

How Literature Creates Atmosphere: A Michel Henry's Material Phenomenology Approach

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Abstract: "Atmosphere" constitutes a distinctive emotional space crafted by authors within artistic works—it inheres in specific material substrates while manifesting through corporeal perception. As one of the core elements of literary aesthetic experience, atmosphere profoundly influences readers' emotional resonance and the manifestation of textual significance. Regrettably, Gernot Böhme, a pivotal figure in facilitating the "atmospheric turn" in contemporary aesthetics, fails to provide explicit methodological guidance for atmosphere creation. Drawing upon Michel Henry's material phenomenology, this study systematically elucidates the internal logic and generative mechanisms of literary atmosphere. By examining how writers strategically deploy diverse material presences in literature—including perceptual materials, affective transmitters, and mnemonic devices—this paper reveals the techniques for constructing immersive atmospheres that deliver unforgettable emotional experiences to readers.

Keywords: Michel Henry; Literary Atmosphere; Affective Materials; Mnemonic Apparatus.

1. Introduction

The concept of "atmosphere" bears notable resemblance to the classical Chinese literary notion of "yijing" (意境), both occupying prominent positions in literary history while remaining elusive to precise definition. Prior to Gernot Böhme's seminal contributions, numerous scholars attempted to conceptualize "atmosphere." In his seminal essay *Atmosphere*, Riedel traces the etymological evolution of the term within German intellectual history. During the latter half of the 20th century, Hermann Schmitz achieved groundbreaking work by systematizing "atmosphere" as both a specialized concept and research paradigm. He posited atmosphere as the affective phenomenon permeating spatially embodied consciousness.

Böhme's significance lies not in conceptual innovation but in elevating atmosphere's theoretical status within aesthetic discourse. Confronted with what he perceived as the elitist trajectory of "judgment aesthetics" and the instrumentalization of aesthetics as mere art-appreciation methodology, Böhme sought to reconstruct a universal aesthetics of perception within Baumgarten's framework of sensuous-cognitive synthesis. Within this reconfiguration, he positioned atmosphere as the primary object of aesthetic perception, thereby instigating an "atmospheric turn" that established atmosphere as the cornerstone concept of new aesthetics. This paradigm shifts propelled literary atmosphere into academic prominence as a critical analytical category.

2. "Embodied Objects": The Body as Medium for Perceiving Literary Atmosphere

(1) The Body as Material Grounding of Atmosphere

The body, as a unique material entity, substantiates the seemingly metaphysical concept of "atmosphere" by anchoring it to objective reality. Defining atmosphere proves challenging, as Gernot Böhme observes, due to traditional ontology's prioritization of *Dingsein* (thing-being). In Kantian epistemology, true existence belongs to objects of

experience, which attain substantiality by serving as carriers of accidents. Atmosphere, lacking tangible materiality, thus evades definition. To resolve this, Böhme reconceptualizes the body as a "secondary conceptual support" for atmosphere, reframing human essence as corporeality. Individuals inquire about their place in the environment by perceiving their own bodies - this act of embodied perception is the pivotal point in the transformation of the atmosphere from abstraction to concreteness (Böhme, 1998). By perceiving their own bodies, individuals interrogate their environmental situatedness ("How do I inhabit this space? What is my affective state here?"), transforming atmosphere into an interstitial quasi-object—neither fully material nor entirely subjective. This aligns with Michel Henry's notion of the body as "affective materiality," where corporeal existence engages the world through "pathos-driven auto-affection." Atmosphere's affective resonance, therefore, is validated through somatic feedback.

In literary creation, atmosphere's efficacy depends on its verification through the embodied experiences of characters or readers. Echoing Merleau-Ponty's assertion that "the body is fundamentally an openness to the world," Henry traces this openness to an "emotional, carnal corporeality." A reader's ability to apprehend atmosphere relies on innate bodily perceptivity. For instance, a blind reader encountering pastoral descriptions in *The Wind in the Willows* struggles to construct vivid scenes or grasp idyllic tonalities due to sensory limitations. Yet, Henry emphasizes sensory interpenetration: "What renders the visual world real may also generate alternative worlds through other senses—the seen can be touched or heard." Literary atmosphere thus necessitates multisensory engagement, mobilizing visual, auditory, and tactile faculties to reconstruct scenes and affective tonalities.

(2) Construction of Visual Scenarios: Building Atmosphere through Visual Elements

The creation of vivid visual scenarios is essential for immersive literary atmospheres. Visual elements—such as light, color, and spatial composition—serve as primary conduits for emotional resonance. As Michel Henry asserts,

sensory perception is fundamentally tied to bodily capacity: "What renders the visual world real may also generate alternative worlds through other senses." In children's literature, for instance, Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* employs vibrant chromatic contrasts to evoke warmth through meticulous visual descriptions:

"The ruddy brick floor smiled up at the smoky ceiling; the oaken settles, shiny with long wear, exchanged cheerful glances with each other; plates on the dresser grinned at pots on the shelf, and the merry firelight flickered and played over everything without distinction."

From Henry's perspective, these visual materials function as affective objects that enhance conatus (Spinoza's "vital force"), translating abstract joy into tangible forms via bodily familiarity. Here, Grahame's use of warm hues (ruddy brick, golden firelight) and orderly spatial arrangements (smiling floor, cheerful furniture) constructs a cozy, joyful atmosphere that aligns with young readers' sensorimotor cognition. The anthropomorphism of objects—floors "smiling," plates "grinning"—translates abstract emotions into tangible visual forms, leveraging children's familiarity with embodied interactions.

Gernot Böhme's theory of "atmosphere as quasi-object" clarifies why such visual coherence matters: atmospheres emerge through the interplay of material signs rather than isolated details. Children, whose abstract thinking is underdeveloped, rely on concrete, familiar imagery. Thus, writers must deploy bold, direct visual language—bright hues, dynamic lighting, and structured compositions—to unify scattered atmospheric cues into a cohesive affective space. Henry's emphasis on "perceptual capacity" further underscores the necessity of tailoring visual descriptions to readers' developmental or cultural frameworks. Without this alignment, atmospheres risk dissolving into abstraction, failing to engage the body's innate perceptivity..

(3) Soundscape Construction: Crafting Atmosphere through Auditory Elements

In contrast to visual-centric genres, Gothic literature prioritizes auditory manipulation to forge unsettling atmospheres. R. Murray Schafer's taxonomy of soundscapes—keynote sounds (ambient tones), signals (meaning-laden sounds), and soundmarks (culturally distinct sounds)—provides a blueprint for sonic atmospheric engineering. Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* exemplifies this through its masterful auditory tension:

"There came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound—much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I knew that sound well too. It was the beating of the old man's heart."

The heartbeat operates as both a signal (conveying temporal urgency) and a keynote (amplifying nocturnal silence). Its rhythmic ambiguity—oscillating between mechanical ticking and organic pulsation—transforms it into a "disambiguating artifact," bypassing rational interpretation to directly unsettle the body. This sonic indeterminacy epitomizes Gothic atmosphere, where sounds refuse fixed meanings, instead activating primal unease through their unresolved duality.

Similarly, in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Poe employs environmental acoustics to heighten dread: the "echoing crack" of splitting wood and the "muffled reverberations" of collapsing walls dissolve spatial boundaries, immersing readers in a disintegrating auditory landscape. Such techniques align with Böhme's notion of atmosphere as a

contrast phenomenon: the dissonance between auditory clarity (the heartbeat's insistence) and semantic ambiguity (its source) amplifies psychological tension. Unlike visual cues, which demand cognitive decoding, sounds penetrate bodily awareness instinctively. The creak of a floorboard or the echo of a distant bell anchors readers in a visceral present tense, exploiting Henry's concept of the body as an "affective medium."

3. "Affective Objects": Emotional Materiality in Literary Atmosphere

The concept of "affective objects" in literature refers to material elements that appear to contain inherent emotional qualities. However, these objects are not intrinsically emotional; rather, they become "affective" through two primary mechanisms: the author's emotional projection or the deliberate crafting of objects designed to evoke anticipated reader responses.

Michel Henry's phenomenological approach provides crucial insight into this process. He posits that materiality fundamentally manifests as affect, proposing that for matter to "reveal itself," it must be approached through what he terms *Affectivité* (affectivity). This concept serves as the key to understanding how inanimate objects acquire emotional resonance. When we examine human perception of materiality, we recognize that we never engage with objects as purely external, static entities. Instead, we interact with composites already saturated with prior emotional experiences and social conditioning. As Spinoza observed, "the human body is affected in many ways by external objects," a principle that extends to literary experience where textual objects stimulate new affective responses in readers. Gernot Böhme complements this view by arguing that aesthetic perception concerns not the objects themselves but rather "what is felt - atmosphere."

The complexity of subjective experience means that individual objects may sustain multiple emotional interpretations. To maintain practical utility in aesthetic creation, we can classify affective objects into two distinct categories based on their emotional impact:

- Objects that enhance conatus (vital force), moving readers toward greater fulfillment (joyful affect)
- Objects that diminish conatus, restricting the mind's active power (sorrowful affect)

This dichotomy finds particular expression in Japanese *mono no aware* aesthetics, which specializes in evoking melancholic resonance through carefully crafted material descriptions. Böhme further develops this framework by noting that atmosphere emerges most perceptibly through contrast - whether between a reader's existing mood and the textual atmosphere, or through transitions between different atmospheric states within the narrative.

Color represents perhaps the most studied affective material in both Henry's and Böhme's theories. Their analyses reveal that:

- Bright hues (particularly yellows and reds) tend to excite and energize
- Cool tones (especially blues) generally soothe and calm

However, atmospheric effect derives not from isolated color references but from their dynamic interplay - what Henry describes as the "shifting affective potency" within

chromatic relationships. This principle finds masterful application in Arthur Rimbaud's *Les Étrennes des orphelins*, where the poet juxtaposes "frost-stiffened wings in gray gloom" with "gilded sweets" and "rosy paradises" to create profound tension between despair and hope. Similarly, Yasunari Kawabata's *Snow Country* employs gradual chromatic darkening to mirror the narrative's progression from the delicate hues of new love to the somber tones of mortality.

Yet the transmission of affect through literary materials remains imperfect. As Böhme acknowledges, atmospheres generate "playful emotional negotiations" that may diverge significantly from authorial intent. This phenomenon aligns with Roland Barthes' concept of the "death of the author," which positions interpretation as fundamentally the reader's prerogative. The affective object, once released into the textual world, becomes subject to the reader's unique experiential framework, potentially generating emotional responses unanticipated by its creator.

This complex interplay between authorial design and reader response constitutes the essential dynamic of literary atmosphere. While authors carefully construct affective materials to guide emotional experience, the ultimate realization of atmosphere depends on the reader's subjective engagement with these textual elements. The most powerful literary works achieve their effects by creating rich fields of affective potential that allow for multiple emotional trajectories while maintaining coherent atmospheric integrity.

4. "Mnemonic Objects": Memory Apparatus in Literary Atmosphere

The construction of literary atmosphere hinges on what Gernot Böhme terms its "quasi-objectivity"—the relative homogeneity of perceptual patterns within cultural groups and the stable correspondence between aesthetic objects and specific atmospheric qualities. This quasi-objectivity provides a foundational framework for atmosphere creation, while its perception relies on the reader's embodied engagement, where the body functions as a mnemonic apparatus. Remarkably, readers from divergent cultures occasionally share atmospheric resonances, a phenomenon potentially rooted in Jungian "collective unconsciousness," while deeper affinities within cultural groups stem from collective memory, defined by Maurice Halbwachs as "the shared process and outcome of past experiences among group members" (Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 2002, p. 33). Collective memory, shaped by shared histories, fosters perceptual homogeneity, enabling literary atmospheres to transcend individual subjectivity.

(1) Collective Memory and the Quasi-Objectivity of Atmosphere

National literatures exemplify how collective memory molds atmospheric tendencies. Japanese literature, influenced by maritime and sylvan traditions, frequently evokes oceanic and forest imagery. American wilderness narratives, reflecting a history of frontier expansion, mythologize untamed landscapes as "ideal realms beyond societal constraints" (Luedtke, *Making America*, 2006, p. 38). Chinese pastoral poetry, conversely, venerates agrarian life, embodying a deep emotional bond with the land as "mother earth." These divergences originate in distinct historical trajectories: the American wilderness "reshaped its people," while China's agrarian legacy cultivated a collective identity

rooted in soil. Literary atmospheres thus operate as cultural palimpsests, layering collective memory onto textual landscapes to evoke shared emotional resonances.

(2) Mnemonic Objects: Triggers of Involuntary Recall

Mnemonic objects—material catalysts of involuntary memory—serve as conduits for atmospheric transmission. Marcel Proust's theory of involuntary memory posits that sensory stimuli (e.g., smells, tastes) can resurrect past experiences abruptly and unbidden. In Toni Morrison's *Home*, war-related objects—a child's smile, grieving families—plunge the protagonist into traumatic recollections. Readers with similar wartime memories experience affective contagion, their own pasts rekindled through textual cues. Lu Xun's depictions of rural customs and hometown foods likewise transcend personal nostalgia, immersing readers in collective reminiscence. As Aleida Assmann notes, literature satisfies "the desire for immortality" (Assmann, *Memory Spaces*, 2016, p. 213), bridging temporal chasms to resurrect lost atmospheres.

These mnemonic objects operate subconsciously. Readers, ensnared by atmosphere, slip into recollection without deliberate intent. A crumbling church in Yan Geling's *The Flowers of War* or the bustling alleyways in Chen Danyan's Shanghai trilogy are not mere settings but emotional portals—textual thresholds where personal and historical memories converge.

(3) Literature as Lieux de Mémoire: Curating Atmospheric Archives

Literary works themselves function as lieux de mémoire (Pierre Nora's "sites of memory"), transforming texts into symbolic museums of collective experience. Michel Henry attributes life's forgetfulness not to distraction but to "a lack of intentionality" (Henry, *Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, 1993, p. 317). Literature counteracts this by constructing habitable mnemonic spaces—utopian realms where time collapses, allowing readers to dwell in reconstituted pasts. These spaces are saturated with the cultural and spiritual ethos of specific communities, as Nora observes: "Realms of memory have become symbolic elements of any community's heritage" (Nora, *Realms of Memory*, 2015, p. 76).

Yan Geling's *The Flowers of War* exemplifies this dynamic. The novel's atmosphere—crafted through dilapidated churches, ashen hues, and relentless artillery—transcends historical documentation to evoke visceral horror. Similarly, Chen Danyan's Shanghai trilogy crystallizes the city's bygone cosmopolitan charm, offering contemporary readers identity-affirming nostalgia. Such works demonstrate literature's dual role: preserving vanished atmospheres while transmitting embedded humanistic values.

(4) The Ethical and Aesthetic Dimensions of Mnemonic Atmospheres

As mnemonic apparatuses, literary atmospheres transcend aesthetic function to assume ethical weight. Texts like *The Flowers of War* do not merely depict war but compel readers to confront its atrocities, transforming atmospheric immersion into a moral act. Conversely, nostalgic atmospheres in works like the Shanghai trilogy provide solace, anchoring displaced identities in imagined homelands.

Readers engage with these texts intentionally, seeking not entertainment but existential grounding. The atmospheric space becomes a "utopia" (Nora, 2015)—a realm where individuals reconcile personal histories with collective legacies. For instance, a diaspora reader encountering Lu Xun's rural vignettes may rediscover fragmented cultural

roots, while a historian parsing *The Flowers of War* might grapple with unprocessed collective trauma.

5. Conclusion

Gernot Böhme's atmospheric aesthetics transcends the confines of traditional elitist frameworks, elevating "atmosphere" to a central aesthetic category. While his theoretical system remains nascent, it pioneers new pathways for literary atmosphere studies. Building on this foundation, Michel Henry's material phenomenology deepens theoretical rigor by dissecting the triadic interplay of materiality, embodiment, and affect, thereby crystallizing three core elements of literary atmosphere construction: Embodied objects— Serving as an artifact of perceptual verification, the body's sensory openness and embodied cognition transmute textual signs into experiential affective fields, enabling immersive aesthetic engagement; Affective Objects – Through symbolic emotional encoding, these materials construct layered networks of conatus, endowing texts with dynamic affective tension; Mnemonic Objects – By reconstructing imagery and collapsing temporal-spatial boundaries, they activate individual and collective memory strata, forging transhistorical emotional resonance.

These material categories do not operate in isolation but coalesce into a fluid atmospheric network through textual interplay, functioning as affective nexuses that interconnect authors, texts, and readers. Böhme and Henry collectively illuminate that literary atmosphere is fundamentally an aesthetic praxis of material-perceptual symbiosis.

Author's Statement

The author declares no financial support or conflicts of interest for this research.

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