

Introduction

Gernot Böhme, "The Space of Poetry"

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Over the past twenty years, Gernot Böhme has played a leading role in the contemporary renaissance of German *Naturphilosophie*, or "natural philosophy", in the guise of a new Critical Theory of social-natural relations, interweaving (post-)Marxist social theory and the New Phenomenology of the contemporary German philosopher, Hermann Schmitz. Böhme's project is underwritten by a sober recognition that "we no longer stand on the brink of environmental catastrophe: we are in the midst of it."³ Under these historically unprecedented circumstances, the old question of how humans are to live well as such on this earth and under this sky acquires a whole new dimension. Picking up a resonant expression from Ernst Bloch, Böhme insists that although the global environment might everywhere bear traces of human impact, far from consigning "nature" to the past, we should reconceptualise it as a yet-to-be realised possibility that as yet lies before us (*Die Natur vor uns*). To realise this possibility would entail the transformation of our industrially degraded earthly environment into a humane living space, in which a decent life might be enjoyed by all and in which a wide diversity of other-than-human beings too might thrive, together with the limitation of the technologisation of the body to levels that we, individually, deem compatible with human dignity: with that dignity, that is to say, which is proper to humans, not so much in contradistinction from animals and God or gods, as in the past, but rather, from machines, technological things of our own making.

This project of socio-ecological transformation is as much a matter for aesthetics as for ethics and politics, in Böhme's analysis, to the extent that aesthetics is understood once more, as it was in the eighteenth century, as a theory of sensuous perception. Since the publication of *Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik* in 1989, Böhme has been working on such an aesthetic theory of nature or an ecological nature aesthetics, the central concept of which is *atmosphäre*, which Böhme argues is the primary object of bodily perception in space. In this context, for Böhme, nature is above all that which is sensuously given, a move developed from a reading of Aristotle: "Natural being is *aistheton*, the perceivable."⁴ Here, the distinction between *physis* and *techne*, the naturally pre-given and the humanly crafted, which has been rendered increasingly problematic with the industrialisation of the earth and the technologisation of the body, is philosophically secondary: what matters is the recognition of our own corporeal and affective responsiveness to other people, things and spaces as a practice of bodily being in (more or less anthropogenic) environments. For it is, in part, on the basis of such a practice that we can rediscover ourselves as inherently ecological selves and begin to discern, delineate and seek to create the kinds of environments that we might wish to inhabit.

In *Atmosphäre*, Böhme defines atmospheres as ontologically indeterminate quasi-objects of perception that lie between subject and object, literally in the medium. Böhme draws on the work of two earlier philosophers to sketch a genealogy of atmosphere: Walter Benjamin and Hermann Schmitz. Benjamin's concept of the aura as the perception of aesthetic distance, Böhme argues, begins as a general type of atmosphere. Aura, as Benjamin theorises it in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", arises in the space between a receptive viewer and a unique work of art or natural object and generates a feeling of that space's magnification. Böhme extrapolates from Benjamin and redraws aura as atmosphere: "an indeterminate, spatially diffused, emotional quality."⁵ He is not the first, however, to elaborate the concept of atmosphere and draws much from Schmitz's phenomenological philosophy

of the body, in which “perception is affective and sympathetic interaction” and atmospheres are “affective powers of feeling, spatial bearers of moods”.⁶

The following essay approaches the concept of atmosphere not only with regard to the experience of atmospheric phenomena in, and of, an environment, but specifically as it is represented in, and engendered through, literary texts: atmosphere, that is, as the affective “space of poetry”, which we enter via the medium of words, but within which we have the opportunity to rediscover what it means to be not only bearers of language but embodied beings in the presence of others, situated somewhere, somehow between earth and sky.

Notes

1. Tim Chandler recently completed a Master of Arts in Critical Theory at the Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, Monash University, with a thesis entitled “Reading Atmospheres: Ecological Aesthetics and Virgil’s *Eclogues*”.
2. Kate Rigby is an Associate Professor in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies. Her research ranges across German Studies, European philosophy, literature and religion, and culture and ecology. Her most recent book is *Topographies of the Sacred* (2004), an ecocritical study of European Romantic-era philosophies and aesthetics of nature and place. She was the founding President of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (Australia–New Zealand). This introduction draws in part on a forthcoming book chapter by Rigby that examines Böhme’s aesthetics in relation to ecocritical literary theory from Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby (eds), *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 2011.
3. Gernot Böhme (2002), *Die Natur vor uns: Naturphilosophie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, Graue Edition, Kusterdingen, p. 261.
4. Gernot Böhme (1992), *Natürlich Natur: Über Natur im Zeitalter ihrer technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a/M, p. 127.
5. Gernot Böhme (1995), *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a/M, p. 27.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 29.