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**THE  
ATMOSPHERE  
OF AN OBJECT**

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Juhani Pallasmaa

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Modern architecture and design have been dominated by vision, and especially focused vision, following the Gestalt principles of psychology. However, focused vision makes us outside observers in relation to what we are seeing. Le Corbusier's famous credo of 1923 exemplifies this retinal position: 'Architecture is the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light.'<sup>1</sup> The master's own works create dramatic and moving sensations of presence, emotion and unifying ambience, but modernity at large has been obsessed with pure form and visibility. We like to visit vernacular and historical settings, often of lesser formal qualities, due to their embracing and caressing sense of materiality, texture, scale and atmosphere. Atmosphere, feeling and empathy were theorized as early as the late 19th century in German research and literature, but modern architecture and design have been oriented towards 'pure' form so obsessively that immaterial, formless and measureless overall ambiances and atmospheres have been neglected. We must recognize, however, that artistic and empathic sensibilities have usually produced captivating atmospheres, although they have not been conscious goals in the designer's thinking or working process.

### Multi-Sensory Fusion

The character of a space, place or object is not merely a visual perceptual quality. The judgment of environmental character is a complex multi-sensory fusion of countless factors, which are immediately and synthetically grasped as an overall atmosphere, feeling, mood or ambience. 'I enter a building, see a room, and – in the fraction of a second – have this feeling about it,' Peter Zumthor confesses.<sup>2</sup> This experience is multi-sensory in its essence, but it also involves judgments beyond the five senses. Indeed, our immediate judgment of the character of a space calls for our entire embodied and existential sense, and this character is perceived in a diffuse and peripheral manner, rather than through precise and conscious observation. Moreover, this complex assessment engages a temporal process as perception, memory and imagination are fused. As we enter a space, the space enters us, and the experience is essentially an exchange and a fusion of the object

A Proto-object by Constantin Brâncuși, *Atelier Brâncuși*, Paris, FR. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

B Stoup by Le Corbusier, *Chapelle Notre-Dame-du-Haut de Ronchamp*, Ronchamp, FR. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

<sup>1</sup> Le Corbusier, *Towards A New Architecture* (1923), London: The Architectural Press, UK, 1959, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Zumthor, *Atmospheres: Architectural Environments. Surrounding Objects*, Basel: Birkhäuser, CH, 2006, p. 13.

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c Passive ventilation system at Agra Fort, UNESCO World Heritage site, built in red sandstone by Emperor Akbar, Agra, IN, 1565-1571. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

d The Pantheon is one of the best preserved Roman buildings in the world. The open dome of the Pantheon has a diameter of 8.7 metres and provides the special light and atmosphere. The total dome has a diameter of 44.4 meters and is the largest dome in the world made of unreinforced concrete. The Pantheon was built between 118 and 125 by Emperor Hadrian, Rome, IT. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

e Sacromonte, Granada, is famous for its cave dwellings. It is located in the hills of Valparaiso, north-east of the historic Arab quarter of El Albaicin, founded in the 17th century. Inspired by the *Gitanos* native to the area, the poet Garcia Lorca gave a lecture on their *Canto jondo*, in which he described it as 'Siguiriya the prototype of deep song [...] the only genre on our continent that preserves in all its purity, as much structurally as stylistically, the primary qualities of the primitive songs of the oriental peoples'. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

and the subject. Each space and situation is an invitation and suggestion to distinct acts. It provides the unifying coherence and character of an object, a room, a space and a landscape, or a human encounter. Atmosphere is the common denominator of the colouring, tuning and feel of the experiential situation. It is a 'quasi-thing'<sup>3</sup> suspended between the perceived object and the sensing subject.

### Atmosphere in the Arts

Atmosphere seems to be more conscious in literary, cinematic and theatrical thinking than in architecture and design. Even the imagery of a painting is integrated by an overall atmosphere or feeling; the most important unifying factor in paintings is usually their specific feel of illumination and colour, more than their conceptual or narrative content. In fact, there is an entire painterly approach, as exemplified by J.M.W. Turner and Claude Monet, which can be called 'atmospheric painting', in both senses of the word, atmosphere being both the subject matter and these paintings' mode of expression. 'Atmosphere is my style,' Turner confessed to John Ruskin, as Zumthor reminds us. The formal and structural ingredients in the works of these artists are deliberately suppressed for the benefit of an all-embracing and shapeless atmosphere, suggestive of temperature, moisture and subtle movements of the air. Colour field painters likewise suppress form and boundaries and utilize large areas of the canvas to create an intense interaction and presence of colour.

Great films, such as the films by Jean Vigo, Jean Renoir, Michelangelo Antonioni and Andrei Tarkosvsky, are also steeped in a characteristic atmospheric continuum. Theatre, too, relies heavily on atmosphere which supports the integrity and continuity of the story regardless of the often abstracted and vaguely hinted features of place or space. An ambience can be so suggestive and dominating that very few cues are needed, as in Lars von Trier's film *Dogville* (2003), in which houses and rooms are often indicated by no more than chalk lines on the dark floor. Yet the drama still grips the spectator's imagination and emotions.

Somewhat paradoxically, we can also speak of 'atmospheric sculpture', such as the sketch-like modellings of Medardo Rosso, Auguste Rodin and Alberto Giacometti. Often it is the atmosphere of the works, as in the abstracted sculptures of Constantin Brâncusi, that create the unique sense of a singular artistic world.

3 Tonino Griffiero, *Quasi-Things: The Paradigm of Atmospheres*, New York: State University of New York Press, USA, 2017.

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F Lars von Trier, *Dogville*, 2003, Denmark. With its story of a village somewhere between nowhere (utopia) and elsewhere (heterotopia), the film makes reference to Bertolt Brecht's alienation effect without being Brechtian. On the contrary, it is very theatrical and atmospheric. A hallmark of the film is its lack of a built environment. Courtesy: The Funambulist, FR.

G Medardo Rosso, *Ecce Puer – Behold the Child*, 1906, IT. Legend has it that Rosso experienced great difficulty with the work, until one evening he was struck by the appearance of a boy peering through some curtains. Rosso chose to depict that fleeting moment and apparently finished the bust in a single sitting. 'When I do a portrait', he said, 'I cannot limit it to the lines of the head since this head belongs to a body; it is in an environment that has an influence on it, it makes part of a whole I cannot suppress.' Courtesy: Museo Medardo Rosso Museum, IT.

H Andrei Tarkovsky on the set of *Stalker*, 1979, Russia, one of the most immersive and rarefied experiences in the history of cinema. Andrei Tarkovsky: 'I prefer to express myself metaphorically. Let me stress: metaphorically, not symbolically. A symbol contains within itself a definite meaning, certain intellectual formula, while metaphor is an image. An image possessing the same distinguishing features as the world it represents. An image – as opposed to a symbol – is indefinite in meaning.' Courtesy: Cinephilia & Beyond, HR.

Artists seem to be more aware of the seminal role of ambience than architects, who tend to think more in terms of the 'pure' qualities of space, form and geometry. Among architects, atmosphere seems to be judged as something romantic and shallowly entertaining. Besides, the serious Western architectural tradition is entirely based on regarding architecture as a material and geometric object experienced through focused vision. Standard architectural images seek clarity rather than ephemerality and obscurity.

Of all the various art forms, music is particularly atmospheric and has a forceful impact on our emotions and moods regardless of how little or how much we intellectually understand musical structures. That seems to be the very reason why music is commonly used to create the desired atmospheric moods in public spaces, shopping malls and even elevators. Music creates atmospheric interior spaces, ephemeral and dynamic experiential fields, rather than distant shapes, structures or objects. Atmosphere emphasizes a sustained being in a situation rather than a singular moment of perception. The fact that music can move us to tears is convincing proof of the emotive power of art as well as of our innate capacity to simulate and internalize abstract experiential structures. Or more precisely, to project our emotions on abstractly symbolic structures.

### A Specific Air

The notion of atmosphere is usually related to weather, environments, places and spaces, but even singular objects project a specific mood or tuning, and they evoke distinct associations and feelings. All great works of art in painting, sculpture, theatre, film and music project atmospheres and specific attunements. Modern architecture at large has been obsessed with clear and pure form, and atmospheric qualities have been neglected and bypassed. Yet even Modern environments have their atmospheres, and what is frequently called 'style', either periodic or personal, is based on atmospheric characteristics as much as on formal criteria.

The objects designed by Satyendra Pakhalé embody poetic analogies, which project strong and embracing atmospheres. They have a specific air around them, which has a direct effect on our perception, behaviour and feelings. Pakhalé's design works exude a benevolent, friendly and inviting atmosphere, like the comforting presence of life companions.

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