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# A brief archaeology of the notion of ambiance

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As the sensory field begins to assert itself in the social sciences and humanities, the notion of ambiance has taken centre stage and appears to be thriving. This is surely no coincidence given that ambiance is the *basso continuo* of the sensory world, the background against which our perceptions and sensations are updated. Paradoxically, while much research has explicitly identified itself with the topic of ambiance, very little work has actually tried to pinpoint the primary sources and deep roots of the notion itself. Such an undertaking is indispensable however if we wish to take the notion seriously, treat it as more than just a portmanteau word and use it as a great opportunity to further knowledge about the sensory ecology of the city.

Here we shall present three perspectives at the very root of the notion of ambiance, thus revealing the scope and diversity of the issues it allows us to tackle<sup>1</sup>. The goal is not so much to provide a formal definition of the notion as to point up the types of issues for which it is useful and the heuristic potential it harbours. We shall begin by examining a first approach rooted in *historical semantics*, then look at a second based on *existential psychopathology*, followed by a third approach driven by *phenomenological aesthetics*.

## ***The semantics of ambiances***

Several linguistic studies in the 1940s and 1950s attempted to update the semantics of the term *ambiance*. They adopted two main approaches: an etymological approach which aimed to identify the origin, underlying conditions and possible roots of the word “ambiance”, and a comparative approach which focused on translations and semantic discrepancies with the word as it exists in other languages.

Although the adjective *ambient* appeared in scientific and technical spheres in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it was only three centuries later – around 1890 – that *ambiance* was nominalised in French: in 1885 in one of de Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s *Cruel Tales* called “Sublime Love”, and in 1890 in André Gide’s *Traité du Narcisse*. Often attributed to the Goncourt brothers, the nominative use of *ambiance* also appeared in 1891 in a passage in their *Journal*. The term was initially nurtured in the symbolist and impressionist literary sphere. The symbolist school made great use of the (French) suffix *-ance* during this period, thus forming the

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<sup>1</sup> No need to say that this is an extremely limited selection of authors and approaches given the vast literature on the subject. For an overview of the domain of ambiance, see the presentation of the *International Ambiances Network*: <https://www.ambiances.net/>. Two main edition series relate directly with this topic: *Ambiances, Atmospheres and Sensory Experiences of Spaces* (Routledge, edited by Rainer Kazig, Damien Masson and Paul Simpson) and *Atmospheric Spaces* (Mimesis International, edited by Tonino Griffiero and Giampiero Moretti). For a more developed presentation of the theory of ambiances, see Jean-Paul Thibaud *En quête d’ambiances. Eprouver la ville en passant*. MetisPresses, Genève, 2015.

word *ambiance* among others. For Paul Adam, one of the representatives of this movement, “*ance* particularly attenuates the primitive meaning, which becomes less determined, vaguer and takes a more nuanced perspective”<sup>2</sup>. In his inaugural research into the word *ambiance*, Karl Michaëlsson built on this argument in an attempt to show that the neologism went against dominant Cartesian reasoning in the French language: “While French continues to maintain the fundamental traits of its former clarity, in its traditional sense, it also resorts increasingly to intuition, expressiveness, half-light and terms which suggest more than they mean, to vague words without precise boundaries. Among such suggestive and imprecise terms, the word *ambiance* holds centre stage due to its use and meaning, as well as for its current popularity”<sup>3</sup>. Despite the appeal of this idea, not all linguists agreed. Leo Spitzer's research later showed clearly the extent to which this reasoning was based on a slightly hasty oversimplification. Indeed, while the term *ambiance* quickly spread into everyday language with a very broad and open meaning, the adjective *ambient* was subject to numerous technical and scientific uses which were much more rigorous and precise.

In a remarkable essay in 1942<sup>4</sup>, Leo Spitzer outlined a veritable theory of knowledge based on the term *ambiance*. While he paid tribute to Michaëlsson's early research, he moved beyond it in many respects by relying on the historical semantics method (of which he is the founder). He argued that the mere use of dictionaries is insufficient for providing information about the origin and evolution of a term. This means of information provides access to “petrified sediment” which is only the visible surface of the field lines and tensions that underpin the word in question. Spitzer's approach was much more ambitious: it aimed to provide a history of ideas, from ancient Greece and Rome up to the contemporary period. With this approach, Spitzer was able to show how the word *ambiance* is embedded in different ways of understanding the world. It is by looking back on these visions of the world that it is possible to understand how the term *ambiance* progressively gained semantic, philosophical and scientific substance.

It would be off-topic here to summarise the conclusions of Spitzer's essay on historical semantics, but we will point up a few of its main ideas. The central argument is that the term *ambiance* is closely connected to the term *milieu* and, consequently, it is not possible to work on the former without also examining the latter. These two words help to clarify each other because they both refer to “what surrounds men and things” and they are often used together (e.g., when we refer to the *ambient milieu*). In other words, research into the different meanings and uses of the word *milieu* provides precious insight into the history of ideas in which the word *ambiance* is rooted. In long passages of great erudition, Spitzer attempted to identify the shifts, changes and challenges to the notion of *ambiance* throughout the history of Western thought.

While it is now recognised that the word *ambiance* derives from the Latin verb *ambire*, Spitzer pointed out that the prefix *amb-* did not originally mean “around” or “what surrounds”, but rather “on both sides” (left and right). This observation is by no means insignificant: indeed, it reveals the protective connotation associated with the verb *ambire*.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Adam quoted by Alexis François: “Suffixe littéraire –ance”, *Vox Romanica*. Vol. IV, Bern, Ursprünglicher Erscheinungsort, 1939, p. 20-34. As Leo Spitzer has shown, a more in-depth study of this suffix reveals that it points more to the perpetuation or subsistence of a state of being, something which lasts and is prolonged over time (*Le français moderne*, Vol. VII, 1939, p. 276), translated here.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Michaëlsson, “Ambiance”, *Studia Neophilologica*, Vol. XII, 1939, p. 91-119, translated here.

<sup>4</sup> Leo Spitzer, “Milieu and Ambiance: an Essay in Historical Semantics”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. III, 1942, p. 1-42 and p. 169-218.

The latter was actually a reference to the action of both arms during a warm embrace. This sense of protection and benevolence, of a protective milieu that is kind to mankind, was an extension of the Ancient Greek vision of the world; it was however challenged with the advent of modern science which sought out determinants external to mankind. Newton's idea of ambient medium was a notable turning point in this respect. An environment regulated by a series of laws in which mankind was no longer the measure for all things came to replace the protective and benevolent nature of ambiance. There was a shift away from a "warm" notion connected to the corporeal and benevolent relationship of mankind with his milieu, towards a "cold" and deterministic abstract idea which made mankind an isolated entity confronted with an ensemble of forces he could not control<sup>5</sup>.

Despite this shift, the shared idea of an active environment which affects the body, spirit and behaviour of individuals endured in different ways in different periods: in the ideas of Hippocrates for whom climate and atmosphere affect the human constitution; in Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws*; in Newton's notion of ambient milieu; and in Taine's theory of milieu. In short, if the notion of ambiance is underpinned by the idea of an active force influencing mankind, this force took on either a protective or threatening connotation, in symbiosis with, or external to mankind, depending on the contemporary worldview.

Aside from etymological research, other methods have been used to try to elucidate the term "ambiance": looking for the equivalent in other languages, research into the semantic discrepancies between similar words in French (milieu, climate, atmosphere, environment) and connecting the term ambiance to the qualifiers used with it in everyday language. Again, these approaches challenged the prevailing use of dictionaries: "Often, the precise meaning of a word cannot be expressed in a basic dictionary definition: its use and values can ultimately be expressed only through examples and contexts – the latter actually constitute the very ambiance of words and are indispensable for a precise understanding of their nature"<sup>6</sup>. Without going into detail, let us just note a few points.

Firstly, the semantic paternity of ambiance, milieu and climate derives from the fact that all three refer to things which surround, envelop and influence us. But the specificity of ambiance compared to the other two is that it directly targets the affective dimension: "*Milieu* is a sober, neutral, strict term which is always more or less bound to its scientific past. *Ambiance* and *climate* are colourful, evocative terms – *climate* thanks to the metaphor that it constantly evokes and *ambiance* due to the feelings it suggests"<sup>7</sup>. If climate is defined as "the set of atmospheric conditions to which a region is subject", the only affective connotation possible is metaphorical or figurative. Ambiance, on the other hand, constantly and immediately conveys a "moral" or affective aspect. Second, unlike milieu or climate, the term ambiance often has a positive connotation and is associated with a pleasant situation or place. As Hans Nilsson-Ehle has argued, while the word "ambiance" can be used as a promotional argument for the advantages of a hotel or restaurant, "it is hard to imagine a hotel advertisement reading \**Milieu!* Refined Cuisine! or \**Climate!* Entertainment!, etc." Lastly, while the adjectives that qualify *milieu* express a relationship, those associated with *ambiance* generally describe a quality. For example, when we talk

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that certain thinkers such as Goethe and the Goncourt brothers reacted against this modern interpretation and attempted to renew with the lessons of Antiquity.

<sup>6</sup> Hans Nilsson-Ehle, "Ambiance, Milieu et Climat", *Studia Neophilologica*, Vol. XXIX, n° 2, 1957, p. 181-191, translated here.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, translated here.

about the “artistic milieu” we simply mean the “milieu of artists”, identifying a specific group within society. But when we talk about “artistic ambiance” it implies “an interior designed with artistic taste, containing beautiful works of art, giving a charming impression of subtle forms and colours”<sup>8</sup>. In short, ambiance inherently involves qualitative thinking.

Let us retain two points in respect of the semantics of ambiances. One, while the meaning of the term *ambiance* has evolved over time, it is because our vision of the world itself has changed. Far from a neutral term devoid of theoretical importance, ambiance has slowly gained a semantic layer which is tied to different conceptions of science. Although ambiance is now becoming a research topic, this challenges the scientific paradigms we use to study it. Two, the term ambiance takes on meaning only within the language registers of which it is a part. Rather than talking about the possibility of a formal and unequivocal definition, it is more appropriate to point up the various types of discourse it solicits.

### ***The psychopathology of ambiances***

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several German psychiatrists became interested in phenomenology and laid the foundations of existential psychopathology. Despite their numerous differences, the research of Ludwig Binswanger, Erwin Straus and Eugene Minkowski<sup>9</sup> constituted a radical critique of behaviourism and the objectivist ideology of the period and offered a new way of thinking about mankind’s relationship with the world. Often relying on clinical case studies and their own practice as therapists, these authors engaged in rich and uncompromising dialogue with Husserlian philosophy, Heideggerian existential analysis and Freudian psychoanalysis. While their main goal was to further understanding of mental disorders, the process also involved a fundamental analysis of the world in which we live. In the most famous of his essays, Binswanger<sup>10</sup> adapted and highlighted Kierkegaard’s proposal: “Above all, we must keep in mind what it means to be a human being”.

While this was indeed psychopathology, we cannot ignore the anthropological focus of the approach<sup>11</sup>. Dissatisfied with the distinction between psychic and somatic processes and sceptical of strictly functional and neurophysiological explanations, existential psychopathology aimed to examine the forms and structures of human existence. Consequently, the study of clinical cases could not be strictly introspective; rather it needed to be open to the different ways of being in the world, regardless of whether they were “normal” or “pathological”. In other words, mental pathologies – and psychosis in particular – were seen as particularly relevant analysers for describing ways of existing.

There are two central arguments behind this idea. First, the detailed description of a specific clinical case need not be limited to the description of a unique experience but also needs to point up the unchanging traits upon which it is based. As Minkowski noted: “It is also important to keep psychopathological phenomenology completely *autonomous* from both clinical psychology and psychology in the usual sense of the term. It is not so much

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, translated here.

<sup>9</sup> Other major thinkers – directly connected to existential analysis – also deserve to at least be mentioned: for example, Viktor Von Weizsacker, Frederik Jacobus Johannes Buytendijk and Henri Maldiney, to name a few.

<sup>10</sup> Ludwig Binswanger, *Le rêve et l'existence*, traduction de Jacqueline Verdeaux, introduction de Michel Foucault, Bruxelles, Desclée de Brouwer, 1954.

<sup>11</sup> It is specifically this anthropological angle that interested Michel Foucault in his introduction to Binswanger’s *Dream and Existence*.

with the individual as a unique case that we compare the common and the general; rather we compare the shared, variable and inconstant characteristics of individuals with the *essence* that simultaneously goes beyond them and bears them along”<sup>12</sup>. In short, the aim was to get away from the subjective to discover the structure underpinning a way of being in the world. This anthropology was not focused on the subject itself but rather on the morphology of the world in which individuals exist. In other words, it is mankind’s relationship with the world and how humans exist in it that forms the common thread that runs through the analysis: “There is no existence that is not an existence in the world, or existence is nothing more than being in the world. Consequently: 1) the perpetual opposition between subject and object is overcome: subjects exist only to the extent that they are in the world; 2) psychology focused on a subject that is detached from the world gives way to anthropology, i.e., to the study of human beings necessarily connected to the world in which they exist”<sup>13</sup>.

It is around this clinical anthropology that the topic of ambiances emerged and took on its full meaning. We can first note that the notion of *ambiance* allowed those interested in the subject to identify a few basic characteristics of human existence. Even more than *ambiance* itself, it was the attitude towards *ambiance* that was being examined. As such, following on from Bleuler, Minkowski identified two vital principles which regulate our mental equilibrium: *syntonie* and *schizoidisme*<sup>14</sup>. *Syntonie* designates the principle which allows us to “vibrate in unison with the environment”. It ensures vital contact with reality and is related to feeling in harmony with the world. Conversely, *schizoidisme* designates the ability to “[detach] ourselves from that environment”. It is connected to personal *elan*, allows the “me” to be affirmed and meaning and direction to be given to the future. These are two complementary functions of human life and it is only when one of them hypertrophies and takes the upper hand that pathological troubles arise: an excess of *schizoidisme* might encourage the development of schizophrenia whilst an excess of *syntonie* might instead lead to manic-depression.

Taking a more boldly Heideggerian approach, Binswanger also described clinical cases which led to fairly identical conclusions. The case of Suzanne Urban<sup>15</sup> involved a patient who lost her ability to maintain perspective and connect with the world in which she lived after a traumatic experience. When in direct contact with an *ambiance*, without the ability to move away or withdraw, she became submerged in a homogenous atmosphere which was terrifying for her. This “*atmosphérisation*”<sup>16</sup> of the world made her feel dispossessed of her being and caused her to fall into a delirium in which everything felt threatening and disturbing. Cases of manic depressive psychosis work completely differently<sup>17</sup>. Regardless of the events that occur around those afflicted, nothing appears to affect or touch them. Sufferers undergo mood swings and opposing thoughts, and flit from one thing to another

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<sup>12</sup> Eugène Minkowski, “Phénoménologie et analyse existentielle en psychopathologie”, In *Ecrits cliniques*, Ramonville Saint-Agne, Erès, 2002, p. 95-138, translated here.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, translated here.

<sup>14</sup> Eugène Minkowski, *Le temps vécu*, Paris, PUF, 1995. Note the great similarity between this distinction made by Minkowski, and that made by Gilbert Durand between the nocturnal and diurnal realms of the imagination (*Les structures anthropologiques de l’imaginaire*, Paris, Bordas, 1969).

<sup>15</sup> Ludwig Binswanger, *Le cas Suzanne Urban. Etude sur la schizophrénie*, Paris, Editions Gérard Monfort, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Concerning the “*atmosphérique*” notion from a psychopathological perspective and the importance of oral meaning in the *atmosphérisation* of the world, see the seminal work of Hubertus Tellenbach, *Goût et Atmosphère*, Paris, PUF, 1983.

<sup>17</sup> Ludwig Binswanger, *Sur la fuite des idées*, Grenoble, Jérôme Million, 2000.

as if nothing was of any real importance. The world as such loses its depth and perspective, and contact with surrounding ambiances appears to be cut-off. For both Minkowski and Binswanger, our way of being in the world seemed intrinsically tied to the way in which we experience ambiance.

To understand how psychopathology defined the notion of ambiance, we most likely need to return to the distinctions made between different types of space. Whether we refer to the distinctions between Binswanger's "oriented space" and "attuned space"<sup>18</sup>, Minkowski's "light space" and "dark space"<sup>19</sup> or Straus's "geographical space" and "landscape space"<sup>20</sup>, it is through space that we can shed light on the notion of ambiance. While these distinctions are not identical, they are nonetheless closely related and all attempt to highlight what we may refer to as "ambient space". So we have pragmatic and finalised space on the one hand, that of our actions and perceptions, of objects and affiliated activities. "Oriented", "light" and "geographical" spaces all designate the functional spaces of everyday life. On the other hand we find affective and qualified space, that of our moods and feelings, of the atmospheres that surround us and how they make us feel. "Attuned", "dark" and "landscape" spaces refer to the ambient world and to our ways of being in the world. It is the former way of experiencing space that is usually given precedence and studied from a scientific perspective; the latter is generally not considered or even described. And yet it relates to the physiognomy of the world in which we live, its more or less hospitable or familiar nature and our direct interaction with surrounding phenomena. The distinction between these two types of spatiality should not mislead us, however. Both are always simultaneously present in everyday experiences. The world is experienced both as a world of objects in relation to which we act and position ourselves, and as a world of qualities that make us tick and attune ourselves.

Let us elaborate further on the ambient world. While up to now we have focused on its spatial aspect, we need to understand what this encompasses. The focus here is not on the world of representation but rather on that of presence; not on the "what" of the surrounding world but rather on the "how" of our being in the world. In other words – and this is what is both interesting and challenging here – it is a matter of grasping what eludes all objectification and characterisation, and understanding what stems from a pre-predicative experience of the world<sup>21</sup>. As mentioned above, the idea of ambient space refers to the anthropological structures of mankind's experience in the world and can never be reduced to a simple topological position.

While Minkowski, Binswanger and Straus agreed on numerous things with regard to ambiance, they did not adhere to the same thought process when tackling the issue. One means of differentiating between these authors is to examine the role that sensoriality plays in each of their approaches. Having spent part of his life in France, Minkowski was the only one of the three to explicitly refer to the term "ambiance". The central concept of *vital contact with reality* implies that it is not so much ambiance itself which is important as the

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<sup>18</sup> Ludwig Binswanger, *Le problème de l'espace en psychopathologie*, Préface et traduction de Caroline Gros-Azorin, Toulouse, Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1998.

<sup>19</sup> Eugène Minkowski, "Vers une psychopathologie de l'espace vécu", in *Le temps vécu*, Paris, PUF, 1995, p. 366-398.

<sup>20</sup> Erwin Straus, "Les formes du spatial. Leur signification pour la motricité et la perception", In Jean-François Courtine (dir.), *Figures de la Subjectivité*, Paris, Editions du CNRS, 1992, p. 15-49.

<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting that the history of philosophy has been marked by this preoccupation, whether in terms of Plato's khôra, Husserl's passive syntheses, or Kant's reflective judgement.

interaction between the individual and ambiances. The term “vital” is fundamental here as - aside from sensory contact with an ambiance - it is the driving force behind such contact that is targeted. Consequently, ambiance needs to be considered in terms of becoming: “Ambiance here must not be assimilated with what we call the ‘outside world’ when we refer to perceptions, nor with a result broken down into its supposed elements. It must be taken as a vast and living whole, in all its primitive force, in which human beings may only subsequently - with help from the analytical processes at their disposal - manage to distinguish between living beings, objects and even physiological stimulants. An ambiance, in all its uniqueness, is not a static given; it is forged through contact with mankind, and mankind through contact with it. Crudely speaking, ambiance is a moving ocean. It is the becoming”<sup>22</sup>. This way of thinking does not exclude the sensorial world from ambiances. On the contrary, it actually involves freeing up the vital scope of our senses by showing how each of them is the product of opening up to the specific world in question. As such, for each sensory sphere there is a specific corresponding human attitude towards ambient life: retaining (hearing), spreading (smell), tasting (taste), touching (tactile)<sup>23</sup>. For Minkowski, metaphors express the overarching role that each sense plays in the general texture of life. In short, it is through ambient outcomes that the phenomenal is connected to the psychic, and the material world to the spiritual world.

For Binswanger, attuned space is based on three “essential radicals” which are complementary and inextricably bound together: spatial-temporality, affectivity and corporeality (to these we could add the relationship with oneself and others<sup>24</sup>). The founder of *Daseinanalysis* thus aimed to identify and describe the complex force which connects these three aspects. Starting from the assumption that the meaning of our relationship with the world is already inscribed in language, he suggested the notion of “sense-direction” (*Bedeutungsrichtung*) for describing this<sup>25</sup>. In some respects, the goal was to restore complete substance and meaning to everyday expressions in order to reveal the basic structures and forms of being in the world. Let us look at his paradigmatic example of the fall: “When we are brutally disappointed and ‘fall back to earth’, we do indeed fall, but it is neither a purely physical fall, nor a fall which imitates (metaphorically or analogically speaking) or is derived from one; more precisely, the essence of brutal deception and fear mean that the harmony of the ambient and common world, which carried us along until then, suddenly receives a blow and stumbles. In this instant, our existence is indeed damaged, torn from its bearings and thrown back upon itself. Until we find a new mooring in the world, our total *Dasein* will be in the direction of stumbling, collapsing and falling. We call this type of general sense-direction naked terror, and it allows us to see that the two are actually *one*”<sup>26</sup>. As such, the phenomenon of “the fall” cannot be reduced simply to one of its accepted significations, be it physical, moral, affective or spiritual. The fall is bound up with a sense-direction to the extent that it creates unity between a type of space-time experience, a style of bodily movement and a dominant affective tonality. From this perspective, sense-direction describes a way of being in a specific world<sup>27</sup>. Binswanger placed particular

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<sup>22</sup> Eugène Minkowski, “Constitution et conflit”, In *Ecrits cliniques... op.cit.*, p. 67-79, translated here.

<sup>23</sup> Eugène Minkowski, *Vers une cosmologie*, Paris, Payot, 1999.

<sup>24</sup> I am thinking particularly of the importance he placed on the phenomenon of the encounter.

<sup>25</sup> For a recent overview of this notion, see Jeanine Chamond (dir.), *Les directions de sens. Phénoménologie et psychopathologie de l'espace vécu*, Argenteuil, Le Cercle herméneutique, 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Ludwig Binswanger, *Le rêve et... op.cit.*, translated here.

<sup>27</sup> As Henri Maldiney has noted: “Its meaning is above or rather beyond all local acceptations. And it must be called *sensorial direction*, i.e., the alliance of words that make the unity of meaning-direction and meaning-



emphasis on the fall, but he also pointed up other sense-direction such as ascent, narrowness, fullness and distance. If attuned space – as it is described and defined by sense-direction – is a space loaded with qualities that harness the subject’s corporeality and sensoriality, it also refers first and foremost to the sphere of vital feelings and not only to that of sensory phenomena. In other words, sense-direction target the atmospheric or climatic dimension of being-in-the-world. Like Minkowski who used the senses to point up their vital potential, Binswanger really emphasised the vital character of affective tonalities. Here again, the subject’s sensoriality is not defined in and for itself; rather, it takes on its full meaning only when it is connected to an emotional state or mood.

It is most likely Erwin Straus who truly developed the aesthetic angle on our presence in the world. Starting from an in-depth critique of behaviourism, he developed the notion of “sensing” to designate the original type of relationship we have with the world. Like Minkowski and Binswanger, he too was interested in living matter and the means of human existence, but he placed particular emphasis on the sensory dimension of lived experience. As Renaud Barbaras has noted about Straus: “Living matter is not the subject constituted by sensing; on the contrary, it is developed through sensing”<sup>28</sup>. We must however be careful not to misinterpret what Straus actually meant by *sensing*. He chose this term primarily to differentiate it from the notion of sensation, understood as localised and occasional excitement resulting from a purely physiological process. Conversely, sensing corresponds to a means of global and immediate communication with the world; it is through sensing that living beings form a whole with the world. This involves both the animal and human worlds. Further, Straus sought to distinguish between sensing and perceiving. While perceiving is already a form of knowledge involving a “gnostic moment”, sensing designates above all a feeling that involves a “pathic moment”, free from all objectification or thematic distancing. With sensing, there is an empathetic relationship and corporeal attachment to the world. For Straus, sensing cannot be dissociated from “moving” since the sensory world cannot be reduced to a state of things or to characteristics that are independent from the subject; rather it requires a vector and affective mechanisms. In sum, it is by attaining a specific physiognomy that things appear to me and exert their affective power over me: “Sensing is oriented towards the physiognomic character of what is frightening or terrifying. (...) Empathy is the broadest concept which encompasses both the act of separating and uniting, that of fleeing and following, attraction and repulsion, etc., which thus also includes both what is pleasant and unpleasant”<sup>29</sup>. It is by emphasising the way things appear and how we approach them that Straus managed to make the sensory world the primary vector of our presence in the world. Landscape space and dance movements are in this respect the two paradigmatic cases upon which the pathic moment unique to sensing is presented. In sum, while Strauss most likely overestimated the distinction between the pathic and the gnostic, he is one of the people who managed to get closest to the phenomenality of the ambient world<sup>30</sup>.

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signification sensitive – which is precisely that of the existential sketch and the unveiling of the being at work within it” (*Regard, Parole, Espace*, Paris, L’Age d’Homme, 1973), translated here.

<sup>28</sup> Renaud Barbaras, “Affectivité et mouvement: le sens du Sentir chez E. Straus”, *Alter. Revue de Phénoménologie*, n°7, 1999, p. 15-29, translated here.

<sup>29</sup> Erwin Straus, *Du sens des sens*, Grenoble, Jérôme Million, 1989, translated here.

<sup>30</sup> As Henri Maldiney (*op.cit.*, translated here) has noted, Straus’s thinking “begins where Husserl’s intentional analysis leaves off, at the hyletic he named but was unable to construct”. For a brief overview of this topic, see Michèle Gennart, “Une phénoménologie des données hylétiques est-elle possible?”, *Etudes Phénoménologiques*, n° 4, 1986, p. 19-46.

We should retain three key ideas regarding the psychopathology of ambiances. Firstly, the field of ambiances involves a vital and non-thematic level of experience. Ambiance is more than just a relationship of knowledge, objectification or representation of the world and it is really bound up with our presence in the world. It involves both how we feel in the world and the way we experience it. And yet we must not exaggerate the divide between sensing and perceiving. Instead, we should look for ways of connecting these two dimensions<sup>31</sup>. Second, ambiance primarily involves affective tonalities, however, these are far from independent of the other components of experience and they make sense only when connected to spatial-temporal forms, types of movement and sensory data. Finally, ambiance can be broken down based on modal logic. It does not designate the “what” of an experience but the “how”. Connecting the different components thus allows us to identify specific ways of being which involve both the subject itself and the world in which the subject exists. In short, ambiance is nothing less than a way to identify, describe and distinguish between “styles of existence”<sup>32</sup>.

### ***The aesthetics of ambiances***

After having addressed the semantics and psychopathology of ambiances, let us now turn to the aesthetic approach. Aesthetics are central to the notion of ambiance since they explicitly address the issue of human sensoriality. There are two elements which frame aesthetics in terms of ambiances. The first is that ambiance conjures up an “environmental aesthetic” which cannot be reduced to a fine arts aesthetic. It is not a work of art which is at the centre of this aesthetic but rather nature, understood in the broadest sense of the term (including the city and urban sphere). And yet, while this aesthetic has both a narrative and ambient facet, the former has largely dominated the latter up to now<sup>33</sup>. The second element is that ambiance allows us to return to the original meaning of aesthetics, understood as a theory of sensory perception. The goal is to restore an understanding of *aesthesis* that goes beyond taste judgements, rehabilitates the place of the body, sensitivity and emotion, and relativizes the weight of semiotics and the primacy of language<sup>34</sup>. Ambiance as such encourages us to rethink both the object of aesthetics and the aesthetic discipline itself.

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<sup>31</sup> As such, Renaud Barbaras (*op.cit.*, translated here) has aptly noted: “It is a given that we do not live exclusively in this pathic dimension in which the animal, itself, is locked up; we have always gone beyond the strictly empathetic relationship in favour of a thematic distancing which understands expressions as determinants of a thing, we live in the universe of perception.” Stating the same idea somewhat differently, Maria Villela-Petit has written: “As human beings we do not know how to remain within a strictly “sensing” dimension for fear of not having access to thought, but we never leave this dimension of our being in the world either, except in extreme cases of pathological rupture of our pathic communication with the world” (“Espace, temps, mouvement chez Erwin Straus”, In Jean-François Courtine (dir.), *Figures... op.cit.*, p. 51-69, translated here).

<sup>32</sup> Henri Maldiney, *op.cit.*

<sup>33</sup> Cheryl Foster has distinguished between the “narrative” approach which involves reading and writing the environment as a history using the semiotics of indexicality and an “ambient” approach which insists on sensitivity and resists a language-based formulation (“The Narrative and the Ambient in Environmental Aesthetics », *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 56, n°2, 1998, p. 127-137).

<sup>34</sup> It is through such arguments that Gernot Böhme constructed his project for a “new aesthetics”: “Aesthetics Knowledge of Nature”, *Issues in Contemporary Culture and Aesthetics*, n°5, 1997, p. 27-37.

We shall limit ourselves here to the aesthetics of ambiances as developed by Jean-François Augoyard and Gernot Böhme<sup>35</sup>. While the former does indeed use the term “ambiance”, the latter employs the term “atmosphere” (a German speaker, Böhme uses the word *Atmosphäre*<sup>36</sup>). Although these two conceptions were formed independently of each other, they nonetheless have several things in common. Beyond the fact that they seek a return to a theory of sensory perception, they both underscore the architectural component and the spatial and material dimension of ambiances more generally<sup>37</sup>. In both cases, the goal is to come up with an aesthetics of ambiances applied to built space. And yet, the aesthetics of ambiances does not refer only to monumental architecture or buildings of reference; it broadly encompasses all types of everyday situations. This approach is opposed to a “museum-like” view of art and refuses an amalgam between artistic and aesthetic experiences; it provides an outlet for analysing the most ordinary situations.

The importance placed on the contextual nature of ambiances encourages the idea of ecological aesthetics. For Augoyard, the goal is to develop *in situ* approaches and build interdisciplinary tools which use “perceptible physical signs and the full range of norms, rules, codes and references, as well as the instruments, features and uses assigned to built forms”<sup>38</sup>. For Böhme, the issue involves analysing the connections between environmental qualities and human sensitivity in order to better understand “how one feels in an environment”<sup>39</sup>. While the terms used by the two are not the same, both tackle the complexity of situations by suggesting that heterogeneous contextual components be connected to each other.

Indeed, this logic of articulation exists at all levels of their thinking. Everything occurs as though ambiance is the very starting point from which various components or polarities need to be connected or harnessed to a single dynamic. Böhme constantly refers to atmosphere as an “in-between”. For clarity, I shall distinguish here between three primary levels of articulation.

The first level concerns the relationship between subject and object. As Augoyard has noted<sup>40</sup>, we can look at the dictionary definition of the term ambiance: “the moral and

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<sup>35</sup> Other well-known authors have also addressed the aesthetics of ambiances. These include Martin Seel, Yuriko Saito, Pierre Sansot, Henri Maldiney, Herman Schmitz and Michael Hauskeller. Further research into their approaches would obviously be of interest.

<sup>36</sup> Gernot Böhme has borrowed the notion of “atmosphere” from Herman Schmitz’s philosophy of the body. While he acknowledges this contribution, Böhme provides a critique of Schmitz’s thought and has suggested an original and personal interpretation of the notion. For Böhme, Schmitz’s thinking is limited in terms of the construction of an aesthetics of ambiances for two main reasons: Schmitz does not completely free himself of a traditional interpretation of the aesthetic which restricts the notion to the artistic field; he only develops the subjective angle of atmosphere and does not sufficiently consider its material and objective aspects. See “Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics”, *Thesis Eleven*, n°36, 1993, p. 113-126.

<sup>37</sup> Several issues of architectural journals have confirmed – if confirmation was needed – the inclusion of ambiances within the discipline of architecture. See for example “Constructing Atmospheres”, *Daidalos*, n° 68, 1998; “Ambiances architecturales et urbaines”, *Les Cahiers de la Recherche Architecturale*, n° 42/43, 1998; “Atmosphère”, *Faces. Journal d’architecture*, n°67, 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Jean-François Augoyard, “Eléments pour une théorie des ambiances architecturales et urbaines”, *Les Cahiers de la Recherche Architecturale*, n° 42/43, 1998, pp. 13-23, translated here.

<sup>39</sup> Gernot Böhme, “Acoustic Atmospheres. A Contribution to the Study of Ecological Aesthetics”, *Soundscape. The Journal of Acoustic Ecology*, Vol. I, n°1, 2000, p.14-18.

<sup>40</sup> Jean-François Augoyard, “Eléments pour une théorie... *op.cit.*”

material atmosphere surrounding a place or person...” As basic as it is, this definition highlights the connection between the “material” and “moral” dimensions. Far from insignificant, this connection is problematic and requires that attention be paid to the “quasi-beings” and “semi-things” which lead to an aesthetic of intermediaries<sup>41</sup>. For his part, Böhme insists on the fact that the atmosphere is both objective, since it emanates from things and can be produced from material arrangements, and subjective since it cannot be defined independently of the people who experience it. In short, atmosphere is regarded as “the characteristic manifestation of the co-presence of subject and object”<sup>42</sup>.

The second level involves the relationship between the senses. Here Augoyard distinguishes between *ambiance* (singular) and *ambiances* (plural). While science and technology tend to dissociate the different sensory bases to better study an environment, questions remain regarding its ability to convey inter-sensory and amodal phenomena. “While architects produce *an ambiance*, we ask that they line up different *ambiances*: a thermal *ambiance*, an acoustic *ambiance*, etc. And yet can we actually scientifically define *a single architectural ambiance*?”<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Böhme challenges the tendency to dissociate the senses initially, only to reunite them later on. In taking a new approach to the issue of synaesthesia, he conversely shows that the sensory unity of a situation actually precedes differentiation between the senses. It is based on atmosphere – understood as a global and indivisible back-drop – that the identification of detail and the distinction between different sensory processes seems to occur<sup>44</sup>.

The third level concerns the relationship between reception and creation. *Ambiance* involves both what can be perceived and what can be produced. Better still, it often challenges such distinctions since what is perceivable is itself an action. Just as architects and scenographers physically construct sensory forms, users configure their milieu through their actions. Augoyard contends that “our relationship with the formal and sensory environment should be understood as an interaction, a constructive movement between what is given and configured, what is felt and acted, perceptible and representable”<sup>45</sup>. Böhme has expressed the same idea in his own manner when arguing that the production of an atmosphere is not simply the result of designing an object but also, simultaneously, “creating the conditions for its appearance”<sup>46</sup>. From this perspective, the way the world appears is the product of both the designer’s work and the inhabitant’s activity.

While there is great affinity between these two actors – particularly in their use of phenomenology – each has a number of unique features. Let us first note that the material and objective aspects of *ambiance* are not addressed in exactly the same terms. For Augoyard, they are connected to both physical signals and constructed space, whilst for Böhme they are more closely tied to the world of things. Based on the idea that all physical signals necessarily include aspects of the built environment in which they are produced, Augoyard attempts to develop a contextual physics: “Situated sound crosses a propagation space which gives it a certain immediate quality; for example: reverberation and stamping

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<sup>41</sup> Jean-François Augoyard, “Faire une *ambiance*?” In Jean-François Augoyard (dir.), *Faire une ambiance*, Bernin, A la Croisée, 2011, p. 17-35

<sup>42</sup> Gernot Böhme, “Atmosphere as An Aesthetic Concept”, *Daidalos*, n°42/43, 1998, p. 112-115.

<sup>43</sup> Jean-François Augoyard, “Eléments pour une théorie... *op.cit.*, translated here.

<sup>44</sup> Gernot Böhme, “Über Synästhesien / On Synaesthesiae”, *Daidalos*, n° 15, 1991, p. 26-37.

<sup>45</sup> Jean-François Augoyard, “Eléments pour une théorie... *op.cit.*, translated here.

<sup>46</sup> “It is never purely a question of designing an object but always, at the same time, of creating the conditions for its appearance”, Gernot Böhme, “On Synaesthesiae... *op.cit.*”

time for sound, specific reflections, changes in temperature, colour, organisation of light-and shadow-play, specific turbulence in air flows around some architectural configurations, or the variable volatility of smells depending on wind speed. Physical signals that can be isolated after the fact exist only through a spatial-temporal incorporation that is entirely dependent on the morphological and material characteristics of a place<sup>47</sup>. This type of approach reconnects with “controlling ambiances” as taught in schools of architecture by reintroducing the contribution of spatial context into meteorological procedures. The aim is nothing less than to rethink the complementarity of the quantitative and the qualitative. And yet, if physical signals exist only when connected to a built environment, they really only take on meaning when they are perceived or filtered by the codes, norms, representations and social interactions at work in a place. As Augoyard has noted, a signal-forming line with multiple contextual features (spatial-temporal, perceptive, cultural, social) “leads to defining a central object which is no longer a signal but a phenomenon”<sup>48</sup>. In other words, the issue is not so much the physical signal itself or the ambiance in general, as the pivotal place created by an “ambiance phenomenon”.

Böhme, for his part, addresses the material dimension of ambiance based on the world of things. His main argument revolves around stating the “ecstatic” nature of things. He questions the traditional ontology of things which considers its qualities as determinations<sup>49</sup> – in other words, according to this traditional view, the characteristics of a thing (its shape, colour, odour, etc.) are what distinguish it from other things. Each thing has internal unity, is self-contained, distinct from others and independent of its surrounding environment. For Böhme however, things have the power to reveal themselves, to interact and to disseminate on their own. As painting illustrates, the colour of an object can be modified by another nearby object, the shape of a thing can create field lines and suggestions of movement. One of the examples given by Böhme to illustrate his argument deserves our attention: “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 that 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 time and space. 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 of the environment of the cup, colouring or ‘tincturing’ in a certain way this environment, as Jakob Böhme would say”<sup>50</sup>. This is how each thing can affect its environment through its presence.

And yet, in pointing up the ecstatic dimension of things, Böhme introduces a third term that is generally left out of theories of perception: the medium. As he has argued, “The structure of perception is not ‘I see something’ but rather ‘in the medium, the presence of things is perceptible’”<sup>51</sup>. This is most certainly the key element of Böhme's thinking about

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<sup>47</sup> Jean-François Augoyard, “L’environnement sensible et les ambiances architecturales”, *L’espace Géographique*, n° 4, 1995, p. 302-318, translated here.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, translated here.

<sup>49</sup> The argument below is particularly based on Gernot Böhme, “Atmosphere as the Fundamental... *op.cit.*”

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>51</sup> Gernot Böhme, “An Aesthetics Theory of Nature: An Interim Report”, *Thesis Eleven*, n°32, 1992, p. 90-102.

atmosphere. Introducing medium as the third term leads to a twofold development. For one, it is on this basis that it becomes possible to move beyond the idea that perception can be reduced to the simple fact of identifying or noticing objects. Indeed, the medium is the basis upon which the world acquires a certain physiognomy and places the perceiving subject in a certain corporeal and affective state. Further, with regard to experience, atmosphere is nothing other than the medium - or more precisely the state of the medium - in a given situation. In other words: "The primary 'object' of perception is atmosphere. 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."<sup>52</sup>

Augoyard and Böhme draw upon markedly different categories. For the former, the idea of atmosphere phenomenon is primordial, with its six complementary elements (physical signals, spatial-temporal forms, percepts, representations, codes and norms, and social interaction). For the latter, the atmosphere issue is instead constructed around the notion of presence, with three main components (the thing, the medium, the senses).

To summarise, we can retain three main contributions from the aesthetics of atmospheres. Firstly, it provides a new way of thinking about sensory perception by pointing up its eminently contextual nature, by including it as a part of everyday social life, opening it to all of the senses and by giving full importance back to physical and material factors. In other words, the focus on the phenomenality of built space helps develop the idea of *urban and architectural atmospheres*. Second, such phenomenological aesthetics help underscore the complexity of atmospheres by encouraging a modal and interdisciplinary approach. From this perspective, rather than dissociating the terms of an atmosphere and isolating the elements that compose it, the goal is to connect and get them to bind together. Although a different path is taken by each author, the aim is to establish connections and continuity which give substance to an atmosphere. Finally, the aesthetics of atmospheres involves a dynamic approach. Rather than taking atmospheres as a given or as a state, the goal is to think of them as a process in action which involves both the activity of inhabitants and that of their designer.

### ***The scope of the notion of atmosphere***

The notion of atmosphere has a broad heuristic and operational scope, open to a diversity of approaches and uses. It takes on its full meaning and strength when implemented from a particular perspective. It is by submitting atmosphere to specific questions that we can best understand the extent of its consequences and implications. Beyond the three areas addressed here, others – ranging from environmental psychology to sensory architecture, human geography to artistic creation, pedagogy to dramaturgy – could also have been explored. It is obvious that one original aspect of the notion of atmosphere is that it encourages interaction between different types of knowledge and the connecting of disciplines. As a nomadic and multi-disciplinary notion, atmosphere offers an original alternative to traditional object/subject, sensory/intelligible, active/passive dualism. It most certainly helps to sensitise thought.

However, let us not mislead ourselves: our difficulty grasping such a field of thought must not lead us to commit common mistakes. Atmosphere is certainly not the same as environment. While there are similarities between the two terms, atmosphere is bound up

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<sup>52</sup> Gernot Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental... *op. cit.*

with sensoriality, emotion and lived experience and cannot tie in with an overly objectivist or positivist approach. This is due to the epistemological implications of the notion of ambiance. And yet, ambiance is not purely subjective either. We have seen that it cannot do without the materiality of built and planned space (we then refer to architectural and urban ambiances) and that it also draws on an anthropological and collective dimension that cannot be reduced to individual experience. Finally, it is patently obvious how far a well understood ambiance is from a cosmetic notion. Far from a simple excess of luxury or comfort, it helps us think about the existential side of human experience. Ambiance places the sensorial world at the very centre of living space and constitutes a *condition of possibility*.

\* This article has previously been published in French. See: Jean-Paul Thibaud « Petite archéologie de la notion d'ambiance », *Communications*, n°72, 2012, p. 155-174.