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Niels Albertsen

► **To cite this version:**

Niels Albertsen. Atmosphere and the anthropogenic Metapolis. Proceedings of the 4th International Congress on Ambiances, Alloaesthesia: Senses, Inventions, Worlds, Réseau International Ambiances, Dec 2020, e-conference, France. pp. 74-77, 10.48537/hal-03220247 . hal-03220247

HAL Id: hal-03220247

<https://hal.science/hal-03220247v1>

Submitted on 11 May 2021

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Atmosphere and the Anthropogenic Metapolis

Abstract. This article explores connections between the concepts of atmosphere, Anthropocene and contemporary urbanity. First, contemporary urbanity is specified as Metapolis composed of different assemblies of density and heterogeneity. Second, the aesthetic atmospheres of the European Metapolis are portrayed as intensified in the historical centres and pluralized throughout the Metapolis. Third, the Metapolis is connected to the concept of the Anthropocene identified as the Great Acceleration. Fourth, the atmospheric and the anthropogenic aspects are assembled under the headings of the weather, atmospheric attentiveness to the Anthropocene and atmospheric aspects of Metropolitan climate politics.

Niels ALBERTSEN¹

Keywords. Air, Anthropocene, Atmosphere, Great Acceleration, Metapolis

Introduction

This article explores connections between the concepts of atmosphere, Anthropocene and contemporary urbanity. The idea is: Geologists think of our age as a new geological epoch - the Anthropocene - due to hitherto unseen human impact on the planet Earth, its climate, ecosystems and geology. Concomitantly more than 50% of the Earth's population inhabit cities. Hence, (human) life on Earth and the Earth itself seems profoundly marked by both urbanization and the human impact on the planet.

This entanglement of urbanization and anthropogenic processes also encompasses aesthetic (Böhme, 2001) atmosphere, since atmosphere is a vital aspect of city-life. Further, the Anthropocene is likely to problematize the usual separation of atmosphere as a meteorological concept and an aesthetic concept. Anthropogenic urbanisation does not seem to call for such division.

The article proceeds as outlined in the abstract.

The Metapolis

Whilst a majority of humans became 'urbanites', it also became unclear what city or urban means. Cities were diagnosed as disappearing. In 1991 Françoise Choay proclaimed the death of the city, since the unity of urbs (the physical territory) and civitas (the community of citizens) is gone (Choay, 2006, 168, 191). Other farewells emphasized the loss of clear delimitations of the city from its outside, of centre-periphery structures, and clearly defined urban orders.

¹. Aarhus School of Architecture, Denmark, na@aarch.dk

At the same time, the concept of urbanization was expanded. According to the thesis of planetary urbanisation, for instance, spaces well beyond the traditional city cores and suburban peripheries have become integral parts of a “worldwide urban fabric” ranging from transoceanic shipping lanes to tourist enclaves, the world’s oceans and the atmosphere (Brenner and Schmid, 2011, 12).

If everything is urban, however, nothing is! The concept “fails to refer to anything” (Sayer, 1984, 281). Cities and urbanities apparently disappear conceptually because of too narrow (city) and too expansive (urbanity/urbanization) *conceptions* of both. Is there an “in-between” the two disappearances, a *concept* of city/urbanity that is neither too little or too much? I think there is. Rethinking Louis Wirth’s “minimal” sociological definition of the city paves the way.

Here the famous definition: “For sociological purposes a city may be defined as a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals” (Wirth, 1938, 8). What should be rethought is “relatively.” By stressing that it is a matter of degree. The city is *more or less* large, dense and heterogeneous; it is a *graduated* phenomenon. Similarly, size, density and heterogeneity do not have to covariate. Urbanities may be large, while densities are low without heterogeneity turning into homogeneity. Graduations include different *compositions* of size, density and heterogeneity.

Jacques Lévy and Michel Lussault have - in explicit continuity with Wirth (Lévy, 2001, 16) - categorised *the graduated city* (my concept) into “geotypes” of varied assemblies of density and heterogeneity. Centralities show high degrees of both: sub- and peri-urban areas have low degrees of density; para-urban areas have low degrees of heterogeneity, and infra-urban areas low degrees of both as the limit case to non-urbanity (Lussault, 2000, 32). Infrastructural mobility networks keep these differentially composed *urban types* accessible and together.

‘The graduated city’ can serve as a *minimal common denominator* for the multiple urbanities of the contemporary city. Citiness is not everything, it has an outside, cf. that cities cover only 2 % of the Earth’s land surface (Pincetl, 2017, 75). Further, the concept does not separate city and urban, and it covers a multiplicity of compositions.

One such composition is François Ascher’s *Métapolis* (1995), i.e. former separated urban areas and landscapes assembled by mobility infrastructures into “vast conurbations” consisting of “dispersed and discontinuous, heterogeneous and multi-polarized” territories, where “the limits and the physical and social differences between city and country become increasingly blurred” (Ascher, 2001, 58). Henceforth, I shall focalize on the different urban types of the Metapolis.

Metropolitan Atmospheres

Atmospherically, the Metapolis “assembles a multitude of ambient places (*lieux-ambiance*), [...] more or less related to each other” (Bourdin, 2014, 112). In European cities this multiplicity often shows a double tendency: the intensification of atmospheres in the historical centres and the pluralisation of atmospheres throughout the urban types. My hometown Aarhus offers an example (see Albertsen, 2013, 227-230 and the references there).

The historical centre presents an *atmosphere of age* where one can sense the city as old without knowing much about history. An *atmosphere of shopping* characterizes it

as commercial centre. The many impressions and differences of dense city life creates *an atmosphere of urbanism*. In recent decades the centre was improved in different ways, intensifying the mix of *atmospheres of age, shopping and urbanism*.

In the suburb three areas, quite similar in terms of income and upper-class settlement, turn out to be different and quite unique in terms of atmosphere. In the Skåde Hills south of the historical centre a “landlord feeling” prevails, in an area called ‘Fedet’ in Risskov towards the North a “Klondike” - like atmosphere prevails, while a small neighbourhood around Stationsgade in the same area shows a strong feeling of community.

Suburbia also exhibits *typical* atmospheres. If we stick to habitation: the neighbourhoods of detached housing with atmospheres of privacy around the house and the lawn; the large social housing estates where atmospheres of standardised ‘neutrality’ have been provided with various devices of homeliness; the low-dense estates with an atmosphere of village-like community, supported by the density of the enclaves, small scale and relative closedness.

In the para- and infra-urban areas a plurality of mixed built-up and landscape constellations show up. A village is surrounded by detached private housing turning the front towards the fields to capture a calm landscape atmosphere. In another village new storey buildings have been implanted, significantly altering the village atmosphere. Around the highway exits atmospheres emerge from constellations of large box-shaped commercial buildings, traffic facilities, mobility and open landscape.

The Anthropogenic Metapolis

The Anthropocene (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000) is a contested concept. For several reasons, which I cannot go into here. Despite the disputes I shall keep the concept because it has proved a useful umbrella for dialogue among the natural and the human sciences (Zalasiewicz, 2017, 168). I identify it as the Great Acceleration, not to take strong position in the hot periodization dispute, but because it matches the arrival of the Metapolis.

The Great Acceleration denotes the extraordinary growth after WWII in human population and global economy, the increased use of energy (fossil fuels) and expanded industrialization, leading to accelerated environmental change and rising levels of CO₂ in the atmosphere. Humans moved to cities. The annual transport of material by humans considerably exceeded that by rivers into the sea. In the biosphere, species invasions and species extinctions increased globally (Zalasiewicz, 2017, 167).

Louis Wirth defined the city as “settlement,” which presupposes built environments and infrastructures. Seen this way, the city is “a social, ecological and technical system of relatively large size, density and complexity. It contains humans and non-humans, some of which (like pigeons) are living and others of which (like street lights) are not” (Beauregard, 2018, 6). The growth of the human/non-human city was a prime mover in the anthropogenic acceleration, first through the rapid expansion of the “taylorfordo-keynesio-corbusian” (Ascher, 1995, 86) functionally zoned modernist city (1950-1975), then through the expansion of the Metapolis. This was an “environmentally disruptive” process. When “humans are brought together in such large and dense human settlements, non-renewable resources are consumed, land is absorbed, and ecosystems are displaced, disturbed and, at times, decimated” (Beauregard, 2018, 76). Today cities cover only 2% of the Earth’s land surface, but consume over 75% of the material resources (Pincetl, 2017, 75).

Atmosphere in the Anthropogenic Metapolis

The arrival of the Metapolis with its atmospheric multiverse was, then, also an anthropogenic urbanization process contributing to global warming and climate change, affecting the Earth system and deteriorating biodiversity. Both processes influence urban living and one may ask for connections. “After all, elements as diverse as air, water and plants are ambient factors as well as environmental resources” (Thibaud, 2015, 303). One obvious question is the relationship between meteorological atmosphere (climate change) and aesthetic atmosphere. The concept of *medium* helps linking.

Air and the Weather

Aesthetic atmosphere is often said to be experienced directly. Subject and object “melt together” just like when you feel the buzz of a mosquito (Böhme, 2001, 56). However, the buzz would be insensible if space was not filled with air. Air, one can say, is a precondition that as “loosely coupled” medium “without resistance” (Luhmann, 1995, 167, 172) allows the aesthetic experience of directness. Hence, perception always presupposes “a *third term* (my italics) between the perceiving subject and the perceived world” (Thibaud, 2015, 224).

Air is not only a third term between perception and perceived, it is also a third term between meteorological and aesthetic atmosphere. Loosely coupled air mediates both the atmosphere we breathe and the atmosphere we feel. “Breathing the air, we also perceive *in* the air,” without air we would both “suffocate” and be “struck senseless” (Ingold, 2012, 82).

Air is the medium in which different types of weather unfold. Shifts in weather conditions affects the aesthetic atmospheres across the anthropogenic Metapolis, following the seasons as well as shorter-term weather situations. Anthropocene weather conditions may be so strong and all-encompassing (hurricanes, cloudbursts, flooding, snowstorms, heat waves) that they dominate/annihilate the plurality of aesthetic atmospheres. Ordinarily, they modify the pluralities without obliterating their differences.

Atmospheric Attentiveness to the Anthropocene

From an everyday life perspective, the challenges of the Anthropocene may seem so overwhelming and unmanageable that it produces passivity and neglect. Here aesthetic atmosphere may come to help. We “need more than just instrumental, cognitive perception to influence attitudes and behaviour in the direction of responding to the conditions of the Anthropocene. We need to be emotionally affected, to be emotionally touched by those processes, which are already destroying our life supporting world” (Sieverts, 2017, 101). We need, one could say, to feel ourselves feeling the climate conditions. With the *Ice Watch Project* Olafur Eliasson has shown how to make the climate question sensuously present in the Metropolitan context. From 2014-2019 he installed large blocks of ice, cast off from the Greenland ice sheet, in the historical centres of Copenhagen, Paris and London. While melting, these blocks were meant to raise awareness of climate change through a direct and tangible experience of melting arctic ice², thus also gesturing towards global warming and connecting human and geological time scales. Thomas Sieverts emphasizes that the Anthropocene requires the use and reuse of built structures for a much longer period than present practice, which emotional attachments to the heritage of built structures and its preservation can assist (Sieverts, 2017, 103).

2. See at: <https://olafureliasson.net/archive/artwork/WEK109190/ice-watch>

Metapolitan Climate Politics: Atmospheric Aspects

Metapoles have been main drivers of the anthropogenic acceleration and its troubling consequences. Metapoles, though, also provide some solutions. Density, for instance, “saves energy, reduces land absorption, and minimises environmental burdens” (Beauregard, 2018, 80). Highlighting the importance of the concept of nature in urban climate politics, David Wachsmuth and Hillary Angelo aptly distinguish two different types of *æsthetics* in such policies: green urban nature and grey urban nature. *Green* denotes “the return of nature to the city in its most verdant form” emphasizing policy strategies such as “green walls, bioswales, and urban agriculture up to large-scale landscaping initiatives.” *Grey* denotes strengthening the already existing sustainable aspects of cities through policies of densification and efficiency measures. The green *æsthetics* appear as constellations of plants, vegetation and water; the grey *æsthetics* as “electric car chargers, high-tech smart-city infrastructure, and green building design.”

Wachsmuth and Angelo treat this *æsthetics* as ideologies tied to unequal power relations. The “*æsthetic* differences are important because they do ideological work.” They also understand them as signs, as *signifying* sustainability. Things that “look like nature, must be more sustainable than things that do not.” The *æsthetics* of grey signify that sustainable solutions are questions of “sophisticated technologies and expertise” (Wachsmuth and Angelo, 2018, 5, 7, 8). I shall not deny the importance of these ideological and semiotic aspects of Metapolitan climate policies. But this is not the whole story. Ideology and semiotics do not capture the aesthetic atmosphere, the sensuous experiences and moods engendered by green and grey, and as such influencing attachments of everyday urban life, and gesturing towards different or combined ways of living in and with the anthropogenic Metapolis.

Conclusion

Connections suggested for further inquiry: The Metapolis and its many atmospheres has arrived with and as co-generator of the Anthropocene; anthropogenic metapolitan atmospheres blur the meteorological/aesthetic distinction; metapolitan climate politics should be atmospheric.

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