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# “I love a party with a happy atmosphere”<sup>1</sup>; notes on the ontology of interpersonal atmosphere

Hannah Drayson

The common English term ‘party’ is often used to refer to a gathering of people (often assembled for the purposes of celebration). This short article considers the ontology of parties and gathers some ways to describe the party as a social atmosphere produced by certain kinds of aesthetic work. It suggests that a party as a ‘thing’, an assembly or gathering of objects and people (Latour, 2004), is characterised and perhaps catalysed by affective exchange achieved and maintained through an assemblage of material and interpersonal ingredients and actions. Parties are relational events characterised by and comprised of what goes on in the ‘in-between’ space between individuals, groups, and environment. This porous interface is what we might refer to as ‘atmosphere’. Here I draw on the work of scholars who have thought about atmosphere and its implications for understanding the subjectivity, bodily presence and meaning in aesthetics as constitutive of the things that they apprehend, for example Gernot Böhme’s “ecological aesthetics” (Chandler, 2011, p.553). Applying this work to the commonplace English phrase ‘party atmosphere’ shows how the party can be most satisfyingly understood through a relational ontology.

Party atmospheres manifest affective exchange between participants that is often strongly felt, yet they can seem fugitive and ephemeral. For Böhme (2017) “embeddedness in the atmosphere makes the situation appear overly complex [...] participants in an interpersonal atmosphere cannot really see themselves as fixed elements, because this atmosphere constantly co-determines them in their being.” (p.98) The phrase ‘palpable atmosphere’<sup>2</sup> seems to often serve as shorthand for affect in relational contexts in which certain feelings arise. Teresa Brennan (2004) reminds us that affect is “social and psychological in origin”(p.1) and yet transmitted through physiological and biological means which are felt and often appear involuntary. As she

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1 As comedian Russ Abbott’s 1985 hit single *I love a party with a happy atmosphere* seems to indicate that, if a party can have a happy atmosphere, it can also have other atmospheres, perhaps not always benign. Abbott’s single seems a wonderful example of a piece of atmospheric media. No doubt it has very different effects in different settings.

2 Teresa Brennan introduces her book, *The Transmission of Affect*, by describing the atmosphere in a room.

explains, an atmosphere is not the result, but the means or medium for the transmission of affect. It is “how one feels the others’ affects [which,] if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject. The ‘atmosphere’ or the environment literally gets into the individual” (ibid).

### *Let’s make a party*

The ‘party’ can refer to many forms of gathering in contemporary Western culture. The word offers a catch-all for a number of sub-types of event; birthday party, house party, office party etc. Why talk about parties rather than club nights, discos, happenings, rituals, festivals, mixers, rallies or gigs; events with comparable interpersonal and atmospheric characteristics? As I would like to show in the account briefly developed here, the word ‘party’ indicates a certain kind of interpersonal and aesthetic experience that, strictly speaking, has a different ontological inflection to those that indicate more specific types of events. Parties can be staged or spontaneous; something like a ritual or a club night could ‘turn into’ a party, or ‘turn out’ to have been a good party. ‘Party’ then offers a sense of something more, something collective in nature and constituted by the shared experience of its participants.

This aspect is detectable in the original meaning of the word, where a ‘party’ was not an event, but more often used to indicate an individual or group of persons i.e. ‘those who were party to the confession’. Around 1920 it began to be used by the New York press and American literature of the period to indicate groups of revelers who would go ‘on’ a party, as if on an expedition: “a traveling group of acquaintances seeking entertainment together” (Seed 2015, p.165).<sup>3</sup> These early parties did not necessarily have a positive affective valence. In the modernist literature of the interwar period, writers like F. Scott Fitzgerald and Evelyn Waugh tended to depict parties—particularly those that were an expedition— as destructive, chaotic, wasteful. Characterised by excessive consumption (particularly alcoholic), moral and personal dissolution, and boredom, they were “like going on a voyage, an indefinite trip in search of eternal pleasure that tended to end on the rocks” (Churchwell, 2014, p.183) (also see Seed, 2015, p.164; Milthorpe, 2015; Milthorpe and Murphy, 2016).<sup>4</sup> In this inflection, a party is less

<sup>3</sup> In colloquial English this usage is retained when people are said to “go out” with a group of friends or on a date.

<sup>4</sup> John Steinbeck’s *Cannery Row* (1945) cautions us regarding the unruly nature of the party. In a narrative driven by the throwing of two parties, Steinbeck describes the party as a “pathological”

an event and more a group of people assembled for a particular, collective purpose, who gather for a certain goal, and may ‘go forth’ together. This sense of collective venture is reflected in other uses such as ‘political party’, which again stresses ‘the party’ in which the goals of the individual are broadened to include those of their fellows.<sup>5</sup> The resonance of this inflection is particularly useful for thinking about affect and atmosphere as it raises the question of a particular ontology of the party, and how that collective sense of being is achieved.

### *Atmosphere and party ontology*

Böhme’s (2017) philosophical exploration of atmosphere offers an analysis useful in thinking about party ontology. He describes the creation of atmosphere as a spacial practice central to contemporary capitalist production where it is made and managed through careful aesthetic work. As Böhme describes them, atmospheres are “subjective facts” that issue neither completely from the “objects or environments from which they proceed” or the “subjects who experience them” (Böhme 1993, p.114, in Bille et al 2015). Instead, they “seem to fill the space with a certain tone of feeling like a haze” (ibid). The sensory qualities of atmospheres tend towards the multi-modal even synaesthetic; they are arrived at in perception as wholes. Despite this, they can be produced through the arrangement of specific details and elements. He gives the examples of décor and lighting; white lighting and blue tiles can give a sense of a space being ‘cold’. As Böhme tells us, while they will not always result from particular sets of circumstances and may not be felt the same by every individual that encounters them, atmospheres still have recognisable qualities that reoccur at different times and places. Also while they are perceived subjectively, atmospheres are still ‘out there’. The parameters that bring them into existence are literally and figuratively ‘in the air’. (p.95)

When making a party—engaging in the aesthetic labour that promotes the production of a party atmosphere— we might consider various elements or ‘atmospheric media’ as ingredients that create certain qualities and moods.

being; “a kind of individual and [...] likely to be a very perverse individual [...] a party hardly ever goes the way it is planned or intended” (p.167). The second party in *Cannery Row* is an apology for the first. Happy atmosphere or not, either to ‘party’ or to throw a party invokes a process, and if we take Steinbeck’s suggestion at face value, we may even think about being a party or a party as itself a ‘being’.

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that Gernot Böhme observes that it is in politics that interpersonal atmosphere seems to have more value and consideration given to it than other spaces of exchange. (2017, p.108)

Barbara Ehrenreich's (2006) cultural history of ecstatic rituals cites the achievement of 'collective joy'— experiences of collectivity and enlargement beyond the self; "communal pleasure, even ecstasy or bliss" as the common goal of many forms of secular and spiritual gatherings. Surveying Dionysian rites, 12<sup>th</sup> century Christian carnival, rock-and-roll gigs and 'Beatlemania', and crowd participation at sporting events such as cricket and football<sup>6</sup>, she offers a 'constellation' of elements that often appear; "music, dancing, eating, drinking or indulging in other mind-altering drugs, costuming and/or various forms of self-decoration, such as face and body painting" (p.43). It may be useful to consider elements used in the production of 'collective joy' from the perspective of the party atmosphere.



*Near Mint party at Images night club Plymouth, 2016. Low hanging decoration diffuses lighting to create a sense of intimacy in a large and open room. Photograph courtesy of Dom Moore.*

### ***Going forth***

Following these insights, we can describe a party as an event in which atmospheres are 'staged' to encourage certain behaviours and actions—many of which may interplay and be connected. We could say then

<sup>6</sup> In her work on the 'cultural history of collective joy', Ehrenreich argues that there has been a long failure of scholarly work to account for positive forms of collective experience, one that was reflected in, and related to, a wider cultural dismissal.

that to engage in the aesthetic labour of producing a party with a happy atmosphere is akin to sourcing and placing together elements that have happy or 'festive' connotations, with the intention that the participants will form a 'party'. Further to this, we might suggest that it is the atmosphere itself that creates the party, that is in essence the glue that binds together the group 'going forth' together described above. Ehrenreich's constellation would, it seems, benefit from some further consideration regarding how its elements produce differing atmospheric effects. While there is not space to do this in its entirety here, we might start by considering these elements as affective modalities that carry affect between individuals and to use Brennan's word, 'permeate' them.

The permeability of the biological individual is brought even more to the fore when we consider an overlooked modality that resonates from the proximity of bodies in space— that of smell. In Brennan's (2004) exploration of the 'concrete mechanisms' (p.68) of affect's transmission she argues that the sociological literature on group formation neglects the physiological evidence for entrainment between individuals that is founded in smell. She suggests that while the mechanisms of entrainment include those that influence the nervous system through the visual mode, through mimesis, and the auditory and rhythmic dimensions are recognized, the more neglected olfactory dimensions offer even more profound effects. In the olfactory dimension, it is pheromonal communication, a form of external hormonal signaling of "pollenlike" chemicals that creatures emit in order to communicate with or influence those of its own, or even other species that might constitute an overlooked dimension of affective transmission. (p.69) In addition, images and gestures can produce hormonal responses in individuals, such as raised testosterone measured in individuals exposed to aggressive images or imagined descriptions of financially threatening situations (pp.70-71). Böhme likewise cites the work of psychiatrist Hubert Tellenbach whose exploration of atmosphere as a manifestation of 'interpersonal reality' focused in its inception on 'atmosphere and taste'. For Tellenbach, smell was the atmosphere that "literally and metaphorically" emanates from a person as a basic aspect of communication, as "a person's radiance, or his or her personal aura" (Böhme, p.103).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Curiously, some atmospheric techniques literally evoke these connections through the use of haze or mist, whereby the physical atmosphere becomes visible. Hazers and smoke machines are atmospheric staging technologies commonly found in theatres and nightclubs. They are used to produce airborne particles that catch the light and produce a dense 'atmosphere'. Depending on the quantity of liquid that they release, hazers produce the visual effect of making objects in the distance less visually distinct, they

On the topic of human presence, and the presence through which humans appear to one another, Böhme (2017) reflects on the arguments made by Jakob Böhme that smell and reverberation are both:

modes whereby a being penetrates its entire surrounding space (classically termed *sphaera activitatis*), and in which the smell or voice endow the atmosphere of this space with a character. What is felt is not only the presence of some general thing but the presence of this particular one. In this context, it is worth remembering that individual knowing and recognition are vitally mediated by smell and voice, both in the animal and the human world. (p.139)

Sonic qualities of reverberation and voice, like smell, have their own atmospheric effects. Böhme maintains that music's qualities make it the atmospheric medium par excellence.<sup>8</sup> It is spacial, and hence its resonant effects, fill an environment, touching and linking both subjects and objects<sup>9</sup> to connect individuals. Reverberation does this not only through transmitting meaning through singing, chanting and movement, but more fundamentally through entrainment achieved by rhythm and melody as well as visual means and mirroring. Forms of synchronised action then offer a group the further possibility of 'becoming a party' through collective

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pick up colour and light, creating a visible mist within the space and giving the empty space a kind of substantial quality. When used on a dance floor they can create a feeling that is intimate and enclosed, bringing curtains down around small groups of dancers, even separating individuals into their own packets of absorption.

8 The problematically a-subjective nature of musical meaning actually means that the concept of atmosphere can offer to liberate researchers aiming to describe the complexities of shared meaning available through music. It does this by refusing to become involved in a nature-culture/subject-object dichotomy, in which the meaning and feeling of a percept must be reduced to specific causes. Vadén and Torvinen (2014) argue that thinking about music as an atmospheric medium offers to resolve problems for the interpretation of musical meaning. They argue that the difficulty in perfecting, or even pinning down, a language that can be used to talk about music is caused by the fact that it is phenomenologically a-subjective, not experienced as a property of oneself, but outside of oneself. Questions about the meanings of music tend to end in a sort of paradox, in which cultural music inflections are so easily recognized that they seem to self-evidently contain the feelings we associate with them; "a strong 'feel' of meaningfulness in music does not necessarily come hand-in-hand with any specific messages or symbolic forms. Modes of musical signification are elusive and shifting, and their linguistic description is unavoidably metaphorical and vague." (p.210) Semiotically, music is rich with symbolic meaning but these meanings can become very quickly unstuck. While some musical features lend themselves to particular embodied interpretations, these apparently immediate and innate feelings are often contingent on long cultural histories rather than physiological universals. They rarely survive cultural and temporal shifts with their meanings intact enough to consider those meanings to be in any way universal. However in certain circumstances they are remarkably robust.

9 The potential for listener's sensitivity to the feel of sonic space is made apparent by the fact that it is so common for recorded or synthesised music to make use of 'atmosphere' as a special effect to offer cues and supports to the mood of a recording. Recording techniques and audio processing that produce specialisation and environmental cues, for example echoes or reverb, or aspects of field recording, such as crowd sounds – are literally referred to as 'atmospheres'.

movement or sound, moving in time or moving reciprocally. As Evan Thompson (2001) argues, some accounts of child development argue that motor movement develops in the first case as a result of the ability to respond to others, not to self-purposive explorations of the environment (p.7). The ability to move with meaning issues in the first case from interpersonal responses. Neuroscientific work also shows that when a person observes another's movements they respond with what seems to be similar neural activity. From a very early stage in human development, the actions of other individuals are essentially 'felt'. Even when they are not understood or outwardly responded to, they are embodied (pp.34-35). In these models our sense of self relies on reciprocity with the bodies and intentions of others; affect permeates the individual and is co-created.

### *An ontology of the party*

Parties are contexts in which elements like sound and music, decorations, lighting and atmospheric effects, costuming, food and feasting are staged in order to produce a particular mood or feeling. But a party is not an event that is attended in order to experience these elements in themselves. While a focus on venue, eating, or music might be common, it is the individuals who attend that make 'a party'. From this perspective we could say that a successful party is where these elements encourage the manifestation of an interpersonal atmosphere where entrainment is maintained and arrived at through various means (movement and singing, pheromones etc.) allowing the participants to travel together through different moods and embark on collective actions. A 'party atmosphere', taken colloquially to refer to a space of joy or cheer, is also an atmosphere that makes 'a party' of the participants. Exploring the sensory qualities of some 'ingredients' of parties as atmospheric media can help to flesh out an account of the party as an emergent entity and theories of atmosphere allow us to locate the affect of the party atmosphere in phenomenological experience. To talk of atmosphere in this context collapses subject-object ontological categories, stressing the intersubjective ontology of the party. It offers an account that is far more satisfying in how it incorporates perception and experience and treats meaning as a property experienced through direct engagement with the world and with others.



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