

Atmospheric Methods

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How might we approach the non-representational background of thought and life? One claim that is shared across non-representational theories is that the background matters: there exist a series of affective, embodied, conditions for representational acts and practices. The background is not an inert, natural, backdrop but a collectively lived and shaped condition. How, then, to research these conditions that shape, without determining, representational life? And how might we learn to focus on the problems that researching such conditions poses to social analysis? In this chapter we address these questions by way of reflections on the methodological challenges of researching one such collective condition: affective atmospheres.

Within the social sciences there is a burgeoning literature on the concept of atmosphere (Adey et al., Forthcoming; Anderson, 2009; Ash, 2012, 2013; Stewart 2012). This literature emerges from, and seeks to develop, existing work on affect and affect theory—itsself an increasingly prominent series of theoretical trajectories for analysing how life is organised outside of strictly representational registers and structures of meaning. For nonrepresentational theory, a turn to affect has opened new ways for thinking the relationship between bodies and spaces in ways that attend to the often-taken-for-granted and implicit effects that encounters between human and non-human bodies can generate. While earlier literature on affect focused on its

individualised actualization as a particular emotional state in a human body, a turn to the concept of affective atmosphere has been a way to think about the diffuse, collective nature of affective life. As Adey et al. put it:

Thinking about affective atmospheres also draws attention to how affects can be “collective” and be transmitted between people. Such atmospheres “form part of the ubiquitous backdrop of everyday life” but a backdrop that is at the same time “forceful and affect[s] the ways in which we inhabit...spaces (Bissell, 2010, p. 272) (Adey, Forthcoming, p, 3).

Atmospheres appear to exemplify a non-representational object of inquiry: they are part of the “ubiquitous backdrop” of life and thought, whilst at the same time exerting some kind of force.

There are, though, a series of methodological challenges the concept of atmosphere poses. Adey et al. argue that in practice “there are conceptual limits to just how the field is being rendered as a site of affect and how it might be researched” (Adey et al., Forthcoming, p. 2). Indeed, these limits are linked to theorisations of affect that are often predicated on the notion of the encounter, where affects emerge when two beings or entities contact one another in some way. This has resulted in various critiques that ask how affects can travel or how the same affect can be experienced by multiple bodies (Pile, 2009). In Seyfert’s words: “how can an affect be simultaneously defined as an effect that only emerges from the encounter between bodies and also as a force external to these bodies?” (2012, p. 29).

The problem is that an atmosphere is at once a condition and is itself conditioned. How is it possible to research both the formation of an affective

atmosphere—that is, how it is conditioned—and what an atmosphere does—that is, how it conditions, or affects? The problem of understanding the non-representational background as conditioned and condition is not unique to the concept of affective atmospheres. Far from it. An emphasis on the background is shared across non-representational theories, alongside an attentiveness to how meaning emerges from practical action and how events introduce the chance of something different into life. The background has been given a number of names, such as milieu or context. However, much in the same way that Bruno Latour (2005) critiques the concept of society, notions of context or background can become caught up in a logic of explanation; either the background is explained away by reference to something else, or it is used to explain. What non-representational theories do in relation to the background is break with this reductive logic of explanation. This means that non-representational methods are part of styles of research and analysis that treat non-representational phenomena as at once conditioned and conditions. Seemingly ephemeral, seemingly vague and diffuse, atmospheres nevertheless have effects and are effects. Non-representational methods work to intensify the problems that the background poses to social analysis and to sense and disclose how the background is composed and organised.

The chapter is organised around four problematics that are intensified in relation to the concept of atmosphere but are shared by other non-representational phenomena. We discuss these problematics through empirical vignettes drawn from our recent experiences of waiting in NHS (National Health Service) hospitals in Newcastle Upon Tyne and Gateshead, UK. First, how is it possible to name an atmosphere, if naming is generally considered to be a representational act that fixes and therefore reduces a phenomenon? Particularly intense atmospheres such as mass

panic or fear may be easy to identify, but it seems harder to analyse and differentiate between more everyday banal or quotidian atmospheres, that may in fact be more important to the ongoing maintenance of social life or the performance of power and politics. Second, how is it possible to account for the coexistence of non-representational conditions? That is to say, can atmospheres co-exist in the same space, or do they require separation and exteriority from one another in order to exist? Third, how might we become sensitive to the causal powers of phenomena that exert a force, but may be vague and diffuse, ephemeral and indeterminate? How can we account for or assign causality to an atmosphere in situations where atmospheres mix with other participants and are themselves multiple? Fourth, if atmospheres are ephemeral then what mechanisms or processes dictate an atmosphere's capacity for change and how do these changes come about? How do we think about change in the background of thought and life without reproducing a model of linear succession?

Identification

A child sits and is soothed and sick is wiped away; a name is called by a receptionist, another a few minutes later; business as people arrive and leave, occasional glances at posters quietly documenting mundane safety routines; doors off to somewhere, background chatter of hushed voices; what looks like a head wound; arms around shoulders, heads awkwardly resting against arms; one of us waits with the almost but not quite soothed child hoping she won't be sick.

Perhaps we could name the atmosphere of the waiting room of a North-East A&E department as anxious waiting. Perhaps it, if an atmosphere is an "it," is better named as the urgency and expectancy of a scene of emergency. Perhaps anxious waiting for the hope of treatment better evokes the atmosphere. Perhaps all of these

names and none of them would serve to express, reflect or enact the background affective quality of a room in which matters of life and death are never far away.

Atmospheres are routinely and regularly individualised by being named. Naming is of course central to efforts to explicate atmospheres in order to render them subject to intervention. Naming is in this respect a pragmatic act. The name fixes an end point to be produced through some kind of intervention. It specifies what should be brought into being, and is usually part of familiar taxonomies of atmospheres. Naming is also a pragmatic way of giving an account of a situation or event. Names are ascribed to atmospheres in ways that enable, or not, joint recognition. But naming also occurs as part of all research into and with atmospheres. Here it poses more of a problem for any analysis influenced by non-representational approaches. For it would be easy to reduce naming to one particular function: fixing within a representational economy. On this understanding, naming would freeze what is in process, determine what is indeterminate. An atmosphere or a set of atmospheres would from then on be housed within the unity of a name. What would supposedly be lost is precisely atmosphere as a condition that exists ambiguously.

Atmospheres appear to be a strange class of non-representational thing—what Galloway and Thacker (2007, p. 11) call “the persistent naming of the entity—that-cannot-be-named. What is obvious and immediate is the same thing that is shadowy and unknown.” The problem is, then, hardly unique to atmospheres but crosses between various non-representational phenomena; the sense that not only do names miss their referent but that the division between representation and referent is an effect of a particular version of representation. Even though atmospheres are also regularly named by those within them or have just exited them, there would be

something suspect about naming, something that appeared to sit uneasily in a book on non-representational methods.

Whilst there is much to be said for this account of naming, it risks reproducing a too one-dimensional account of the relation between researching atmospheres and representation. In particular, it risks presuming a difference in kind between the representational and non-representational and reproducing a one-dimensional understanding of representation. Let's return to our hesitancy in naming the atmospheres that coexisted within the waiting room to summarise some alternative representational practices and strategies. Proliferating names for atmospheres might be one way of responding to the volatility of atmospheres, or their ambiguous, indeterminate, status, by placing in question whether an atmosphere is a determinate thing with fixed properties and capacities. Another representational strategy might be to be cryptic about the name given to an atmosphere, attempting to acknowledge the tension that inheres in naming the background of life and thought by hinting or through misdirection. Another representational strategy is to invent fabulous new names for every atmosphere encountered, in doing so refusing to invoke any kind of universal descriptor for an atmosphere. Inventing a new name—names that do not allow for recognition, names that confuse, names that resonate—for every atmosphere would affirm the singularity of this or that atmosphere and its irreducibility. Here the name wouldn't be pulled off the shelf and applied to a situation.

But perhaps we get a different sense of the work naming does if we think about naming as part of a methodological practice involving a combination of description and speculation. A practice that acknowledges that atmospheres cannot be faced without a name, but treats naming as one act in a practice orientated to the emanation

of an atmosphere. Naming an atmosphere is, first, recognition of the individuation of a particular atmosphere and its difference from other atmospheres. Naming presupposes, then, the existence of that which is named. It is one part of a process of ascribing an identity to an atmosphere that occurs alongside a research process that makes present the individuation of this or that atmosphere. Specifically, naming is an act within a practice of description that attunes to the composition of an atmosphere and the emanation of an atmosphere from some kind of ensemble. As a practice, it might be that many names are tried out for atmospheres before one fits the particular affective quality. In this respect, naming emerges, in part, from how the researcher is simultaneously orientated towards an atmosphere and dwells within that same atmosphere.

Identification is an ongoing process that involves assembling traces of an atmosphere from a multiplicity of bits and pieces. But, and second, naming is also an act that evokes something beyond the name and can hint towards how uncertainty inheres in the process of ascribing an identity to an atmosphere. We could say, first, that any name invokes the singularity and generality of any atmosphere. A name is singular in that it speaks to the specificity of how a particular atmosphere emanates. It gestures towards something that clearly and obviously exceeds the unity of a name. Naming is also general, though. It gestures towards commonalities and differences with other atmospheres. It invites us to consider that something might be shared between the ensembles from which atmospheres emanate and in the way in which atmospheres condition.

We could then emphasise, slightly differently, how naming acts to evoke something of the particularity of an atmosphere and how an atmosphere conditions.

Perhaps, certain atmosphere comes to attach to the name itself, conjuring other atmospheres. Riley (2005) reminds us that names have a tone. They move. By highlighting the role of naming in orientating towards the individuation of an atmosphere we are trying to rescue naming from its devaluation as a representational act somehow counter to non-representational methods. Naming is a necessary act because, whether done cryptically, inventively or otherwise, by evoking atmosphere as one entity amongst others it provides a necessary starting point for any analysis: that atmospheres are real phenomena that are part of the conditions for life and thought, albeit strange phenomena whose existence is always in question.

Co-existence

A group of people are sitting in a square waiting room, next to a series of doors leading to a variety of examination and treatment rooms. Based in the optometry department, the room provides patients a space to sit after they have been booked into the hospital away from the general waiting area, but before they have been seen by a nurse or doctor. The patients are all there regarding some issue with their eyes. Each waits, not knowing the severity or banality of the medical problem the other patients (or perhaps themselves) may suffer from. Nor are they aware of the treatment that the other patients may be about to experience behind the closed doors that line the waiting room's walls. Some may be there for a routine eye test, others for a more invasive procedure and yet others looking to receive a diagnosis for some seemingly obscure ailment. This ambiguity over the medical status of each individual, alongside the fear, anticipation or calm that accompanies the knowledge, or lack thereof, of what will happen in the examination or treatment room makes it difficult to discern an overarching atmosphere that unites or pervades the various assembled bodies. Some

patients appear relaxed, while others tense and nervous. Two older ladies chat about television soap operas and immigration, while a younger man looks at the ground and taps his feet.

It is tempting to summarise the tone or feel of an atmosphere under one overarching name such as fear or panic and assume that an atmosphere's single feel or tone is what gives an atmosphere the capacity to dictate or dominate a particular situation or environment. Such a strategy might suggest that the assemblage of bodies and objects that constitute the waiting room described above have generated an atmosphere of uncertainty or ambiguity. For example, while the older women appear relaxed and chatty other patients appear tense and uncomfortable. However, turning to this simple vignette again, it is possible to argue that the waiting room is constituted by multiple atmospheres that touch, contact and rub up against one another, rather than a single, overarching or dominant one. The two ladies chatting appeared at ease and the sound and gentle manner of their conversation about ostensibly public issues and television shows touched other waiting patients and drew them into the conversation, bolstering and amplifying an atmosphere of calm conviviality. At the same moment, others sitting in the waiting room clearly did not want to be involved in this conversation and turned their heads towards the floor or away from the conversation to avoid being drawn into the mundane chatter. These patients were emanating a more hesitant or fearful comportment, expressed through their body language and behaviour, such as sighing loudly and shifting from side to side in their seat. Rather than competing with one another, these forces and their associated affects (of hesitancy, calm and potential worry) existed alongside one another without direct collision or competition. In this example there was no clear relationship of dominance in which one atmosphere overrode or cancelled out the other. In other words, these

multiple atmospheres seemingly contacted or touched one another, while remaining affectively discrete. For a nonrepresentational analysis of atmospheres to be effective, this requires understanding how to account for these forms of contact and touch.

Graham Harman's reading of Jean-Luc Nancy's theory of touch is useful in this regard. As Harman argues:

to touch something is to make contact with it even when remaining separate from it because the entities that touch do not fuse together. To touch is to caress a surface that belongs to something else, but never to master or consume it. It requires a certain space between beings, but also an interface where they meet (Harman, 2012, p. 98).

In relation to the examples discussed above, the atmospheres emanating from the various bodies and objects in the waiting room touched, but did not simply mix or fuse together. Rather, they existed as discrete phenomena. The sound waves and intonation of the voices of the ladies sitting in the waiting room may have affected the bodies of the more hesitant patients, causing them to shift or look away, but it did not override the atmosphere of hesitancy they exuded. In this case affects that can constitute an atmosphere may completely miss other affects that could cause an atmosphere to change. Harman alludes to objects that "miss" or do not touch and affect one another, even when in the same environment through the simple example of a paper screen:

We can bring to mind an oriental paper screen of the type that is used to divide fashionable rooms into sectors, filtering lamplight into a muted glow. Such a device offers a formidable barrier for the particles of dust that continually drift

into it, or even gravel chips that might accidentally be kicked up against it. But the soft light passing through the room encounters it only as a partial obstacle (Harman, 2002, p. 31).

Atmospheres can then co-exist alongside one another without fusing or melting together precisely because the objects and bodies that make up an atmosphere do not exist as a set of totally interactive or accessible relations (also see Ash, 2013).

We can further elucidate how atmospheres potentially co-exist in the same environment while still appearing distinct and separate, without necessarily affecting one another through Nancy's distinction between the weight and mass of bodies. In *Corpus*, Nancy (2008) argues the weight of a body is what it exerts on other things, while the mass of a thing is the amount of matter it is composed of. Comparing weight and mass "Nancy contrasts the weight that bodies exert on other bodies with the mass through which they concentrate in themselves...here the weight of mutual relations takes clear precedence" (Harman, 2012, p. 100). For Nancy, a body or object is defined by its boundary and a boundary is determined by a relationship to something other than itself. In Harman's reading, for Nancy, it is the mutual weighing of bodies that is primary to giving a thing its boundary (and thus defining it). However at the same time, a process of weighing is only possible because of a thing's mass, which is singular and precedes its encounter with other things. The thing's non-relational mass and its relational weight are therefore intertwined, but it is the thing's weight (rather than its mass) that emerges when contacting or touching with other things.

Translating this into our language of atmospheres, mass refers to each individual object and body's features or properties which give it a unique potential to affect, dependent on its relational configuration with other things. Weight refers to the

affects that emerge from the selective relations between objects that actually occur within a given situation and thus form a specific atmosphere. In other words, bodies or objects have a mass, which shapes their capacity to affect, but do not necessarily weigh upon one another. For example, a sound wave may not affect a concrete block and so be unable to contribute or shape the atmosphere associated with the concrete block, even if the sound wave physically touches the block. At the same time, when aspects of objects do contact and affect one another this can create a mutual weighing, in which affective communication takes place and thus an atmosphere is formed. While seemingly abstract, this account of atmospheres having a weight actually chimes with lived experience, where people often refer to a situation as “heavy” or a room as expressing a “light and airy feeling.”

We can use the distinction between non-relational mass and relational weight, alongside our understanding of objects as selectively encountering one another, to understand how atmospheres can be composed of a number of the same bodies and objects, while remaining mutually exterior from one another. For example, the affects the ladies in the sitting room generated through the specific sound and intonation of their voices extended and met the bodies of the other patients in the waiting room. Most patients were affected by this, which caused some to turn and join the conversation and others to turn away. In this case the same affect had differential impacts on the bodies involved in the encounter. Some affects touched, communicated and weighed against one another generating an atmosphere, while in other cases particular bodies or objects touched but did not communicate or missed one another, thus remaining outside of the atmosphere. In other cases, bodies or object in an environment neither touched nor communicated at all. These relations of touch, communication and non-touch, in turn generated different effects and thus another

atmosphere. Crucially both atmospheres, of convivial conversation as well as polite frustration, were equally present, while remaining distinct, even when specific objects and bodies were contributing to both atmospheres at the same time. In the optometry ward, the weighing and thus co-existence of these two atmospheres in turn emphasised and highlighted the distinction and difference between them to the patients who were waiting for treatment or diagnosis.

In terms of nonrepresentational methods, understanding how objects selectively encounter and weigh or fail to weigh against each other could be aided by the further development of what Shaw et al. (2013) term a “standpoint ontology.” Referring to mosquitos, Shaw et al. understand standpoint ontology as seeing “lived experience as unavoidably partial and fragmented: as a very particular experience of being-in-the-world” (p. 263). To occupy a mosquito’s standpoint they suggest it is necessary to “delve beneath the molar forms and discover a world of chemistry, ions and sparks: where environment and organism pulsate together” (p. 263). Whereas Shaw et al.’s standpoint ontology assumes perspective is limited to living things, developing a standpoint ontology to study atmospheres would require the researcher to attempt to occupy the position of multiple entities, both living and non-living, to think through how an object or force encounters other things.

A nonrepresentational approach to atmospheres’ coexistence involves a flattening and breaking down of distinctions between living and dead matter to suggest that all objects have the potential to equally impact or weigh upon an atmosphere. Attending to the standpoint of various objects does not mean simply making a list of an object’s properties. Rather, a nonrepresentational approach to atmospheres considers an object’s potential as well as actual modes of relation, which

are in turn dependent on the other bodies and objects present in an atmosphere. In the example above, we could begin an investigation of an atmosphere from the standpoint of the exhaled air that forms the sigh of waiting patients such as its power, reach, volume, pitch and so on. Or we could begin with the light bulbs that shape the kind of illumination that the waiting room is bathed in. Following the nonrepresentational conviction that “mimesis is impossible” (Vannini, this volume) attempting to occupy the standpoint of a light bulb is not to pretend to understand what it is really like to be a light bulb or a breath of air. Rather it is to focus on forms of exchange and communication which often exist beneath the thresholds of humans’ conscious awareness, or indeed do not phenomenally appear to humans at all, in order to open up and question the limits and boundaries that shape the co-existence of atmospheres.

Causal Powers

It is the objects and bodies and the precise nature of the types of affective interaction that take place (or fail to take place) in a situation that determine the coexistence of atmospheres and their boundaries, limits and consistencies. And yet, atmospheres are irreducible phenomena: neither wholly separate from the relations that form them, nor wholly determined by those relations. Emphasising the irreducibility of atmospheres directs us to their strange, ambiguous causal powers. Consider another example of the emergency waiting room and the ripple of surprise occasioned by a sudden cry momentarily interrupting waiting.

It’s around 2.40 am, the room is quiet. People appear in pain. Some are worried, others doze more or less quietly. Doctors come and go, people arrive and leave. Two parents are tired, awake. Our daughter sleeps nestled into her mother’s shoulder.

Suddenly, she cries out. It's not a noise we've heard before. It startles and scares us. When will we get to see a doctor? Should we ask? The noise jolts other people, they turn to us, some stealing glances at our daughter. One man says quietly "poor thing." Someone we presume is his partner nods.

On the one hand, the atmosphere of the room conditions how waiting happens. An atmosphere appears to have a quasi-autonomous existence, shaping actions that are themselves part of how an atmosphere settles and shifts a little, but continues to stay awhile. Perhaps lacking the sense of solidity we give to other more obvious material conditions, atmospheres condition by becoming part of how situations and events happen. On the other hand, atmospheres are conditioned by the ensemble of bits and pieces from which they emanate. We might make an open-ended list of the elements that condition without determining an atmosphere, itself an act that remind us of the (im)material heterogeneity of the "origins" for this or that atmosphere. Where an "origin" of an atmosphere is understood, following Bennett (2010: 33), as "a complex, mobile, and heteronomous enjoiner of forces" that mediates how an atmosphere emanates:

... the logistics of emergency care and systems of prioritisation based on need

... sleeping children

... white walls, blood, sick

... practices and expressions of sympathy

... being with strangers

... a cry and the absence of cries.

... waves of tiredness

... the uncertain commonality of illness and pain

How might we attune to an atmosphere as irreducible phenomenon: at once an effect of such an ensemble but also itself a causal power alongside others in situations or events? A version of this question has been at the heart of reflections on the term atmospheres. The phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne (1976) stresses that an atmosphere as a “total effect” cannot be decomposed into a series of separate parts. Focusing on aesthetic atmospheres (1976, p. 327, italics in original), he stresses that “we cannot reduce to their elements the melancholy grace of Ravel’s *Pavana pour une enfante défunte*, the glory of Franck’s chorales, or the tender sensitivity of Debussy’s *La fille aux cheveux de lin*.” Whilst an atmosphere is composed from a set of elements, atmosphere as a singular affective quality exceeds them. There are parts of his account we disagree with, but Dufrenne’s emphasis on an atmosphere as a “total effect” is interesting because it puts in question a methodology that would reduce any particular atmosphere to a secondary, lifeless, product of a network of relations that is given methodological primacy. How, then, to approach the causal powers of atmospheres?

What Harman (2010) calls linear billiard-ball causation may be useful for thinking about some of the ways in which atmospheres emanate, but an attempt to separate out the assembling of atmospheres into effects and determinants is likely to fall short precisely because atmospheres envelop, they infuse and mix with other elements. Let’s return to the scene from the emergency waiting room. How should we separate out cause and effect, or distinguish between that which conditions and that which is conditioned? Nevertheless, there may be occasions of what Delanda (2005), Connolly (2005) and others term “efficient causality:” where an atmospheric effect

follows from a determinant and that effect proceeds in a linear fashion on a set trajectory. Methodologically, we need to be open to the possibility of such occasions in order to keep open the question of what atmospheres do. But we also need to experiment with other versions of causality that offer us alternative ways of attuning to what atmospheres do.

Perhaps we could learn from William E. Connolly's (2011) idea of "emergent causality" when approaching what an atmosphere does. Connolly describes "emergent causality" as process whereby causes can become effects and vice-versa, which give a good sense of how something like an atmosphere is both an effect of a gathering of elements and a mediating force that actively changes the gathering it emanates from. The causal power of an atmosphere is only, however, revealed through those changes:

Emergent causality is causal—rather than reducible to a mere web of definitional relations—in that a movement in one force-field helps to induce changes in others. But it is also emergent in that: first, some of the turbulence introduced into the second field is not always knowable in detail in itself before it arrives darkly through the effects that emerge; [and] second, the new forces may become infused to some degree into the very organisation of the emergent phenomenon so that the causal factor is not entirely separate from the latter field (Connolly, 2011, p. 171).

Whilst not discussing atmospheres directly, what Connolly provokes us to think about is how an atmosphere is at once an effect that emanates from a gathering, and a cause that may itself have some degree of weight. An atmosphere is an "emergent cause" because we cannot be sure of the character of the atmosphere before registering its effects in what bodies do—an atmosphere is revealed precisely as it is

expressed in bodily feelings, and qualified in emotions and other actions. In the above vignette, perhaps the atmosphere emerges in and is reflected in and is enacted by the acts of concern that range from a hug to a word of sympathy uttered and overheard. Perhaps the atmosphere becomes infused into those and other acts. As well as being ambiguous with regard to the absence/presence and subjective/objective distinctions, atmospheres are ambiguous with regard to the distinction between causes and effects. It is in this sense that atmospheres weigh on others ambiguously. They become one casually efficacious element amongst others, but in a way that is uncertain precisely because of their ambiguous status as surrounds that envelop and encircle. Atmospheres are perhaps better researched as affective propositions, unfinished lures to feeling a situation, site, person or thing in a particular way that may come to condition life.

Transformation

Atmospheres change—that much we have seen in the examples of a cry in an emergency room, or the to and fro of conversation in the optometry department. However the issue is to understand exactly how and why an atmosphere may change, whilst holding onto the touch, or weight, of an atmosphere. Recognising the co-existence of atmospheres we can wager that extremely infectious or dominant atmospheres, such as mass panic or terror are actually quite rare phenomena, compared to the multiple minor atmospheres that constitute the banality of everyday experience. In this case it is important to differentiate between transformations that occur through interior changes within an atmosphere as distinct from changes in atmosphere that occur when one atmosphere encounters another and overrides or defuses its potency to affect. This kind of distinction is key to a nonrepresentational

approach to atmospheres because it allows us to introduce differentiations that multiply, rather than shut down, potential ways of knowing and forms of understanding atmospheres. In turn these distinctions help bring to presence a heightened awareness, in both the researcher and eventual reader of that research, regarding the complexity of atmospheric transformation. Returning to the example of waiting rooms, the difference between internal and external transformation can be fleshed out through the following vignette.

A woman emerged from a treatment room to a waiting area in an endoscopy ward. Previous to her exit the room had been calm, with patients reading magazines and watching the flat screen television that was attached to one wall. Exiting the door the woman looked visibly upset. A catheter tube emerged from one nostril and was bent backwards towards her ear and disappeared under the neck of her t-shirt, taped in place with medical sticking plasters. A partner, friend or relative of the woman who had been sitting in the waiting room quickly stood up and approached the woman as if to comfort her. The woman turned away and left the room, leaving the relative to gather their belongings and hastily follow her. This event, only a few seconds in duration, palpably altered the atmosphere in the waiting room. The previous sense of calm was interrupted and replaced with a sense of unease and disquiet. Other patients, who previously had been watching television or reading a magazine had noted the woman's hasty exit from the waiting area and the addition of the catheter tube that had not been present when she had entered the treatment room. This event perhaps began to stir the imagination of others who may have been present for the same procedure, inciting feelings of fear or apprehension. This palpable change in atmosphere was brought about by both an internal change in the atmosphere

emanating from the woman, which in turn clashed with the existing atmosphere and worked to override it, shaping the atmosphere of the room even after she had left.

Examining the scene again in more detail, the internal change in the atmosphere that the woman emanated may have been brought about by the treatment she had undergone, but also the medical apparatus that she was augmented with. Her disposition and mood had clearly changed, but it was not simply the addition of these objects to the situation that had altered the atmosphere. Rather, it was the specific arrangement and configuration of these objects on the woman's body. The intrusion of a catheter tube into her nostril seemed to produce an uncomfortable and unfamiliar set of sensations which was echoed by the look on her face and body language. Regardless of her personal subjective experience of the catheter and prior treatment, the catheter's capacity to affect was both internally experienced as well as publically felt by others in the waiting room. Here the catheter ignited a kind of synesthetic recognition in one of the authors, who began to imagine the sensation of the catheter, even though he had never personally experienced the sensation of wearing one himself. Indeed, this example shows that the affects a person may experience in a situation do not have to be accurately communicated or transported to another person in order to generate a coherent or powerful atmosphere. What matters is the force of transmission itself, how many bodies an object affects and in what way. In this case, the woman leaving the room had created an atmosphere through the assemblage of entities that were very localised to her own body, but still had a powerful, transmittable affect.

As we argued earlier, atmospheres regularly co-exist in the same environment without encountering or affecting one another. However, in the above case the existence of one atmosphere and the introduction of another caused the new

atmosphere to become the dominant one. Here, the affects present in one atmosphere meet affects in the new atmosphere. Rather than passing these affects without influence, these affects do communicate and begin to take on their own intensity, which in turn alters the boundaries between the atmospheres. If the communication between atmospheres continues, this can lead to the situation (as described above) in which the power of the existing atmosphere's capacity to affect has diminished to the point at which it is no longer accessible to the objects or bodies in that situation. From the position of the bodies and objects in that environment this means that the existing atmosphere no longer has the capacity to affect and so, for all intents and purposes, appears to become subsumed by the new atmosphere.

Methodologically this means that atmospheric change can be understood as a matter of affects meeting one another in ways that produce (or fail to produce) new relations between the entities within that atmosphere. Rather than using a quantitative vocabulary based around the addition or subtraction of elements to an atmosphere to understand change, it may be better to use a qualitative vocabulary of thresholds and tipping points. These two terms can be elaborated by returning to the concepts of weight and mass developed in section three. Each object and body in an environment has a mass, which weighs upon one another and brings an atmosphere into existence. An atmosphere's threshold for internal change is therefore shaped by the presence and distribution of the mass of objects and bodies, because it is the mass of objects and bodies and their configuration that determines an atmosphere's capacity to affect. Altering the position of a body or changing some condition within an atmosphere changes its capacity to affect and can potentially overcome a threshold that maintained the global or prevailing affect the atmosphere was generating. For example, the placement of a catheter upon a body has the potential to totally alter the comportment

and behaviour of that body. The calmness that initially characterised the woman's demeanour in the endoscopy ward was replaced by irritation, frustration and seeming self-consciousness. Here the catheter and its particular placement in the woman's nose and throat introduced new, seemingly negative affects, breaking through the previous threshold that constituted her confident atmosphere to produce a new more intense, negative atmosphere in its place.

In a similar way we could state that it is the mutual weighing between atmospheres when they selectively encounter one another, which both separates them out and holds them in tension, which shapes an atmosphere's tipping point. Here a tipping point is understood to be the point at which an atmosphere stops emanating its particular affects because it is overridden or subsumed by another atmosphere external to it. In the case of the newly augmented woman in the waiting area of the endoscopy unit, an atmosphere was introduced to the situation, and momentarily co-existed with the existing atmosphere. But as people became aware of, and responded to, the negative affects emanating from the women, the new atmosphere began to override the existing one, until it became dominant. Suffice to say, an atmosphere's tipping point is not absolute or fixed, but relative to the objects that compose the existing atmosphere, as well as the arrangement of objects and intensities of affect in the new atmosphere. Formally put, we could say that mass determines an atmosphere's threshold at which it undergoes internal change, while the relational weighing between atmospheres determine their tipping point, or the point at which an atmosphere is subsumed or overridden by the external change brought about by another atmosphere. In other words, atmospheres take on particular phenomenal appearances to the entities within that atmosphere as affects meet or fail to meet one another and build or fail to build intensity. The production (or lack thereof) of intensity

in turn creates the phenomenal appearance of an atmospheric change happening or not happening, depending on the objects and bodies involved in an encounter.

Returning to the problematic of nonrepresentational methods, attending to these multiple forms of transformation is not about fixing each atmosphere through a particular set of naming practices. Rather than identifying various forms of internal and external change as a way of exhaustively describing an atmosphere, we can use a qualitative vocabulary of tipping points and thresholds to focus on an atmospheres ambiguous nature by attending to its continuing differentiation as objects weigh and fail to weigh against one another. Representing atmospheres in language and words is a matter of following these processes of differentiation and change in order to answer a specific research question, while recognising that these processes of differentiation are always subject to another differentiation or another form of exposure that emerges when the researcher attempts to occupy an alternative standpoint or perspective.

Conclusion

The chapter has worked with a double account of non-representational methods. First, non-representational methods concern objects of inquiry that are, under some description, non-representational. For us, atmospheres exemplify such an object of inquiry. In their vagueness, in their ambiguity, in their indeterminacy, in their weight, atmospheres might be seen as not simply the paradigmatic non-representational object, but also a matter of concern that heightens the challenges the non-representational supposedly poses to social scientific habits and practices of description and explanation. This does not mean that atmospheres are somehow separate from representational forms and devices. Far from it. But it does mean that atmospheres cannot be treated through an exclusive emphasis on a system of

signification and it does mean that the strange reality of atmospheres poses some problems for social analysis.

Which leads us to the second sense of non-representational methods we have worked with, albeit more implicitly than the first. Non-representational methods do not refer to a separate set of methods neatly distinguished from methods that are now supposedly deficient. Instead, we take non-representational methods to name a set of ways of approaching a phenomenon, of relating or not to the weight or touch of something, which intensify the problems that the object of inquiry poses for social analysis. We could say, then, that a non-representational method involves an intensification of problems and requires staying with those problems for a while.

In this spirit, what we have tried to do in this chapter is intensify the problems that emerge once atmospheres become a matter of concern in the social sciences. Problematics that we see as shared between atmosphere and other non-representational conditions and concerns. Problematics that all concern how to explicate the background of life and thought without presuming that the background is simply an inert “context” or that the background is a mysterious, inaccessible, substance outside of all mediation.

Indeed, by answering the five questions raised in the introduction we have developed a methodology to study how atmospheres operate in practice. To conclude then, we can return to these questions to summarise what an atmospheric methodology might do and how the case of atmospheres opens up wider questions about nonrepresentational methods.

Firstly, how to identify an atmosphere and what role does naming play in rendering atmospheres sensible through recognition and identification? Here we touch on problems of misrecognition, but also of naming as a pragmatic act that, rather than being bestowed with a power to stifle life, is one way in which atmospheres are rendered present. Naming is ambivalent though. Both evocative and referential, naming speaks to the necessity of treating atmospheres as conditioned conditions that are at once singular—this atmosphere here, now—and held in common—atmospheres that repeat with variations across sites, networks or events.

Secondly, we have argued that atmospheres are both ontologically and spatially discrete from one another, but they can also co-exist within the same space or environment without necessarily affecting one another. This is an important point because it complicates a narrative in which a space or system produces a single overarching atmosphere. To account for how multiple atmospheres can exist alongside one another requires we attempt to occupy multiple standpoints to consider how a body or object may be contributing to different but contemporaneous atmospheres. In turn this encourages us to take the non-human as seriously as the human when evoking an atmosphere. Regarding non-representational methods, this means developing a standpoint ontology to emphasise the excessive and not quite graspable nature of atmospheres. Indeed, investigating an atmosphere from the perspective of a catheter tube or health poster can itself conjure a sense of strangeness or unfamiliarity in a reader. As Vannini suggests in the introduction to this volume, generating a sense of wonder through the ways phenomena are accounted for is something like an ethos shared across non-representational theories. As such, these standpoints do not attempt to occupy an impossible position—the reality of existence for a catheter tube or health poster—but they do allow us to avoid an impulse to begin and end accounts

of atmosphere with the human. By holding the question of what exactly constitutes an atmosphere open, a gap is created in which a broader range of non-human things can occupy a researcher's concern, at least for a while.

Thirdly, how might we build the irreducibility of atmospheres into our methodological practices? Atmospheres are conditioned by relations, but neither reducible to them nor completely separate from them. This means experimenting in analysis with ways of approaching the causal powers of atmospheres: how atmospheres envelop and surround, infusing practices and becoming part of the background of sites. To name an atmosphere, to return to our first point, is to evoke their causal role. But to do so requires that we work with complex versions of causality, including ideas of emergent causality, that are attuned to in-distinctions between causes and effects and are able to hold onto how an affective condition takes place.

Fourthly, we have argued that changes in atmospheres take place via two processes: an atmosphere can change via the differentiation of objects or affects internal to an atmosphere and an atmosphere can also change when it meets another atmosphere that overrides or alters its capacity to affect in a fundamental way. In this regard changes in atmosphere can be gradual, as entities that constitute it are changed or are taken or added to that atmosphere, or change can be sudden, such as when one very potent atmosphere meets another and overrides it, cancelling the less potent atmosphere's capacity to affect. Studying atmospheric change then, requires researchers to become sensitised to differences between internal and external atmospheric shifts. On one hand, this involves identifying all the entities in a situation and what parts or aspects of these entities are interacting or relating to other entities in ways that amplify or reinforce an existing atmosphere. On the other hand this

involves recognising when a new set of affects emerge from outside the current atmosphere. Becoming sensitive to an atmosphere's weight and touch does not mean throwing away or discarding pre-existing research methods. Rather it is a matter of style, a way of recording, analysing and writing that stays with the multiplicity of things that form an atmosphere and shape its capacity to change, instead of trying to immediately name an object or body as the central cause of affective transformation. Objects and bodies are not then to be analysed from one perspective, but several. The catheter does not have one single affect, but a catheter-nose affect, a catheter-face affect, a catheter stranger affect and so on.

Finally then, we hope that the concepts and strategies developed here will help sensitise researchers to the complexities of atmosphere and in doing so expand and inform future nonrepresentational work on this ephemeral, yet constitutive, phenomenon.

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