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Atmosphere, Resonance, and Immanent Transcendence

Rethinking the Aesthetic Experience as a Threefold

Anders PALSTRØM¹

Abstract. The paper reinterprets the concept of *æsthetic experience*, combining the neo-phenomenological notion of *atmosphere* with the concept of *resonance*, developed by Hartmut Rosa, and the concept of *immanent transcendence*, coined by Dorthe Jørgensen. It hereby distinguishes between three aspects of *æsthetic experience*, interpreting the *æsthetic experience* as a sensitive interplay of emotional spatiality (*atmosphere*), vibrant relationality (*resonance*), and sensitive cognition (*immanent transcendence*). The paper suggests that this threefold structure can account for a variety of our sensitive *æsthetic experiences* in atmospheric situations, some being mainly atmospheric, others mainly resonant, and others deeply meaningful in a more cognitive sense.

Keywords. *Atmosphere, Resonance, Immanent Transcendence, Sensitivity, Aesthetics*

Introduction

The neo-phenomenological research on atmospheres (ambiances, *stimmungen* etc.) have without doubt led to an actualization of *æsthetics* and *æsthetic thinking* in the last few decades. Returning to the notion of *aisthesis* as the basic form of human experience, combined with the interpretation of feelings as spatial phenomena, the *æsthetics* of atmospheres have successfully emphasized the sensitive qualities of our being-in-the-world; in this regard, *æsthetic experience* is conceived as *atmospheric experience* (Griffero, 2016).

However, *æsthetic experiences* are not all about atmospheres, though we might say that *æsthetic experiences* are always atmospherically attuned in some way or another. I distinguish here between atmospheric situations as basic situations of felt-bodily involvement and genuine *æsthetic experiences*, occurring momentarily within the atmospheric situation. Some *æsthetic experiences* are more cognitive than emotional, some more relational than spatial, while others again seem to be first and foremost spatially emotional and, as such, mainly atmospheric. In order to grasp this variety of *æsthetic experiences*, this paper distinguishes between three different aspects of the *æsthetic experience*, drawing both on the tradition of *new phenomenology*, established by Hermann Schmitz, the *theory of resonance*, established by Hartmut Rosa, and the metaphysics of experience, developed by Dorthe Jørgensen. In doing so, I aim to combine the notions of resonance and immanent transcendence with that of atmosphere in order to better unfold the dynamic structure of *æsthetic experience*, reinterpreting it as a threefold.

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Atmosphere

Drawing on the tradition of new phenomenology, aesthetic experiences are, for a start, atmospheric. The aesthetic situation is, for a start, atmospheric. As Hermann Schmitz have shown, atmospheres can be conceived as spatial feelings, grasping us in the situations of which we are felt-bodily involved (Schmitz, 2019, 94, 100). The spatiality of the atmosphere reveals our situatedness, exposed as we are to the surroundings of this world, while at the same time expressing the pathic qualities of this involvement. In this regard, we always find ourselves felt-bodily involved in atmospheric situations. According to Schmitz, an atmosphere is “the unbounded occupation of a surfaceless space in the region of what is experienced as present” (Schmitz, 2019, 94). This region is what Gernot Böhme also denotes the “in-between” (Böhme, 2020, 14, 159). As enveloping phenomena, atmospheres manifest themselves between subject and object; indeed, around them.

Further, atmospheres are by nature vague but we perceive them anyway as being significant (Griffero, 2016, 12). In other words, the significance of the atmosphere is a vague significance, manifesting itself through our felt-bodily awareness in the atmospheric situation. Drawing on both Schmitz and Böhme, Tonino Griffero likewise emphasizes the pathicity of the sensitive experience. Due to its atmosphere, the vague and meaningful aesthetic situation is, according to Griffero, first and foremost pathic (Griffero, 2019). I will later argue against Griffero’s pathic naivety which I believe, even from a neo-phenomenological point of view, is an unnecessary reduction of the aesthetic experience to mere feeling.

Finally, the notion of the atmospheric situation points toward the preformative character of atmospheres. Typically, we experience the surrounding atmosphere as a dynamic emotional state of already-there-ness. Whether we become aware of the atmosphere in a given situation or not, it has always already enveloped us, as Martin Heidegger also stresses in his famous interpretation of *Befindlichkeit* (Heidegger, 1996, 126). What, then, does the pathic notion of atmosphere as a spatial phenomenon leave uncovered?

Resonance

Though the concept of resonance is not foreign to new phenomenology (Schmitz, 1969; Griffero, 2016, 6; Pallasmaa, 2019, 121-122; Wolf, 2019, 211), I believe it is fruitful to distinguish it from that of atmosphere in order to better grasp the dynamics of the aesthetic experience, i.g. the interrelation between atmosphere and resonance. In this regard, Hartmut Rosa offers a comprehensive concept, highlighting the relational qualities of meaningful human experience as such. I believe this allows us to conceive resonance as an aesthetic phenomenon and, due to its relational character, a constitutive aspect of aesthetic experience. Returning to the notion of an atmospheric situation, resonance is here conceived as a phenomenon that momentarily can occur *within* a given atmospheric situation.

Most importantly, the concept of resonance denotes certain phenomenal qualities of the *relationship* between subject and (segment of) world. While the modern world is, according to Rosa, mainly experienced as mute - reflecting alienation as a fundamental mode of being - momentary experiences of resonance show us that other ways of relating to the world is in fact possible, whether that is in the horizontal spheres of personal encounters, the diagonal spheres of encounters with things, or in the vertical spheres of religion, art, nature or history (Rosa, 2019, 195). To be clear, resonance can occur in all kinds of situations: when having conversations, when drawing and

painting, when praying, or even when playing sports. According to Rosa, resonance is both bodily and cognitively experienced as a vivid, vibrating, and deeply meaningful relationship in which subject and world each have their own voice, an encounter where both subject and world transform each other (Rosa, 2019, 167; 298).

Moreover, as a relational phenomenon, resonance is according to Rosa not in itself an emotional state of being. Rather, resonant relationships consist of both emotional and cognitive involvement (Rosa, 2019, 168, 126), and Rosa even holds that the experience of resonance momentarily repeals the distinction between body and mind (Rosa, 2019, 169), a dualism which Schmitz, too, has profoundly challenged (Schmitz, 2010). Both Schmitz and Rosa thus offer an opportunity to rethink the interplay of feeling and thinking in the atmospheric situations in which aesthetic experience might occur. I will return to this in the final part of this paper.

In contrast to Schmitz, Rosa also emphasizes the importance of active engagement (and even efficacy) for resonance to occur. Whether we are reading a book of poems, dwelling in front of a compelling work of art, or walking through a neighborhood, resonance demands a capability to sensitively relate to what we encounter, e.g. the sensitive capability to read poems and encounter art, or to open oneself to the surroundings of the city (even more so when creating the poems or paintings ourselves). The experience of sudden resonance implicates, thus always a mode of active engagement (Rosa, 2019, 158). However, this does not mean that resonance can be forced to occur, or that it is something we can instrumentally control. Resonance is - just like atmospheres - constitutively uncontrollable (Rosa, 2018).

Finally, Rosa himself reflects upon the intimate relation between resonance and atmosphere (in Rosa, experienced subjectively as mood) (Rosa, 2019, 181-188). As an enveloping phenomenon, the atmosphere now comes to show as the attuned spatial medium of our meaningful relationships to the world. For genuine aesthetic experience to happen, resonance is always atmospherically attuned in a certain way, also when unnoticed. In prospects of establishing the interpretation of the aesthetic experience as a threefold, the notions of atmosphere and resonance, on this basis, denote two equally important aspects of the aesthetic experience; i.e. the aspects of spatiality and relationality.

Immanent Transcendence

How can we, from an aestheticological point of view, understand the impression that the genuine aesthetic experience is experienced as being both sensitive and meaningful? And how can we interpret our way of being both perceptually, emotionally and cognitively engaged in the aesthetic experience? In search for answers, I now turn to Dorthe Jørgensen's *metaphysics of experience*, an aesthetically poetic philosophy developed with regard to the aesthetics of Baumgarten and Kant, the metaphysics of Benjamin, and the phenomenology of Heidegger, among others. Moreover, in Jørgensen's interpretation of philosophical aesthetics, we encounter what I conceive as the third aspect of aesthetic experience, namely the 'immanent transcendence' of sensitive cognition.

According to Jørgensen, the aesthetic dimension of the world is in no way mute. Rather, if only we allow ourselves to sensitively engage with the world in open awareness, we are struck by the beauty of its world poetry. Such experiences are, when they momentarily occur, with regard to Baumgarten 'sensitive' experiences in the original meaning of the term: vivid and confused, below the limit of distinctiveness

(Baumgarten, 1750/1986, 17). Sensitive experiences are in other words indistinct, vivid experiences of a “feeling, sensate, and presentiment character” (Jørgensen, 2018, 52). Drawing on the artist, Paul Klee, Jørgensen terms this aesthetic dimension of human experience ‘the intermediate world’. Accordingly, when we enter the intermediate world of aesthetic experience, we expose ourselves to the beauty of sensitivity, an experience which, with regard to both Heidegger, Løgstrup, Schmitz, and Böhme, Jørgensen too conceives as atmospherically attuned (Jørgensen, 2018, 52). And we could add: relationally resonant.

On this basis, I turn to the aspect of cognition in aesthetic experience. In the poetic experience of the intermediate world, Jørgensen holds that an “immanent transcendence” occurs as a sensitively experienced surplus of meaning (Jørgensen, 2018, 57). *Something* appears to transcend itself, and though we certainly might feel ambivalent about it, there is no doubt that such experiences carry their own meaningfulness in an inscrutable way. With regard to both Baumgarten’s sensitive cognition and Kant’s free play, Jørgensen holds that our cognitive involvement in such experiences is “in its own right” a mode of aesthetic reflection. The aesthetic experience is in its sensitivity, with regard to Kant, an expanded way of thinking; by nature cognitive, though not in any rationalistic or psychological way.

In this respect, Schmitz seems to open for similar interpretations of our subjectively situated cognitive involvement, though it might not have been recognized until now. The key is that hermeneutical thinking, according to Schmitz, might even occur without becoming explicative, i.g. as an indistinct mode of cognitive awareness. The reason for this is, accordingly, that hermeneutical thinking originates in bodily thinking but in such a sensitive way that the limit between bodily thinking and hermeneutical thinking is itself indistinct (Schmitz, 2010, 90). Even though hermeneutical thinking is by nature explicative, it follows that it can actually occur as a non-explicative thinking in the experienced situation. Further, the hermeneutical thinking can of course also develop explicatively within such a situation, and it often does. Think about entering a church: we instantly feel the atmosphere of the nave, but according to Schmitz we can also find ourselves implicatively (and of course explicatively) reflecting upon the embedded significance of our being in this sacred church, emotionally attuned by the atmosphere dwelling there. On this basis, it should be clear that cognition - even from a neo-phenomenological point of view - is just as involved as our body in the aesthetic experience, although we cannot really distinguish between bodily and cognitively reflective awareness during the aesthetic experience, or for that matter between body and mind. Thus, the immanent transcendence of the experienced surplus of meaning tells us that we cannot reduce the aesthetic experience to mere pathicity. Rather, the phenomenal aspects of atmosphere, resonance, and immanent transcendence express the comprehensive ambiguity of the aesthetic experience in its dynamic nature of genuine sensitivity. As an aesthetically cognitive phenomenon, I believe that immanent transcendence should be distinguished from the relational aspect of resonance. Resonance does not in itself seem to necessarily imply transcendence, while on the other hand, immanent transcendence only seems to occur within the experience of an atmospherically attuned resonance, transcending the relational mode of experience from within. The cognitive aspect of the aesthetic experience can thus be interpreted to denote the sensitive experience of the significant surplus of meaning embedded in the atmospherically attuned resonance, an interpretation which Rosa does not seem to exclude (speaking instead of deep resonance). Though experiences of immanent transcendence might indeed be rare to most of us, Jørgensen stresses across her work the importance of faithfully exposing ourselves to this transformative dimension of experience.

Finally, Jørgensen emphasizes the creative role of imagination in the æsthetic experience (Jørgensen, 2020). In addition to feeling, sensation, and presentiment, the intermediate world of sensitivity is a world of imagination. Jørgensen holds that imagination creatively conditions the way in which we encounter the world in open awareness, interpreting imagination as an asubjective, quasi-objective power (Jørgensen, 2018, 38). Drawing on Jørgensen, imagination seemingly comes to show as the unifying constituent of the æsthetic threefold, conditioning our engagement in the æsthetic situation in a sensitive and transparent way. For my part, however, it remains to be reflected upon - in accordance with our æsthetic experiences - how imagination more specifically interferes with the way we experience the phenomena of atmosphere, resonance, and immanent transcendence.

Conclusion

On a closing remark, the interpretation of the æsthetic experience as a threefold does not reduce the sensitive nature of the æsthetic experience - either to mere feeling or rational cognition. Rather, it offers an opportunity to æsthetically reflect upon the interplay between the three dynamic aspects of the æsthetic experience occurring in the atmospheric situation. It follows that the threefold æsthetic experience can manifest itself in all kinds of different ways, depending on the particular situation and the content of the relational encounter. Some experiences may be more atmospherically affective than cognitive, some might be more cognitively resonant than atmospherically attuned. Just as the phenomenon of immanent transcendence can manifest itself as an experienced surplus of meaning more or less noticeably. The distinctions of constitutive aspects of genuine æsthetic experience are thus held to be fruitful in prospects of future research on the variety of æsthetic experiences occurring in the atmospheric situations in which we find ourselves to be sensitively involved...

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