

Excursions

Volume 11, Issue 1 (2021) | (Re)Connect



Cover Photo: (Re)Connect by Charlotte Esposito

Desiree Foerster
Awareness for Atmospheres

www.excursions-journal.org.uk

Awareness for Atmospheres

Desiree Foerster

University of Chicago

Abstract

In this essay I reflect on the meaning of atmospheres while the human world has been overwhelmed by a respiratory disease. In an auto-ethnographic gesture I reflect different ways of sensing and becoming sensitive to the atmospheric changes in my home during self-isolation. This self-questioning is directly related to the conceptualisation of air in view of its potential risk of carrying infectious virus particles. The air we breathe is currently stylised as a cloud on the micro level of aerosols, which gives reason to think anew about the status of the atmospheric with regard to our being in the world. Through combining philosophical reflection with aesthetic practice, I explore how an attunement towards the ways air flows through our habitats can open a new perspective on processes of subjectivation in a time of ongoing crisis. I argue that becoming sensitive towards air flow not only heightens our sensitivity for the affectivity of atmospheric processes but also for the different registers of our experience able to capture these effects.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has confined us to our homes. This place, where we used to come to rest, to unwind, to express ourselves in the form of decoration, spatial layout, and activities, has turned into a place where the dimensions of public and private, of work and leisure, continuously collapse. We have convertible standing desks now where there was a cheap Ikea stand-

in for an office table. An ergonomic chair and mouse, an espresso machine. The couch that used to receive our tired bodies after returning home has become storage for papers, tools, unwashed dishes. Now this is the place, the locus of our existence; this is where we dwell, where we work, eat, sleep, exercise. The place that collects the smells of our bodies, of our food and, sometimes, of the food of our neighbours. The movements seem to repeat; each point in space has a specific function, even the abandoned ones. At the time I am writing this essay, some of us are seeing our 6th or 7th month of spending most of our time inside that space. We have taken on its smells and it has taken on ours. This intimate relationship between place and self has become so familiar now that it is too familiar for some. Aspects of this relationship, which are usually in the background of our awareness, and that are not noticed because we are always in passing, slowly come to the fore. An increased sensitivity to the space that surrounds us, to the porousness of the boundary between inside and outside, comes with complex affects and feelings – not all of them pleasant.

With the passing time, something else happens. Feelings and moods begin to differentiate. The original feeling of unrest, of subliminal fear, and insecurity – feelings that we will soon refer to as the root for our collective *PTSD* (...just that the ‘p’, the ‘post-’, is quite misleading in a time in which one catastrophic event only momentarily hides the biggest of all and ongoing catastrophes during human existence, also known as climate change...) – begin to give way to other, more immediately felt feelings. It is the body waking up. But to what?

With the summer comes the heat, and since my desk is in a room with big windows, the warm air around me accumulates. Due to my German upbringing, I am not used to air-conditioning and I am definitely not a friend of it. Now, I live in Chicago, the American Midwest, and air-conditioning is to be found in every home. Instead of cooling the air electronically, I open the windows. Especially those in front of large trees, which cast shadows that cool

the air before it can enter the interior. But unfortunately, I am extremely sensitive to drafts. An unnoticed draft can cause me to have unpleasant and constant sinusitis. Since childhood I have learned to sense and avoid the slightest breeze – by changing my position in space or by removing the cause of the problem, for example, by closing a window. Drafts have always been crucial landmarks for me. Or I should rather say, atmospheric marks. Over the months of lockdown, I have become familiar with the atmospheric markers of my apartment, so much so that the contrast between my feeling embedded in the atmosphere of my apartment to the alien and hostile atmosphere outside provoked the questions for me: to what extent does becoming familiar go hand in hand with objectifying what I am familiarising myself with? And can I instead develop a sensitivity to the world that registers its effects on my body, on my mood, without losing the openness, the curiosity, for that which affects me? Ultimately, this means developing a sensitivity that goes beyond consciousness, by which the human subject so often defines itself.

What I want to talk about in this essay is how during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic I have begun to develop an awareness for the atmospheric processes in my apartment. Such awareness does not occur suddenly. It is a slow process in which I notice different intensities, thresholds, which are not only registered physically or felt, but after a while also lead to an extension of my sensitivity to the space itself, how it enables and inhibits the movement of air, and the role my own body takes in this process. This will eventually lead me to question how far a sensitivity to my limited and familiar environment can be extended to the world, a world whose atmosphere is currently permeated by a presumably alien and hostile virus. This essay engages with these questions in a probably rather uncommon way. While I reflect on them with the help of different theories concerned with atmospheres as well as with experience, I will experiment with different conditions in my surroundings that allow me to become familiar with atmospheric processes and their impact on my feeling,

thinking, and acting. Since it is impossible to gain an objective perspective on one's own subjective experience, I will attend to the micro-phenomenological method (Petitmengin, 2007), which intends to give access to pre-reflective experience, to bring my awareness to previously unrecognised layers of my experience. Usually done in an interview, I will use this method here to question myself, my own experience in different situations throughout my day. However, I will not describe the course of this self-questioning, but rather will contextualise the moments of experience that stand out for me in relation to my research questions. This means that, in this essay, I will shift from past to present tense throughout, the past tense marking the description of the context in which my experience took place and the present tense reflecting on my experiences. Additionally, I will embrace the subjectiveness of my experience and welcome speculative and intuitive parts, and will attend to the imaginative leaps (Whitehead, 1929) that the newly created conditions for experience afford.

Droplets in the air

It goes without saying that turning to the atmosphere, especially to the air as part of the atmosphere, is charged with meanings associated with the ongoing health crisis, and thus the origin of my confinement. The air we breathe has become dangerous, a carrier of invisible virus particles. Even before the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)¹ officially announced that not only is the coronavirus transmission airborne but that even aerosols can carry infectious virus particles, scientific papers suggesting this fact were circulating in social networks. This ultimately means that a carrier of the virus does not have to be standing in front of me, talking, sneezing, or coughing to transmit the virus. Every outbreath releases tiny particles of saliva or

¹ The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is the national public health agency of the United States. The CDC oversees tools, expertise, and the communication of safety protocols to control and prevent disease, injury, and disability in the US.

respiratory fluid into the air. According to the CDC, depending on airflow, these aerosols can remain suspended in the air over hours and ultimately be breathed in by an individual long after they left the lungs of their host.

The aerosol cloud is more than a trace we leave with our bodies in space; it becomes an alien and externalised part of ourselves which testifies to our having been there while this being already mutates, transforms into something else, ready to merge with others. The aerosol cloud as something outside ourselves, something we might or might not encounter while walking the streets, is an uncanny object. Other than the atmosphere, the aerosol cloud is closer to a discrete object, originating from a person's body and existing for a short duration before dissipating. We cannot see it, but it seems that we account for its existence. The streets now sometimes seem to have fallen into slumber. People walk distanced and distantly, their faces covered in masks, leaving six feet of space for the aerosol cloud to occupy. Without a perceivable cause and without any phenomenological equivalent, this uncanny object becomes interesting in light of one question intimately linked to any aesthetic theory concerning atmospheres: is the atmosphere something in-between subject and object, or does it in fact give rise to subjects and objects in the first place? A quasi-distinct object, the aerosol cloud seems to take on multiple modes of existence. As a material agent as well as an immaterial aspect of the particular mood that seems to have fallen upon the usually lively cityscapes, it seems to be at once something created, projected by human subjects, and a novel aspect of the new manner in which human subjects encounter space, how we experience our environments now. Or is it something altogether different, an in-between or overlapping quality of experience that is somehow shared between beings and their environments?

There is Something in the Air – Becoming Sensitive to Airflow

The relationship between cause and effect has become so complicated in the so-called 'corona crisis' that one could almost begin to believe that the

existing world order, which is so convenient for some and so deadly for others, might actually change. As the virus multiplies and spreads, colonising new bodies, aspects of our relationship to space and to others with whom we share that space become visible – and this applies not only to organic life but also to material goods. Amidst the fear that this new, invisible and incalculable threat produces, a feeling of admiration mingles. How well is this virus adapted to our bodies, our ways of living, of moving through the world? It is so attuned to our bodies that I wonder, can we learn something from the virus? Related to this question is the link between the current health crisis and the ecological importance of atmospheric processes with an emphasis on the role that our sensitive body plays in being intimately linked with the atmosphere through our breath. An inquiry into this intimate relationship might ultimately suggest a much needed ecological, non-human-centred sensibility. For that, we would have to take a more differentiated perspective on the current situation. As it is now, our perception of air is focalised on it being the medium for a potentially deadly virus; it is being differentiated and scaled down from air to aerosols, depicted in graphs and simulations. But air does not comply with boundaries – neither bodily nor otherwise spatial. It has its own temporality and behaves in ways unattainable for us. In the face of this, thinking about atmospheric processes and the airflow that enlivens the space of my dwelling, gains for me a sense of urgency. Following the question of how I could explore the experience of the atmosphere around me – both in the sense of the climatic conditions and of my emotional response to the space – I pondered ways to mediate the behaviour of air flowing through my apartment to make it available to my senses. How do I sense the air flowing? Do I sense it as something outside my body, together with my bodily response? And how does the sensing of it, the becoming aware of it, change my emotions, feelings? How I habituate the

space? To make sense-able² how changes in my atmospheric surroundings affect me in an embodied way, I started mapping the airflow in the room I now spend most of my waking hours in: my office.

Crucial to addressing the question of how to map something invisible was finding a representation of the air's flow that would remain a trace of this flow's processuality: the *before* and *after* of its representation. Which forms of representing airflow minimise the imposition of a certain quality on the air *for me*? Which forms of catching different states of the air flowing through my room feel appropriate *to me*? I decided that a first approach to my self-appointed task would be to map the effects that airflow has on a very light material. I decided on crepe paper, a tissue that is regarded as one of the thinnest papers, with a thickness below 35 g/m². I started hanging crepe paper from the ceiling, covering key areas of my room that are touched by the air. Crepe paper is a very light material that starts fluttering with the tiniest airflow. The crepe paper I bought came in different colours, and I decided on the colour blue – probably out of a subconscious association of air with that colour. I cut the strips into different sizes, between the length of my arm from wrist to shoulder and from toes to hip.

Mapping Airflow

A short description of the room I am talking about is in order. Imagine a room about 12 by 15 feet. If you stand in its entrance, you see bay windows in the left corner, a single window in the right corner. My table is placed in the front right corner; to the left is a couch. This room has no door – it connects to the hallway that leads to the kitchen. In the kitchen, there is a sliding door that leads to the patio.

² I use 'sense-able' in this essay to indicate that the becoming sensitive towards air flow not only heightens our sensitivity for the affectivity of atmospheric processes but also for the different registers of our experience able to capture these effects.

My experiment begins in the summer; it is very hot, especially because I do not use any air conditioning. Usually, the window on the side of my table is halfway open, as is the sliding door in the kitchen. Thus, the air is often moving between these two openings. But as I realised quickly with help of the crepe paper, the air also creeps into the corners, moves upwards and down, sometimes gets stuck.

I hang a couple of long strips of crepe paper from the ceiling. One is in front of the window – this one shows me how much air comes in, or goes out, indicated by the movement of air pressing the strip against the window. Besides the direction of the airflow, the movement of the paper also suggests, however basically, the force with which the air moves. This expression of force must of course be seen relative to the paper, its weight, angle, and shape, which becomes subject to the force. Despite these relativisations, there is a certain range of possible perceivable oscillations that are caused by the applied force, and which serve as a scale for me – from slight, hardly noticeable movements to a fluttering of the paper in which about two thirds of the strip floats horizontally and moves up and down. At times the paper close to my window flaps leisurely up and down, thereby creating a faint sound, as if one were using a sheet of paper as a hand fan, just thinner and more dislocated in space. At other times it braces up into the air, beating flag-like.

There are more paper strips placed throughout the room. There is one placed to my right, from my perspective of sitting at the table, writing this text. It is taped to a thin stick that I stuck in between the bricks of the wall. This flag usually moves sideways, as if swaying in the air. Never does it get so much traction that it moves into a horizontal position like the paper in the opposite window. Then there is a strip to my lower left, attached to my table and hanging between the table's legs. I noticed earlier that my exposed legs would sometimes be touched by a light breeze if the window was open, so I wanted to understand how strongly the strip would have to move and thereby indicate a certain force of the airflow applied to it until I myself

would feel the breeze. I have placed a fourth strip more towards the middle of the room, about two by four feet from the window. This strip almost never moves. It seems to mark the boundary of airflow coming into my room through the side window.

The only occasion on which I saw that particular strip moving without that movement being caused by my own body was when tornado-like winds blew over Chicago on August 10th, 2020. That day the atmosphere changed seemingly within seconds. At first the stillness seemed tranquil, almost as if the Earth were holding her breath. When I connected a cord to a power outlet it created a spark. That was when I realised that there was something off with that stillness. I looked outside the window. The air seemed heavy, thick, misty. Then a sudden wind gust blew in through the window, the strips all in motion. I closed the windows and unplugged what I could. I felt a sudden pressure in my eardrums, as if they had been detached from my skull and went skyrocketing. The light flickered but did not go off as it had in other buildings. Our building was not in the main path of the storm. This event was a reminder to me of how transparent, and at the same time how crucial, the separation between the interior and the exterior is.

Besides this rather extra-ordinary atmospheric event, in the everyday I quickly realised that the movement of the strips made me more sensitive to the airflow. If I noticed in the periphery of my view that one or more strips were moving, I paused and directed my attention to those parts of my body that would detect some airflow. The cooling pressure on my legs – a tickling more than a touch. The whiff on my cheek more a suggestion than something *caused*. If the skin on my legs registered the coolness of the air, if the air was actualised thereby as something outside myself, I would often rather abruptly shift from feeling the airflow as a tickle on my skin to a sense of my own body getting cold. In this case, the airflow was not a suggestion anymore; it was the cause of me feeling uncomfortable, something I had to act upon. I closed my window.

Upon reflection, what seems to happen here is a shift in awareness from something outside my body – the airflow, the moving paper strips – to my way of sensing different intensities of airflow and temperature, to, finally, how I feel about it, how I relate myself to that experience, how I assess that moment in time that has just become a *situation* that I have to act upon. In that particular case it led to the feeling of discomfort, followed by the judgment that it was getting a bit too cold – it crossed my mind that I might get sick! – resulting in me closing the window. So, what does this sensing of airflow *do* with me as a subject, a spatial being, or rather, as a spatial *becoming*?

This question is particularly relevant today because it makes us wonder about the impact of the current crisis on the human subject. If atmospheres are something in between subjects and objects, their contextualisation as a space composed of potentially contagious aerosols impacts the ways subjects relate to their surroundings, how they perceive and act in them. If the atmosphere gives rise to subjects and objects in the first place, what is that subject then, that arises from the objectification of air and breathing – which otherwise would signify the interconnection of the world and our body – to the aerosol cloud, as a hostile intruder? What does the current health crisis turn us into? To understand better how our reference to atmospheres matters for the potential for new ways of subjectification, we should first take a closer look at the different ways to conceptualise them.

The Status of the Atmosphere and the Construction of Objects

Cultural scholar Gottfried Böhme wrote about the atmosphere: “Atmosphere can only become a concept [...] if we succeed in accounting for the peculiar intermediary status of atmospheres between subject and object” (1993, p. 114). The status of the atmosphere as an intermediary between subject and object allows in Böhme’s understanding a formulation of an aesthetic theory

of nature, as it relates environmental qualities to human states. Böhme does not think of this relation as monodirectional, in the way that aspects of the environment would immediately evoke particular emotions, moods, or feelings in a perceiver, or that emotions, moods, or feelings would determine the way such aspects are perceived. Not that such relations do not exist. My subjective experience is that I can be aware of how my mood impacts the way I perceive a thing or how the encounter with certain objects evokes a strong feeling in me. But Böhme's point is that there is more to atmospheres than the fact that they impact the way we perceive the world or feel in a particular moment. What he ultimately aims at with his concept of atmospheres is to bring the sensuous back into the field of aesthetics. The sensuous, once abandoned by Immanuel Kant, can highlight the role of our bodily *presence with* the things – and what best describes this '*presence with*' is, according to Böhme (1993), the atmosphere:

Atmosphere is the common reality of the perceiver and the perceived. It is the reality of the perceived as the sphere of its presence and the reality of the perceiver, insofar as in sensing the atmosphere s/he is bodily present in a certain way (p. 122).

For Böhme, in this way, atmospheres belong to the space in which subjects encounter objects. They do not belong to either of the two but instead compose and enliven the in-between of subjects and objects. Atmospheres might be the condition for humans to create or manipulate what Böhme calls the 'atmospheric.' Since the atmospheric is not exclusively encountered in the arts but also used to impact people's actions and assessments, becoming familiar with the way atmospheres affect our experience gains ethical-political importance. When the air we breathe turns into a carrier of a dangerous virus, and the mere fact of sharing the air with others becomes a source of danger, this meaning becomes particularly acute. We need a different understanding of atmospheric processes, an understanding that we are always embedded in them, that they cannot be

separated from us in the form of distinct objects that float statically in space six feet from us.

An aesthetics of atmospheres that acknowledges the ways atmospheres condition how and what we perceive, and thereby also accounts for novel experiences and the emergence of events, is concerned with the spatiality of our being. To understand better how they relate to that aspect of our spatiality that interrelates us with the world in extending towards it, I want to turn to the philosopher Alfred N. Whitehead (1929), who was not particularly concerned with atmospheres but with experience and feelings. In his seminal work *Process and Reality*, Whitehead proposed a system of thought in terms of which every element of our experience could be interpreted. Feeling was thereby explored as a constitutive, creative, processual activity, not reserved to human subjects. Rather, Whitehead's process philosophy featured feelings prominently, as that operational process in an organism that leads to the formation of subjectivities in the first place. What we refer to as 'life' consists for Whitehead of 'occasions of experience' that are composed of feelings. While the content of feeling is important, the way, the *how*, something is felt seems to be even more important to him. Feelings are the foundation of Whitehead's ontology, as is the operation of prehension, through which feelings on different levels within an organism as well as between organism and world are related to each other. This operation can be defined as "a primitive form of 'apprehension' meant to indicate a 'taking account of,' or 'feeling,' devoid of conscious awareness" (Audi, 2009, p. 972).

For Whitehead, prehension is the way in which something – an entity, occasion, a pattern – is felt by a prehending entity as compatible with one aspect or aspects of its own structure. The reason for this felt compatibility lies in part in the capacity of the prehending entity to compare what is encountered in the occasion with previous encountered occasions. What is prehended in the newly encountered occasion becomes part of the constitution of the prehending

entity, thereby impacting what can be felt as compatible in the future. In Whitehead's understanding, experience is not reserved for humans, or for animals, even. Experience is in nature; it is fundamental to the ongoing process of becoming that happens at all layers of existence. In prehending an occasion, this shared capability of experience creates for Whitehead a *withness with the world*. But in order to be felt, a potentially compatible aspect has to be intense enough, and has to stand out. Intensity as a central mode of expression that allows for perception helps to describe the aesthetic experience of atmospheres, since atmospheres themselves can hardly be perceived as distinct objects. As geographer Ben Anderson points out, intensities, on the other hand, can hardly be captured by the names we give our emotions. The affective character of atmospheres, however their ambiguity, he continues, "enable us to reflect on affective experience as occurring beyond, around, and alongside the formation of subjectivity" (2009, p. 77). Atmospheres then might open up a space to think through and with intensities stored in affects that are not localized in space nor belong to subjects and objects, but that have a vectoral character that "animate or dampen the background sense of life" (Stern in Anderson, 2009, p. 78).

If we think of atmospheres as emotions that pull us towards the world, or as Whitehead's lures for feeling, propositions that give feelings a definiteness of enjoyment and purpose that make them stand out to the prehending entity (1929, p. 280), then atmospheres gain an active role. More than filling some in-between the world and us, they integrate us into the world and vice-versa: atmospheres as occasions of experience can be prehended, just like we can be prehended by atmospheres. At the same time, atmospheres are part of the world being prehended in every other occasion. A perspective crystallises here that is profoundly pluralistic, relational, and integral – and as such, also atmospheric.

The affection of the lived body through atmospheres can be seen now as the actualisation of a relation in which feelings prehend each other. As atmospheres become part of our own composition of being, we might become

able to perceive in an atmospheric way (Seel, 2005), become sensitive to the way things appear to our senses – and thus also to the ruptures, incoherencies, and a-synchronicities that arise between us and the perceived world. Understood in its affective quality, as philosopher Tonino Griffero (2014) puts it,

[An] atmosphere can overwhelm us, it can find us in tune with it, it can be recognised without being really felt, it can elicit a resistance that pushes us to change it, it may (for various reasons, also absolutely idiosyncratic) be perceived differently in the course of time, and it may be so dependent on the perceptual (subjective) form that it concretises itself even in materials that normally express other moods (p. 139).

To go beyond this phenomenological reference to atmospheres, I would like to suggest an ethico-aesthetic expansion of the discourse. If atmospheric processes become sense-able so that we can familiarise ourselves with them, attuning to atmospheres allows us to address being-in-the-world in relation to our corporeality as the bodily, spatial dimension of being, our temporality as the lived experience of time, and our subjectivity understood as the synthesising and structuring force of these dimensions, which allows us to form meaningful relations with our world. By attempting to map the airflow in my apartment so that I can become more sensitive to its changing intensities and how they register in my physical body and my immediate surroundings, the question arises to what extent something has changed in my way of perceiving, and whether this increased sensitivity can be extended beyond the limited context of my apartment.

Sense-able Difference

With autumn, the airflow gains a different character. The air becomes cooler, feels somewhat lighter, and if it enters through the window, all the strips – even the one that never moved and that became somewhat like the visual border of

airflow for me – begin piling up, climbing up the invisible air currents, swinging from side to side, only to suddenly stop and turn into a wild flutter.

Reflecting on my experience, I notice small changes now in my behaviour and attentiveness relative to the strips. Before I turn towards the strips, before I see the flutter in the air, now there is this moment of a pulling, of being pulled. It feels as if the air announces its presence by gently touching my arm and shoulder, which are turned towards the window. This is not in a way that I could actually feel it or locate the coolness of the breeze on my skin and identify it as a draft, but something much more subtle, like a character or quality of the air that fills the space and that is expressed in fleeting occasions of experience. I do not know if this sense of the air announcing its presence is shaped by the now familiar movement of the strips, their lightness and jitteriness. I actually do not believe so, because this sense of a presence has nothing jittery about it. It almost feels like an un-localized spreading of warmth, which seems very counterintuitive since I usually feel the airflow at first as a cool breeze. So, is this presence generated by my body? Or between my body and the air? Is it some in-between or something that intertwines? My body feels the world with multiple senses. If we refer to them as the visual, auditory, and gustatory senses, we tend to forget that they cross-effect each other.

Tiny bells shackle in the air. I hung them recently on a string next to the strip on the window and attached a little kite-like paper to them in order to provide a surface for the air to apply its force. Usually, they are used to alarm songbirds of cats closing in. If I hear the bells ring as a result of them being lifted by the airflow and gravitating down against my windowsill, I know that the airflow is picking up.

Little round crystals on the windows cast coloured light rays on the floor; they can tell me about the state of the sun. When it is almost lunchtime, the crystal on the window facing east announces its encounter with light, which is diffracted and thrown into my little cave space. In the afternoon, the crystal

next to my office desk facing south takes over. It is getting late. These light fixtures express their interaction with the atmosphere in the most subtle way, with the diffracted light being captured by my sight only if I look intentionally.

Over the past seven months, the question of how we can describe something that is as ephemeral as atmospheres turned, for me, into the question: on what level can I experience its effects? More concretely, how can I see, hear, and feel in an embodied way how the atmosphere around me changes? How long must such an effect extend in time to become noticeable? Besides feelings, how else can I describe the effects of atmospheres on myself?

In the early 1990s, the philosopher Henri Lefebvre, with his book *'Rhythmanalysis'*, formulated a way to attune to one's everyday surroundings, to become familiar with their underlying patterns as well as the patterns of one's own embodied sense apparatus. In his essay *'Seen from My Window'* (1992/2004), he describes with a sensitive use of language the details of his subjective perception of how life unfolds rhythmically in front of his window – how sounds, seasons, movements of bodies and matters, organise into something with meaning, something meaningful to the observing subject. His description seems like a passing palpation of the scene with all senses merged to one bodily impression. He sets out the basic conditions of his observation. The frame of the window. The distribution of fixed objects in space – the Centre Pompidou, a hotel. Directionality, repetition, difference. Familiarity of the common – people working or living in the neighbourhood – and familiarity of the uncommon – tourists from all over the world. The uncommonness of the tourists – their clothes, habits, gestures – turns ordinary within their role in a globalised world. The difference that makes them stand out is the excess that is necessary to create a recognisable characteristic.

Lefebvre says, “Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm” (1992/2004, p. 15). The repetition of time and space, he continues, is one way to analyse

rhythm; another is the relation between repetition and difference. The difference, at least in part, is given through the lived, the carnal, the body as it comes into contact with regulated time. ‘Rhythmanalysis’ in Lefebvre’s vision would fundamentally change our perspective of our surroundings, because it would change our conceptions of space and the senses. I want to add that it also brings wonder back into scholarship, as can be felt along the lines with which Lefebvre describes the way the garden in front of his window changes after he begins to understand its rhythms. This attunement to the repetition and differences in the sensible present as it unfolds through the movements of the trees, the smells and sounds of flowers, birds, and insects, expresses not only the intensity of his experience but, I want to add, also the rhythms, phases, evocations, and emergencies of experience itself. Lefebvre’s careful juxtaposition of descriptive categories (1992/2004, p. 9) shows his own experimental approach to concepts and representations – which are important but also situated, transformable, and transforming.

Being confined to our homes, through mandatory or voluntary lockdown – looking out our windows – are we all becoming what Lefebvre imagined as rhythmanalysts? Is it the essence of life as it unfolds in space and time that becomes apparent to us in these moments of contemplation?

Conclusion: Bodies Rooting in the Air

In coming to a conclusion, I would like to bridge the gap between paying attention to the rhythmic unfolding of events outside and within myself, and explore how the resonance that arises from this brings with it a certain urgency of care. For Lefebvre, rhythmanalysts would have to first learn the rhythms of their bodies – bodies that now seem even more fragile and porous in the presence of the virus. This body that Lefebvre wants to attune to seems populated with many bodies: viruses, bacteria, and pollutants that fill our lungs and bloodstreams with every breath. It is a body that longs for touch. For connection. To receive an invitation, to be kind. It longs for kindness.

Maybe the body we shall attune to if we want to become rhythm analysts today is a body connected with its surroundings in many more ways than consciousness can gather. Maybe we can finally become plants, plant-like. Rooted where we are. Unable to escape nearing danger. Slow, slowed down. Constantly attentive to everything that happens or does not happen around us, without becoming neurotic. Feminist scholar Luce Irigaray (2001) said,

Your silence exists as does my self gathering. But so does the almost absolute silence of the world's dawning. In such suspension, before every utterance on earth, there is a cloud, an almost immobile air. The plants already breathe, while we still ask ourselves how to speak to each other, without taking breath away from them (p. 3).

Can I learn to breathe from the shimmering leaves of the walnut tree in front of my window? More than providing shade, cooling the air, it stands there seemingly motionless and yet so full of movement – still, resting, and at the same time fluttering; the wave is water, even if it seems to separate itself from the sea momentarily.

Our breath connects us to the world. The air I breathe envelops my body, envelops bodies. I can sense it, for example as a breeze. The moment I start to consider what I sense as a hazard to my health, my focus shifts. That is how our brain is wired. In that moment, the air is no longer something I sense with different parts of my body, or in the motion of the paper strips around me, but a distinct threat. Air, the atmosphere, which is always here, where I am, in motion, enveloping me, is objectified to a draft that could make me sick, to an aerosol cloud that could carry virus particles. This evaluation is usually followed by action: I close a window, I dress warmer, I wear a mask. The outward gaze of the rhythm analyst, the sensitive, empathic observer, is replaced in this moment by a *flee-or-attack* attitude, so deeply integrated into our being. Plants can teach us to respond to a threat without separating the self from the world. They cannot pack up their roots and run away. Their best defence is their sensitivity to what is happening around

them, above and below ground. And thereby they are anything but passive. As Natasha Myers points out, plants rely on molecular clocks that enable them “to rhythmically modify their physiology and behaviour over the course of a day, a season, or a year” (2014, p. 14). Plants, she continues, “must adapt themselves to cycles of light and darkness, as well as to seasonal variations. Plants behave differently at different times of the day”. To get a sense of how plants sense and intervene into their world, we must learn “to pay attention to what it is that plants pay attention to” (Ibid.) Becoming plant-like could then mean: not exchanging subjectivity for what is happening in the world, not closing ourselves off completely from it in the impetus to protect ourselves. It would mean, instead, to learn about our bodily senses, how we are sensing, and how we make sense of the world. It would mean to render our bodies available to sensing the sentience of the world.

I look at the houseplants that I never cared much about and that have become important to me since the start of the pandemic. Recently, I have not been able to stop thinking about how we confine them to these small pots, decide for them if and how much water and sun they receive. Unable to guess even slightly what they would prefer – if a plant has any concept of preference or will. Can this world become sensible to us, too? Can we learn from the rootedness and awareness and intricateness of plants with the atmosphere, with place? Can we begin to care in new ways for a world of loss, for a world that does not fit the doctrine of accumulation and progress, but that collapses, becomes extinct, and yet continues to give birth, to transform, to metabolise?

Rhythmanalysts intervene in the everyday in order to “reinstat[e] the sensible in consciousness and in *thought*” (Lefebvre 1992/2004, p. 26). I would add, as rhythmanalysts, we intervene in order to extend our consciousness and attune to those processes of sensing and becoming sensible that come before and yet condition what we are able to become aware of, able to think. My ways of mapping the air in my home during the

Covid-19 pandemic, however amateurish or naive, have been such an intervention in the everyday. This everyday that has progressively changed into one long stream of clearing and dawning, a continuous passing, of breathing in and out; that has unveiled the repetitions that condition sense-able difference to arise. Atmospheres, the ephemeral, the ungraspable, that which embeds us in the world, and me falling into their rhythms, has enabled me to become aware of yet another ephemeral agent of the present – my experience as such, always ‘here’, always unfolding – and yet so hard to grasp in its totality. Atmospheric is what it is.

References

- Anderson, B. (2009) ‘Affective Atmospheres’, *Emotion, Space and Society*, 2, p77–81.
- Audi, R. (2009) *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Böhme, G. (1993) ‘Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics’, *Thesis Eleven* 36(1), p113-126.
- Griffero, T. (2016) *Atmospheres. Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Irigaray, L. (2001) *To Be Two*. New York: Routledge.
- Lefebvre, H. (1992/2004) *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life*. London ; New York: Continuum.
- Myers, N. (2014) ‘Conversations on Plant Sensing: Notes from the Field’, *Nature Culture* 3, p. 7–34.
- North Whitehead, A. (1929/1985) *Process and Reality; an Essay in Cosmology*. New York: Free Press.
- Petitmengin, C. (2007) ‘Towards the Source of Thoughts’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 14, p. 54–82.
- Seel, M. (2005) *Aesthetics of Appearing, Cultural Memory in the Present*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.