

# Carl Dreyer's Corpse

## *Horror Film Atmosphere and Narrative*

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Horror films are “atmospheric” compared to most other genre films. It would be hard to reach a different conclusion following even the most cursory survey of writing on the genre, from the earliest newspaper reviews to scholarly works published this year. Even if one takes into account the widespread opinion that the films became less atmospheric when *Psycho* (1960) influentially introduced a greater degree of explicitness to the genre, still, the genre as a whole has always been distinctive as much for the quantity as for the quality of the atmosphere it pumps into its films.

But what is horror film atmosphere? Any attempt to answer this question must ask what parts of a film contribute to its atmosphere. Most of this essay is devoted to exploring this question, paying particular attention to the role narrative plays in atmosphere's creation, a role that has, to date, been undervalued and misunderstood.<sup>1</sup> One should also ask what sorts of things an atmosphere can evoke. Here is a good starting question for us, because even the quickest sketch of an answer points to one of several problems facing anyone hoping to flesh out a productive definition of horror film atmosphere. My approach to these problems, and a definition, will consist mostly of examining statements that have been made about the atmosphere in various horror films. These statements show, broadly speaking, two things: first, that writers through the decades have minimized and overlooked atmosphere as an analytical concept and as a formal component of horror films; and second, that these writers know more about atmosphere than they realize. Making some of their implicit knowledge explicit is an aim of this essay. I conclude by briefly considering work by German philosopher Gernot Böhme, whose thinking on atmosphere in relation to media other than cinema can help us better understand and appreciate what everyone agrees is an especially atmospheric genre of film.

Before beginning, let me acknowledge that by looking at statements across a wide span of decades, and by not discriminating between popular and academic writing,

I may seem to be taking an ahistorical and undiscerning approach to a vast body of discourse. Certainly this body deserves more attention than I give it here, for I believe a fascinating history of film atmosphere *as an idea* remains to be written. But I suggest that this idea exhibits, through the decades, a stubbornly untheorized quality. It has almost always been atmosphere with a small *a*, a concept far more often invoked than even lightly probed. What the word means has been mostly taken for granted, and what it has to teach us about how horror films cohere and how they affect viewers remains poorly understood.

### Problems of Definition

What sorts of things can a horror film atmosphere evoke? An atmosphere can be redolent of an idea, frequently (although not always) one soaking in emotion. For example, in the Bates house in *Psycho*, “the Victorian decor, crammed with invention, intensifies the atmosphere of sexual repression” (Wood, 1989: 147); while in the opening hotel-room sequence, “the heat, the bleached feel of the visuals, the half-nakedness, evoke an atmosphere of unsatiated sensuality” (Durnat, 2000: 42). An atmosphere might also conjure up the spirit of a literary author—Wodehouse in *Ghost Story* (1981), Poe in *The Black Cat* (1934)—or a film subgenre or cycle, as in “the atmosphere of the vampire genre” in *Daughters of Darkness* (1971) (Zimmerman, 1996: 384). And of course an atmosphere can evoke a time and place, nineteenth century London in a *Jekyll and Hyde* adaptation, the 1980s (and its horror films) in *House of the Devil* (2009).

Films that call to mind an author or historical period suggest that an atmosphere can seem to point outside itself, to connect a film to the world around it. But the word “atmosphere,” with its roots in meteorology, also suggests a kind of *internal* weather system, one a film whips up and sustains within its own textual borders. *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928) “resides within its sealed world, as if—yes, as if buried alive” (Ebert, 2005: 142); *White Zombie* (1932) exudes “an atmosphere of fusty timelessness” (Rigby, 2007: 109); Universal classic horror movies created “a tight, false world of studio-built landscape, where ... every actor was caught in the closing ring of horrors, untouched by the possibility of a normal world beyond” (Gifford, 1973: 192, my ellipsis). An atmosphere can forge a link to the outside world or cut a film off from it.

These are only some of the things a film atmosphere can do and evoke; enough, I hope, to suggest that it might be difficult to come up with a description that encompasses such a broad range of possibilities. Another problem of definition is that the concept is itself often characterized as “ineffable,” as in this screenwriting guide from 1944:

Sometimes, we find a place with a certain something which we call atmosphere. But this certain something is of almost miraculous appearance, too volatile to be defined .... It seems that this attribute of a place escapes all crystallization into a rule. (Vale, 1944: 56, my ellipsis)

If atmosphere is indeterminate and ineffable, how can we hope to define it with any concreteness? A related problem is that the term has historically been applied less for purposes of analysis than for ones of evaluation. Atmosphere is elusive, but a good critic knows it when she sees it. And a good filmmaker knows how to create it. The vagueness of what everyone means by the word makes it easy for critics to assert their superior taste while advancing opinions that are purely subjective.

More conceptual murkiness arises from the tendency to use the word interchangeably with "mood." Still more confusing is when writers string these words together, implying that they mean different things without explaining what this difference might be: "Horror movies of mood and atmosphere are interesting for how they treat moral struggles with evil" (Freeland, 2004: 191); "Art-dread is associated with horror movies based on mood and atmosphere" (Cherry, 2009: 164). Are the words synonyms or do they partially overlap or do they mean different things? I suggest that these words function, in many kinds of film writing, as a kind of padding, appearing together when a sentence has a more pleasing cadence ticking off two attributes rather than just one. While, as I suggest below, some statements that have been made about mood can help us understand atmosphere, I prefer to focus on "atmosphere" because the "weather system" sense of the word invites us to consider the *spatiality* of a film—the space filled by all the big and small atmospheric shifts and disturbances—and so it encourages us to construe the concept in terms of a film's concrete formal particulars.

This is what Julian Hanich does in his study of emotion in horror films and thrillers. He identifies a film's atmospheric elements as "setting, daytime, weather and season" (2010: 171). By linking atmosphere to just a few elements, Hanich advances a definition that not only grounds the term in the film text but also steers clear of the vague and impressionistic language that has characterized nearly all its applications. But Hanich goes too far by linking atmosphere to too few elements. He extends a longstanding tradition of shoehorning atmosphere into too small a box within the total filmic system. In much film writing, typically in an off-hand and unreflective manner, atmosphere is insulated from those parts of a film with which it is assumed not to overlap. This thinking works to constrain our sense of the concept, when it should be moving in the opposite direction.

Take atmosphere and meaning. Writers seldom look to atmosphere for elements that centrally convey a film's themes, and when such elements do, this can be judged distinctive enough to warrant a mention: David Bordwell finds *Vampyr* (1932) developing "death motifs . . . not solely for atmosphere but also to build up a reserve, as it were, of connotative energy to be discharged at a later phase in the narrative" (1981: 95, my ellipsis). But this double functioning is not unusual at all. Returning to Wood on *Psycho*, is "sexual repression" an atmosphere of the film or a meaning? Clearly it is both. Similarly, Vivian Sobchack (2001: 122) refers to the "convincing atmosphere of paranoia" in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). But anyone focusing on paranoia in this film is likely to find the concept characterizing more than just what most would call its atmosphere. Where is the line separating meaning from atmosphere? Here is the better question: What is wrong with trying to draw any such line at all?

More bewildering than statements that distinguish atmosphere from mood, and atmosphere from meaning, are ones that implicitly partition atmosphere from style, as when a writer notes that “films of Gothic horror are expressionist in their style and atmosphere” (Ross, 1972: 2). This might just be another example of sentence padding, but such casual statements, taken in sum, constitute the picture of atmosphere that film studies has drawn for itself; and it is hard to imagine what parts of a film are creating its atmosphere if not, in large measure, its style. But writers know this, and the picture is more complicated (contradictory, really), because many of these same writers indicate their intuitive grasp of the dense web of connections that binds atmosphere to every part of a film—not just nondiegetic (“mood”) music, off-screen diegetic sound, and mise-en-scene, but elements of style routinely cordoned off from atmosphere, including framing and editing. And if atmosphere cannot be separated from *any* other aspect of a film, and if these other aspects are not merely “colored” by atmosphere but directly take part in its creation, then we need to rethink atmosphere’s relationship to the filmic whole. For reasons of space, I will devote the rest of this essay to the relationship between horror film atmosphere and narrative.

## Narrative

What is the relationship between atmosphere and narrative? One pattern in the literature suggests that they represent two poles around which one might structure an artwork. For example, Jean Epstein’s *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928) “was based on a Poe story that is more atmosphere than plot” (Ebert, 2005: 171). And with *Vampyr*, Dreyer “focuses on mood and atmosphere rather than exploring the emotions of his characters” (Senn, 1996: 77). A film with deficiencies in one area can compensate by beefing up its reserves in the other: *Ringu 2* (1999) “lacked the clearly defined narrative of *Ringu* but what it lacked in clarity it made up for in atmosphere” (Hutchings, 2008: 264). Such statements find artworks foregrounding atmosphere over narrative considerations, with favorable results.

This same foregrounding can also meet with criticism. In *Isle of the Dead* (1945), a Val Lewton film directed by Mark Robson, a scene involving a ghostly female figure lacks something found in Lewton films directed by Jacques Tourneur:

There is a slow track forward into the black rectangle formed by the open door of her tomb as her faint white figure emerges, but the dimension of uncertainty omnipresent in Tourneur is absent here: we are dealing with stylistic effects to create atmosphere and nothing more, however effective they are. (Humphries, 2002: 53)

We should note, in addition to a camera movement creating atmosphere, this writer’s opinion that a movement that does *only* this is wasting the viewer’s time. Similarly, David Denby writes that the makers of *Hereafter* (2010) “clearly wanted to work

soberly and realistically and to avoid routine scare techniques and the banalities of 'atmosphere'" (*New Yorker*, 1 Nov. 2010: 26). It is unclear why Denby encloses the word in quotes. Perhaps it is to signal his disdain for atmosphere for atmosphere's sake, which would put him in the company of writers who view such a prioritization as a weak and even irritating aesthetic choice.

More disregard for the concept is suggested by the sense of atmosphere as a kind of aesthetic leftover. Considering a film heavily edited for US distribution, one writer notes that "with the deletion of all of Mario Bava's sado-masochistic scenes from *La frusta e il corpo*, its American remnant *What!* is reduced to an hour of atmospheric, but meaningless, corridor-wandering" (Erickson, 2000: 272). Delete a film's plot action and what remains behind is poetic air that no longer serves a worthwhile purpose. The extreme result of defining atmosphere in terms of what it is not — not meaning, not style, not narrative — is to push it to the margins and view it as little more than textual dressing, or garnish. It makes the meal nicer but, far from the main course, it is not even a side dish.

Such statements point to the widespread tendency to see atmosphere as secondary to almost everything else in a film, including, and perhaps especially, its narrative. Atmosphere is subordinate. It is background. This is why some critics get annoyed when filmmakers devote too much energy to atmosphere when they should be attending to the textual "foreground," where one finds the characters and story. Reflecting this bias, an *American Cinematographer* article describes the instructions followed by the costumers working on a big-budget film:

The atmosphere on the whole in "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" is little short of a miracle in variety and breath-taking splendor. And yet, no matter how much they like the styles and general effect of the costuming, they have the same orders as every other person on the unit: "The costuming must be subdued. We are spending money on it primarily to make it so correct that it will be inconspicuous." (Arthur Q. Hagerman, "Costuming a Super-production," Feb. 1923: 20)

Good atmosphere is atmosphere that does not call too much attention to itself or get in the way. It must be, above all, *appropriate* to the narrative's unfolding.

It is this entrenched view of the hierarchical relationship between atmosphere and everything else in a film that needs to be challenged. More specifically, atmosphere should not be thought of as separable from narrative. Nor is it sufficient to say that they exist in a tightly integrated relationship, and that the line dividing the two can be fuzzy. Many examples of this sort of qualification can be found in Hanich, who notes, for example, that "separating atmospheric *components* from the *whole* contains the risk of distorting matters" (2010: 171, his italics). But then he proceeds to separate them anyway. To do so is to misconstrue the essence of the dynamic that defines their relationship.

Consider characters, those major movers of the narrative, the figures whose actions propel the plot and whose goals we care about. In the conventional view,

characters move against the atmospheric backdrop, which colors and supports their activities. But characters support the atmosphere as well. In *Night Monster* (1942), “old hands at the game like Bela Lugosi and Lionel Atwill are simply present for atmosphere purposes” (*New York Herald Tribune*, 30 Nov. 1942). In *House of Frankenstein* (1944), “through successive locales, the monsters carry with them their own violent environment” (Denne, 1972: 127). In *The Golem* (1915), the “creature of inadequacy is surrounded by an atmosphere of sadness: a melancholy sense of doomed efforts to reach the unattainable.” This figure moves across a “soul-suffused landscape” (*Die Schaubühne*, xi, 1915: 225–227; quoted in Prawer, 1980: 29). But where is the “soul” coming from? Is it seeping into this yearning creature or pouring out of him?

More recognitions of this two-way dynamic abound. In *Psycho*, Lila wades into a space thick with dread when she enters the Bates house: “As we can’t make up our mind whether the danger’s coming from in front (Mom) or behind (Norman) we’re no longer thinking very coherently, but yield to the atmosphere” (Durgnat, 2000: 46). Lila is caught in a riptide of horror that appears to stream out of two characters. Atmosphere here functions not as a background but as the medium that transmits and sustains this character’s and the viewers’ emotions. Lastly, when Rick Worland writes that *Cat People* (1942) “diverged from Universal predecessors by substituting suggestive horror effects and psychological atmosphere for the attacks of physical monsters” (2007: 176), he suggests that there is no point in trying to distinguish between character psychology and at least certain kinds of horror film atmosphere.

Raymond Durgnat (2000: 43–44) further blurs the line between atmosphere and narrative when he writes that, in *Psycho*, Norman’s

friendliness is all the more reassuring in contrast with the sinister atmosphere (the stuffed birds, the Victorian house with the petulant, tyrannical old mother), though he seems tainted by it. The over-obvious horror clichés shift our suspicions from Norman to the atmosphere; they camouflage the inevitable stiltedness of his relationship with Mrs. Bates.

Atmosphere thus provides camouflage that helps preserve a later surprise. Something that does the same is the camera that, when Norman is carrying Mother upstairs, climbs to an extreme high-angle, from which her status as a corpse remains concealed. This crane suppresses narrative information, and no one would disagree that the movement belongs in a discussion of *narration*, itself at the center of any discussion of narrative. But atmosphere, Durgnat finds, is working a deception, too. Is this not *also* narration at work? Where is the line, however indistinct one might claim that it can be, separating atmosphere from narration? It is impossible to locate.

I have been suggesting some ways we can problematize the accepted understanding of the relationship between horror film atmosphere and narrative. Keeping in this vein, let us turn to a narrative process that is arguably as characteristic of the genre as its celebrated atmosphere: suspense.

## Suspense and Dread

That atmosphere and suspense are thoroughly entwined could not be a less controversial claim. *Jane Eyre* (1914) benefits from “an atmosphere of suspense, due in a measure to the spooky situations” (“Jane Eyre,” *Moving Picture World*, 14 Feb. 1914: 810); *The Cat Creeps* (1930) creates a “‘creepy’ atmosphere of suspense and terror” (“Mystery Held Over Another Spooky Week,” *Washington Post*, 16 Nov. 1930: A2); *Night Watch* (1973) “creates a nice atmosphere of suspense over who’s going to wind up dead in the wing-chair” (Alexander Walker, rev. of *Night Watch*, *Evening Standard*, 6 Sept. 1973: 30). The stock phrase “atmosphere of suspense” crops up in every kind of film writing. But what does it—and the less ubiquitous but still common “atmosphere of dread”—mean?

The standard understanding is that a film’s atmosphere is appropriate to and supports the narrative operations called *suspense* and *dread*. Hanich subscribes to this view, writing that certain atmospheric elements “are not a necessary condition for dread, but fear can thrive against their backdrop since the experiences they enable are concomitant to those of dread. Hence atmospheres of constriction and isolation do not create but *facilitate* and *enhance* dread and are therefore almost always part of it” (Hanich, 2010: 171, his italics).

A different interpretation of these phrases would see suspense and dread permeating a film’s atmosphere and understand them to contribute to, and support, the atmospheric whole. My working definition of dread is that it fosters (unlike the broader category of suspense), less a state of hopeful expectancy (when will James Bond defuse the bomb?) than one of awful near certainty that the imminent outcome for a character will be bad. In the case of a horror film, this outcome is often death at the hands of a monster or other stalker waiting somewhere nearby in the darkness. In its most conventional configurations, the threat is unseen, or partially seen, and manifests itself in things like indeterminate off-screen noises and shadowy movements in the out-of-focus background. This is dread, which again is a form of suspense—for as Noel Carroll notes, “one still has suspense even if evil triumphs” (1996: 102). With this understanding of dread, let us now consider atmosphere’s relationship to it. I begin my approach to the question by briefly cataloging some of the attributes that have been assigned, separately, to these two dimensions of the cinematic text.

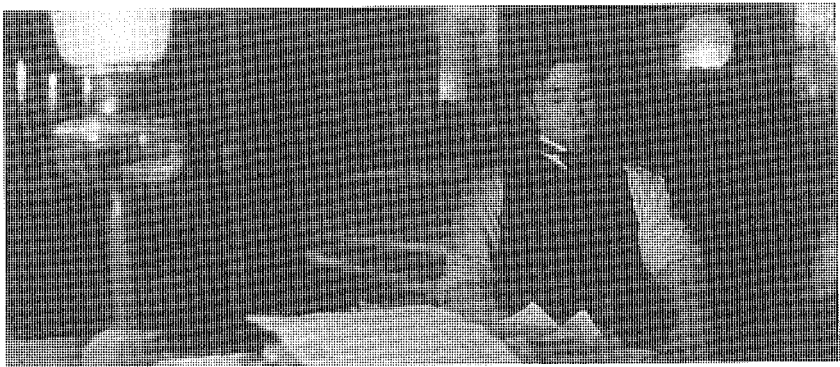
*Atmosphere is diffuse.* Hanich writes that “atmospheres are gushed out spatially, but cannot be pinpointed locally,” and calls them “diffuse emotive colorations of the lived-body without concrete object” (2010: 170 and 171). For Greg M. Smith, moods are “low-level emotional states that tend to be more diffuse and longer lasting than emotions” (2003: 38). *Dread is likewise diffuse.* One writer finds that dread is “different from fear because it is looser and less focused on an object” (Freeland, 2000: 238). Calling it by a different name, another notes that “terror is always of the indeterminate and incomprehensible, of the unseen but sensed or suspected, or of the imperfectly seen” (Rockett, 1988: 46). Also working with a different name, and

making a pertinent comparison, S.S. Prawer writes that “to be *unheimlich*, a work need not provide shocks of horror: the uncanny may be diffused over the whole as an atmosphere like fogs that blanket London in the more macabre pages of Dickens” (1980: 111; he relates the uncanny to dread on p. 124).

*Atmosphere can be sustained or it can leak out of a film.* In *White Zombie*, “the macabre atmosphere is evenly maintained (*Variety*, 2 Aug. 1932: 15); whereas in *The Hears* (1980), “atmosphere builds strongly for the first hour, but then just dissipates” (Muir, 2007: 103). *Suspense and dread also can be preserved or allowed to fizzle.* The zombies in *The Fog* (1980) “fail to inspire sustained dread” (Newman, 2011: 230); while in *Monster* (2003), “there is little of the repetitious, pseudo-sexual buildup and release of suspense so much a staple of mainstream thrillers” (Simpson, 2010: 137).

*Atmosphere is background*, not only because it frequently refers to settings, but because it routinely is judged to be of secondary importance and so stakes out the figurative background as well: “Ah, *Wilderness* is a first-class atmosphere piece . . . Practically all of it that is good is background, in the way of local color” (Otis Ferguson, “To Act One’s Age,” *New Republic*, 25 Dec. 1935: 198, my ellipsis). Also, recall Hanich, referring to “atmospheric elements,” writing that “fear can thrive against their backdrop.” *Dread is background, too*, in the indiscriminate off-screen noises that can constitute a sonic backdrop for the shadowy contents of the frame, in smudges of movements glimpsed in mirrors, in the slow advance of figures from the blurry depths (Figure 9.1). In *Halloween* (1978):

Having established the threatening aspect of the background and periphery of his compositions, Carpenter uses that disparity between his characters’ restricted viewpoints and his audience’s inevitably more encompassing field of view to sustain the general atmosphere of tension and expectation. (Telotte, 1987: 123)



**Figure 9.1** The Woman appears in the deep background in *The Woman in Black* (2012). Directed by James Watkins. Produced by Cross Creek Pictures, Hammer Film Productions, Alliance Films, UK Film Council, Talisman Productions, Exclusive Media Group, Film i Väst, Filmgate Films, and Filmgate.



Dread is background for Hanich as well; in *Psycho*, expectations of imminent violence constitute a "background assumption that dominates the character of dread and feeds it" (Hanich, 2010: 158).

*Atmosphere makes certain events and outcomes seem more likely; it facilitates, is conducive; it primes.* One type of film atmosphere "initiates uneasiness in the audience even before the manifestation of the phenomenon so that when that occurs, terror comes upon the audiences all the more readily" (Rockett, 1988: 93). *Hellraiser* (1987) "creates such an atmosphere of dread that the astonishing visual set pieces simply detonate in a chain reaction of cumulative intensity" (Pym, 2004: 512). As noted, for Hanich atmospheres "*facilitate and enhance* dread," while for Ed. S. Tan, "mood is a disposition that encourages certain emotions and inhibits others" (2011: 204; and see Smith, 2003: 38–40, 42). *Dread primes, too*, since it is all about what is going to happen, about anticipation. Matt Hills, considering "objectless affect such as anxiety"—and so what we are calling dread—writes that "this affective process would predispose audiences to seek an object to attach their objectless affect to, priming them to experience the emotion of art-horror when a suitable object (whether a 'horrifying' monster of a 'horrific' force) is represented" (2005: 28).

*Atmospheres can be thick, enveloping, saturating.* In *Alien* (1979), "an eerie atmosphere seems to engulf everything" (Creed, 1993: 16); "a brooding sense of death permeates *The Black Cat*" (Jensen, 1974: 76); *The Old Dark House* (1932) "is thick with horror atmosphere" (Paszyllk, 2009: 23). *So can dread.* As Hills notes, "objectless anxiety ... potentially saturates a *mise-en-scène*" (Hills, 2005: 27, my ellipsis). Most eloquent on this dimension of dread is Hanich, who describes viewers' "thickening inner-time experience" during scenes of anticipatory fear (2010: 160, his italics). He finds that dread scenes cause viewers to experience duration "as *denser* than average scenes," and writes that "time in dread swells up and distends" (2010: 187, his italics; 191).

I present this catalog not to show that atmosphere can be complementary and appropriate to dread, nor to underline how many attributes the two share, but to challenge the idea that these dimensions of the cinematic text can be—even through the most delicate and provisional means imaginable—disentangled. More to the point, I claim that the atmospheres that permeate dread scenes do not *accompany* these scenes at all, but rather constitute their *culmination*. To understand what an "atmosphere of dread" is, one must first understand which is the cart and which is the horse.

Before arguing for atmosphere as a culmination, let me give an illustration of the fruitlessness of trying to separate atmosphere from suspense. As I find with film atmosphere generally, older writings tend to shed more light on this fundamental inseparability than more recent ones. Here is Béla Balász in *Theory of the Film*:

It often happens that the camera shows not the person or scene itself but only its image in a mirror, or a shadow of it on the wall. This may be a means of preparation, destined to increase the effect of what is coming; this applies especially to the case of shadows cast before, which by making us imagine the figure belonging to them, create in advance an appropriate atmosphere. Such indirect indications of something to

come always contain some threatening, promising or curiosity-arousing mystery. No horror can be so horrible, no beauty so enchanting, if really seen, than the horror or enchantment suggested by its shadow . . . . In a direct shot we see only the scene itself; for instance a man about to shoot himself, a revolver in his hand, the hand raised to fire the shot. Even if something else is actually visible on the screen, the glaring nature of the scene blots it out. But if we see only a shadow of the scene on a wall, then we see the wall, the room of which it is a part and the physiognomy of the things which witness the deed. If we see something in a mirror, we see the mirror and its character together with the reflected image. Man and the scene he plays do not stand before us so nakedly, so without atmosphere. The real animation of the background increases the real animation of the scene itself. (1953: 109–110, my ellipsis)

Richly, Balász lays out this sequence in a way that scrambles attempts to see atmosphere and dread working tightly in unison to lay groundwork for an event to come. An image in a mirror, a shadow on a wall, act as “means of preparation” that are “destined to increase the effect of what is coming.” So these elements are priming viewers. But how to label them? Balász claims they “create in advance an appropriate atmosphere” and refers to them as “the real animation of the background,” so he would seem to agree with those who find atmosphere mainly *facilitating* what is going on in the scene. But what is going on and how do we apprehend it?

A man raises a gun to his head. This we register, even though neither the man nor the gun is visible. Instead we see a shadow or a reflection, bits of surface that are embedded in the *mise-en-scene* and telegraphing essential plot actions. A wall, a mirror, elements in the setting, are generating this hypothetical scene’s primary narrational output. The sequence is spreading story information across the frame, so *something* is diffuse—but what? There is no meaningful distinction to be made between what is atmosphere and what is narration. It is not enough to say that the two are closely related and intertwined. They are *fused*. Notions of “foreground” and “background” do not help us conceptualize this relationship. We need a better model. Guidance on what shape this model might take can be found, again, in older writings—for if dread scenes are driven, and made, by the unseen and the partially seen, then Boris Karloff knew, as did Balász, which is the cart and which is the horse: “The mightiest weapon of the writer of the terror tale is the *power of suggestion*—the skill to take the reader by means of that power into an atmosphere where even the incredible seems credible” (1943: 12). Atmosphere is not a handmaiden but a destination.

### Dreyer’s Corpse

For a definition of film suspense, we go back to the most famous one, Hitchcock’s, from his interview with François Truffaut:

We are now having a very innocent little chat. Let’s suppose that there is a bomb underneath this table between us. Nothing happens, and then all of a sudden, “Boom!”

There is an explosion. The public is *surprised*, but prior to this surprise, it has seen an absolutely ordinary scene, of no special consequence. Now, let us take a *suspense* situation. The bomb is underneath the table and the public *knows* it, probably because they have seen the anarchist place it there. The public is *aware* that the bomb is going to explode at one o'clock and there is a clock in the decor. The public can see that it is a quarter to one. In these conditions the same innocuous conversation becomes fascinating because the public is participating in the scene. The audience is longing to warn the characters on the screen: "You shouldn't be talking about such trivial matters. There is a bomb beneath you and it is about to explode!"

In the first case we have given the public fifteen seconds of *surprise* at the moment of the explosion. In the second we have provided them with fifteen minutes of *suspense*. The conclusion is that whenever possible the public must be informed. Except when the surprise is a twist, that is, when the unexpected ending is, in itself, the highlight of the story. (quoted in Truffaut with Scott, 1985: 73, italics original)

Hitchcock explains how unrestricted narration (viewers knowing more than the characters) can pull viewers into a scene, intensifying their involvement and producing the immersive emotional experience that lovers of suspense relish. Such a narrational strategy can arch across a whole film, as in Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), in which two accomplices murder a man, put him in a trunk, then host a dinner party that might or might not result in their eventual exposure and capture. This principle shapes films in moment-by-moment ways as well, for we see it at work in *The Woman in Black* (2012; see Figure 9.1) when camera placement combines with staging to inform viewers, but not a character, of an approaching threat.

At macro and micro levels, viewer knowledge can "saturate" a mise-en-scene and every other part of a film as well. In Hitchcock's scenario, we have a clock, a table, two chairs, two figures, and some dialogue. All these elements, spread across the sequence (and so diffuse), are colored by what viewers know—that is, by the classic suspense setup. This knowledge blankets everything, like the fog in Praver's analogy concerning the uncanny. Operating in the background, never forgotten, this knowledge transforms every image and sound. Hitchcock has suffused the scene with an "atmosphere of suspense."

Compare his scenario to one sketched by another filmmaker. Carl Dreyer explains the effect he was after when he made *Vampyr*:

Imagine that we are sitting in an ordinary room. Suddenly we are told that there is a corpse behind the door. In an instant the room we are sitting in is completely altered: everything in it has taken on another look; the light, the atmosphere have changed, though they are physically the same. This is because *we* have changed, and the objects *are* as we conceive them. That is the effect I want to get in my film. (quoted in Neergaard, 1950: 27, his italics)

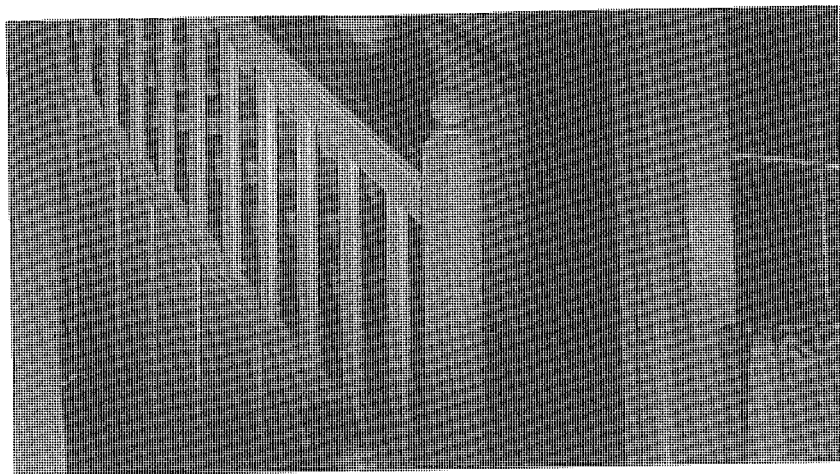
It takes only a couple of alterations to bring Dreyer's description into line with Hitchcock's. Imagine this is a scene *in a film* and that *viewers* are told there is a corpse behind a door. Now we can say that at the moment viewers learn of the corpse, the

narration becomes less restricted. This time, the elements weighing on our (but not the characters') minds are not a bomb and a clock but a corpse and a door. Helpfully, Dreyer is explicit in ways Hitchcock is not. Everything has changed, though nothing has. Let us say it is the same room as in Hitchcock's scenario. The same table and chairs, the same figures, even the same clock (which, in Dreyer's scene, means nothing to us). Picture the same mundane dialogue and ordinary high-key lighting. Now viewers are not bracing for an explosion, and straining to hear ticking, but processing the discomfiting knowledge of something close by and disgusting. As Dreyer notes—and we can say the same thing about Hitchcock's scene—this narrational shift effects a change in the *atmosphere*, one that engulfs, overpowers, and redefines everything, from what the men are saying to what the wallpaper looks like to how the scene is lit.

I am not claiming that narrative is the sole or even the most important source of film atmosphere, only that it is a neglected and poorly understood one. Certainly stylistic choices generate atmosphere as well. A camera creeping over a moonlit swamp, accompanied by sounds of snapping branches and indistinct gurgling, will be atmospheric, even if this is the first shot in the film and viewers have no narrative context in which to set it. But confining a scene's atmosphere to setting, time of day, season, and weather—and even if one adds other aspects of film style—can only account for atmosphere in an incomplete and inaccurate fashion, for the sum of these elements will be less than the atmospheric whole.

Underestimating how many parts of a film flow into its atmosphere will lead to problematic claims. Cinematographer John Alton, after considering the mood-altering effects of weather, writes that “next to the elements is the setting, which influences mood also. A cemetery, for example, cannot even in the brightest sunlight look a happy place” (1995: 120). But filmmakers shooting a cemetery scene are less constrained than Alton believes. In the anthology film *Paris, je t'aime* (2006), in the “14e Arrondissement” segment, an American tourist visits a cemetery on a sunny day. In her guidebook, she reads about the famous people buried there while she stops at their graves. The scene is accompanied by carefree and upbeat nondiegetic music that is about as menacing as what you might hear in an elevator or a dentist's office. This vignette, about a lonely middle-aged woman whom love has passed by, is colored by a mild melancholy, but it is far from maudlin, and it has a happy ending. And if the music and bright sunlight were not enough to encourage viewers to construe the cemetery scene as other than gloomy, following it, after contemplating her own mortality, the character says in a voice over: “But I am not a sad person. Au contraire.” Director Alexander Payne takes chances and reaps rewards undreamed of by Alton.

Likewise, in *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard writes that compared to anything one might encounter in an attic, “creatures moving about in the cellar are slower, less scampering, more mysterious,” adding that “in the attic, fears are easily ‘rationalized.’” Whereas in the cellar, “‘rationalization’ is less rapid and less clear” (1994: 19). But, as with a cemetery, absolute affective attributes cannot be assigned



**Figure 9.2** A shot that shows Melanie's point of view. *The Birds* (1963). Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Produced by Universal Pictures and Alfred J. Hitchcock Productions.

to an attic setting. Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963) shows that narrative and stylistic choices can swamp an attic in as much menace and mystery as any other location. Late in the film, off-screen fluttering noises serve roughly the same function as the strange creaks that, in another horror film, might draw a heroine toward a cellar. Mitch is asleep; Melanie takes her flashlight and investigates. Representing her point of view, the camera tracks forward and tilts up, her flashlight illuminating a stairway ascent that is as scary as any other horror film's twisting descent into a basement (Figure 9.2). And there is nothing "rational" about the threat scene awaiting her at the top of these stairs.

The tendency to see affective potentials immanent to a setting persists in more recent writing as well. After quoting Bachelard on forests, Hanich asks: "Why ... is the immensity of the forest (as in *The Blair Witch Project*) frightening while the immensity of the prairie (as in *Dances with Wolves*) is not?" (2010: 176, my ellipsis). Here is the kernel of his answer:

While the prairie gives you the feeling of standing *on top* and the sky creates an impression of being *under* their horizontal expansions, you are always *inside* the forest, enwrapped by its horizontal *and* vertical immensity. (176, his italics)

Hanich adds that in a forest, darkness, twigs, and other obstructions limit our vision, and this "enables a *depth* experience that we do not have in the prairie where vision can reach expansively out to the horizon" (177, his italics). But just as a scene of elation and delight can unfold in a tangled forest, so can fear set in under open skies—a corn field for example, and the flat land surrounding it, in broad daylight.

I am describing the setting of the famous crop-dusting sequence in *North by Northwest* (1959), in which Hitchcock ignores conventions and plays with our

expectations, including ones held by writers who would explain how a setting is supposed to make us feel. A more prudent and supple approach would concede that, without knowing how a film's narrative is making use of the setting, we have no idea. And once Hitchcock saturates a setting, any one he chooses, in an "atmosphere of suspense," then suspense not only is what we feel; it also is the principal galvanizing core, and source, of the sequence's atmosphere. Ignore the role narrative plays in creating atmosphere and one is bound to make claims that inventive filmmakers will easily prove wrong. Atmosphere will always escape and exceed such limiting views.

## Conclusion

For every case of a writer reflexively sectioning off atmosphere from the other parts of a film, one finds another writer acknowledging, however implicitly, that such a thing is impossible. Sometimes it is the same writer doing both these things at once, which shows that in our thinking, as in films, atmosphere is always percolating up, pushing forward, touching everything. It cannot be confined to a background, even if we insist that it is a background of the most supportive, enabling, and indispensable kind. Atmosphere sifts *downward*, too. In the hierarchy we construct for understanding what films do, what they are about, narrative tends to sit at the top. But narrative does not sit "on top" of film atmosphere; it feeds the atmosphere, which is bigger and more important than the story the film is telling.

The summative, global nature of atmosphere has been recognized by some writers. Smith, for example, argues that "the primary emotive effect of film is to create mood" (2003: 42).<sup>2</sup> One can find likeminded views by looking outside film studies. In *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, H. P. Lovecraft calls atmosphere "the all-important thing, for the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of plot but the creation of a given sensation" (2000: 23). And Mark Wigley writes that "atmosphere might even be the central objective of the architect" (1998: 18). These writers provide guidance on how film studies can begin to develop a more comprehensive and enlightened understanding of atmosphere in horror and other sorts of films. Much more of the same can be found in writing by Gernot Böhme.

A number of points in my argument echo claims Böhme has made about atmosphere in relation to stage productions and other media. This brief passage shows how we contemplate some of the same problems of definition and how, in general, he takes a view highly sympathetic to mine:

The phenomenon of 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. And yet one cannot actually speak of "the whole," still less of the whole of the world; speech is analytical and must confine itself to particulars. (Böhme, 2012: 2)

Böhme (1993, 1998a, 1998b) writes lucidly about the word's meteorological roots; atmosphere's diffuseness as a textual entity and, necessarily and productively, as an analytical concept; how atmosphere radiates from persons and things; and more. For Böhme, the atmosphere of an artwork amounts to no less than the sum total of the work's constituent elements plus its affective power. Not only coalescing the work into a unified entity, atmosphere also circumscribes the work and its perceiver. It constitutes the intersubjective experience that defines the work in the context of its reception. According to this view, within a horror film, dread and narrative are mere pieces of the atmospheric whole. Böhme articulates an opposite approach to ones that would too rigidly compartmentalize a film's formal workings, undervalue the interconnectedness of—and fluid interplay between—its elements, and place atmosphere in a bottom (or rear) compartment in the total system.

In conclusion, I have argued that horror film narratives create atmosphere in direct and largely unappreciated ways, but this is not to say that *lapses* in narrative—films with a minimum of plot, ones, like *Vampyr*, with attenuated or incomprehensible narratives—do not generate atmosphere in distinctive ways as well. Atmosphere may have as special a relationship to the *absence* of narrative as it does to narrative.<sup>3</sup> I believe further study would find such a view to be complementary to the one expressed here.

### Notes

1. Signs that this has begun to change include Kristi McKim's *Cinema as Weather: Stylistic Screens and Atmospheric Change* (2013), in which she construes cinematic weather as an "atmospheric" dimension of a film that bears a strong relationship to narrative.
2. Smith is not without critics, some who uphold distinctions I challenge in this essay. For example, considering Smith, Carl Plantinga writes: "It isn't the mood that causes the suspense ... If the scene is successful, it is the narrative situation that elicits suspense" (2009: 142, my ellipses).
3. I explore this possibility in Spadoni (2014).

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