

15 Atmospheres – Schmitz, Massumi and beyond

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This short discussion piece engages with a phenomenological approach to atmospheres, focussing on the work of Hermann Schmitz. Against a background of agreement on the contours of an understanding of atmospheres and their relevance, the text will present a number of critical considerations, in part comparing and contrasting Schmitz’s approach with that of cultural theorist and affect studies pioneer Brian Massumi.

The meaning and significance of “atmosphere”

Atmospheres are pervasive: they are everywhere, we’re always in them, enveloped by them. The weather is an atmosphere, and we’re always *in* a “weather.” So, too, is the “climate” that prevails in a room or in a building. Every social gathering is replete with atmospheric qualities, charging the space between all those present at the scene. Objects – from old pieces of furniture to the newest devices of high-tech media – radiate atmospheres. Hovering over it all are cultural climates, affective textures of historical epochs or of geographical regions at certain times; the same is true of social milieus, cities and villages, institutional spaces, subcultures, digital niches and all other types of social settings. Moreover, each of us is beset individually by bodily atmospheres, sensually present as corporeal stirrings such as vigour or languidness, and radiated outwards from one’s postural demeanour as an aura, as charismatic affective tone, however subtle, infusing a person’s surroundings with a specific level of energy, both situationally and habitually in the longer run.

So, what *are* atmospheres? In order to get anywhere with this question, we are well-advised to first of all suspend, at least for the moment, our educated scruples about experiential presence and phenomenal immediacy. We will get nowhere if we do not at least attempt to behold and grasp atmospheres in their experiential presence *before* explicit reflection and conceptualisation set in. Prior to any such dissective operation, atmospheres are manifest as tangible, forceful, qualitative “presences” in experiential space – what grips us, long before we might grasp it, if we ever do. They encircle subjects of experience, “filling up” their respective corporeal milieu, the ambiance of a sensing being. Atmospheres are what we mean when we sense and say that “there is something in the air” – or rather, they are the

ambient air itself insofar as it is situationally charged with an energetic texture. Accordingly, atmospheres impress themselves – in a holistic manner, in a range between tender and forceful – upon an adequately attuned sensibility. Without cultivating, activating and holding open such an attuned sensibility, and without a readiness to express and articulate its oftentimes vague or inchoate deliverances, we will have a hard time getting anywhere near to what atmospheres are all about.

So, we might and should say this about them: atmospheres are that which is always already “there,” filling up lived space around us; thereby they subtly yet pervasively set the tone for our being and being-together. This is what Heidegger pointed out in his characterisation of moods or attunements, and which I think is still one of the more noteworthy philosophical articulations of atmospheric presences:

Attunements [*Stimmungen*] are *not side-effects* but are something which in advance determine our being with one another. It seems as though an attunement is in each case already there, so to speak, like an atmosphere in which we first immerse ourselves in each case and which then attunes us through and through.

(Heidegger 1995 [1929–1930], 100; Engl. 67; emphasis in original)

Importantly, atmospheres are not identical to their being felt, not reducible to subjective conditions – we are not talking about modes of experience; otherwise, we could stick with a subjectivistically construed talk about moods. The key is that we can behold atmospheres from a distance, sense their presence without being ourselves in their affective grip. We can see, grasp and neutrally describe the jubilation of the party, the tension of the meeting, the enthusiasm of the crowd and also the sadness or despair enveloping a friend in mourning, without being affectively involved ourselves.

Somewhat more technically, I suggest that atmospheres are a type of *affordance*: prepared occasions for affective engagement, for absorption and attunement (Slaby 2014). They are experiential possibilities “on offer” in the environment, to beings with adequate dispositions. An atmosphere is such that we *can* be taken in, we *can* come to feel in tune with its dynamic formation. This possibility for affectedness might itself “affect” us in a certain way; there is an element of active allure, which is often sensed even by those who are not prone to being swayed by the atmosphere at issue. Everybody knows this from moments of detachment from a jubilant gathering, or at the site of a sorrowful scene from which one is disconnected. Often in such situations, there is a characteristic experiential and agentive threshold between one’s maintaining composure – probably heeding a prior resolution not to be swayed – and one’s being sucked into the fray.

This indicates a duality of dimensions. The atmosphere in ambient space is distinct from our corporeal attunement to it. We cannot do without such a distinction, however vague and porous the boundary between atmosphere and corporeal attunement may be in each given case, and however much this tentative boundary

might shift between cases. Only on such grounds can we make sense of cases of affective discord: languid or otherwise exhausted, we utterly fail to resonate with even the most vibrant, welcoming, jubilant surroundings, barely hanging in there, absently glaring at the passing show. On the other hand, our most vigorous, vital, most vibrantly radiating disposition might fall flat in the face of barren surroundings – in a thin and sterile atmosphere of a locale from which all joy and all flavour has been expelled.

These are extremes. What is important is to secure a workable distinction between atmosphere and corporeal attunement. Surely, we must be on guard against locking the subject into their individual corporeal frame, as if it were impossible for us to transgress our subjectivity and dissolve into the surrounding scene. Yet, on the other hand, something akin to being locked into one's subjective frame, unable to resonate with one's ambient, is an acute possibility, so we should not exclude it on terminological grounds. Heidegger, for instance, puts emphasis on the *burdensome* character of “thrownness,” of finding oneself “here,” the horrors of being “this particular thing,” saddled with this particular disposition in such and such circumstances (Heidegger 1995, 531). His point is that we often cannot shake free of our specific atmospheric complexion. We carry a characteristic affective framing – an existential imprint of our individual being – inevitably with us, wherever we go. In a variety of locutions of ordinary language, the said distinction between situational atmosphere and individual affective comportment surfaces: we have a range of terms for public moods, affective climates and broad atmospheric formations – and likewise, many terms to be applied to individual affective conditions. Many of these terms find equal application on both sides of that divide: *tenseness* can pertain to a meeting, as well as to my individual disposition while participating in one that is not tense at all. There is a lot of *angst* in the room, we might rightly say, while it is clear throughout that we ourselves are not angst-ridden at all, and so on.¹

Learning from Schmitz

With these various tentative characterisations of atmospheres, I have entered the discursive and ideational territory of eminent German phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz. If our aim is indeed to chart “Germanophone affect studies” – a project I have some reservations about, given its methodologically nationalist contours – then we can hardly avoid dealing with Schmitz. Hermann Schmitz (born in 1927) is a philosophical *enfant terrible* and the founder of a movement that his refreshing lack of modesty made him dub “new phenomenology.” Atmospheres, in roughly the sense I have outlined earlier, are right at the heart of its intuition base and conceptual repertoire. So here is a brief take on Schmitz, this unique time traveller sent to us from what can feel like a bygone era of the German spirit.

“There is nothing wrong with the history of philosophy,” Schmitz is fond of saying – “up until around 400 B.C.” (Schmitz, Müllan and Slaby 2011, 243). At that time, he thinks, somewhere between Heraclitus and Sophocles, began the fateful splitting of the world (*schicksalhafte Weltspaltung*): the world was divided

into outer world and inner world. An individualised inner realm was invented, one for every conscious being, called soul, *psyché*, *mens*, mind or some such. Schmitz writes:

I term it the psychologistic-reductionist-introjectionist objectification and characterise it as follows: the realm of experience is dissected by ascribing to each conscious subject a private inner sphere containing their entire experience. This is done, at first, under the name “soul.” The external realm remaining between the souls is ground down to features of a few kinds that are ideally suited for statistics and experiments due to their inter-momentary and intersubjective identifiability, measurability and selective variability. The remnants of this grinding down are either [. . .] located in the souls or are ignored. But even so, they wind up there furtively, so to speak. Among them are the emotions, furthermore the felt body [*Leib*] and corporeal [*leiblich*] communication (e.g. in exchanging glances), significant situations and with them impressions charged with significance, as well as surfaceless spaces and their occupation (e.g. by wind and weather). Thus, the greater part of spontaneous experience of the world is lost sight of to apprehensive attention. (Schmitz, Müllan, and Slaby 2011, 247)

Not surprisingly, Schmitz’s self-assigned mission is and has been to reverse this trend – to restore a world- and self-understanding that better captures spontaneous lived experience: a self-understanding that is pre-Socratic, at least in spirit.² Already here we can see a parallel, if a somewhat generic one, with Brian Massumi’s work and intellectual mission. Massumi is surely no stranger to the assumption that conceptual abstractions pertaining to a (post)modern intellectual and sociopolitical formation have for long, and quite profoundly, distorted our collective and individual lived experience. So, for Massumi, too, it is a key task for philosophical thought to dismantle this prevailing culture of abstraction, to break the gridlock of intellectualistic systems, codes and habits, in order to set free the promissory and transformative potentials of pure experience – and of dynamic, pre-categorical affective intensity in particular (see e.g. Massumi 2002, 2011).

Yet, before I turn to Massumi’s work, I will all too briefly skim through some of the basic ideas and concepts of Schmitz’s philosophy. At heart of his system – and a “system” indeed it is: his *System der Philosophie* (1964–1980) stretches to ten volumes and more than 5,500 pages of text – sits *der Leib* (i.e. the felt, or rather: the *feeling* body) mightily enthroned. “Corporeality” is probably a better technical translation, because what Schmitz means by *Leib*, substantive notwithstanding, is not another “body” in the sense of a concrete entity in the world, but rather corporeal dynamics and resonances of various kinds whose presence and operations form the crucial basis of subjectivity, and thus the central playing field for phenomenology: what *Leib* in fact stands for are various corporeal stirrings, modes of affectedness, involvement and absorption unfolding in and through the field of presence which usually is – as Schmitz is fond of saying – “felt in the region of,” but is not identical to one’s body (Schmitz, Müllan, and Slaby 2011, 245). This

dynamic *Leib*, corporeality, or *feeling* body comes into view once we stop treating experience as a matter of inner mental awareness. What Schmitz means by *Leib* is close to Heidegger's *being-in-the-world*, yet glossed in a vocabulary that foregrounds bodily felt impressions, drives and tendencies, and variations in sensible intensity. Just like being-in-the-world, the feeling body encompasses *all* modes of comportment, dwelling, being in – how we find ourselves in our surroundings, our being with others, and so on (cf. Slaby 2008).

Importantly, for Schmitz, this notion of the feeling body is inextricable from an understanding of space. It is a key point of the articulation that corporeality is itself a spatial phenomenon – a mode of being spatial, of taking space, of being in and of a space, an elementary spatial dynamic. Obviously, the “space” in question is not the objectively measurable, three-dimensional space of geometry. Instead, it is a pre-dimensional “surfaceless” space. Think of the voluminous sensual presence of sound, or the conspicuous expanse of sombre silence.

Atmospheres, for Schmitz, pertain to this surfaceless, pre-dimensional spatial milieu – they are what charges, energises this pre-categorical realm; and so, atmospheres have the capacity to forcefully “grip” and “engage” the vital dynamics of the feeling body. This is how Schmitz defines them: “An atmosphere is an expansive (not always total) occupation of a surfaceless space in the realm of experienced presence [*Bereich erlebter Anwesenheit*]” (Schmitz 2014, 50). The felt-body is a sounding board for such spatially “poured out” atmospheres. In his philosophical work, Schmitz literally thrives in this pre-dimensional, energetically charged milieu prior to the subject/object split, seeking again and again to describe in vivid and creative phrases formations and tendencies that prevail therein – in effect, devising no less than his very own “alphabet of corporeality.” This descriptive tableau contains a stunning array of concepts: corporeal affectedness, corporeal communication, the vital drive with its interplay of expansion and contraction, protopathic and epicritic tendencies, chaotic manifolds, the primitive present, significant situations, diffuse meaningfulness, personal regression and personal emancipation, and so on: a near-complete reframing of human embodiment and situatedness in the world in the terms of variants of corporal dynamics, attunements and all the various atmospheric presences these attunements might align or disalign with.

Notably, Schmitz considers *emotions* (the German *Gefühle* in the sense of intentionally directed affective states or comportments; cf. Slaby 2008) to be atmospheres in the sense just described: fear, anger, happiness, shame, sadness, envy and the like – all the typical emotion types that make up our categorical repertoire in this regard – are not inner states directed at aspects of the world, but presences in pre-dimensional space. Schmitz considers emotions to be spatial presences “gripping” the felt-body in characteristic modes of corporeal affectedness (*affektives Betroffensein*). Thus, if I were ashamed now while speaking to you, I would be enveloped by a conspicuous affective atmosphere that would inhibit me, press me down, urge me to avert your looks, make me want to disappear or dissolve – while you, as my audience, even if unrelated to me and altogether unconcerned by what made me ashamed, would likely also be gripped by the tangible presence of my

shame in the interpersonal space shared by all of us present. Perhaps you would be pulled into vicarious embarrassment (*Fremdschämen*), or you would have to actively resist becoming affected, by warding off your gaze or working yourself deliberately into a different affective condition. Or maybe you find yourself beset by a specific counter-affect (such as anger), one that is fit for the occasion, and one with which you would then actively “oppose” my shame. At times, this might go so far as to result in an outright struggle for affective dominance within our shared situation. According to Schmitz, emotions as atmospheres are tangible entities – he also calls them “half-things” – in interpersonal space; they fill up the shared “we-space” of our mutual corporeal attunement (cf. Krueger 2011). And so, emotions are capable of affecting those directly concerned – but also others present at the scene, even unrelated bystanders. Think of a sad person radiating a “cloud” of sorrow, or someone bursting with rage emitting shockwaves of aggression. Time and again, such marked affective presences in the realm of the interpersonal even inspire remarkable linguistic inventions: think of words such as “cringeworthy” in English or *Fremdschämen* in German. This is certainly a part of Schmitz’s oeuvre, which has a lot of phenomenological appeal, despite – or because of – it sounding so counterintuitive at first, at least to those of us who are firmly anchored in standard modern ontologies.

Critiquing Schmitz

Thus, as already hinted at, there is some common ground between Massumi and Schmitz, both intuitively and conceptually. This is a parallel that is less surprising when one considers Massumi’s early work on Merleau-Ponty, whose philosophy of corporeality and expansive writing style bears at least a generic resemblance to Schmitz’s approach. When Massumi writes that “[w]hat is normally called the ‘mind’ is a reduction of the body’s capacities to the sphere of reflective consciousness” (Massumi 2015, 211) – this is very much in line with Schmitz. Massumi’s *radical empiricism* inspired by James, Bergson and Whitehead is centred on the assumption of the experiential presence of the *virtual*. According to this approach, we are at all times surrounded by fields of potential, pre-categorically manifest but not yet crystallised into concrete possibilities (or actualities). Massumi speaks of tendency, incipience and becoming, and holds these apart from what is fully formed, structured and determinate. The virtual is manifest as a field of forces, a particular modality of presencing different from the determinate availability of matters of fact. The virtual is tangibly “there,” charging a situation with lines of becoming, always exceeding what is present in the range of our established concepts. This resonates well with how Schmitz conceives of the intensive presence of pre-articulate meaningfulness (*binnendiffuse Bedeutsamkeit*)³ within atmospherically charged situations. Schmitz likewise hints at a nascent potentiality within pre-dimensional space, a “chaotic manifold,” dynamically unfolding, capable of gripping us affectively. However, here it is important to note that Schmitz does not work with a concept of *the virtual*. To him, what is possible is to a large extent pre-coded within the diffuse meaningfulness of significant

situations, merely awaiting explication. At least on the surface of his writings, there is little sense for the emergence of the new, and little sense for the creative and inventive potentialities on the part of individuals' capacity to make sense of their own experience. According to Schmitz, we are all more or less saddled with a range of pre-conceived experiential complexes, and what is more, we – non-experts – are usually quite bad at beholding and describing these phenomenological occurrences for what they are. We need the new phenomenologist to tell and show us. In consequence, Schmitz's outlook tends to be conservative-essentialist, not progressive-transformative.

There are other important differences between Schmitz and Massumi. Despite his critical stance vis-à-vis large swathes of modern thought, Schmitz never leaves the frame of reference of classical humanism. Subjects of experience, persons, individual “possessors of consciousness” (“*Bewussthaber*”) make up the steady backdrop of his thought, the firm and well-trodden conceptual ground he never leaves. Reality remains organised into the poles of subjectivity and objectivity, and whatever phenomenon Schmitz thematises will be situated within a continuum of different stages or levels of personhood, on a range between “personal emancipation” and “personal regression.” Of course, Schmitz does invoke intensive processes that transgress reflective consciousness. But such exceptional states of heightened experiential presence are thematised exclusively within a person-centric frame of reference. High-intensity absorption in an atmosphere is *personal regression*; that is, it is still an experience that unfolds within the ambit of a coherently bounded personal perspective. Everything is presented from the perspective of the individual subject. This subject is moreover construed as obviously able-bodied, fully developed, socially entitled, occupying a firm middle ground of normalcy with regard to all its central capacities. Such a subject might temporarily move out of itself – in moments of surprise, in states of shock, rage or rapture – only to ever so quickly recover into modes of composed self-possession.

In many respects, Schmitz is an exemplification of a certain paradigm of the “German spirit,” and this should make us pause. With his preference for harmonious wholes, for scenarios of idyllic concordance, unquestionable belonging, with his leaning towards a type of spirituality drawn from Christian rituals of worship, and an ableist image of an ever-so-healthy, expansive corporeality, we are confronted with a picture that is in many respects decidedly retro: even with hermeneutical goodwill, it is hard to deny that Schmitz draws his impulses from a fictitious Goetheian universe of normative masculine Germanness.⁴

Accordingly, a workable way forward with Schmitz is to subject him to a version of the feminist *bandita* treatment: rob the intellectual riches, tear them out of context and leave the rest by the wayside. I have already indicated what I find worth acknowledging in Schmitz, and worth elaborating upon, what I continue to work with whenever a fitting occasion arises: his thorough and descriptively nuanced anti-mentalism; the dynamic interplay of lived corporeality and atmospheres, and his immensely rich vocabulary for outlining the “alphabet of corporeality.” Likewise, his generic perspective on emotions as characteristic

atmospheric formations in interpersonal space is a valid starting point for constructing a phenomenologically sound and innovative approach to emotions. However, at the same time, one has to be cautious not to succumb to Schmitz's essentialism of emotion types. There are vastly more possible emotional configurations than Schmitz's Goethian lexicon will allow. Now on to some further points about Schmitz's work that strike me as troublesome.

Atmospheres are construed as tangible forces that *grab us with authority*. When Schmitz says atmosphere, talk of *authority* is usually not too far off. This is an oft-recurring line in Schmitz: “*Das übermächtig gewordene atmosphärische Gefühl absorbiert die in ihm eingebetteten Einzelwesen*” (Schmitz 2005 [1969], 129; trans.: “the overwhelmingly powerful atmospheric feeling absorbs all single beings embedded within it”).⁵ The atmosphere is a homogenising force, exerting its overwhelming influence on all that is in its vicinity. It is not only construed as intrinsically powerful – which in itself might be a valid analytical point – but the power at issue is always such as to centralise and homogenise. It is power in the authoritarian mode. Transposed to the social realm, the paradigm is that of an integrated collective, drawing in participant individuals, smoothing over their individual intentions and characteristics, giving rise to ecstatic feelings of melting into or merging with a homogenising conglomerate. Think of an army division on a march, torchlight processions, the patriarchal family gathered merrily around the Christmas tree, the “holy spirit” manifest to a group of solemn devotees, and so on. There is something disturbing in these images of ordered wholeness, especially when they appear together with descriptions of atmospheres as powerful forces. If the phenomenological anti-mentalism and interpersonal relationalism of Schmitz came at the price of only ever dissolving individuals into homogenising collectives or having them succumb to authoritative situational forces, this would be a disappointing outcome.

Schmitz is fond of typologies, often in neat dualistic pairings. Thereby, he runs in danger of essentialising not only forms of corporeal comportment, but also personality types, temperaments or national characters. Difference and heterogeneity, by and large, escape his optic.⁶ Schmitz's language is smooth, seamless, rife with figures of completion, harmony, unbroken gestalts. There is little that is tentative – no inkling of “stuttering” in his language, as Deleuze might put it. Goethe indeed, but not a trace of Kafka – major, not minor literature (cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1986 [1975]). This Schmitzian style – most often speaking from the height of conviction, with little in the way of doubt or hesitation – might help explain some of the surprising appeal and fascination Schmitz has exerted on younger German academics in recent years. Those weary from trudging through the textual deserts of poststructuralism, or those exhausted by modernist and post-modernist literature, or again those who have found little fun in the conceptual strictures of analytic philosophy, might think, when reading Schmitz, that they have finally hit on a sanctuary of concretion, determinacy, vividness. His texts go straight and smooth, and they carry a message that is as lively and tangible as it is, comparatively, simple. The basic parameters of modern thought remain in place – the dualistic framework of mind vs. matter, subject vs. object, humanities

vs. science, experience vs. objectified nature, etc. – and suddenly we, the good well-mannered humanists, are also coming out on top.

Returning to the more narrow domain of emotion theories, Schmitz's approach here gravitates toward what I like to call a "monopathic" outlook: much of what he describes is such that *one* paramount feeling or atmosphere prevails and sets the tone for the entire scene. Rarely discussed are cases of mixed emotions, tensions, different currents tearing one in contrasting directions, cases of unresolved conflict, presences haunted by conspicuous absences, and so on. This is one area where French-theory-inspired affect studies differs: here, affect oftentimes signals dissonance, difference, and transformativity. It operates with an awareness for the dirty little secrets of situated existence, and although it still roams the roads of Germanophone intellectual history, Nietzsche and Freud have long taken the place of a streamlined Goethe.

Finally, to add one more stab at the friendly old man, one might also wonder aloud about a latent solipsism in Schmitz's writings. He describes social interaction in terms of *Einleibung* – incorporation. Individual corporeality either expands outwards, taking in others to form a larger integrated whole, or it gets itself sucked into and absorbed by a larger formation. There is little regard for the other *as other*; radical difference, alterity, doesn't seem to fit the mould. This is a point made often by Bernhard Waldenfels, who might be considered Schmitz's long-time antipode in German phenomenology.

So, in sum, I am not sure if the restorative orientation of Germanophone affect theory, its latent Romanticism and its founding and sweeping assumption that modernity brings mostly alienation and its longing for wholeness, harmony, presence and immediacy, is what we need when we want to go forward with work on affect and atmospheres. Still, of course, a discussion of atmospheres in the context of the works of Schmitz and Massumi is an excellent occasion for scrutinising these trends. Why is it that certain images of thought, focussed on atmospheric totality, order and harmony, and gripping authority, have made a comeback, after they had been discredited by mid-twentieth-century anti-totalitarian thought?

Outlook

To end on a more positive note and with what I take to be mostly common ground with Massumi, I want to close with a few remarks inspired by Deleuze and Guattari (esp. 1983 [1972]). These authors have not only provided concepts and orientations, but also embodied an intellectual spirit that might help us develop Schmitzian insights into a more progressive direction. I briefly hint at three points, just to have them resonate and provide input for further discussion at the end of my all-too-brief remarks.

Machinic assemblages (agencement)

The conceptual lineage of assemblage thought is uniquely productive in thinking the cranky complexity of situated affective formations (cf. Slaby, Mühlhoff,

and Wüschner 2019). *Agencements* – better translated into English as “arrangements” (Buchanan 2015) – are local concatenations of heterogeneous elements, both human and non-human, that are not homogenising, but rather specific, potentially weird, haphazardly assembled, idiosyncratic. They are dynamic clusters of materials that operate according to improvised technical principles instead of an ideal of organismic wholeness – they are human/non-human hybrids, cyborgs, beasts from different universes oddly cobbled together. Yet they usually come with a characteristic tone, taste or style – and thus you need to be properly attuned, in the know, capable of seeing through the mess. What I like to call “arrangement thinking” is thus not all that far removed from phenomenology, as it also prizes individual articulative skill, capacities of judgement and an acutely attuned descriptive eye. But affective arrangements are no longer steeped in subjective feeling and corporeal dynamics; instead, the formerly subjective and individual elements are here bloated out into oddball mixtures of different kinds of stuff. Accordingly, by choosing the framework of arrangement thinking, the analytical purview in studying affective and atmospheric formations gets much enlarged to cover wider swathes of the socio-technological, material and discursive environment and all sorts of different – sometimes manifestly weird or crazy – forms of their composition.

Polyphonic, nomadic, heterogenetic subjectivity

With these machinic arrangements and arrangement thinking comes its own type or trashed-up version of subjectivity, a counter-image to the stratified, hierarchical subject forged by Prussian discipline: a dynamic and open subjectivity that is only ever halfway to consolidating into a subject proper. It might unfold without stable identity and is forever out and about in the world, on the move and open to the new – a quirky, plural assortment of its own kind as it might be uniquely packaged with others, humans as well as non-humans (cf. Guattari 1995). With this shape-shifting dynamic openness, such a composite subjectivity has the potential to evade attempts by hegemonic powers to subject it to the strictures of governance and policy. Dispersed, polyphonic subjectivity is not exactly ungovernable, but it will be recalcitrant, evasive, intangible enough so as to not be governed readily, smoothly and at the whims and whisks of the powers that be.

Affect as that which escapes capture and instigates change

Lest anyone forgets, Massumi’s lasting message is that affect cannot be fixed; affect is dynamic openness and in-between-ness, it lies at the cusp of the present moment, it is the felt present’s evasiveness itself (cf. Massumi 2011, 2015). One might disagree with a lot of what Massumi has written about affect, and I certainly will not engage in any such quarrels here. What I take from him is mainly a meta point: the key insight lies in taking seriously the performativity – or lived significance – of the very claim that affect cannot be captured, cannot be pinned down, cannot be arrested intellectually or descriptively in some theory or other. Because

if we truly inhabit this claim, if we *live* it (and don't just apprehend it from a safe distance), then this prevents us from falling back into the position of discursive authority, whereby the game will ever only be to just say better than everybody else what is what. This is not what contemporary *affect studies* aspire to do. Part of the aim here is rather to cultivate an openness and sharpen an awareness for ongoing, nascent, not-yet-stabilised dynamics of experience and relationality (cf. Slaby and Mühlhoff 2019). Affect is construed as a generative *irruption*, potentially instigating transitions from established understandings toward new thoughts and new discursive and practical moves. What is at issue is a dynamic reservoir of possibility, spheres of potential – what is formative but not yet formed. In this key, work on affect and atmospheres does not hark back to classical repertoires of cultural forms, does not yearn for completeness, harmony or order, but aims to prepare the grounds for individual, social and political transformation.

Notes

- 1 For a concise and insightful charting of how the concept of atmosphere assumed its current theoretical guise, see Riedel (2019).
- 2 Schmitz speaks of his attempt to “dig up” (*ausgraben*) undistorted lived experience (*unwillkürliche Lebenserfahrung*).
- 3 Also translated in this volume as “internally diffuse meaningfulness.”
- 4 Schmitz leaves no doubt that Goethe is the central inspiring figure, in general and in terms of theorizing emotions and feelings as atmospheres: “*Goethe hat eine hohe phänomenologische Leistung vollbracht, indem er das Gefühl als räumlich ausgebreitete, leiblich ergreifende Atmosphäre der Introjektion entzog und darin die phänomenale Gegenwart des Göttlichen erkannte*” (Schmitz 2005 [1969], 133). However, to do justice to the real Goethe, one should note that the Goethian semblances in Schmitz's work are streamlined into a harmonistic outlook somewhat at odds with the complexity and intellectual dynamics of Goethe's oeuvre.
- 5 “*Eine den Betroffenen und dessen phänomenale Umgebung umprägende Mächtigkeit ist den als Atmosphären ergossenen Gefühlen wohl sämtlich eigen*” (Schmitz 2005 [1969], 132).
- 6 For example: “*Es gibt zwei reine Stimmungen: Zufriedenheit und Verzweiflung*” (Schmitz 2014, 22).

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