and 12 shoemakers in Williamsburg back then compared to the single shop one can visit today. Many visitors, in fact, come to appreciate this 'cheating strategy' because they now better understand the motivation behind it.

Phase 5: 'It's like I've been here all my life.'

This stage marks the peak of atmospheric involvement: Colonial Williamsburg has become 'like an addictive drug in a good sense.' The new frameworks of emotion and knowledge become embedded into the visitor's identity and everyday life. The feeling of authenticity that has evolved is neither tied to the subject matter of the historical events or the buildings, nor is it embedded in the place itself. Rather, it is an emotion rooting in an individual's atmospheric involvement. It is a permanent situation of a state that has become detached from any place-based situations of a current moment: 'It just feels like home. And it has nothing to do with coming here and "Oh, look at all the history." With me it goes beyond that: it's an actual love for the place, just because it is what it is. And getting outside the colonial area into town, I carry that feeling with me. You go a block over and you're out of THIS, but you still feel like you're part of it.' Visitors experiencing this stage plan to learn more about the complexities of American history. Some also plan to move to Williamsburg to be closer to their 'happy place' and to become involved as donors or volunteers.

A Conceptual Model of Atmospheres and Authenticity

The process of experiencing atmospheric immersion is composed of five phases (gripping, immersing, unfolding, connecting, fulfilling), each of which is made up of different effective categories rooting in the subject matter and its place (figure 2). The analysis shows that atmospheres and authenticity influence each other in the form of a dynamic dialogue between situational settings, the emerging atmospheres, the self and the subject-matter. If we want to understand the meaning and the power of authenticity, we must look at the atmospheric that it arises from.

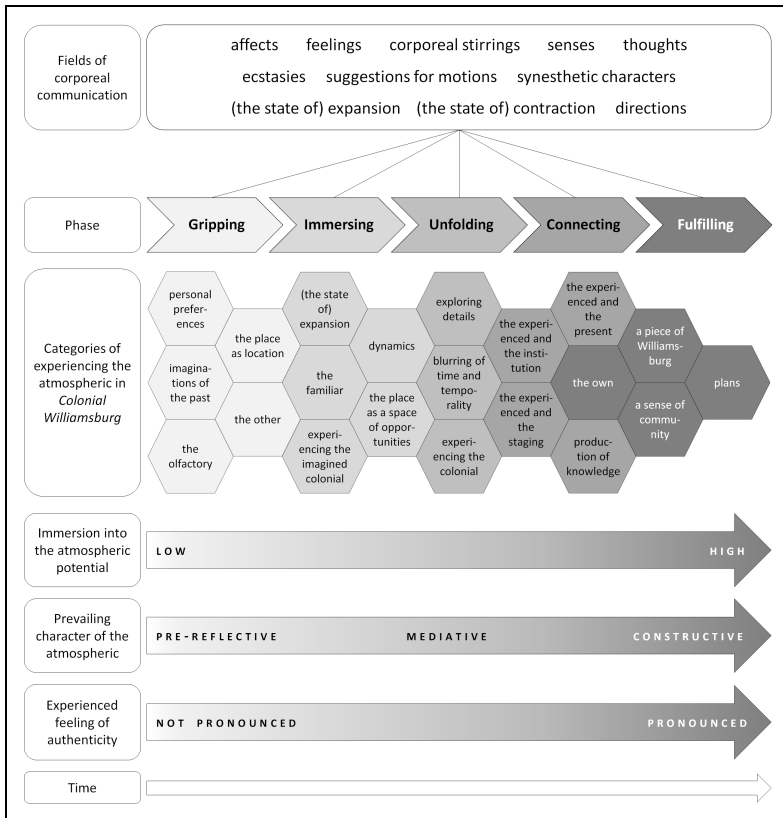


Figure 2. Experiencing the atmospheric and the authentic: a conceptual model

The immersion into the atmospheric potential is at its peak in the last phase where it can bring about new place-based and experience-based realities in the shape of permanent situations of a state. In the course of atmospheric immersion, authenticity can emerge as an emotional state that, as a new part of the personal context of the sensing subject, then influences all future situations and atmospheres. The feeling of authenticity that is constructed in this process is also impacted by the individual's capacities for reflection and imagination which are triggered predomi-

nately in the last two phases. The connotation of this atmospherically induced emotion of the authentic is influenced by the personal and the cultural context of all persons involved, the coincidental and the way atmospherically relevant elements are implemented in situational settings. With links to time, place and self, authenticity is a persistent and yet dynamic construct that is dependent on the stories through which we shape our cultural landscapes and to which we relate through atmospheres.

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