

ATMOSPHERES. A CONTRIBUTION OF DESIGN TO UNDERSTAND HOW THEY APPEAR

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ATMOSPHERE

PRACTICE-LED RESEARCH

IMAGE RESEARCH

VISUAL COMMUNICATION DESIGN

ICONIC TURN

This paper investigates how images can evoke and represent atmospheres, moving beyond traditional aesthetic concerns with beauty in art to consider perception, experience, and environmental interaction in a world which is mostly designed. Drawing on contemporary philosophy, particularly the work of Böhme and Seel, it frames atmospheres as phenomena arising between a beholder and their environment, experienced individually and shared intersubjectively. Through a practice-led image research

methodology, the study analyses series of experimental image variations – ranging from photorealistic 3D renderings of a scene to highly abstracted compositions – to examine how visual elements such as composition, color, light, perspective, and materiality contribute to atmospheric effects. The findings highlight the capacity of aesthetic practice to make implicit sensory knowledge explicit, offering a deeper understanding of how images shape emotional and perceptual experiences.

INTRODUCTION

The discourse on atmospheres marks a significant shift within the philosophy of aesthetics. Contributions from authors such as Hermann Schmitz and Gernot Böhme represent an evolution from the historical focus on beauty in art and nature towards a broader philosophy of perception (Böhme, [1995] 2022; Hauskeller, 2015; Schmitz, 2014; Seel, 2000). Martin Seel suggests that aesthetic appearance can occur in any perceptible object (Seel, 2000, p. 46). He distinguishes aesthetic experience as a sensory phenomenon that transcends descriptive language (Seel, 2000, p. 47). Drawing on Paul Valéry, Seel describes aesthetic appearance as an indeterminacy that enables the beholder to explore a field of possible interpretations, thus allowing the perception of individuality, variety, and freedom – unlike more determinate experiences (Seel, 2000, pp. 30-31; Valéry, 2021, p. 181). Gernot Böhme's contribution to the discourse on atmospheres extends the understanding of aesthetic practice beyond art to a variety of design fields. He argues that the density of industrialised societies and environmental degradation disrupt our physical equilibrium with our surroundings. Experiencing dense urban agglomerations, contaminated water, rising temperatures, and extreme weather conditions hinders harmonious environmental interaction. With little of the natural environment remaining, homeostasis must now be achieved through designed environments (Böhme, [1995] 2022, p. 14). Whereas nature was once the ideal for art, the artificial has now become the model for nature (Seel, 1996, p. 11). Consequently, architects, stage designers, product designers, and communication designers bear the responsibility of creating seemingly natural conditions that support balanced environmental exchange (Böhme, [1995] 2022, p. 16). From this perspective, Böhme introduces the concept of *atmosphere*. An atmosphere is the immediate emotional response to the holistic experience of an environment, object, or message. Böhme defines atmospheres not as objects but

as phenomena that arise between the beholder and their environment –whether consisting of architecture, designed objects, communication artefacts, or works of art. In a natural landscape, for instance, emotional responses such as comfort or discomfort are shaped by factors like temperature, light, vegetation, and materiality. Before consciously analysing these factors, we perceive an atmosphere that may feel inviting, repellent, soothing, or hostile. Similarly, atmospheres influence experience in any designed environment, including interactions with objects or visual messages in communication design.

THE QUASI-OBJECTIVITY OF ATMOSPHERES

With an understanding of aesthetic experience as an atmosphere that occurs between an object or environment and the beholder, applied aesthetic practice is elevated from its traditionally secondary role in comparison with art. Böhme describes a practical phenomenology present in architecture, scenography, product design, and visual communication design (Böhme, 2017, p. 33)¹. These fields involve the creation and continual evaluation of atmospheres. Using stage design as an example, Böhme describes how a set designer must consider the impact of their creation on a specific theatre piece and the cultural context of the audience (Böhme, 2017, p. 30). Understanding the material constellations that evoke specific atmospheres –composition, form, colour, light, and materiality– is a shared objective in architecture, design, and art, forming a key aspect of professional expertise in these fields. Yet there appears to be limited reflection on this topic within the aforementioned aesthetic practices. Is this due to the indeterminacy and volatility of atmospheres, leading to the assumption that they cannot be intersubjectively described or objectified? Böhme describes the perception of an atmosphere as both an individual sensation and a shared experience. Each

theatre-goer perceives the stage set in a unique way, yet it is still possible to describe and discuss the quality of this sensation with others within a shared cultural context. Consequently, Böhme (2017, p. 30) labels atmospheres as “quasi-objective”. If we acknowledge the need to expand our understanding of aesthetic experience (while avoiding the term *knowledge*) for aesthetic practices, and the importance of education and awareness within the context of mass communication, then aesthetic practices themselves –and their implicit knowledge– can serve as a methodology for understanding atmospheric effects. In other words, the implicit knowledge involved in creating atmospheres is transformed into explicit insight into how atmospheres, influenced by material constellations, appear in their diverse qualities. Practice-led image research is a methodology that we have developed within the context of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Iconic Research, initiated in 2005 and funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) (Renner, 2010; Renner, 2011; Renner et al., 2017-18; see also Bolt, 2004; Ingold, 2013). We can define the methodology of practice-led image research as the creation of images in order to contribute to the understanding of how they generate meaning. Through this methodology, we do not create images to communicate a message, but rather to describe the effect of images and their material constellations through comparative analysis. With this general methodology of practice-led image research, we can also focus on the question of how images can evoke and represent an atmosphere. As visual communication designers, we can alter composition, perspective, colour, and the representation of materiality in images. This approach involves phases of creating systematic variations, followed by phases of reflection and analysis of the variations developed through a comparative approach (Renner, 2011). In this sequence of iterative processes –involving experimentation with materials and analytical reflection– the outcome is the verbalisation of how an atmosphere is evoked through the image in view of the

image under consideration. Verbalising the evaluation of the atmosphere represented in an image enables other beholders to agree with or contest the interpretation². This fosters a multiplicity of perspectives and the *art of interpretation* described within the context of hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1968, p. 32)³. In the following part of the paper, we will examine to what extent the described methodology allows us to contribute to the understanding of how images and their material constellations evoke a specific atmosphere. We will narrow the topic to the representation of outdoor environments and discuss three examples to ask the question: *What happens when we represent a landscape in a particular manner within an image?*

EVALUATING ATMOSPHERES THROUGH IMAGE MAKING WITH 3D RENDERING SOFTWARE

Anna Dippert selected several architectural sites in the city of Basel and reconstructed them using the open-source 3D software *Blender* (Dippert, 2023). Although the software enables immersive navigation through these spaces via VR headsets, this interpretation focuses on still images generated with the software. Our inquiry centres on how these images create atmospheres rather than exploring how VR headsets influence the perception of space and atmosphere. It is therefore not our goal to evaluate how technology replicates real experience. Instead, we focus on how the still images evoke and vary the atmosphere of the chosen location from one visual iteration to another. To constrain the parameters and enhance comparability within the field of variations, we focus on a single site: the public pool Eglisee in Basel (Figure 01 - 03). One viewpoint and perspective were selected. By systematically altering visual parameters such as the representation of lighting, materiality, and colour, a wide range of visual variations was produced (Figure 03). These variations enable us to interpret the atmosphere of a specific image by comparing it with other instances within this spectrum of possibilities.



Figure 1 Anna Dippert, *We got liminal spaces at home*, 2023, 3D-Rendering.

The image shown in Figure 01 appears, compared with the other four images (Figures 02 a-d), to represent a lighting situation familiar in Central Europe. From the lighting, we infer that the time of day depicted is either dawn or dusk. The concrete plane in the foreground is illuminated by a lamp outside the image frame, reflecting a warm tone. The pool is also touched by this light, which casts a glow over the foreground. As we move from the remote edge of the pool towards the background, the adjacent lawn, trees, and buildings become obscured. The details of the background objects are hidden, their dark tones blending together. The furthest objects—the trees—form black silhouettes that contrast with the much lighter, bluish sky. The sky is cloudless and gradually lightens towards the horizon. Within the darkness of the background, a two-storey building is visible. Its ground- and first-floor windows are illuminated. Although some light sources can be seen within the rooms, the interiors remain empty. A cone of light falls on the right-hand side of the building's façade, facing the viewer. The source of this



Figure 2 Anna Dippert, *We got liminal spaces at home*, 2023, 3D-Rendering. (Fig. 02a: top left, Fig. 02b: top right, Fig. 02c: bottom left, Fig. 02d: bottom right).

light is unclear: lamps above the pool are visible, but not lit. The entire scene lacks visible people, yet the water in the pool appears to be in motion, as though someone had just been swimming. The water reflects the light from the building's windows as vertical stripes on its choppy surface. The remote section of the pool is cordoned off by a rope held afloat by small buoys. Although the entire image is rendered in a photorealistic manner, closer inspection reveals a graphic reduction in the surface textures. This method of creating realistic imagery was widely used in graphic design and art during the first half of the twentieth century. Often referred to as magic realism, this visual language uses texture, shading, and light to produce representations that appear more real than photographs. This effect is achieved by selectively emphasising particular qualities of the depicted objects, thus conveying their spatial and material characteristics⁴. One prominent texture, that of lichen, is placed on the concrete frame surrounding the pool. The lichen's texture reveals natural growth in a graphically reduced

form. This differs from a photographic representation in that it translates, rather than reproduces, what could have been captured photographically. This mode of realistic representation has also been described as *synesthetic imagery*, where visual perception evokes sensations of touch, sound, smell, or taste (Richter, 2016; Cavallaro, 2013). We can *feel* the rough concrete surface with its lichen, *hear* the sound of the moving water, *smell* the chlorine, and *hear* the birds chirping at dawn or dusk. The only elements interrupting this multi-sensory, and therefore holistic, perception of atmosphere are the metal handrails leading into the pool. These are rendered in low resolution; the reduction of the curved top into straight segments reveals the digital nature of the image and disrupts the realism sustained by the rest of the composition. Having described the verifiable characteristics of the image—elements that can be confirmed or contested by the reader through observation—we can now turn to a more general evaluation. The realistic scene depicts a public pool before or after opening hours. The absence of people renders the

Figure 3 Anna Dippert, *We got liminal spaces at home*, 2023, overview of the 3D-Renderings.



scene uncanny. Its contradictions complicate immediate interpretation: while no one is visible, the choppy water and the illuminated rooms suggest human presence, yet the rooms appear empty and the building abandoned. The dramatic lighting –emphasising the foreground while obscuring the middle ground– intensifies the contradictory and eerie atmosphere. It evokes a sense of abandonment and can be interpreted as *liminal* in the popular sense of the term. As Anna Dippert notes in her written Master's thesis, referencing studies in cultural anthropology (van Gennep [1909], 2005), the scene also addresses liminality as a transitional space between the known and the unknown – a shift from the illuminated foreground to the obscured background. It symbolises a transition from the familiar purpose of a public pool to an unexpected, enigmatic setting. We may therefore conclude that the atmosphere evoked by Figure 01 is characterised by the indeterminacy of transition – from the familiar (the visible) to the unexpected (the obscured) (Dippert, 2023, p. 8). Turning to the other images selected for comparative evaluation, Figure 02a presents the pool in full daylight, even though the lamps above the pool remain lit. The sun must be low on the horizon, as the raised pool border casts long shadows. The pink colouring of the building, the pinkish tone of the pool's raised edge, and the concrete plane in the foreground create a friendlier, more inviting atmosphere than in Figure 01. We might imagine this pool situated in a more southern region. There are no shadowed areas due to insufficient light; the trees are not silhouetted, and their foliage and branches are clearly visible. Yet, several aspects seem incongruous. The water level in the pool is low, the waves are large, and the water appears yellowish and murky. The building's windows are almost black, revealing nothing of the interior, and appear like closed shutters. Although the absence of people adds to the scene's mystery, this image conveys neither the drama nor the eeriness of Figure 01.

Figure 02b is dominated by a monochrome palette of orange and ochre tones, in contrast with the more naturalistic

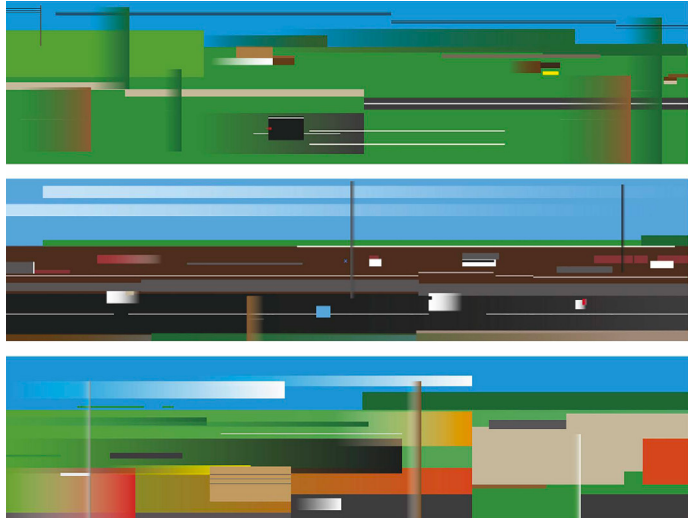
colour schemes of the other images. The monochromatic quality unifies the visual elements and suggests atmospheric colouring caused by air conditions – perhaps a sandstorm or nearby wildfire filling the air with dust or ash. The trees are depicted more schematically here; the two prominent trees to the left of the building allow a glimpse of the distant landscape, which glows intensely orange, evoking fire or explosion. The right half of the image recalls the strange lighting of a solar eclipse, yet the left side offers another explanation: suspended particles in the air diffuse the sunlight. The interpretation of fire, explosion, or sandstorm implies human absence due to adverse conditions. This internal narrative evokes a documentary atmosphere in which even the ochre-coloured pool water appears plausible. Figure 02c directly recalls the first image (Figure 01) but is significantly darker. The foreground is obscured, and the pool itself is invisible. The focus lies on the building's illuminated windows and two strings of glowing lights, which shimmer through a light mist yet cast little illumination on the pool or foreground. The only indication of the pool is the reflection of the windows in the water's surface – which, without prior knowledge, might be mistaken for the façade of a taller building. This image produces an even more mysterious and uncanny atmosphere, recalling the visual language of horror films⁵. Figure 02d omits the building's interior illumination but introduces a slightly lighter depiction of the pool and foreground. We can discern the pool's edge, the metal handrails, the two strings of illuminated lamps, and the silhouette line separating the background from the sky. Mist rising from the pool's surface adds another layer to the already obscured scene, highlighted by reflections of the overhead lamps. The atmosphere is less inviting than in Figure 02a, less documentary than in Figure 02b, and less frightening than in Figure 02c. The atmosphere in Figure 02d can again be interpreted as *liminal*, insofar as the transitional aspect is made visible through the water turning into mist – rising from the present into the indeterminate future beyond the image frame.

ABSTRACTION AND ATMOSPHERE

Looking back at the project *We got liminal spaces at home* by Anna Dippert, all the images follow the schema of central perspective established during the Renaissance in Central Europe. Software which is designed to represent three-dimensional space is based on this understanding. A radically different approach, however, can explore the representation of space as a temporal experience – as a visual accumulation of different views – as has been established in the context of various Asian cultures. The following visualisation by Shiping Sheng, representing the atmospheres of a train journey from Basel to Zürich, does not conform to the widespread schema of central perspective. It contributes to our understanding of how the representation of a landscape can create an atmosphere even through a more abstract approach⁶.

The image elements in all three variations (Figures 04 a-c) do not represent the landscape viewed from the train window in a realistic way. The compositions make it possible to distinguish the sky from the landscape through colour. Buildings, streets, fields, clouds, and other elements we expect in a landscape are only hinted at. In Fig. 04a, we can see grassland in summer in the Swiss countryside. A few farmhouses are scattered across the scene, and some unpaved roads appear next to the train tracks between large grassy fields. It feels warm; we can smell hay (suggested by the lighter green rectangle in the upper left) and hear the bells of cows in the distance. In Figure 04b, we are travelling along a motorway outside a city. A variety of vehicles move in separate lanes. We can hear the noise of fast traffic and sense the quality of the air through the depiction of mist in the sky. In Figure 04c, we are leaving the countryside and entering an agglomeration. Green fields gradually transition into a built environment. Bright orange roof tiles reflect the warm sunlight, while warm grey and ochre planes can be read as the walls of buildings. It is not a frightening cityscape, but

Figure 4a, b, c (from top to bottom). Shiping Sheng, *Panorama Landscape Basel to Zürich*, 2024. Digital Print.

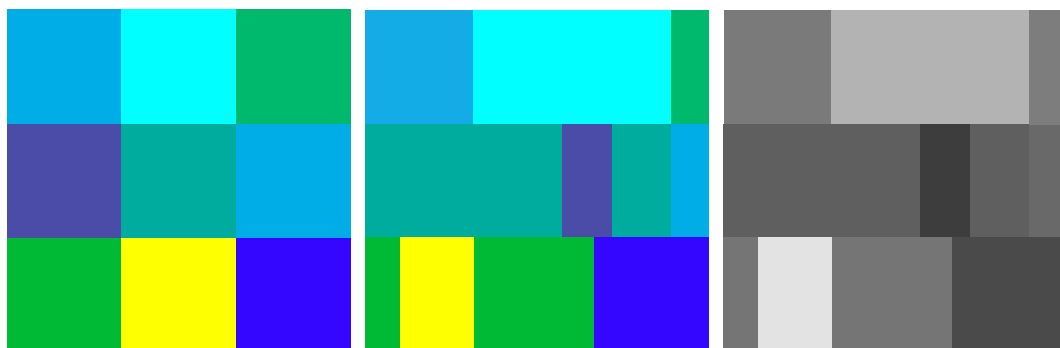


rather a calm and peaceful village surrounded by green fields. The light no longer feels like summer sunshine, but rather appears broken and diffused, as in early autumn. Although the three variations represent a landscape over a period of time on a train journey and abstract specific details into graphic forms, the colours in the compositions are instrumental in expressing atmosphere. The houses and other elements of the landscape are highly abstracted, yet in combination with colour we can imagine and physically recall the experience of an atmosphere that we have encountered through the images. Even though the above interpretation of the images was written by the author, who knows Switzerland well, the abstracted forms do not refer to a specific landscape but instead provide a starting point that allows any beholder to project their own experiences of being in an environment. The intuitive interpretation of seasonal atmospheres—their specific light and colour qualities—relates to an experience more widely shared than, for example, the view of an empty public pool in a very specific situation. With this non-specific approach, the project *Panorama Landscape Basel to Zürich* by Shiping Sheng differs from the very specific atmospheres presented in the project *We got liminal spaces at home* by Anna Dippert.

To take an additional step towards abstraction, we can refer to three colour compositions by Weiran Liang. These were created as an introductory exercise for the class *Aesthetic Practice*. The students were asked to design (1) a harmonious colour composition expressing a positive atmosphere using nine equal squares; (2) to alter the horizontal proportions of the squares to make the composition more intriguing; and (3) to translate the second composition into a greyscale version representing the tonal values of the colours (Figures 05 a-c).

Already the first composition (Figure 05a) conveys an atmosphere that can be associated with a landscape. A blue sky above green meadows, some water, and even a field of yellow flowers can easily be imagined. When the horizontal divisions are emphasised in the second composition (Figure 05b), the sense of foreground, middle ground, and background becomes even more clearly suggested. This second composition allows for a spatial interpretation of the rectangles. The light blue rectangle at the top of the composition is crucial for understanding the image as a landscape (light blue is read as bright sky). Likewise, the pure yellow and blue at the bottom help us interpret the four rectangles below as the foreground. However, this interpretation as a landscape becomes far less plausible when we look at the third greyscale composition (Figure 05c). It appears instead as a representation of a flat façade with a rather sombre atmosphere, in contrast to the bright and energetic mood of the first composition (Figure 05a).

Figure 5a, b, c (from left to right). Weiran Liang, *Introductory Exercise for Aesthetic Practice*, 2025, Digital Print.



CONCLUSION: TOWARDS AN ATLAS OF IMAGES

If we leave behind the dense description and interpretation of the selected images, we may ask: what is the outcome of the project that we can summarise and share intersubjectively? We have discussed only a minimal selection of three areas of possible contingencies within images that have a mimetic relationship to the environment. Even with this small number of images and the constraints of each approach, we were able to describe formal aspects that trigger specific atmospheres – understood as an immediate emotional reaction. The realistic representations (Figures 01-03) can evoke a specific atmosphere through the friction between the image and what the beholder has previously experienced. The contrast between what is shown and what is obscured serves to evoke an atmosphere of the uncanny. The hyper-realistic 3D renderings are the most transparent images we have discussed. They purport to be faithful representations of the location and are rather seductive in this respect. Even though they make it easy to perceive a specific atmosphere, they lack the declaration of authorship and the author's interpretation of the scene. The visual interpretation is not made explicit. Therefore, we can criticise a lack of integrity and authenticity (Pallasmaa, 2022, p. 24). The further the abstraction progresses, the more clearly the image declares the authorship of the designer. The images become a canvas onto which the beholder's experiences can be projected. Although the images of the second series (Figure 04) do not follow the convention of central perspective, we can perceive an atmosphere interpreted as a summary of views collected over time in a panorama. The abstraction of the images does not allow us to recognise details, but colours and rectangular shapes are sufficient to trigger the experience of a landscape and its atmosphere. With the third series of images (Figure 05), it can be demonstrated how colour and emphasis on the horizontal line are widely shared visual experiences that are easily triggered

even through highly abstracted compositions. The discussed examples can be understood as a contribution to an atlas of images in general, and more specifically to an atlas that addresses the atmospheric effects of images. Atlases are instrumental in establishing a disciplinary discourse⁷. Through an atlas, the knowledge of a discipline can be exchanged and shared broadly.

The methodology of practice-led image research differs from other disciplines within the context of Image Science (*Bildwissenschaft*) in that the analysis of images is not limited to existing ones or restricted to images in the context of art. Image series can be generated to evaluate a specific image category in focus. We can describe the purpose of an image atlas on atmospheres in the following words: “The atlases drill the eye of the beginner and refresh the eye of the old hand.” (Daston & Galison, 2010, p. 22)

For the beginner, and for anyone exposed to images in today’s society, it is crucial to understand how images create atmospheres. In the constant streams of visual stimuli to which we are exposed, a broad understanding of their effects is essential to enable individuals to form their own opinions. If we turn to the “old hand” –the architect, scenographer, product designer, visual communication designer, or illustrator– an atlas allows them to gain an overview of what has been done and which effects can be described with regard to the form of the image or object. It is a tool that teaches designers and supports them to continue to create atmospheres which have not yet been described, but which are intriguing, surprising, authentic, and make our designed environments liveable. It goes without saying that the work on this atlas has only just begun.

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All images are held in the archive of the Institute for Digital Communication Institute at the Basel Academy of Art and Design.

NOTES

- 1 "One might speak of a practical, or better: a poetic phenomenology, because we are dealing here with the art of bringing something to appearance." Böhme, 2017, p. 33.
- 2 The experimental creation of aesthetic artifacts is a common ground for both artistic and design research. However, the use of the artifacts differs: in artistic research, the aesthetic object and the atmosphere it generates are seen as the research outcome (Henke, 2019; Elkins, 2014). In design research, however, the goal is to articulate the atmosphere associated with the object to achieve intersubjective understanding in view of the object.
- 3 "Hermeneutics primarily means an artful practice. This is indicated by the term itself, which has to be complemented by 'techné'. The art it is all about, is the art of announcement, of interpretation, of explanation and of exegesis and finally and of course includes the art of understanding on which it is based and which is required wherever the meaning of something does not appear open or unambiguous." (Gadamer 1968, p. 32, translation by the author.)
- 4 See the imagery used in poster design e.g. Stöcklin Niklaus, Sonnenschutz Bi-Oro, 1941, 120 x 90.5 cm, Lithography. <https://www.recherche-plakatsammlungbasel.ch/objects/52767/sonnenschutz-bi-oro?ctx=8bo766575d20b963c6596840f08759b6d1f8acc9&idx=157> (Last visited: 23.02.2025)
- 5 See also: Gaston Bachelard's description of the fear of the cellar: Bachelard, [1958] 1994, p.19.
- 6 Shiping Sheng is a Master Student at the Institute for Digital Communication Environments at the Basel Academy of Art and Design. The project Panoramic Landscape Basel – Zurich was developed in the class Image Lab taught by Lena Frei and the author.
- 7 See also Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas ([1929] 2025)

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