

IMAGING AS ATMOSPHERING

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ATTUNEMENT

ORDINARY

SOUNDSCAPE

SMELLSCAPE

DRAWING

This introductory essay argues that we may be witnessing the emergence of an “atmospheric turn,” part of a broader epistemological shift in the ways we perceive, represent, and design the world. Moving beyond the visual bias that has long shaped architecture and other image-based disciplines, it proposes a more embodied and multisensory perspective, in which atmospheres are understood in relation to situated and affective phenomena. Drawing on theories of affect and interaction, as well as on the fundamental contributions of sound studies, the essay emphasizes how sensory

experience arises from the interplay of environments, bodies, memories, and more-than-human agencies.

Within this framework, drawing, imaging, and surveying are reconsidered as practices that can engage with dimensions exceeding vision alone, including sound, smell, touch, and climatic conditions. The text therefore highlights both the limits and the potential of conventional representation, calling for the development of new strategies to represent atmospheric qualities by integrating subjective, embodied, and aesthetic forms of knowledge with analytical and data-driven methods.

"Descriptions, however, can give only a rather poor idea of what a real boomerang flight is like. One should stand in the open air to see how very three-dimensional this phenomenon is and hear the soft, pulsating, swishing sound of the boomerang arms moving rapidly through the air." (Hess, 1968, p. 126)

ATMOSPHERIC TURN

The contributions in this issue of the *IMG Journal* testify that we are already pretty much into what can be called an *atmospheric turn*. This was already precisely observed by Elisabetta Canepa (2022, pp. 109–114), but it may be worth beginning this introduction by attempting to look at this turn from a wider perspective, since it implies a fundamental epistemological turn.

We owe some of the first important steps toward a scientific theory of atmospheres to Tonino Griffero (see, e.g., Griffero, 2014) and, while the neurosciences are providing revolutionary instruments and methodologies to measure and observe humans' responses to combinations of stimuli (Mallgrave, 2013), scholars are making major efforts to build proper theoretical frameworks to observe, analyze, represent, and design atmospheres by drawing from many disciplines, one of the most notable examples being the work carried out by Canepa (2022) for her doctoral research. Still, it remains very difficult for most designers to anticipate—to project—what the atmosphere of their building, product, or other kind of artifact will "be" once it is set in a specific site or space, unless the project is carried out on site, *in the field*, and with a sensitivity and an attention that, in contemporary architecture, Peter Zumthor (2006; 2010) shares with not so many other colleagues.

We experience every day that "a particular piece of music can change the atmosphere in a room, [...] a particular article of clothing can change the impression a person makes,

[...] a certain architecture can modify the expression of a city” (Seel, 2005, p. 92); sometimes we are more aware than at other times of this influence because it also depends on our disposition, on the condition of us as subjects. For this reason, when dealing with atmospheres, it is appropriate to consider the presence and position of the observing subject together with the observed object, that is, to draw less from theories about influences and more on theories of affects (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) and, more generally, of interaction (Canepa, 2022, p. 101; Pérez-Gómez, 2016, p. 32). “Atmosphere (*atmos* = exhalation or vapor, *sphaire* = sphere or globe) is [...] something we all know, even outside the nonetheless relevant meteorological field” (Griffero, 2014, p. 1), but if asked why a certain place makes someone feel at ease, or uncomfortable, an immediate reply is often difficult. It takes time, attention, and an observation keenly aware of what each of our senses perceives in the environment to begin understanding how those sensations connect with our previous experiences in the phenomenal world.

Most people involved in the design of spaces and environments are trained to analyze and represent them visually and through visual devices, whether photographs, or drawings made by hand or with digital tools. It is one of the reasons why, during and after modernity, architecture has usually been considered mostly for its visual appearance. The same applies to the ways ancient architectures have been treated as models for modern architecture: Palladio focused on the ratios and appearances he could control by tracing and studying drawings, even though Pliny wrote about the stucco that covered the marbles of Greek temples that “if one wets one’s thumb with saliva and rubs it on the plaster, it still gives off the smell and taste of saffron” (Pliny the Elder, 1938, vol. 36, p. 40, cited in Emmons, 2019, p. 137).

Some decades before the current atmospheric turn, a *sonic turn* began to radically modify approaches that had been taken for granted at least since the fifteenth century. Acoustemological approaches (Feld, 1996; Haskell, 2022)

demonstrate that focusing on listening, rather than looking, changes humans' ways of being in the world, of thinking about it, and of representing it. This renewed attention to listening certainly helped shape attitudes and methodologies across almost every scientific field toward using our other senses to investigate reality, both through our bodies and through representations that are no longer only visual (sonification is now widely recognized and deployed in virtually every field). The notion of *soundscape* (Schafer, 1977) is nowadays considered problematic and denotes an ongoing "vicariousness" of the senses toward vision: one of Tim Ingold's objections to the term is that, if we accept *soundscape*, we should equally have to use *lightscape* for any visual experience and representation of a landscape (Ingold, 2011, p. 137). Nonetheless, *soundscape* has largely helped architects and urban planners take account of the acoustic aspects of buildings and cities (Blessner & Salter, 2007).

In another text, Ingold showed how "the idea of landscape, in its modern guise, entails a transition from the gathering of experiences to their projection, or from a haptic to an optical mode of perception" (Ingold, 2022, p. 155), but his argument can apply to every sensory register. His insight comes from comparing his experience inside a lodge—a conical space defined by wooden poles and caribou skins—with the common experience of being in a modern or contemporary building. In the latter, windows allow our gaze to stretch virtually to the horizon while keeping out the weather (but also sounds and smells); in the former, the only visible thing outside is a small portion of the sky, but all the other senses are connected with the surroundings.

Smellscapes (McLean, 2018) and *touchscapes* (Borer, 2013) have more recently followed soundscapes: what it is worth noting here is that they have helped reshape and redefine the notion of landscape itself, which initially emerged in relation to visual representation during the early Renaissance in Europe and has since been continually reshaped, especially in scientific terms since the nineteenth century (Jakob, 2022). When

it comes to finding the words to describe haptic (Brand, 2023) or—even more—olfactory sensations, however, it becomes even more evident how strongly the Western world has kept them relegated to the margins (Corbin, 1986; Hajdini, 2024, pp. 1–31; Karageorgos, 2024). One general problem with these *-scape* declinations is that they keep different sensory registers separated from one another, so that they can be studied with relatively consolidated methodologies. The notion that today seems to fill this gap, by providing a similar but more comprehensive common ground across the same scientific fields of inquiry, is that of atmosphere. Atmospheres, in fact, invite a rediscovery not only of sensory dimensions long neglected by modernity, which privileged language and visual representation: this turn not only underscores that auditory, olfactory, and other dimensions are integral, but also points to the fact that atmospheres are largely produced by nonhuman and more-than-human entities, including those that affect us in subtle yet significant ways. Capturing these phenomena requires increasingly complex models and computational tools, but sensing them still requires first of all our bodies and minds to “listen” to them and to “tune” with them. Integrating aesthetic, embodied, situated, and subjective approaches with data-driven, mechanized, orthographic, and objective methodologies offers opportunities to innovate in observing, representing, analyzing, and designing the world.

SITUATIONS AND ATTUNEMENT

It should be noted at this point that long before *per-spectives* (looking through) there were *per-fumes* (smoking through), and that the first known examples of human representation are intrinsically—and literally—atmospheric: pigments were projected onto cave walls in Europe and Asia together with the air blown from human mouths, leaving shadows of human hands on the stone (Dobrez, 2014). The projection

was not centered on the human eye, nor on a flame, but on the oral cavity. Throughout Giuliana Bruno's work, we find evidence of the complex relation between projection and atmosphere (Bruno, 2014, 2022), as well as a fundamental awareness of the human body as the subject, or spectator, that activates this relation through perception, memory, and intelligence (Bruno, 2002). Adopting an atmospheric approach to representation therefore means being aware of the mediation introduced by the instruments we use—from the pencil or the straw to the most advanced sensor-based digital tools—while at the same time not allowing our senses to be obfuscated by the attention required to operate those instruments. The myth of objectivity (Daston & Galison, 2007) all too often leads surveyors to forget that every survey operation is always dependent on the *hic et nunc*, whose specificities can now be considered in terms of the atmosphere which is at stake.

Tonino Griffero once again helps us understand what “perceiving atmospherically” implies, its specificity being “not grasping (presumed) elementary sense-data and, only afterwards or *per accidens*, states of things, but [...] instead being involved by things or, even better, situations” (Griffero, 2014, p. 15). Conversely, a situation can be defined as “a multiple and chaotic state of things that can be distinguished from others precisely thanks to its peculiar atmospheric tone. Then, an atmospheric phenomenology will be nothing but a special declination of a more general philosophy of situations” (Griffero, 2014, p. 31). The concept of *situation* is therefore fundamental and inextricably connected to *atmosphere*: to become aware of atmospheres, we must begin by becoming aware of being *in situ*¹.

Without a place (*situ*), neither landscapes nor atmospheres are given. A landscape needs a situated observer to be studied, but an atmosphere needs something more, or maybe different: an active dweller, someone who actively tunes to it. For Pérez-Gómez (2016) this is the key to reappropriating and updating the notion of *Stimmung* to rediscover

the meaning of architecture, in an era when human subjects are increasingly subjected to external powers. We can call it *attunement*, an active tuning to a specific place which implies being aware of it. In 2025, the sound artist and researcher Nicola Di Croce conducted with the singer Beatrice Di Fonzo the active part of a masterclass at the Teatrino of Palazzo Grassi in Venice, titled *Non-Human Listening*, in which participants began by actively listening to the place and later performed exercises of attunement, interacting with its sounds². In the same year, architect Erzë Dinarama curated the Kosovo Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale, situating visitors within an olfactory representation of the cycle of traditional agricultural seasons in her country: olfactory artist Sissel Tolaas designed molecular compositions that were diffused through the space on a timed cycle, presenting visitors with a seasonal calendar through an olfactory, embodied representation of what, across the seasons, is in the air. The landscape was not only represented in its dynamics; it expanded into atmosphere.

DRAWING ATMOSPHERES

Architectural drawing—and, more generally, drawing that must comply with ISO standards because it is meant to convey precise information universally—offers some solutions that can, at times, evoke other sensory reactions. For example, hatches or BIM parameters can be associated with specific materials, and, through them, we can imagine how those materials would feel, smell, or react to light or to climatic conditions. But those artists and architects who are more interested in atmospheres and want to use drawing as a mediator—between sensing and re-presenting information, or between imagining and designing—often develop personal tactics to represent atmospheric features, confronting the paradox of imaging what is not representable to sight because it pertains

mostly to other sensory registers. Among the most compelling contemporary examples are the Swiss architect Philippe Rahm (2023), who has developed precise strategies based on heat maps and diagrams to represent physical phenomena that affect the climatic behavior of places, and the Japanese studio Atelier Bow-Wow, which returns to the existing buildings it has designed to observe how they are inhabited, updating the project drawings with “incidental details” (Atelier Bow-Wow, 2014, p. 117) and adapting them to the ways human and nonhuman presences affect them. Among their references, Atelier Bow-Wow mention Kon Wajiro (see Traganou & Kuroishi, 2014) and Saul Steinberg³, but also Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s Roman views, where “the lives of people in a city” are “observed together with the architecture around them” (Atelier Bow-Wow, 2014, p. 121)⁴. Kon Wajiro offered early examples of graphically innovative sociological investigations into domestic and urban spaces, occurring strikingly at roughly the same time that Egle Renata Trincanato was observing her “uncelebrated Venice” (Trincanato, 2025) by entering the homes of ordinary people in the *sestieri* of Venice to survey and draw them, for the very first time in history. In her beautiful hand drawings, very often traces of everyday life can be found: plants, laundry, pieces of furniture, drapes, vases, foods, human figures dressed in their clothes. Alongside her typological and architectural observations, these elements help us understand that what makes the atmosphere—we might say now—of Venice lies probably more in such uncelebrated places than in the larger *palazzi* owned by wealthy families and designed by famous architects of the past.

Wajiro and Trincanato were working some three decades before Michel de Certeau and his colleagues began developing a revolutionary methodology for analyzing how people creatively engage with mass culture in their daily lives (de Certeau, 1984; de Certeau, Giard, & Mayol, 1998), and before Deleuze and Guattari proposed groundbreaking theoretical tools—relevant here mostly for their

aesthetic and ecological implications—for thinking about the world and engaging with it. Even if this issue of *IMG Journal* mostly hosts contributions in the fields of aesthetics, arts, design, and architecture, we should not forget that the notion of atmosphere—much as has happened, and is still happening, with that of landscape—can be transformative in fields that may seem light-years away. Just as one example, more than a century ago the economist Alfred Marshall described “industrial atmosphere” (Marshall, 1919) as something very specific—situated, we might say today—that cannot be relocated to another industrial place. It is elusive yet fundamental, because this atmosphere allows craft knowledge to circulate and be transmitted “in the air”: an industrial atmosphere contains tacit knowledge, productive habits, know-how, networks, and social conditions that provide benefits that are impossible to quantify in monetary terms, yet crucial both to the quality of human life and to the well-being of the industry.

ORDINARY BACKGROUND NOISE

Today, half a century after de Certeau and after Deleuze and Guattari, new epistemic and ecological challenges arise from discoveries about the intelligence of plants, fungi, and other biological entities (Tripaldi, 2022), as well as from artificial intelligence (Pasquinelli, 2023). Yet the apparent universalization of data and shared information still largely depends on calibrations that must be carried out under the guidance of humans who are acutely aware of where they are situated and of the conditions around them and with which they interact—in other words, of the atmosphere⁵. The Acid Horizon collective of theorists invites us to pursue “the imageless image” (Acid Horizon, 2023, pp. 182–183) by invoking James Hillman’s invitation to “stick with the image” (Hillman, 1989, p. 74): to move inward with attention, to enter the image and inhabit it. This suggests that situations—and

therefore atmospheres—can also be explored within our minds, in an isolated practice that “involves a qualitative shift in our attention, one keen on noticing and supposing versus prefiguring and presupposing” (Acid Horizon, 2023, p. 183). It is an invitation to be attentive to the situation rather than projecting overbuilt fantasies onto it. But by reading Hillman within the wider framework of Jungian collective consciousness and connecting this approach to images with the work of the philosopher Mark Fisher (2009)⁶, they also identify ways of collectively inhabiting the same images—or situations: if an image is shared, it offers the possibility of learning from the ways others relate to it and of acting together.

This is true not only with other humans, but also with animals and other entities. The video *The Nightwatch* (2004) by Belgian artist Francis Alÿs displays CCTV surveillance footage recorded after Alÿs released a fox into London’s National Portrait Gallery at night. The spectator follows the animal as it slips in and out of view across empty galleries, seen only through the museum’s monitoring system, unsettling the power dynamics of surveillance and control and inviting the watcher to learn how a fox makes sense of a space designed for humans with a specific function and organization, that visitors tend to take for granted. In this sense, *The Nightwatch* is an invitation to becoming-animal. Extending Hillman’s approach to images through Deleuze, becoming-animal can be considered as a search for an intermediate state “between human and animal, a relational space evocative of intensities, affects and movement—a becoming-*other*” (Acid Horizon, 2023, p. 188): a possible strategy to research atmospheres.

Sensing, thinking, imaging, drawing, and designing atmospherically implies a situated approach that goes hand in hand with attunement to the situation. It requires awareness of affects and empathy with situations (Canepa, 2022, pp. 150–156). It invites attention to what dominant cultures treat as background noise, as the Forensic Architecture team does when investigating events in violent and chaotic

situations⁷ (Weizman, 2017). It also implies becoming familiar with complexity in order to learn from it, deriving new information and grasping new possible orders (Daston, 2019) to question or subvert the current ones.

NOTES

1 The Situationists were already aware of this, since they adopted the term *ambiance* “to describe the emotional potential that pervades a place, namely its atmospheric identity” (Canepa, 2022, p. 57).

2 See <https://www.pinaultcollection.com/palazzograssi/en/non-human-listening-masterclass> and Andreani (2025).

3 They make a specific reference to the 1946 drawing titled *Doubling Up* (Steinberg, 1949), first published in *Architectural Forum* in 1946, which was also an explicit inspiration for Perec (1987).

4 In his series of drawings *Capricci* (2005-ongoing), Luca Vitone adds small musical notes to Piranesi’s views. Emerging from ground level, they suggest acoustic (musical) presences within otherwise dense but silent representations.

5 The video *Skyvelære* (While Attempting to Balance) (2013) by Swedish artist Ellen Røed documents the 11th International Pyrheliometer Comparison (IPC-XI), where metrologists from dozens of countries gather to calibrate pyrheliometers, instruments used to measure solar irradiance. The video lingers on the repetitive, carefully timed routines of tracking the sun and reading instruments, foregrounding the gestures, rhythms, and collective coordination through which “objective” measurements are produced. In doing so, it turns a technical procedure into a reflection on how standards and reference points are enacted through bodies, devices and the environment working together.

6 Acid Horizon, “Mark Fisher Meets James Hillman: Melancholy, Manic Culture & the End of Capitalist Realism (with Emma Stamm)”, podcast, October 23, 2025. <https://acidhorizonpodcast.buzzsprout.com/1064269/episodes/18032920-mark-fisher-meets-james-hillman-melancholy-manic-culture-the-end-of-capitalist-realism-with-emma-stamm>.

7 The results are available on the constantly updated website <https://forensic-architecture.org>.

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