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Carsten Friberg

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Perceiving (Political) Space

Carsten FRIBERG

Independent researcher, Denmark
carsten.friberg@gmail.com

Abstract. *This presentation is a philosophical reflection on the elements that form our perception of space. The reflection relates to Gernot Böhme's phenomenological concept of atmosphere, which involves a notion of perception in which presence, and being affected by what is present to us, is central. Perceiving political space is about the implicit ideological elements affecting us and forming how we perceive space; it points to how perception is informed by political ideals embodied in the space in which we are present.*

Keywords: *space, perception, phenomenology, political*

Threshold

A starting point for talking about atmosphere is to emphasise how space is always affective space; any space exercises an influence on people present to the extent where space 'is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 26). Space will always be informed by a particular ideology, and hence it is politically formed, and we will be, willingly or un-willingly, engaged in and dominated by it (Lefebvre, 1991, Rancière, 2009, Agamben, 2009).

The issue I raise here is how the concept of atmosphere answers an interest in investigating how ideologies embedded in the environment affect us, i.e. how politically formed space forms our perception, meaning not only what we perceive but also how we perceive it.

Atmosphere is a phenomenological concept relating to perception i.e. questioning the constitution and interpretation of our perception (Böhme, 2001, see Heidegger, 1997, Merleau-Ponty, 2010). It challenges the dominance of object identification in most discourses on perception and suggests physical presence to be the key element in perception (Böhme, 2001, pp. 42 and 45). Atmosphere, in relation to the political form of space, turns attention from interpreting spatial organisation, to the concrete influence on our sensorial and bodily relation to the environment. Furthermore, it places focus on discussing how ideologies embedded in the environment influence us, and educate us to participate in, and finally appropriate, these ideologies.

My approach is philosophical. Philosophy is about knowledge, however it is not about specific knowledge, which is for empirical sciences to acquire, but about the legitimacy of this knowledge. Such investigation intends to create awareness of how we relate to the spaces we live in and how the design and construction of such spaces becomes a political instrument we are, frequently unknowingly, subject to. I will go through some terminological clarifications to arrive at what the concept of atmosphere has to offer this perspective and debate.

Terminological steps

Political

Political is used to mean the presence of powers that influence and govern people through the organisation of the environment. 'Politics (...) is the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience, of objects posited as common and as pertaining to a common decision, of subjects recognised as capable of designating these objects and outing forward arguments about them' (Rancière 2009, p. 24).

To the explicit political arguments we normally think of in relation to politics, we must add the embodied structures of power in the environment. Decisions, the outcomes of argument, leave traces in the environment when carried out, and often we respond to these traces without paying them much attention. We reproduce specific ideas of power through our acts, and we are subject to the environment's influence as exercised through 'spatial practice' that determine 'a sequence of acts which embody a signifying practice' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 57, see pp. 84 and 142 f.).

In our practices we, for example, pay attention to the difference between public and private space in order to respect the latter, but respecting this order does not also imply reflection upon the idea of organising space into a physical separation between private property and public space. Such separation is not natural but contextual and many examples, historical and contemporary, can be found (see Chakar, 2002).

The organisation of the environment often appears as the manifestation of a practical solution to specific needs, as discussed and elaborated by Giorgio Agamben. Agamben refers to similarities of the dispositive (apparatus) of Michel Foucault and the *Gestell* of Martin Heidegger, understood as 'a set of practices, bodies of knowledge, measures, and institutions that aim to manage, govern, control, and orient – in a way that purports to be useful – the behaviors, gestures, and thoughts of human beings' (Agamben, 2009, p. 12).

Perception

To perceive is to acquire an understanding of something. Philosophically the question is what kind of understanding satisfies our expectations; when do we have the expected answer to a question about what something is?

We have, for example, in front of us an object - a small, red toy-car on the floor. We ask the child what it is, and the child may answer: 'it is red!' Correcting the child we will then tell the child that it is indeed red, but it is a car that is red. Car is the right answer to the question. Red, small, and on the floor are not the substance of the matter, but accidental to it. Determining something as something depends upon what best answers our expectations. This determination implies discriminating between what belongs to the matter but could be different and what it *is*, which is what we have learned to know as essential.

This may appear rather uncontroversial, even banal. It does, however, give occasion to ask if an understanding of perception as directed towards determining something as something ignores important elements in perception. One approach to responding to this question is through an understanding of aesthetics as sensorial knowledge, such as introduced by A.G. Baumgarten. Building on G.W. Leibniz' characterisation of perceptions forming a continuum going from confused to distinct

ideas, Baumgarten draws attention to the cognitive value of the confused ideas. When Gernot Böhme, in his lectures on *Asthetik*, characterises aesthetics as a general theory about perception, he refers to Baumgarten (Böhme, 2001, pp. 11 ff.). He asks if something has been left behind when aesthetics, within the generations following Baumgarten, became a philosophy of fine arts.

What is left behind is a relation to the presence of something and how we are bodily affected by the qualities in the environment and come to understand them (ibid., p. 31). We rush to translate the presence of something into an identification of an object – like a toy-car – and ignore what is the fundamental occurrence of the perception, which is the sensorial and bodily detection of presence (ibid., p. 45). This is the first moment in our perception and this is what is called atmosphere.

What is brought into question here is not the need to identify something; this forms the first step towards knowledge. The question is what satisfies this identification? The phenomenological tradition has drawn attention to how modern philosophy has detached the perceiver from what is perceived to the extent that the sciences are no longer ‘inhabiting the world’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 9) but are confronting the world with an predetermined understanding of what is valid knowledge. We learn to perceive through such determining lenses. This is why Maurice Merleau-Ponty takes an interest in forms of perceiving appearing outside the standards of normal perception, such as with the painter (Merleau-Ponty, 1964), and why he asks for an investigation into the notion that ‘to look at an object is to inhabit it’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2010, p. 79), an expression returned to below.

The lenses we perceive through are cut by the expectations of the dominant understanding of the perceiver. For instance, for modern man, the wind turning the blades of the mill and the river rotating the turbines of the power plant are not forces stronger than man, but sources of energy, of electricity, that can be distributed and used everywhere (Heidegger, 1997, pp. 18 ff.); when ‘nature is now seen as merely the raw material out of which the productive forces of a variety of social systems have forged their particular spaces’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 31). It is this prioritising in perception that calls for a critical investigation, and one such investigation is offered by Böhme with the concept of atmosphere.

Phenomenology

Atmosphere is a phenomenological concept. Phenomenology is, in the language of Heidegger, not about concrete Beings, which are within the field of the empirical sciences, but instead about Being, i.e. about the interpretation of phenomena. The philosophical interest is in what conditions our approach to the world and our interpretation of it; it is about ‘how this setting, which acts as a background to every act of consciousness, comes to be constituted’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2010, p. 321). Perceiving political space is hence not about characterising the political elements within it, or the organisation of space, but rather about the implicit ideological elements that form how we perceive space and, furthermore, what is implied in the application of a particular understanding to the perception of space.

The philosophical interest is not the denial of the importance of perceiving objects we can identify and build our knowledge upon; rather, the interest lies in the implications behind this identification, which is an act of discrimination regarding how and what to perceive. Perception is interpretation (ibid., p. 42); ‘the subject thinks rather than perceives his perception and its truth’ (ibid., p. 351). This is an

interest that directs the investigation towards activities, which can reveal to us the process of things becoming things, i.e. taking the form we perceive, a process perhaps most clearly accessible in painting where the material is becoming form (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 69).

The concept of atmosphere has more parallels with Merleau-Ponty, such as his investigation into bodily presence in space as one of inhabiting it, and having a practice that precedes any intellectual construction or interpretation of it (Merleau-Ponty, 2010, p. 296). Bodily inhabiting space forms a fundamental act of interpreting, and acting with, the environment: an act that, in return, is not lone but social, forming space in accordance with how we together come to understand it and the possible common organisation of it.

Political space

Henri Lefebvre characterises space that is ‘nothing more than the passive locus of social relations, the milieu in which their combination takes on body, or the aggregate of the procedures employed in their removal’ as ‘an empty abstraction’ (Lefebvre 1991, pp. 11 f.). Such abstractions are tempting as they offer a concept of space that corresponds to ideas of order, most notably what we find in geometry. Such abstract space ‘depends on consensus’ (ibid., p. 57) and the important question will be what consensus there is (ibid., p. 83). Even an idea of a geometrical space believed to be neutral is a principle of ordering, which demonstrates a power over the environment.

Turning to Heidegger we get an idea of what is implied when we talk about space. He draws attention to how the German word for space, *Raum*, is related to admitting something to a space, both physical space and in verbal argument (admitting the other has a point). Both meanings are present in the German *enräumen* (Heidegger, 1997, pp. 148 f.). Space, *Raum*, is about giving or clearing a space, *räumen*; we can think of the clearing in the wood as making space for activities. The question then is not to the size of the space cleared, but to what the space will be used for, how we organise it, and what kind of life that will inhabit the space. Space is hence related to our intentions for creating it.

The space we create and organise today is mostly related to built space. We organise space in accordance with how we understand our way of living, such as separating it due to biological reproduction, reproduction of labour power and reproduction of the social relations of production (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 32). The order between these three elements is a matter of social and historical conditions, which determine, for instance, what is public and private and how a façade can control what is visible and what is condemned to happen behind closed doors (ibid., p. 99). The order of private and public, whether labour should be visible or hidden (see Arendt, 1998), determines the organisation of the built environment, as well as what we perceive – not only what is there to be perceived, but also our perception of, i.e. judgement of, people engaged in different activities.

Exit: the atmosphere

What then, does the concept of atmosphere offer to this interest in the perception of politically formed space?

The environment affects us through the elements present. They form our reality. At this juncture we must turn to the two German words for reality: *Wirklichkeit* and *Realität* where the former is about the phenomenal and actual presence that affects us, and the latter relates to factual things, to Latin *res* (Böhme, 2001, pp. 118 and 160, Heidegger, 1997, pp. 44 ff., Merleau-Ponty, 2010, p. 349). While the latter appears to be the foundation of knowledge, it should be noted that facts and things in their Latin origin, *factum* and *res*, imply being produced and settled upon, respectively. The things, *res*, our knowledge is directed towards are themselves problematic, as can be inferred from the Germanic word, thing, which in some Germanic languages also has a verbal form, meaning to negotiate (Heidegger, 1997, pp. 167 ff.). In Danish *tinge* is to bargain and the place (*sted*) for this activity, where the elders meet to settle conflicts and legislate is a *tingsted*. Indeed, *tingsted* is still included in the name of the Danish parliament, which in a democratic age is not only for the elders but all people (*folk*): *Folketing*. Our reality is what has been agreed upon as an order exercising its influence upon us.

We find a parallel on stage at the theatre where there is a difference between the reality of actors and props and the appearances of characters and events. The appearances present on stage affect us and become reality for as long as we engage in accepting the contract of fiction in the theatre. While we know there is a difference between appearance and being, of what we see on stage and what we know it to be, our philosophical tradition has asked if this is also true of what we encounter off stage, thus making it crucial to critically distinguish. Objects are not always as they appear; we should be careful not to judge the book by its cover.

The concept of atmosphere is not about questioning this critical approach in general but to ask if this differentiation between the essential and the non-essential in perception is itself formed, firstly by an idea of the priority of object-directedness, and secondly by an understanding of what kinds of objects satisfy the direction of the perception.

The latter can perhaps easily be seen as having ideological and political implications, like when we identify, for example, private and public distinctions in the environment. It also concerns the idea of characterising space as a neutral frame or container filled with objects without acknowledging that there is no neutral space with content, only a relation to objects and space produced by the world relation we have (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 94). A neutral space as a frame is made possible by a way of thinking that does not inhabit the world but reduces the world to objects that we, as bodiless observers, are confronted with and read as signs rather than engage with (*ibid.*, p. 142).

This points to how the former, the object-directness of perception, is a reduction of full perception, which begins with our confrontation with atmospheres, the atmospherical, synaesthetics, physiognomies, ekstases, stages, symbol and signs which are the characteristics given by Böhme of our phenomenal reality (*Wirklichkeit*) (Böhme, 2001, p. 164). They can be interpreted as appearances of something, of an object or thing, which then becomes a conclusion to the process of differentiation and reduction of the full perception (*ibid.*, p. 172). The problem here is not a reduction in order to grasp an object that forms the basis of our knowledge; the problem is to ignore the other aspects of the perception when they are no less present and still exercising an influence on us. This is exactly why atmosphere is also a concept of aesthetics when related to Baumgarten who was motivated by the

reductionist approach embedded within the rationality of the Enlightenment, which left sensorial cognitive elements crucial for social skills and related to bodily appearance and sensitivity towards situations effectively homeless. The weakness of such reduction is the ignorance of still being subject to what has been dismissed. It is like neglecting the persuasion of rhetoric for being seductive, concealing the true matter of the discourse through emotional effects, and simultaneously being unaware of how this favours a specific, just different, ethos of the speaker.

Atmosphere as a philosophical concept offers a critical comment on the legitimacy of the dominant idea of perception in line with Merleau-Ponty's investigation of our bodily presence preceding the object-directed perception and knowledge dominant within Western philosophy. Atmosphere is also inscribed in the aesthetic tradition of the sensorial and bodily formation of us, which all throughout the Western tradition has been a foundation for education and hence for creating political communities and communication. What we find characterised as dispositive/apparatus (Agamben, 2009) and distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2009, p. 25) can combine with atmosphere in an investigation of how ideologies embodied in the organisation of our environment exercise an influence over us and direct our perception to what we learn to look for, while at the same time teaching us to overlook what might be more fundamentally influential.

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Author

Carsten Friberg, PhD, Independent Researcher. He teaches at various institutions and collaborates with artists and researchers on national and international projects.