

CFP: The Atmospheres and Ambiences of Modernist Literature

Université Paris Nanterre (CREA)

10-11 April 2025

Deadline for proposals: 15 June 2024

Keynote Speakers:

Bruce Bégout (Université Bordeaux Montaigne)

Birgit Breidenbach (University of East Anglia)

Abstract

The figure of atmosphere has emerged with increasing prominence over the course of the last twenty years as a means of reconfiguring our ways of engaging with literary texts. Gernot Böhme notes the prevalence in everyday discourse of the term “atmosphere,” used to describe a wide variety of situations: the serene atmosphere of a spring morning, the feeling we may have of being enveloped by a friendly or tense atmosphere upon entering a room, or the atmosphere that a particular person might seem to radiate (Böhme 112-113). These phenomena which we seem to encounter on a daily basis are yet very difficult to determine ontologically: “We are not sure whether we should attribute them to the objects or environments from which they proceed or to the subjects who experience them” (Böhme 114).

In his 2012 book *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht brings attention to the literary potential of the phenomenon of atmosphere. Gumbrecht’s proposed strategy of reading for *Stimmung*, which he claims is the approach of most “non-professional readers,” would allow literary scholars to reclaim a “vitality and aesthetic immediacy” that is often absent in contemporary literary scholarship (Gumbrecht 3, 12). When we read for *Stimmung*, we are no longer engaged in hermeneutic deciphering or historical reconstruction, but in an affective and bodily “becoming-present” of a text’s *Stimmung* (Gumbrecht 18).

Drawing on Böhme, Gumbrecht and others, Anna Abramson in her 2016 thesis, *The Age of Atmosphere: Air, Affect, and Technology in Modernist Literature*, presents a case for the relevance of taking into account the phenomenon of atmosphere in our reading of literary texts of the modernist period. Among many consequences of an attention to atmosphere in modernist literature is a shift from considering modernist literary techniques as means of representing psychological interiority to considering these techniques as ways of rendering atmosphere. Modernist literature, according to Abramson, operates a shift from a concern with the realist narration of sequential events to an increasing interest in the background environment out of which events arise. When the unnoticed background, the atmosphere in which events occur, is put into the foreground, this creates the uncanny “effect of ambience” which Timothy Morton analyzes in his 2007 book *Ecology Without Nature*.

An engagement with atmospheres and ambiances in modernist literature may take on many forms. Henry James writes in “The Lesson of Balzac” of how a certain “colour of the air” suffuses a work of fiction due to an unconsciously produced “effect of atmosphere.” In Joseph Conrad’s “Typhoon,” we might sense how a planetary atmosphere becomes inextricably entangled with human subjectivity. We might also think of how literature’s rendering of a visceral sense of *place* seems to involve strange distortions in time, as in Elizabeth Bowen’s *The House in Paris*. Atmospheric distortions of time may also be at play in the many layers of myth and memory in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. We may think of the sonorous atmospheres created by the rhythms and cadences of William Faulkner’s slowly unfolding

prose. Or we may recall the aura that surrounds the Rev'un Shegog, whose voice reverberates throughout the collective atmosphere of the church in *The Sound and the Fury*. We could consider narrative technique itself as a rendering of atmosphere, as in the way Anna Abramson in the third chapter of her thesis shows how the weaving in and out of first-person vantage points and free indirect discourse among various characters in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* blurs subjective boundaries, making the reader sense a kind of collective, brooding atmosphere. We might also think of the uncannily intimate entanglements of the human and non-human in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* in terms of what Natalie Dederichs calls "atmospheric re(lation)ality."

These are but some of the many possibilities open to us as we embark on a rereading of modernist literature with a renewed attention to the atmospheres, ambiances, or *Stimmungen* that these works seem intensely engaged in. As we reread these works of modernist literature today in the era of what Bruno Latour calls our ongoing "ecological mutation," perhaps we may learn to patiently attune our attention to what is in the background: the atmospheres and ambiances that make our world and our situations of reading what they are and what they may become.

We welcome papers that engage with atmosphere/ambience in any imaginable form in the works of modernist literature in the Anglophone world from the marginal to the canonical. (ca. 1880-1950)

*If you are interested in participating, please send an abstract of around 300 words along with a short biographical note (~100 words) to Henry Carmines (hcarmines@parisnanterre.fr), Isabelle Loréal (iloreal@gmx.fr) and Myrto Charvalia (m.charvalia@parisnanterre.fr) by **June 15th 2024**.*

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Bruce Bégout, (Université Bordeaux Montaigne), author of *Le concept d'ambiance*, Éditions du Seuil, 2020.

Birgit Breidenbach (University of East Anglia), author of *Aesthetic and Philosophical Reflections on Mood: Stimmung and Modernity*, Routledge, 2020.

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Deadline for submission: June 15th 2024

Date of conference: April 10th-11th 2025

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