

Special issue:

Staging Atmospheres – Theatre and the Atmospheric Turn

This special issue of *Ambiances* seeks to address issues raised by the emerging theatrical paradigm within international scholarship on atmosphere and ambiance. On the one hand, the issue seeks to investigate why the theatre seems to present itself as such an acute example of what Thibaud (2015) has termed the 'affective tonality' of aesthetic experience for scholarship that is not necessarily concerned with the phenomenology of performance per se. On the other hand, the editors hope to address what, in turn, the practice and study of theatre has to learn from the atmospheric turn across a range of other disciplines in which the features of theatre and the theatrical as aesthetic, spatial and/or social generators of atmospheres have been regularly deployed by scholars in architecture, geography and philosophy (Böhme 2017, McCormack 2014, Bille et al 2015). What is noteworthy across many, if not all, of these enquiries is the rejuvenation of the aesthetic as an intellectual and ethical project. In ecocritical studies however, while atmosphere is a core concern it has notably eschewed the theatrical. Where the rhythm and logic of the ecocritical is rooted in crisis and urgency, the theatrical has often been perceived to be non-urgent or even an indulgent distraction and quintessentially 'unreal' in a manner that is unhelpful in terms of addressing the environmental catastrophe unfolding in real terms (Arons and May 2012, Farrier 2014). The ecological is regularly perceived to be fundamentally 'outdoors', whereas the theatrical, conversely, is often assumed to speak of a necessarily 'indoor' activity, presented on a stage that is 'ungrounded' in a manner that is understood to be at odds with otherwise being 'in' or 'enmeshed' with the environment at large (Ingold 2011). However, contemporary theatre can be seen to increasingly present itself to its creators and audiences in terms that can be understood as ecological and atmospheric conditions. What might greater insight into the production and reception of theatre's atmospheric conditions lend to enquiries that draw upon it analogically and/or in exemplary terms? How can the staging of atmospheres within theatre, and associated practices offer concrete examples and methods to broader concerns for sociocultural, political, and ecological climates? Similarly, what lessons should theatre and performance studies take from the considerable efforts within the atmospheric turn to address affect, aesthetics, and environments?

As well as inviting contributions that deal with theatrical practices and their modes of production and reception directly, the editors are also keen to foster a wider discussion. On the one hand, this might suggest means by which theatrical ideas or examples can inform a wider understanding of the affective, aesthetic and socio-political production and reception of atmospheres. On the other, it might also seek to apply pressure to the extent and validity of theatrical and performative tropes within the atmospheric turn. The topics listed below are intended to be only suggestive rather than prescriptive, and the editors are keen to support innovative and original contributions from a diversity of disciplines beyond theatre and performance studies.

Possible topics include:

Audiences

While it may be tempting to configure theatrical ambiances around the relationships between staging and spectatorship in the first instance, the significance of intra-audience conditions of behaviour, affect, and design should not be overlooked. What roles might distraction, discomfort, air-conditioning, fidgeting, etiquette, proximity, refreshment or house-lighting play in shaping the generation and experience of atmospheres that are not directly consequential upon events and activity on stage? How do the cultural and geographical situations of theatres as institutions, architectural and urban locations, their pricing, prestige and history play out in setting conditions for atmospheric production and reception? By what methods might the collective reception of affects and ambiance exemplified by the attention of theatre audiences be studied and accounted for?

Beyond this, the editors ask, how readily does a theatrically informed model of audience apply to atmospheric conditions outside the playhouse? How might conditions of audience beyond theatre buildings be identified and described? How readily does a theatrical model of audience translate beyond auditorium-based practices and design? What sort of challenges or pressures to theatrically informed ideas of audience attention arise in the study of a scenographic or performative production of atmospheres in other social and environmental contexts?

Theatricality and event

As Davis and Postlewait have suggested, theatricality can mean 'not only that which is quintessentially the theatre, but the theatre subsumed into the whole world' (2004, p.1). What are the markers and methods by which theatrical atmospheres might be gauged in the 'real world' beyond institutions

or situations which announce themselves as 'theatre' (Read 2003)? Similarly, while theatre has long sought to represent or invoke climatic conditions, and to contain or amplify their sensory and affective impact (Welton 2012), to what extent can atmospheric perturbations themselves be understood as theatrical events? Furthermore, with theatre now often both staged and inferred in contexts beyond its buildings, what part do climate, weather, and other 'prevailing conditions' play in determining and mediating its experience? Vice-versa, what of contexts in which weather, or other atmospheric conditions are themselves understood to perform or act, or to form a theatrical event?

The material immaterial

Theatre's physical conditions of setting, gesture, speech and so on provide obvious starting points for a consideration of how its events are generative of atmosphere. However, the increasing power and presence of sound and light within theatrical events also make the its immaterial conditions significant in terms of both production and reception. Sound and light are increasingly to be found taking centre stage, to 'both create and manipulate conditions in which meaning is generated', as Katherine Graham has argued (2018, p.198) and not simply serving as illumination or auditory enhancement for narrative and scenic action. While there are considerable bodies of professional knowledge concerning the design of sound and light for the stage, literature that seeks to account for the phenomenology of their experience is sparse. How might the particular intensities of the experience of the material presence of immaterial theatrical media offer examples to their occurrence elsewhere?

In addition to the above, how might we account for the atmospherics of 'presence' that so often occur in accounts of theatre-going as an experience? Whether this has to do with a felt relationship with actors' character or celebrity, or with the seeming 'liveness' that infuses the nightly repetition of fictional characters and imagined events, how might theatrical presence offer a model of affective vitality to studies of atmosphere? How does this inform, or connect with studies of charisma and celebrity more broadly as practices of atmospheric infection, enchantment, or intoxication (Goodall 2008)?

Narrative

Dramaturgically and scenically, theatrical events are regularly marked by absence, and yet can still be productive of tangible atmospheres in its stead. Whether dramatic or 'post-dramatic', theatrical narratives are often appeals to imagine a state of affairs in the immediate circumstances of the theatrical stage and event (Lehmann 1999). On the one hand, this has something to do with the iterative and affective powers of speech and gesture to conjure atmospheric alternatives to current circumstances, and on the other of attention to 'story-telling' as a psychologically immersive experience. How is narrative experienced as a kind of atmosphere within the theatre, and how might particular modes of delivery be productive to social situations beyond it within, for example, education, healthcare, or business?

Affect

Affect in the theatre is often discussed in terms of different degrees to which audiences are supposed to be able 'feel the feelings' of fictional characters in the extent and intensity to which they are first felt by the actors portraying them (Konijn 2000). Beyond these fictions, how might a more straightforward attention to what actors and their audiences 'do' in respect of bodily activities of speaking, movement, or attending speak to the atmospheric transmission of affect as an actual consequence of real-world activity? How, for example, can performers' expressive use of gesture employ energetic qualities of rhythm, amplitude and so on to produce affective presence or atmosphere beyond the immediate signifiers or codes of characters that they articulate? Affective labour and atmospheric production are increasingly concerns of the so-called 'experience economy' beyond the theatre (Carnera 2012). In light of this, are there wider applications and/or implications for an understanding of atmospheres on the basis of sensorimotor expressivity?

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