An Atmosphere of Entropy
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Abstract

This paper emerges from experiences collected by staying in a city, Budapest, as a visitor. Building on Gernot Böhme's theory of atmospheres that insists on feeling and sensing, rather than decoding, as an approach to the world, I chart how the cityscape lends itself to an atmospheric reading and how this in turn gives way to thinking about performance. The particular atmosphere investigated is one of entropy that is an atmosphere of decay and deterioration, which I contrast with what I term 'entropic signs', which I conceive as an inversion of Roland Barthes's notion of the mythical function of signs. Through documenting an embodied engagement with the sites under consideration, I propose that rather than producing a feeling of nihilism or futility, an entropic atmosphere cultivates a sense for creative becomings. In the final part of the essay I discuss what an atmosphere of entropy reveals about performance, suggesting that that an entropic aesthetics allows us to conceive of performance as an activity that cultivates a sensibility for how the present gives way to an unpredictable future.

Introduction: Sensing Atmospheres

This essay starts with a provocation set to me by Carl Lavery: "Where do you get a taste for entropy? What does it do to you? How does it make you feel?" Lavery's questions reached me as I was staying in Budapest as a visitor. In response, I would like to chart how the cityscape evoked an entropic atmosphere and offer a theorisation of this atmospheric experience. Moreover, I allow this reading to lead me into thinking about how an entro-

pic atmosphere might offer a generative starting point for theorising performance. In doing so, I hope to suggest, in accordance with Helen Nicholson, that the spatial structures that surround us contain a "pedagogical force". That is, they might provide us with a "sensory training" that can inform our thinking in other areas – in this case performance – more widely (95).

My discussion builds upon Gernot Böhme's theory of atmospheres that parallels with the non-representational turn in human geography and the affective turn in the study of arts in its insistence on experiencing, rather than decoding, as an approach to the world.[1] What is appealing about Böhme's theory for the purpose of this essay is that it allows me to "make transparent and articulatable" ('Atmosphere' 125) an aesthetic reality that is rooted in an everyday experience and - in a second step - use the outcome of this to theorise another area of experience: performance. To undertake this I offer a mixed-media investigation composed of theoretical and personal writing, as well as a series of photographs which, alongside the writing, seek to capture something of the entropic atmosphere I encountered. The photographs are included as a means of communicating the richness of atmosphere that, in the sense that I use the term here, names an intangible yet noticeably present feeling that exceeds verbal description.

1 Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth describe in their introduction to The Affect Theory Reader the year 1995 as a 'watershed moment' (5) for the affective turn as it saw the publication of foundational essays by Eve Sedgwick and Brian Massumi. Since then, a number writings that seek to theorise and articulate bodily sensations as a way of illuminating how we relate to the world have been published, many of which are collected in the aforementioned reader. Affect theory has also played a significant role in the development of human geography through the writings of Nigel Thrift and his non-representational theory.

In asserting that atmospheric experiences are tacitly familiar in everyday life as well as in the reception of artworks, but seldom acknowledged in an academic context,[2] Böhme develops a theory of atmospheres as a new approach to aesthetics that is fundamentally rooted in a spatial and relational vocabulary. For him – and contra earlier articulations on the term such as those of Hermann Schmitz – the experience of atmosphere cannot be simply located in the perceiving subject but comes to the fore through things radiating into their spatial environment. By proposing an aesthetics that takes "the relation between environmental qualities and human states" as a starting point, Böhme's ideas might be used to expand Nicholas Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics ('Atmosphere' 116). Whereas Bourriaud's writing centres on inter-human activities, Böhme's work offers a way of identifying the relationship between human and non-human actors. Bourriaud analyses a tendency in the visual arts of the 1990s to move away from the solitary contemplation of an artwork, instead stressing "the micro-community gathering" (61) that an exhibition provokes, especially when the work itself facilitates interactions between its onlookers. He goes on to associate a crucial emancipatory agenda with this tendency, claiming that it holds the potential to invent and enact "new life possibilities" (45) through the formation of a "temporary collective" (61) who jointly "[learn] to inhabit the world in better ways" (13). Similarly, Böhme's concept of atmospheres propels

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2 Böhme's assertions might be tempered somewhat since, for example, the practices of psychogeography are often attentive to atmospheric experiences. Guy Debord's 'Psychogeographic Guide to Paris' for instance charts the different atmospheric blocks of Paris. While Böhme perhaps overstates the marginalisation of atmosphere, his work does produce a more structured approach to identifying and delimiting them than often attempted.

us to recognise ways of inhabiting the world that acknowledge our enmeshment with non-human formations. He is clear in that he seeks to move away from a "classical ontology" of the thing that is premised on distance and is "conceived in terms of its closure" (120) to a more co-creative relationship between the perceiver and the perceived in which things are imbued with a certain agency: the ability to "make their presence perceptible" (121). Atmospheres occur through an experience of being-with, in which both subject and object reach out to each other, radiate towards each other across a spatial divide.

However, I am also responsive to how Bourriaud's ideas have been critiqued by Claire Bishop. She takes issue with the idea that any kind of relationality, irrespective of its nature and participants, is seen as democratic and emancipatory without in-terrogating the specific "quality of the relations" (65). Arguing that Bourriaud's ideas too easily establish a collective "whose members identify with each other", she warns that his notion of community is premised on "immanent togetherness" (67), thus denying the importance of antagonism and conflict in both ar-tistic and democratic processes. Taking Bishop's critique into account, it is important to stress that the kind of relationality that atmospheres establish between non-human (though at times human-produced) spatial structures and human perceivers is not one of selfsame immanence. Rather, Böhme's writing disrupts any notion of collective immanence, since an atmosphere ap-pears as something that is always in excess of both the perceiver and the perceived. It is a highly paradoxical term that names a type of experience that is both objective – insofar as it lies out-side of the perceiver – and subjective to the extent that "without the sentient being [atmospheres] are nothing" ('The Art of the Stage Set' 2). Rather than provoking identification, atmospheric

experiences sharpen an awareness of difference – between the human and the non-human – while at the same time underlining their dependency on each other.

Böhme's framework also opens up the possibility for conceiving of the non-human as equally involved in performative activities. He notes that whereas we have a rich everyday vocabulary to describe atmospheres, aesthetic theories have concentrated on three exclusively: "the beautiful, the sublime and then the characterless atmosphere or "atmosphere as such", aura" ('Atmosphere' 122). Building on this, this essay seeks to contribute to Böhme's project by revealing one of a myriad of possible atmospheres we might encounter: the entropic. The term entropy is loaned from the study of thermodynamics and describes how all systems – even those that appear tightly closed – lose energy. The law of entropy explains that there is always some energy that cannot be converted, made purposeful. Entropy is the measure of what goes amiss, what escapes the system, what exceeds it. This loss of energy – no matter how negligible – destabilises a system, making it porous and causing an inclination towards decay and degeneration. Entropy, in other words, produces disorder and results in the dissolution of systems over time.

This is what Budapest taught me about entropy and performance:

I: Entropic Signs

Budapest is a palimpsestic city.[3] Because of the political history of Hungary across the last two centuries – seeing the creation

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3 Andreas Huyssen suggests that urban landscapes might be conceived as 'palimpsests of space' in which multiple layers of temporality co-exist and: 'strong marks of present space merge with traces of the past' (8).

and collapse of numerous political systems, one after another, from monarchies, through short-lived democracy, to kingdoms, empires, then fascist and communist rule, arriving at contemporary late-capitalism – an abundance of obsolete monuments and buildings inhabit the cityscape, leftovers of past systems, now collapsed.

Figure 1: *Stalin's Boots* recreated by Ákos Eleőd (2006). Memento Park, Budapest. Author's own (28 Dec 2014).

It would seem that Hungary's capital lends itself from the outset to an investigation of an entropic atmosphere since its cityscape is marked by the entropic decline and eventual collapse of political systems. However, I found that these marks did not in fact produce an atmosphere of entropy, rather they acted as what I will term 'entropic signs'. I offer this discussion of entropic signs in order to differentiate them from an atmosphere of entropy, which I discuss in part II.

The development of Budapest's cityscape in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is characterised by struggles over how to memorialise its past. The primary site that prompts my discussion – Memento Park – grew out of these struggles. A popular tourist destination, the park is situated on the outskirts of the city and contains a remarkable collection of socialist statues and plaques. Its location on the borders of the city has often been noted as a compromise between two factions in the population – those calling for socialist public artworks to be destroyed and those arguing in favour of retaining them in their original locations (Light).

Figure 2: *Béla Kun Memorial* **by Varga Imre (1986). Memento Park, Budapest. Author's own (28 Dec 2014).**

Beverly James argues that relocating these monuments from their original context "radically [destabilises] whatever meanings they had come to embody previously" (294). Indeed, they now no longer function as an expression of the values and history of the communist state, but rather seem to act as entropic signs. That is, their previous semiotic function is overshadowed by a secondary layer of meaning: they point towards a time in the past reminding the visitor of the decline of systems of thought and political organisation. This secondary function takes prominence over the diverse visions of communist politics represented by the individual works of art, an effect that is amplified for the mostly Western European and North American visitors who are offered little or no interpretation and contextualisation of the works. The subtlety and particularity of the societal visions presented go unread by most visitors.

I suggest that an entropic sign is a sign whose representational function has faded because the context in which it was legible has been eroded. In this way, entropic signs expose the performative function of signs: they demonstrate how signifiers constitute and regulate identities and beliefs – through their absence rather than their presence. Entropic signs might be seen as an inversion of what Roland Barthes calls myth, a "mode of signification" in which a secondary order of meaning takes hold of a sign and functions as a way of naturalising ideological positions (109). A statue of Stalin, for example, not only denotes the historical person but the mythical function of the sign establishes him as a exalted figure of communist thought beyond the boundaries of the Soviet Union. Entropic signs are signs whose mythical content has become obsolete through radical changes in their ideological surroundings but whose mythical function

still lingers in a spectral form. The former fullness of the sign is perceptible but it no longer fulfils its naturalising function; it has become de-naturalised.

Such entropic signs are copious in Budapest. However, what I frequently noted was how little space for an experience of entropy there seemed to be. Places where I expected to find a sense of the entropic turned out to be thoroughly recuperated and repurposed: the destroyed Café New York, a hub of artistic life in turn-of-the-century Hungary when the country was still one of the pinnacles of the European cultural scene, has been re-built as an expensive sightseeing destination and Memento Park is frequently treated as a kitsch theme park in which visitors take entertaining selfies and can buy ironic communist-themed sou-venirs. Entropic signs seemingly lend themselves to appropria-tion. In the case of Memento Park, the statues no longer commit visions of political organisation to stone but function as a meth-od of affirming Hungary's devotion to Western values and Eu-ropeanness. It communicates, as Duncan Light notes, that "the country is sufficiently relaxed about its experience of commu-nism to have few reservations about remembering it" (168). At the same time – by placing the park on a wasteland on the outer border of the city – it is implied that the country's communist past is well and truly over, lacking any bearing on the present. Entropic signs, having been emptied of their original mythical function, can be used to give birth to new myths, precisely be-cause their emptiness acts as an invitation to fill them again. In this way entropic signs might point towards the decline of ideological truth statements but at the same time this loss can be converted into new systems of thought, made purposeful once again.

Figure 3: *Past Visions of Progress*, Memento Park, Budapest. Author's own (28 Dec 2014).

II: Sensing Entropy

It was not the public memorials to the disintegration of past political systems where I experienced an atmosphere of entropy but in much more mundane places. Gazing upon the myriad subsiding, decaying neo-Renaissance villas built in the decades before the final collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, allowing that gaze to feel, to search for atmospheric connections, I began to sense entropy. With their boarded-up windows and facades that give way to warped roofs, they are testimonials to Budapest's fall from a centre of European art and culture to a city that is unable or unwilling to take care of its ubiquitous grand architecture. Standing side-by-side with well-maintained and in-use buildings housing art collections and embassies, these rotting structures act as an ever-present memento mori, a reminder that all that is present tends toward disintegration.

Figure 4: *Wall Detail*. Andrássy út, Budapest. Author's own (30 Dec 2014).

What struck me was how these ruins provided me with a space for unexpected aesthetic pleasures beyond intent or control. The multiple textures – crumbling plaster revealing solid stonework, coarse patches of rust, soft areas of moss – and colours – burnt orange, yellowed whites, dirty greys, fresh greens – were like sudden, violent bursts of disorder amongst the otherwise cleanly white-washed, authoritative, stately buildings. They made me giddy, roused my curiosity, asked me to touch and explore them in a way the surrounding buildings foreclosed.

Figure 5: *Wall Detail*. **Andrássy út, Budapest. Author's own (30 Dec 2014).**

Figure 6: *Wall Detail*. **Andrássy út, Budapest. Author's own (30 Dec 2014).**

To experience an atmosphere, according to Böhme, is to be possessed by something external to oneself "like an alien power" and "in order to define their character, one must expose oneself to them, one must experience them in one's own emotional state" ('The Art of the Stage Set' 2). My account then of an entropic atmosphere is inevitably subjective and to some extent speculative; I can only theorise from an "irrational" standpoint (3). On a basic level the textures and materials I describe above carry signs of decay – moss is an indexical signifier for the neglect of a building and its ruinous state. In contrast to what I have termed entropic signs in the previous section, however, these uncontrolled signs of decay are not manifestations of ideological positions that can be decoded, but phenomena that affectively reach out to the observer, creating an intangible sensory experience that cannot be accounted for in semiotic terms alone. The rotting state of the buildings, the flat natural light conditions of late December and the lingering threat of rain enveloped me in an atmosphere of decline and degeneration.

To my surprise, what this atmosphere provoked in me was not a melancholic state of mourning or a nihilistic sense of futility. Finding my imagination drawn more to these abandoned places than their well-behaved neighbours, I was tempted to consider the generative potential of entropy, wondering what happens to escaped energy that does not simply dissipate or vanish. Rather it must manifest in coincidental forms, as unpredictable changes and becomings. The dissolving walls involved me, welcoming my hand and my eye to interact with them. I suggest, then, that an entropic atmosphere develops a sensibility for change and possibility. Entropic atmospheres might not so much hark back to a place in the past, mourning a lost object, but set up the possibility of a future. The grammar of entropy is

not written in the past tense, enthralled with what is lost, but is articulated in modals of speculation: what could, might, may be. Immersed in this atmosphere, I was prompted to consider that perhaps we need experiences of entropy for political reasons: as a means to summon chaos in the political body, as a reminder that change is not only possible but inevitable. With the backdrop of a city that in the past century instituted torture and execution as means to ensure the smooth running of the political system of the day – whether fascist or communist – in order to keep a stable equilibrium for the benefit of its elites, a flurry of moss, rust and rain can allow us to sense that the future is always undetermined.

III: An Entropic Aesthetics of Performance
What then does an entropic atmosphere have to do with performance?

On the one hand, atmospheres might be experienced, identified and charted with the purpose of re-creating them through performance in the way that Stuart Grant outlines in his article 'Performing an Aesthetics of Atmosphere'. Certainly, the entropic atmosphere that I delineate here can be used as a basis for practice-led research that investigates which scenographic and performative tools envelop an audience in a feeling of entropy. However, what I would like to suggest is a different way in which atmospheres can inform performance studies, one in which paying attention to particular atmospheric experiences reveals something about the activity of performance. As noted at the start of this discussion, I propose that atmospheric experiences act as a sensory training ground. By tuning into an atmosphere, we sharpen our senses to the kind of experience it provokes and the different ways of inhabiting the world it articulates.

Cultivating an openness to an entropic atmosphere allows us to develop a sense for entropic processes in performance. Indeed, an aesthetics of entropy makes it possible to detect a structural similarity between the sensation of entropy and the temporality of performance. Frequently, performance has been understood as an activity that negotiates between present and past time. Peggy Phelan, for example, has famously characterised the ontology of performance as a becoming "through disappearance" since its "only life is in the present" (146). Phelan's thinking centres on the relationship between the past and the present of performance: the time of performance is in its fading, and the experience of performance is one of loss; performance makes perceptible the moment in which the present becomes past. Rebecca Schneider in 'Performance Remains' has challenged Phelan's assertion by emphasising what remains of performance by drawing on memory and oral history. Here, performance's time is in how the past ghosts the present. An entropic approach to performance's time, in contrast, might not so much be interested in loss or remains and their respective privileging of the present and past of performance but in the potential time of the future that performance makes sensible. Recently, Lavery has suggested that we pay more attention to the futurity of performance, conceiving it as "an event that discloses the future in the very process of erasing the now, in producing the past" (112). This is what a reading of performance that is informed by entropic atmospheres can achieve. I have proposed that an atmosphere of entropy makes both the possibility and inevitability of a future time perceptible and attunes us to the seeds of the future in the actions and states of the present, reminding us that we live in a present that will inevitably give way to an essentially unstable, as yet undetermined future. Just as a closed system of

energy exchange cannot be maintained and the entropic loss of energy will cause changes within the system, an aesthetics of entropy promotes a sensitivity towards how the future devours the present moment, that something else, something unpredictable, is always to come.

This sensation can also be detected in the present-time of watching performance. Due to the time-bounded nature of performance - it is both in and of time - it brings to the fore the impossibility of stepping outside of the flow of time. It draws us back towards the past, since we always seem to lag slightly behind our own perceptions, but at the same time it propels us forward in time. We are caught, as Hans-Thies Lehmann notes, between the states of "just now" and "in an instant" (114). This conflux of temporal processes gives shape to an entropic experience of being in the act of watching performance as we simultaneously witness the decaying of the present into the past and the creation of a future time. In this way, performance can remind us that to be alive is not to be an element in a perpetual motion machine or a closed system of energy exchange, but that something is always escaping us and that living mindfully means observing how everything around us is always already collapsing, making room for becomings, ushering us into the new.

While identifying particular works that bring to the fore such an entropic experience in and of performance goes beyond the scope of this article, I would like to end by suggesting that the framework of entropic aesthetics can be used as an analytical model for pinpointing how performance works create an experience of futurity. Such a sensibility for futurity might be of particular importance, as Lavery notes, in a world where the "transformations that climate change […] will bring" and the "unsustainable practices of neo-liberal capitalism" place us at

threshold of an indeterminate and turbulent future (113). In this paper I have suggested that an atmospheric analysis of a place – in this case the decaying structures of buildings on Budapest's Andrássy Avenue – can stimulate thinking in the discipline of performance studies. Theorising performance from the vantage point of atmospheres acknowledges that we develop ways of inhabiting the world and understanding our activities within it not just through our interactions with other people, as Bourriaud proposes, but that places and things also impact upon our perceived reality through the production of atmospheres which inform and enlighten different ways of being and experiencing.

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