What is Film Atmosphere?

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There is no direct training in atmospherics in schools of architecture. It appears on no syllabus.

—Mark Wigley, “The Architecture of Atmosphere”

Many kinds of writing across the history of cinema exemplify the best and worst tendencies in thinking about film atmosphere. This might seem like the emptiest statement that could be made about any subject that has been written about over such a long period, but I suggest that it holds especially true for this topic. The number of times the word atmosphere appears, in sources ranging from industry trade journals published at the start of the previous century to works of theory published this year, attests to the importance that film writers continuously attach to it—yet few have paused to spell out why atmosphere matters or even to articulate what they mean by the word.

This has started to change in recent years as scholars have begun taking up atmosphere more directly as a topic of inquiry. This work shares with older writing a tendency to view the phenomenon as primarily or exclusively associated with an artwork’s environmental character—specifically, in the case of a film, its settings, sounds, and depictions of weather. I challenge that view in this essay, and argue that film writing, even when it has applied the concept unreflectively, hints at a much broader understanding of what atmosphere consists of and what has been missed about its importance. Such writing—often film reviews, and other works by writers who indulge freely in impressionistic and opinionated prose—points to a difficulty facing anyone who wants to describe and account for atmosphere with some academic rigor, which is that much of the best thinking on the topic has been unabashedly evaluative in nature. Disentangling the phenomenon from this language of appraisal poses a challenge, in part because it is not clear such a feat can be accomplished, and in part because it is not clear it should be. In what follows, I do not entirely avoid this language myself.
I begin by quickly surveying how film writers have invoked the term *atmosphere*, asking specifically how they construe the relationship between atmosphere and style. From these claims it will be possible to infer some general propositions about the nature of film atmosphere, and tie these points to writing by German philosopher Gernot Böhme, who considers the atmosphere in such aesthetic works as theatrical stage sets and architectural structures. Böhme, I argue, offers a robust and general definition of the concept that sheds light on how atmosphere functions in films. Last, in an attempt to show how his ideas can be applied in film studies, I sift through some metaphors that have been used to characterize the atmosphere in films, and conclude by looking at one, breath, in relation to a film that has probably been called “atmospheric” as often as any film ever made: Jacques Tourneur’s 1943 *I Walked with a Zombie*.

**Atmosphere and Style**

In an unbearably moving death scene, in which the hero throws himself over the moon of emotion, and the camera spills an oatmealish atmosphere around him, the style is a cross between Hawks and Euripides, and the visual details are magnificent.

—Manny Farber on *The Champion* (Dir. Mark Robson, 1949)

Many have viewed atmosphere as a thing apart from the other aspects of a film. Here are three examples of this endemic thinking: 1) a 1910 advertisement in *The Moving Picture World* promises that “the strength of this story, the picturesque settings, live western atmosphere, and the highly artistic photography, make this picture among the best of our Western producer’s recent dramatic offerings”; 2) screenwriter Frances Marion explains, in 1938, that practitioners of her craft churn out variations on familiar story patterns by creating and manipulating “character, environment, atmosphere, time, relationship, motivation, and complications”; and 3) a 2007 book about horror films finds subgenres displaying “differences at the levels of convention, narrative, iconography, atmosphere and setting.” This inclination, to tick off a list of a film’s ingredients and include atmosphere in it, suggests that it should be possible to identify many parts of a film that play no appreciable role in creating and sustaining its atmosphere.

This thinking can insert a wall between a film’s atmosphere and its style, one we can observe operating at different levels of generality. At the highest level, V. F. Perkins writes of a film that, “in terms of atmosphere the scene is successful; it remains very questionable on the level of style”; not as high, Graham Greene describes the “atmospherically correct” qualities of a Sherlock Holmes film, then adds that “this is the atmosphere conveyed, I should make clear, and not the effect of the photography”; and Lotte
Eisner sections off just one type of shot when she writes, of G. W. Pabst’s 1929 *Pandora’s Box*, that “it is the close-ups which determine the character of the film; the flamboyant or phosphorescent atmosphere and the luminous mists of London remain throughout merely a kind of accompaniment to these close-ups.”

Such compartmentalizing thinking is widespread, even though many of these same writers understand that it is ludicrous to try to separate a film’s atmosphere from its style. I will begin with stylistic elements that everyone agrees are inseparable from atmosphere, and work toward ones that are less often explicitly recognized for the role they play.

Maybe foremost among the unquestioned contributors is mise en scène. Lighting, for example, everyone knows, is atmospheric: in Carl Th. Dreyer’s *Vampyr* (1932), “shadows cast by the staircase railings jerking crazily around on the walls of the stairwell … are left an unexplained part of the general uncanny atmosphere”; in *Cat People* (Dir. Jacques Tourneur, 1942), “the dappled and deceptive lighting, the rough texture of the wall and the shadows of wind-blown leaves create a sinister atmosphere.”

Noting walls and staircases, these writers identify another aspect of mise en scène with a universally acknowledged connection to atmosphere: settings. A 1926 description of a 1909 film reports that during production, “incidental scenes for atmosphere were made, including campfires and the like”; a 1950 book about Hollywood observes that, “if the actors do not carry a romantic scene well, the director can shoot from them to a landscape bathed in a full moon and thus increase the romantic atmosphere”; and Dudley Andrew, a contemporary scholar who shows great sensitivity to atmosphere, notes, of props in poetic realist films, that “coordinated lighting and set design … bathe these objects in an atmosphere that seems to emanate from something deep inside them.”

One reason the notion that settings help to create atmosphere seems self-evident is that settings so obviously factor in the creation of cinematic space—and atmosphere, which conjures up images of mist, vapor, stratospheric heights and vast stretches, and weather events of every kind gathering and moving across these reaches—evokes space as well. This is also why, if I may digress for a moment, atmosphere makes for a more productive name of the phenomenon under examination than does mood, a word that has been used interchangeably with atmosphere throughout film history. Rather than anthropomorphize a film by giving it a mood, I suggest that it is preferable to spatialize it, thus encouraging us to focus on formal aspects of the work. The sense of a film as a dynamic, unfolding, volumetric entity is reinforced by one of it possessing an atmosphere. The innate spatiality of a film renders settings—and the things arrayed across them, such as props and lighting—uncontroversially relevant to studying atmosphere.
The same reasoning renders diegetic sound straightforwardly relevant as well. Most pertinent is ambient sound, a recognition underlined by the language of sound technicians. A sound recording handbook, for example, instructs technicians to supply “background atmosphere (‘atmos’ or ‘buzz track’) at the same level and in sufficient quantity to cover any gaps that may be introduced by editing or where there are more pictures than synchronous sound.” Moreover, just as often touched upon in considerations of atmosphere is, of course, nondiegetic music. One need look no further than this music’s common synonym, “mood music,” but here are two more recognitions of the basic connection: an encyclopedist of music for silent films advises accompanists, when making selections, to “determine the geographic and national atmosphere of your picture”; and a composer of scores for sound films writes that he “tries to find a musical ‘atmosphere’ that belongs to that film alone.”

Cinematography offers up more techniques with readily apparent links to atmosphere. In a silent film, tinting colors a film’s spaces when “atmosphere is carefully sustained with the yellow candlelight, the gold dawn, the pink firelight, the deep blue of the night.” A shot’s duration figures in the equation also. In Orson Welles’s *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), André Bazin finds a sequence shot emphasizing a kitchen’s cluttered surfaces, pressurizing a dramatic buildup that, when the scene reaches its climax, discharges itself in a manner that resonates with the electrical storm thundering outside; and in Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993), another writes:

> freneticism is conveyed by the camera’s rapid cuts and tracking shots as it follows the women into the showers’ darkened interior; yet as they stare at the showerheads, the camera pace appears to slow down and the mood intensifies, heightening an atmosphere of tense anticipation.

Third, and just as a long take will confer added weight to a setting, so will a distant camera. A book on film acting notes that “the long shot is usually taken to establish the atmosphere and setting of a scene.” Less prosaically, Manny Farber reflects on Carol Reed’s *The Third Man* (1949):

> The movie’s almost antique, enervated tone comes from endless distance shots with poetically caught atmosphere and terrain, glimpses of languid, lachrymose people sweeping or combing their hair, and that limp Reed manner with actors, which makes you feel you could push a finger straight through a head, and a sweater or a hat has as much warmth and curiosity as the person wearing it.

Farber, who identifies another synonym of atmosphere (tone), is another who sees distant framings making atmosphere. Also, he helps us shift our attention to stylistic elements that are less often acknowledged for the part they play—for Farber also finds atmosphere fueled by performances, including ones by actors in leading roles. He thus challenges a pervasive
and long-entrenched view in film studies, which is that atmosphere properly serves as a background and an accompaniment to a film’s characters, turns of the plot, and other foregrounded elements. Here are two expressions of this thinking: King Vidor, in the silent era, envisions a “motion picture without a story. By that I mean a production in which the main interest will center about the atmosphere and background rather than in the acting or the plot”;24 and Alan Williams describes, in Hollywood sound films, “a clear and reassuring hierarchy of sonic importance, and this is reinforced by a kind of step-system of sonic presence, sounds being made to seem either very close (important) or distant (‘atmosphere’).”25

One last point to note about this passage in Farber is his willingness to explore how The Third Man makes him feel, his synesthetic grasp of the most intimate contours and textures of the viewing experience. Without this sensitivity, it is difficult to analyze, appreciate, and even perceive the atmospheric character of a film.26 Here again is a challenge for film scholarship: How to maintain a disciplined perspective while not shying away from these sensuous, and, as Farber shows repeatedly, specifically tactile qualities of a film? I will address this question directly later on, and suggest here only that we might look to Farber and some of his contemporaries for examples and inspiration.

So much for the low-hanging fruit. I now want to show that writers—despite their frequent claims and working assumptions to the contrary—implicitly understand that no element of style can be isolated from atmosphere. Take dialogue, which, many suppose, it is the atmosphere’s function to support through its subservient appropriateness. Yet Julian Hanich can find, in haunted house films, that “the dense, constricting, labyrinth-like atmosphere is not only evoked visually, but also through dialogue passages.”27 Consider, too, close-ups, which shut out the environment, and, Lotte Eisner suggests, compel viewers to focus on those foregrounds that it is the atmosphere’s function merely to accompany.

First, close-ups do not necessarily shut out the environment. One might be of a prop, and therefore magnify a detail of setting. For example, Sergei Eisenstein identifies the kettle as the subject of the “most Griffithian of close-ups,” and finds these shots soaking in a “Dickensian atmosphere.”28 The problem gets pricklier, though, when considering that more ubiquitous subject of the close-up, the human face, which telegraphs character motivations and other psychology, and, when dialogue issues from it, parcels out major quantities of narrative information.29 Yet it turns out that this cardinal fixture of the cinematic foreground is no different than a kettle in this regard.

Referring to a scene in Billy Wilder’s Sunset Boulevard (1950), in which a character says something to another under his breath, Farber writes that,
when “the camera moved in for a very close close-up, the atmosphere became molecular and as though diseased.”

Gilberto Perez, quoting another writer, describes a moonlit close-up of the love-struck Ellie in Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night* (1934), when “the camera briefly catches a moist reflection of light in her eyes: ‘a gleam slight but clear’ that distills the ‘atmosphere of yearning’ suffusing the whole movie.”

Imagine the routine perception of the relationship between narrative and atmosphere to conform not to a foreground/background schema but instead an inside/outside one, with the characters and story claiming the bull’s-eye and the atmosphere relegated to the outer rings. Perez turns this schema inside out when he sees an eye, that moist nucleus of a character’s expression and emotionality, distilling an entire film’s atmosphere.

Perez can see an atmosphere distilled in an eye because atmosphere is not merely space but its emotional coloration. This is why nondiegetic music, so plainly linked to atmosphere—but, for all its association with the cinematic “background,” less obviously linked to space—constitutes a wedge that can help us pry the concept away from a film’s settings and ambient sounds, for any element of style that can color a film’s emotional tonality can be shown, and has been understood, to manufacture atmosphere.

Not just distant and close views but every kind of view can stoke a film’s atmospheric output. No facet of cinematography lies outside the reach of this vast operation, including more and less mobile framings. In a film, “apparently aimless camera movements enhance the claustrophobic atmosphere.”

In another, featuring “limited camera movement and stationary characters, the pacing is slow and atmospheric.”

Camera angles pitch in as well—when “well-chosen camera angles and memorable frame compositions intelligently ‘tell’ the story while adding to the movie’s atmosphere”; and when another film uses “bizarre low angles and depth to signify a threatening atmosphere.”

Finally, editing might seem like the most airless component of film style of all. But atmosphere is everywhere, and no part of a film does not contribute to it. A Griffith film captures details of setting in “shots which were not called for in the plot but which, when carefully edited, created an atmosphere and background that greatly reinforced the narrative and action of the story.”

More abstractly—and breaking away from setting altogether—another analyzes Griffith’s “ability to take advantage of the atmosphere of speculation arising between shots.”

Atmosphere refuses to stay in the backgrounds and outer rings. Far from a support and an accompaniment, it is everywhere. To recognize this quality is to take a step toward revising our understanding of the place and function of atmosphere within the total film viewing experience.
The Highly Global Nature of the Appraisal

This quality proper to the work… is a world atmosphere. How is it produced? Through the ensemble from which it emanates. All the elements of the world represented conspire to produce it.

—Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*

Many writers, in addition to seeing atmosphere as subordinate and supportive, do not hesitate to declare some films more atmospheric than others, and some not atmospheric at all. Eugene Vale, in his 1944 screenwriting handbook, draws this analogy:

Any place used or frequented predominantly by a characteristically distinct group or class of people is likely to have atmosphere. For instance: a place which sells utensils to fishermen who have been fishermen all their lives, has atmosphere. However, if it is only a section in a department store, selling utensils to fishermen who go fishing on Sundays, it is likely to have no atmosphere.

Not asking whether the department store simply has a different atmosphere than the fishing shop, Vale writes that “some places have atmosphere and others have not.” Then, in a move highly characteristic of the term’s application throughout film history, he wields it judgmentally: “Many artists have tried to create atmosphere, some successfully, others not, and some were able to create it occasionally.” Such reasoning suggests that it should be possible to identify artworks that contain no atmosphere whatsoever.

More recent thinking reaches different conclusions. For architect and architecture theorist Mark Wigley, even in cases of the most pragmatic and austere designs, “atmospheric effects cannot be avoided.” This is so even for that most pragmatic and austere architectural instrument—the blueprint:

The cult of the abstract line constructs its own atmosphere. It defines a dream space in which the architect works, a space in which atmospheric drawings or statements can then be tolerated as subordinate excesses. The very rejection of atmosphere constructs a particular atmosphere. Every small choice of representational technique defines an atmosphere.

In another sphere, every small choice of representational technique, taken together, constitutes a film’s style. Wigley suggests that, in architecture and cinema alike, these techniques cannot help but yield atmosphere, for that outcome is intrinsic to their essence and operation. So construed, atmosphere becomes something different than a distinctive quality which some films possess and others lack. Whether or not the artist is successful, and indifferent to the judgments of critics, atmospheric effects cannot be avoided.

Atmospheres are “global” entities, then, in two senses: every part of a film helps create it; and every film has it. Returning to the first sense,
Gernot Böhme links this quality to the haziness that inescapably attaches itself to the concept whenever someone tries to describe it:

Atmosphere is itself something extremely vague, indeterminate, intangible. The reason is primarily that atmospheres are totalities: atmospheres imbue everything, they tinge the whole of the world or a view, they bathe everything in a certain light, unify a diversity of impressions in a single emotive state.\(^{45}\)

Film writers who share this sense include Ed. S. Tan, who, summarizing work by researchers on mood, writes that an “important characteristic is the absence of an object and the highly global nature of the appraisal. When you feel depressed, the whole world looks miserable. Moods are not episodic and may last longer than the film.”\(^{46}\)

More pragmatic thinkers understand this global nature as well. Especially attuned to it are writers on film music. A New York Times correspondent, writing in the midst of the coming of sound, predicted that film sound would “provide ‘atmosphere’ instead of disconnected ‘incidental noises.’”\(^{47}\)

This journalist intuits that soundtracks will do something more dispersed and galvanizing than punctuate the odd moment here and there. Rick Altman observes that, earlier, silent film accompanists came to the same recognition.\(^{48}\) He quotes film music columnist Clarence E. Sinn, who, in 1910, identifies the accompanist’s primary obligation:

> It is the general character of the picture which you must observe. Taken together, what is the predominant feature? Is it pathetic, mysterious, tragical or comical? Work up to this general effect whatever it is. The producer takes great pains to convey certain impressions and preserve a certain atmosphere, and it is his due that these unities be preserved so the audience may receive his story in the same spirit in which it is told.\(^{49}\)

Pushing further, Aaron Copland understands that music must not only preserve unities but also create them, defining this function of film scoring:

> Building a sense of continuity. The picture editor knows better than anyone how serviceable music can be in tying together a visual medium which is, by its very nature, continually in danger of falling apart. One sees this most obviously in montage scenes where the use of a unifying musical idea may save the quick flashes of disconnected scenes from seeming merely chaotic.\(^{50}\)

Atmosphere helps to save a film from the centrifugal force of its own heterogeneity. Binding, blanketing music makes this function explicit, although I have argued that every part of a film feeds atmospheric production.

Writers on topics other than music who appreciate the global nature of atmosphere include Perez, who sees an “‘atmosphere of yearning’ suffusing the whole” of It Happened One Night; and Andrew, who perceives, in French poetic realist films, “atmosphere as an effect of cinematic texture, as a pervasive overtone emanating variously from cinematography, set design, sound, music, script, and acting.”\(^{51}\) Perez and Andrew grasp atmosphere’s relationship to the aesthetic totality.
Atmosphere is everywhere in a film, and no film is without it. But what is it? What do people mean when they invoke the term? Just by cataloging how they have done so, we already begin to see the outlines of a definition taking shape. Yet, as even my brief survey shows, the word’s meaning is anything but fixed. There are many kinds and senses of atmosphere, and a definition broad enough to encompass them all will necessarily be an accommodating one. The term is widely applicable, which makes its meaning potentially slippery, and the phenomenon itself is as ubiquitous, indeterminate, and diffuse as air. These qualities make it especially important to resist temptations to be vague and overly impressionistic when conceptualizing what atmosphere is and when approaching an individual film. Böhme provides guidance on both of these fronts.

**Giant Sponges and Other Metaphors**

TERRY GROSS, host: Jim Cameron, welcome to FRESH AIR. Can I ask you to give us an example of a shot or two, or a scene, that epitomizes for you what you can do with 3-D that you couldn’t do in a regular film?

Mr. JAMES CAMERON (Filmmaker, *Avatar*): Well, I think it’s sometimes as simple as, you know, a shot in a snowstorm would feel so much more tactile to the viewer. You’d actually feel like the snowflakes were falling on you and around you, you know, that sort of thing, any time that the medium of the air between you and the subject can be filled with something.

—Terry Gross, host, *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio

Atmospheres are not backgrounds but totalities. Böhme extends this claim by a leap, casting atmosphere’s reach outside the boundaries of the aesthetic text. He describes, as many film writers have done, senses of the phenomenon as both space and emotional coloration, defining atmosphere “as tuned space, i.e. a space with a certain mood.” But whose mood? The artwork’s, as in a piece of “moody chamber music,” or the perceiver’s? Crucially, it is both, because for Böhme, an atmosphere consists of every particle of the aesthetic work and also the surrounding intersubjective experience that binds perceivers to the work and perceivers to each other.

This makes intuitive sense, for what ultimately matters is the atmosphere that engulfs not a film’s characters but its audience. When Tan writes that a mood “may last longer than the film,” he has gestured beyond the film and pointed toward its viewers. Recall, too, Clarence E. Sinn’s call for accompanists to focus on the atmosphere the producer wanted, so “the audience may receive his story in the same spirit in which it is told.” Accompanists help push this “spirit” out into the auditorium. But music only helps, for all the other elements are pushing, too, including settings:

Andrew, referring to French production designer Alexandre Trauner, writes
that “a general atmosphere suffuses each Trauner film, one so pervasive that it beclouds the spectator.”

Draw the circle of an atmosphere’s compass and it will encircle a film’s viewers. This helps to explain why so many have identified the locus of an atmosphere not in a film text but a theater auditorium. The press book for Victor Halperin’s White Zombie (1932) includes this wishful account of a preview screening:

A tense stillness pervaded the atmosphere. Eyes were riveted on the screen and every now and then the stillness was punctuated by shrieks of horror at some thrilling climax until the final exciting sequence practically lifted them from their seats and left them limp.

Another horror film, André de Toth’s House of Wax (1953), left a reviewer feeling, when the film ended, that “if you had escaped the orgiastic participation you felt dirtied, as if in an atmosphere of perversion.” And Farber paints this drippingly sensuous, if unpleasant, picture of the exhibition site, tacking on a note about film atmosphere only at the end:

The hard-bitten action film finds its natural home in caves: the murky, congested theaters, looking like glorified tattoo parlors on the outside and located near bus terminals in big cities. These theaters roll action films in what, at first, seems like a nightmarish atmosphere of shabby transience, prints that seem overgrown with jungle moss, sound tracks infected with hiccups. The spectator watches two or three action films go by and leaves feeling as though he were a pirate discharged from a giant sponge.

The cutthroat atmosphere in the itch house is reproduced in the movies shown there.

Atmosphere’s expansive reach and essential status make intuitive sense. Böhme’s intervention is that he makes these attributes explicit terms of the discussion, and this approach is overdue. He also accounts for the indeterminacy and diffuseness of atmosphere while simultaneously suggesting a way that our analysis of it need not itself lack concreteness. He does this by emphasizing atmosphere’s quality of betweenness. Atmospheres are an:

intermediate phenomenon, something between subject and object. That makes them, as such, intangible, and means that… they have no secure ontological status. But for that very reason it is rewarding to approach them from two sides, from the side of subjects and from the side of objects, from the side of reception aesthetics and from the side of production aesthetics.

Böhme brings together, under his umbrella concept, the circumscribed particulars of the aesthetic text with the ephemeral intangibles of its reception. And so the steady and “objective” eye we bring to formal analysis can help anchor the study of something more airy and elusive.

Some who register this quality of betweenness envision atmosphere as a sort of viscous substance spread across a film’s surface. A film’s story is “impressionistically coated with San Francisco’s oatmeal-gray atmosphere;”
another’s bad music is “poured over the whole film like a sticky sauce;” another’s director and art director:

clothe everything in chiaroscuro and mist… Swirls of dust and smoke wreath the dwellings of the beggar king and cling to the bare walls, where the wretches’ rags are like ornamental blobs of paint, and hover in the nuptial shed on the docks, softening the splendour of the tables brimming with fruit and silverware amid the reflections of the gentle candlelight.

These evocations of clothing, clinging, wreathing, brimming, and reflecting affix our senses to edges and surfaces—including, when costumes become paint blobs on canvas, the film’s surface, a membrane that simultaneously demarcates and forms a seam of contact between the film’s world and its viewers. That we can, as Böhme notes, approach an atmosphere from two sides is suggested in the way an atmosphere can adhere to a film’s walls and costumes and wrap in the other direction with equal ease—as when House of Wax deposits a residue on viewers, and another film’s “haunting atmosphere clings onto you like steam in a bathhouse.” Atmosphere goes both ways because its location can be pinpointed in neither the film nor its viewers. It comes into being when these entities come together.

Our task is to concretize this uniqueness in its sensuous external features… so that the screen manifests the “flesh” and the texture of the atmosphere.

—Andrei Tarkovsky on his 1972 film Solaris

Atmospheres are vague, spread out, and ineffable, and so a writer can be forgiven for resorting to figurative and even fanciful language when trying to evoke one. This approach turns out, in fact, to be a valuable rhetorical impulse, for such language casts light on atmosphere’s functioning, sources, and character—including its liminality. A metaphor implied by the figurations of atmosphere as a coating is atmosphere as a skin, a metaphor that sends us into territory that has been explored by theorists who take a phenomenological approach to cinema. Vivian Sobchack, Laura Marks, Jennifer Barker, and others argue for decentering sight as the reigning mode of perception for understanding film spectatorship, reimagining the process as a form of touch. Sobchack construes spectatorship as “embodied vision,” and places at the core of her theory a conception of the experience as heavily intersubjective. Barker, in The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience, examines “the relation between the spectator’s lived-body and that of the film.” Her emphasis on two bodies calls to mind a vacillation described previously, whereby an atmosphere may stick to a film or to its viewers. For Barker—and Laura Marks, for whom skin figures centrally in her theory of haptic visuality—atmosphere is not a key word, but some of their concerns and priorities nevertheless dovetail with mine.
The overlap increases in work by Kristi McKim, who introduces another metaphor. In *Cinema as Weather: Stylistic Screens and Atmospheric Change*, McKim asks how on-screen weather conditions shape and mirror “the weather of our screening experience.”68 Taking a cue from the roots of the word *atmosphere* in meteorology, and asking how cinematic portrayals of such environmental conditions as wind, rain, and snow infiltrate film viewing, McKim finds these conditions creating atmosphere in more substantive ways than notions of weather as merely an appropriate backdrop would suggest.69 Others recognize the importance of diegetic weather in making atmosphere—Robert Bird, for example, who describes, in a Tarkovsky film, “an atmosphere fed by the harsh sea wind that scours the landscape, courses through open windows and carries the force of war.”70 Weather is atmospheric—and, importantly, whether or not a film features much salient weather at all, atmospheres are weather-like: Katie Trumpener finds, when a musical transitions into or out of a number, viewers registering “a perceptible shift in the atmosphere, the emotional ‘weather’ of a movie.”71

While the skin metaphor visualizes atmosphere’s betweenness, a benefit of construing atmosphere as “emotional weather” is that it offers a model of the phenomenon as airborne, and this is appropriate given its name; as Böhme writes, “atmospheres are moods, which one feels in the air.”72 What is gained by thinking about atmosphere as an air one can feel? Something not lost is a sense of the phenomenon as eminently shared by a film and its viewers, as the James Cameron quote at the top of this section suggests. Furthermore, once airborne, atmosphere lends itself to other metaphors that illuminate the phenomenon’s intersubjectivity with special vividness.

The atmosphere reeks of compulsive wrongness.

—Anthony Lane, reviewing Robin Pront’s film *The Ardennes* (2017)73

There are types of air that, more than weather, enter and exit the body freely, and demonstrate that the envelope separating a person from her surroundings is nothing if not porous. One such air is aroma. Laura Marks, in *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, explores how films by the Brothers Quay arouse viewers’ sense of smell by confronting them with rich textures and an “overwhelming presence of detail.”74 More mainstream works evoke this sensation as well. For Böhme, “what is characteristic of things is their tone, their ‘odor’ or emanation—that is to say, the way in which they express their essence”;75 while for Béla Balász, atmosphere is “the air and the aroma that pervade every work of art.”76 Film atmospheres that trigger experiences akin to olfactory sensations include one that carries “a genuine aroma of Poe”;77 one featuring “exteriors with a tangy sharpness that was practically three-dimensional”;78 and, two from James Agee—a
film with “an atmosphere you can all but get the temperature and cider fragrance and staidly sporty erotic tension of,” and one that exudes an “oxygen-sharp, otherwise unattainable atmosphere, almost a smell, of freedom.”

Aromas enter and exit the body. The outside world coming in is comparable to the emotions that can grip and pervade a viewer, blurring the line that objectively, although not experientially, tells us where a film leaves off and its reception begins. Another air that suggests this permeability is breath.

Cinema Audiences Reproducibly Vary the Chemical Composition of Air During Films, by Broadcasting Scene Specific Emissions on Breath

—Jonathan Williams et al. Report title in Scientific Reports

Linking Walter Benjamin’s concept of the aura to atmosphere, Böhme writes that an aura is “something which flows forth spatially, almost something like a breath or a haze.” In film studies, one finds breathing to be another bodily experience that phenomenologists, including Barker, explore for what it can tell us about a process that theorists throughout film history have construed overwhelmingly as an optical one. In The Place of Breath in Cinema, Davina Quinlivan asks how some films highlight the “dualistic nature of breathing which unsettles boundaries between ourselves and the outer world.” Here again, a phenomenologist’s observations apply in a study of atmosphere—where one detects two-way traffic across this boundary in writing that points, collectively, to two bodies breathing while a film unreels. In a film, diegetic sound “breathes atmosphere into the tale;” another finds ways “to intensify the real-life atmosphere in which the camera can breathe;” in another, settings “breathe the atmosphere of an uncanny ruin.” And so soundtracks, cameras, and settings are breathing. So are whole films: Hans Janowitz, cowriter of The Cabinet of Caligari (1920), directed by Robert Wiene, writes that “the atmosphere of the picture had to breathe an air of unreality”; in another film, a close-up marks the moment at which the film “holds its breath.” We can add to this list audiences, and note that what they are inhaling is films: on a commercial airliner, “the flickering screens that surround passengers create an atmosphere of images lighting the cabin and permeating the cabin, as if cinema becomes air to breathe.” But, if audiences are breathing, it is not at every moment: in a silent film, just before a gunshot is fired, the orchestra paused, “held its breath with the patrons until the suspense had passed”; while in film scenes characterized by dread and stillness, “viewers hardly dare to breathe.”

Films and their audiences breathe each other. I suggest that one reason breath, better than aroma, captures this sense of mutual intake and outflow
is that breathing is essential to life; and without atmosphere, likewise, there
is no film experience at all. And yet one cannot dispel the notion that
some films are more atmospheric than others quite so easily, in fact not
nearly so. All films have it, but some brew atmospheres that intoxicate and
linger. Again we return to evaluation, built into the DNA of the concept,
for Vale has a point when he claims that aficionados of atmosphere will
find the piquant specificity of a shop for dedicated anglers more enticing
than the bland countertops and smells of a department store. Both might
be, technically speaking, “atmospheric,” but qualities we associate with the
word waft more compellingly from the cluttered, dim, 40-year-old place
than from the Sears. All films have it, but some launch us into rhapsodic
celebrations of their atmospheres while most do not. I close with a film
that does.

I Walked with a Zombie

The dialogue is almost nothing but a commentary on past events, obsessively
revising itself, finally giving up the struggle to explain and surrendering to a mute
acceptance of the inexplicable. We watch the slow, atmospheric, lovingly detailed
scenes with delight and fascination, realizing at the end that we have seen nothing
but the traces of a conflict decided in advance.

—Chris Fujiwara on I Walked with a Zombie

I Walked with a Zombie arouses sensations of touch, for one writer effusing
a “velvety lushness,” including in a scene in which “whispering slivers of
light streak through the slatted blinds of a Caribbean mansion, like fingers
reaching out in the darkness.” Moreover—and switching metaphors—if
the film rolls over its viewers like a fog, then the material of this advance is
not primarily narrative in nature, for—as Chris Fujiwara and J. P. Telotte
note—the film’s narrative is oblique and thinly dispersed. It never explains
whether the root of zombieism is supernatural or physiological, but instead
provides dramatic setups that lack payoffs, and, in general, loosens up the
causal connections, making room for air we can feel. No sharply incised
twists and turns pull a viewer through this film. Instead, something more
consistent churns through every shot, giving rise to the hypnogogic experi-
ence that watching this film can induce. The film is no thrill ride but
69 minutes of what one admirer calls “an enveloping mood piece.”

Narrative construction is one reason this modest film manifests a volumin-
ously and palpably diffuse nature. Others include light that streaks like fin-
gers, and qualities of a formal organization that are strongly characterized
by things that spread.

This quality of dispersal and diffuseness, and the morbid substance of
the film’s veil-like textures, are signaled early on, when a character, Paul
Holland (Tom Conway), on a boat slipping through the night, tells his new employee, Betsy Connell (Frances Dee): “That luminous water—it takes its gleam from millions of tiny dead bodies. The glitter of putrescence. There’s no beauty here. Only death and decay.” Across the film, lattice-works of shadows cast by tree branches and window blinds, and plant fronds that splay out and coat the exterior as well as the interior settings, blend the film’s spaces and wash over the frame, softening distinctions between foreground and background, and inside and outside (Figures 1–2). Simultaneously, studding the film are emblems anchoring vigorous motivic constellations and parallels. A hanging gourd offshoots a link to a hanging animal carcass, which connects to an animal skull suspended on a stick, which connects to a human skull set into a circle of stones on the ground (Figures 3–6); and Ti-Misery, the slave-ship masthead grimly ornamenting a courtyard, sparks a link to the black, statue-like zombie Carrefour; and a zombie woman in a diaphanous gown, pierced first by a sabre and later an arrow, visually rhymes with her voodoo-doll counterpart, pierced by a pin, all while circling us back to the arrow-pierced figurehead (Figures 7–10).

Death and decay imagery spreads over the film, while spreading over and through it is an air that is restlessly, noisily moving. Wind blows through the animal skull, making an eerie sound, and through the holes in the gourd, making a doleful chime; and a conch shell, when blown into,

Figure 1. An example of the film’s approach to dispersing shadows finely across its settings.
Figure 2. Plants and shadows crowd an indoor space that is wide open to the night air.

Figure 3. A hanging gourd.
Figure 4. A hanging animal carcass.

Figure 5. An animal skull on a stick.
Figure 6. A skull in a circle of stones.

Figure 7. The figurehead Ti-Misery.
Figure 8. Carrefour guards the crossroads.

Figure 9. Pierced by a sabre, the zombie does not bleed.
issues a call that summons the zombie woman to the houmfort—the voodoo temple that is the film’s center of death. Wind is seen and heard at many moments, including when it disturbs the inside of the manor house, where the characters dine. More strikingly, wind blows louder than we have heard before, in a shot that marks the beginning of a journey to the houmfort, as the camera tracks more dramatically than we have seen before, sweeping past leaves that stir and rattle. The ensuing walk through the cane field is accompanied by a constant wind that carries drumbeats blowing from the characters’ destination. Back at the house, a character listens to the drums and complains: “For some reason, they always pick a night like this. This hot wind even sets me on edge.” Hot and—we can assume, in this tropical place—humid wind is like a breath that streams from the characters, settings, and the themes not only of death and decay, but, as Alexander Nemerov notes, an uncontainable sadness that is concentrated most potently in the weeping Ti-Misery. This breath intermingles with that of viewers. Where the air comes from, and who or what inspires and expires it, ceases to be clear. The mournful enchantment of the film keeps expanding, and is not halted by the final credits.

Near the beginning, on the boat, Betsy says in a voiceover: “I looked at those great glowing stars. I felt the warm wind on my cheek. I breathed deep, and every bit of me inside myself said, ‘How beautiful.’” Holland speaks up. “It’s not beautiful,” he says. Betsy replies, “You read my
thoughts, Mr. Holland.” The exchange dramatizes something atmosphere does, and atmospheric films do with exemplary power. Floating on the dreamy, meaning-charged, luminescent waves, a character reads another’s thoughts. Thoughts and feelings crisscross and interfuse in the space between. Interior things breach boundaries effortlessly, mysteriously. The balmy air carries the emotional charge of the scene all the way to us.

Notes

2. See, for example, Bird, Andrei Tarkovsky: Elements of Cinema; Groening Cinema Beyond Territory: Inflight Entertainment and Atmospheres of Globalization, Spadoni, “Carl Dreyer’s Corpse: Horror Film Atmosphere and Narrative,” in A Companion to the Horror Film; and Spadoni, “Horror Film Atmosphere as Anti-Narrative (and Vice Versa),” in Merchants of Menace: The Business of Horror Cinema.
3. See, for example, Pollmann “Kalte Stimmung, or the Mode of Mood: Ice and Snow in Melodrama,” in Colloquia Germanica; McKim, Cinema as Weather: Stylistic Screens and Atmospheric Change; Hanich, Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear; and, for an example from literature study, Pizzo, “Atmospheric Exceptionalism in Jane Eyre: Charlotte Brontë’s Weather Wisdom,” in PMLA.
5. “Essanay Films—Comedy and Western—Two Big Releases” [advertisement], in Moving Picture World, p. 159.
7. Schneider, 100 European Horror Films, p. xxi.
8. Perkins, Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies, p. 87.
12. Powell, Deleuze and Horror Film, p. 70.
15. Andrew, Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film, p. 37.
23. Farber, “The Third Man,” in The Nation [1 April 1950], reproduced in Polito, Farber on Film, p. 331.
25. Williams, “Godard’s Use of Sound,” in Film Sound: Theory and Practice, pp. 336–7; On atmosphere as background, see Spadoni, “Dreyer’s Corpse.”
26. On the high value Farber placed on emotional expression in films, see Bordwell, The Rhapsodes: How 1940s Critics Changed American Film Culture, pp. 82–110.
29. On how film narratives generate atmosphere, see Spadoni, “Dreyer’s Corpse.”
32. For Böhme on atmospheres as both emotional and spatial, see, for example, Aesthetics of Atmospheres, p. 5.
40. Vale, The Technique of Screenplay Writing, p. 56.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
46. Tan, Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film as an Emotion Machine, p. 204. On film atmosphere as “vague and elusive,” also see Bird, Andrei Tarkovsky, pp. 10, 13, 211.
48. Altman notes that live music before 1910 tended to accentuate individual moments and that “not until the teens would musicians regularly adopt an aesthetic of continuous music matched not to transient images or actions but to each scene’s overall atmosphere” (Altman, Silent Film Sound, p. 368).
49. Altman, *Silent Film Sound*, p. 243.
52. On the many senses of atmosphere and on its indeterminacy, see, for example, Böhme, *Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, pp. 11–12, 28–29, 183; and Bird, *Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 211. On film atmosphere’s diffuseness, see Spadoni, “Dreyer’s Corpse.”
55. Andrew, *Mists of Regret*, p. 188.
58. Farber, “Underground Films,” in *Commentary* [November 1957], reproduced in Polito, *Farber on Film*, p. 489. Mark Kermode suggests that, for an atmosphere to cast its spell, the audience need neither be large nor in a theater:

> At around 11:00, when everyone else was in bed, I would sneak down into the family living room and sit entranced by a selection of creaky… horror flicks, usually from the Hammer or Amicus stable. No matter that I had to have the volume turned down so far that it was impossible to hear anything that was being said: what was captivating was the electrifying atmosphere, the sense of watching something that was forbidden, secretive, taboo” (“I Was a Teenage Horror Fan, Or, ‘How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Linda Blair,’” in *Ill Effects: The Media/Violence Debate*, p. 57).

59. Böhme, *Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, p. 29; also see, for example, p. 183; and Griffero, *Atmospheres*, pp. 121–123.
63. L-A Marks, “Eastern Promises,” in *Culture Compass*.
64. Tarkovsky quoted in Bird, *Andrei Tarkovsky*, p. 117.
65. Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* and *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*.
69. For the word’s meteorological origins, also see, for example, Böhme, *Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, pp. 2, 25, 28, 163.
71. Trumpener, “The René Clair Moment and the Overlap Films of the Early 1930s: Detlef Sierck’s *April, April*” in *Film Criticism*, p. 39.
appears in Böhme’s 2017 book, the phrase becomes “atmospheres are moods pervading the air” (p. 167).

73. Lane, “Family Packs” in New Yorker, p. 86.


75. Böhme, Aesthetics of Atmospheres, p. 32.

76. Balázs, Visible Man [1924] in Carter (editor) and Livingstone (translator), Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory: Visible Man and The Spirit of Film, p. 22. For another invocation of this metaphor in a description of atmosphere, see Orsini, Michel. "Point of View,” p. 11.

77. Rigby, American Gothic: Sixty Years of Horror Cinema, p. 146.

78. Brownlow, The Parade’s Gone By, p. 221.


80. Agee, in The Nation [13 April 1946], reproduced in Agee, Agee on Film, p. 185.

81. On atmosphere and the olfactory, and the olfactory linked to breath, see Griffero, Atmospheres, pp. 63–9.


83. Böhme, Aesthetics of Atmospheres, p. 15.


85. Quinlivan, Place of Breath, p. 91.

86. Andrew, Mists of Regret, p. 110.


91. Groening, Cinema Beyond Territory, p. 11.


97. On how a weak narrative can make a film more atmospheric, see Spadoni, “Horror Film Atmosphere.”


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