

# Spaces and Atmospheric Memories

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*Our starting point is the following hypothesis: the human constructions of architecture and urbanism are a destination of memory. Such a starting point calls for an investigation of the place that memory must occupy within the framework of a topological phenomenology. It is in the context of such a framework that our key argument is developed as follows: the alignment between memory and space reveals itself, in a particularly intense and illustrative way, in the immersive experiences of certain ambiences, or atmospheres.*

1 Bruce Bégout, *Los Angeles, capitale du XXe siècle* (Paris: Inculte/Barnum, 2019), 18.

## Destinations of Memories

Our starting point is the following hypothesis: the human constructions of architecture and urbanism are a destination of memory. This hypothesis can be demonstrated through a double condition: on the one hand, confirming that memory is not only of time, but also of space, that is, also of places, sites and objects; on the other hand, demonstrating that to remember is not something we can understand by an abstract projection of ideas, but only *in the flesh*, that is, throughout geographical involvements, significant locations, heterodoxic emplacements and atmospheric immersions that speak primarily to the bodily condition of our being-in-the world. The same can be said in another way: our hypothesis calls for an investigation of the place that memory must occupy within the framework of a topological phenomenology.

A topological phenomenology is an approach that pursues the descriptive exhaustion of places as they *appear* – as they appear as polarizing webs of customs and uses, of intensities and tones, of incorporations and decentrations, of times and memories. Based on such an approach, it is assumed that the characteristics of such a way of complex appearing, as noted by Bruce Bégout, “are not revealed as pure values in the sky of ideas, but are determined (...) in a lively, narrative, daily topography.”<sup>1</sup> I would like to add that such a topography is also, in a certain way, *memorable*.

In relation to this last aspect, there are many difficulties to consider. The outline of a topological phenomenology of memory would demand a series of fundamental investigations: it would be necessary to consider, for example, the theme of spatial sedimentations that any lived topography inscribes on the body; it should also be necessary to consider the way in which space offers the narratives of recovered time a matrix of durability, a model of *in-placement* and environmental sense; also, one should consider the way in which objects can function as spatial reminders or exoskeletons of memory. And all of this would be but the beginning. In the impossibility of dealing, at this moment, with all the major implications of all such fertile paths, I would at least like to consider a precise aspect that crosses them all: the fact that the alignment between memory and space reveals itself, in a particularly intense and illustrative way, in the immersive experiences of certain *ambiances*, or atmospheres.

## The Memorable Style of a City

When I think about the possibility of studying the alignment between memory and space, I always return to a passage from Merleau-Ponty’s *Phénoménologie de la perception* in which the French philosopher writes about a journey to Paris. The story is, at first sight, a kind of “case study” mobilized to tackle the problem of perception. But, unexpectedly, something else becomes thinkable: a strange link between perception and

- 2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 325 [Eng. trans, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London; New York: Routledge, 1958), 327].
- 3 Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 325 [327].
- 4 *Ibid.*, 325 [327–328].
- 5 *Ibid.*, 325 [328].
- 6 He uses it elsewhere. See *ibid.*, 400 [405].
- 7 We can argue it “with” Merleau-Ponty, even if the philosopher himself is not fully aware, at the time of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, of the scope of its own words, as if a *shadow* of his own thought was operating under his own phenomenological descriptions. See Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l’invisible*, (Paris: Gallimard, Poche, 2004), 237.

the memory of space – a memory that seems to be secured by the streets, the people, the buildings, the public lamps, the margins of the Seine river, the trees.

Here are the initial terms of the problem, as Merleau-Ponty puts them: the traditional problem of the perception of space and perception in general (the problem of how one can, in an explicit act, determine spatial relationships between objects and between objects with their ‘properties’) must be reintegrated into a “vaster problem”, into a “first order question.” Regarding the problem of perception, the vaster problem is, for Merleau-Ponty, this: the act of perception “appears only against the background of an already familiar world.”<sup>2</sup>

Let us now take into consideration the example given by Merleau-Ponty to face this key aspect: the experience of arriving in Paris by train. What – our philosopher asks – do I perceive as Paris when I arrive? One thing is clear: I do not have perceptions, I do not posit one object (a house, a bench, a street) as beside another one, along with their objective relationships, after which I perceive Paris. What happens is something entirely different: “I have a flow of experiences which imply and explain each other both simultaneously and successively”: a flow of strangely familiar experiences. “Paris, for me, at that moment, is not an object of many facets, a collection of perceptions, nor is it the law governing all these perceptions”;<sup>3</sup> as I arrive and journey through Paris – Merleau-Ponty adds – the cafés, people’s faces, the poplars along the quays, the bends of the Seine stand out “against the city’s whole being, and merely confirms that there is a certain style (...) Paris possesses.”<sup>4</sup> When one arrives there “for the first time”, the first roads that one sees as one left the station were, *like the first words spoken by a stranger, simply manifestations of that still ambiguous style, but one already unlike any other.*<sup>5</sup>

I would like to argue here that Merleau-Ponty, when referring to the *ambiguous style of manifestation* of the city, is, in fact (and even if he does not use the concept here<sup>6</sup>), talking about the *ambience* of the city, about the *atmosphere* of Paris. If this is so, then we should add a crucial point to our analysis: *the perception of Paris is, originally, the perception of an atmosphere* and not of objects postulated as being one near the other. Better yet, we could argue that any perception of an object is only possible over the more primitive *way of appearing* of an atmosphere or ambience that binds together, as if by an ancient and anonymous pact, the perceiving subject, and the perceived world.<sup>7</sup>

If this is so, a crucial implication, I would argue, can be drawn regarding the case of memory. In fact, we could contend that as one remembers a visit to Paris, memories are never just representational data of isolated objects, actions, and people; on the contrary, what is remembered is, first and foremost a specific atmosphere, a particular ambience of Paris that penetrates, envelops, keeps in place, and *brings into the present a memorable lived topology*. We could not remember anything

8 Peter Sloterdijk, *Écumes*, quoted in Bégout, *Le concept d'ambiance* (Paris: Seuil, 2020), 379.

9 Bégout, *Le concept d'ambiance*, 257.

10 *Ibid.*, 27.

11 *Ibid.*, 257.

of Paris without the *atmospheric memory, the tonal memory of Paris*. This is something that will become particularly evident in the situation of returning to a city we once visited: as we return, we are once again merged with the atmosphere of the city; and suddenly, the apparently lost time of our first visit becomes vividly present *in that tonal emersion*. It is a weird experience: the past becomes intensely, vividly present *in the present*, as if atmospheres kept it safe from definitive oblivion. A kind of *fantom past* (and fantom memory) is kept in place by atmospheres that affiliate space, time and “my” lived experiences.

### Ambiances

But what exactly is an ambience, an atmosphere? The answer is not evident. It is true that there is a common concept of “atmosphere” that circulates in everyday discourses about “environments” and that we can identify with relative ease. But underlying the myriad of “concepts” that all the “experts” in “environments” abundantly propose, there is a symmetrically vulgar explanation of ambience that remains questionable. That abundance of proposals is certainly important because it allows us to conclude the anthropological importance of environments. Peter Sloterdijk recognizes this, having even introduced the notion of “man as an engineer of atmospheres” to the centre of his anthropology.<sup>8</sup> But we must look at such an abundance of contemporary references to “atmospheres” with the mistrust inherent to an informed philosophical approach.

In fact, the common explanation consists, in one way or another, of conceiving ambiances as an encounter, an interaction, a relationship between one’s sensitivity and its surroundings. This is, curiously, the conception that dominates most of the interpretations proposed by the human sciences; it is mixture, interaction, the crossing between body and space that prevails in those accounts. B. Bégout recently came to argue, in a particularly vigorous and original way, that such interpretations, based on a kind of initial breakdown or analytical decomposition of the environment in its simple components (a localized subject and a world that surrounds it) and in the subsequent recompositing or circumstantial combination, is debatable.<sup>9</sup>

Bégout’s counterproposal will be an eco-phenomenological perspective on ambience.<sup>10</sup> According to this perspective, the experience, *somewhere*, of the appearance of an ambience, of an atmosphere, of a flair, “does not manifest the distinct presence” and putative alliance of a localized subject, on the one hand, and a surrounding world, on the other;<sup>11</sup> ambiances are not explained by interactions, but by *immersion*. An ambience is the involving and penetrating *fabric of appearance*.

It will not be denied, of course, that the *appearance* of an atmosphere, of a tonal environmental flair, demands the presence of a subjectivity that experiences it; nor will it be forgotten that such an *appearance* is favoured by certain contexts (geographic, meteorological,

12 Ibid., 258.

13 Ibid., 258.

14 As Merleau-Ponty still suggests, tributary to the phenomenological primacy of consciousness.

15 Bégout, *Le concept d'ambiance*, 258.

16 Ibid., 258.

17 Ibid., 258.

urban, material, etc.); but – and this “but” is a crucial one – this does not mean, from a phenomenological point of view, that what such subjectivity feels as an environment refers to its own presence as a subject in face of particular objects.<sup>12</sup> One feels the atmosphere; but what one thus feels is much more than oneself as a perceiving subject. One feels something that is neither subject nor object. The point is subtle: when we experience an atmosphere, it is we who, as “subjects”, feel it; but what we thus feel is not ourselves, nor something fully present in face of us. According to Bégout, what is at issue here is a strange, but fundamental experience of a subjective experience that remains anonymous or *a-subjective*. It could be argued that the experience of an ambience forces us to recognize “subjectivity for what it is: a simple non-phenomenal condition of phenomenality.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, the atmosphere is not the manifestation of what a subject feels, but the *non-appearing condition that – in and with what appears – sustains all that appears*.

That condition is one that *merges* the perceptive subject and the appearing world. The term we must use is, in fact, “to merge.” That is to say that ambiances or atmospheres also do not seem to be, strictly speaking, the manifestation of a connection, of an interaction, of an intertwining between a place, a landscape, a cultural context, and the affective moods of those who feel them.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the experience of an ambience is not that of an assembly: it is, originally, that of “involvement” and “penetration.”<sup>15</sup>

The originality of Bégout’s eco-phenomenological approach is summarized in these concepts, which allows us to consistently reforge the “atmospheric turn” of contemporary thought: the ambience, as a phenomenon, is the involvement and penetration of a tonal atmosphere that attests to the way of appearing of a “background that is irreducible to the elements and relations”<sup>16</sup> – a background that is nothing but the mediational *flair* in which the elements and relations can appear. In other words, in the experience of an ambience everything happens as if the subject had the capacity to feel more than himself and more than his connection to a given context. In fact, the subject can feel, *in* and *as* an ambience, “what is neither subject nor object, but the atmospheric background (...) from which subjects and objects appear.”<sup>17</sup>

It is a powerful argument: the experience of an ambience, of a certain *atmospheric style* is the proof of the appearance of something that surpasses the *connection*. Therefore, it must be held that ambiances literally decentralize the subject at the very core of the phenomenal field. “To feel” an atmosphere, to find oneself immersed in it, to oscillate affectively to its pace, is to lose our central reference place. In this experience, we are not a pole of action, nor of thought, nor are we a place for the inscription of impressions; the usual movement of self-referentiality is extinguished. What thus absorbs us is also what transforms us into tonal subjects: we became the very ability to plunge, to be submerged, to be caught in the moment, and in the place. This is why we can argue that

18 When we understand an ambience the symbiotic comprehension and the symbolic institution are fused – even if we can distinguish the two corresponding phases of comprehension.  
See *ibid.*, 261.

19 *Ibid.*, 261.

20 *Ibid.*, 258.

21 *Ibid.*, 258.

an ambience is not something “of the subject”, nor something that “is to be found in the subject”; on the contrary: an atmospheric ambience is the style of an immersive appearance itself.

### Atmospheric Memories

Consider a final example: we walk into a house and declare: “it has a comfortable atmosphere.”<sup>18</sup> The “house” appeared to me as an ambience. It is true that we perceive the walls and materials, but only as penetrated, as merged in the way of appearing of the atmosphere of comfort. The “comfortable house” is not, in this sense, just a set of walls and windows that “create an atmosphere” by interacting with the visitor; the “comfortable house” testifies to the *immersive effect of an atmosphere* as the condition for something to present itself to me.<sup>19</sup> And what happens when I return to that comfortable house, in which I began to live and lived for some time? What do I remember? And how do I remember?

My argument here is that the “same” comfort seems to become present once again; and in that *presence a fantom memory* of the merged “ancient” tonal house and tonal a-subjective subject reappears – as if arriving from an ancient derelict world.

It is true that the ambience “has the absolute individuality of one here and now not reproducible”;<sup>20</sup> but it is also true that an ambience “authorizes a certain recognition process.”<sup>21</sup> I would contend that such a recognition can also function in memory. If this is so, we could finally organize the main thesis of this paper as follows: I argued earlier that an ambience is a kind of latent presence, diffused throughout the house, or the city (in our examples). We perceive it *in and with* something specific and self-evident, but at the same time as something not fully graspable or needing a definition. Ambience is a simple, immediate, delicate, fleeting but memorable experience; it manifests mediation, involvement and the affective unity of a moment that carries with it the original immersive bond between subject and world. I also contended that an initial perception independent of any atmospheric background is inconceivable. And finally, I claim that spaces, things, and events are sometimes salvaged from the past by the involvement and penetration of atmospheres that merge persons and spaces in the same memorable tone that is the condition itself for something to appear.