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## Theoretical introduction

- 1 We tend to think about emotions in accordance with the basic grammatical structure of our language: when we say that the person X feels Y, we implicitly define emotions as predicates belonging to subjects. In this way our language encourages us to think of emotions as phenomena that *belong* to subjects—to grammatical subjects as well as to human subjects. My feelings are mine, I might say, and they belong to me, because they occur in me. The presumption of subjective ownership of emotions is thus often intertwined with a presumption of the interiority of emotions. We think of emotions as residing inside our soul, our consciousness, our subconsciousness, our psyche or in some other interior container that is more or less co-extensive with, but not identical to, our body. As Sara Ahmed has put it: “if I was thinking about emotions, I would probably assume that I need to look inwards, asking myself, ‘How do I feel?’ Such a model of emotion as interiority is crucial to psychology [...] In a psychological model, I have feelings, and they are mine” (*Cultural Politics* 8).
- 2 The rise of affect theory in recent literary and cultural studies can be seen as an attempt to circumvent these prevailing presumptions of interiority and ownership. In fact, the very concept of affect is often foregrounded as part of an endeavor to advance a vocabulary with which we can talk about partly *exterior* and not entirely *ownable* aspects of what we have traditionally referred to as “our emotions.” Judith Butler, for example, has argued that we always participate in a “circuit” of affect that is larger than any individual and thus partly exterior to all of us. According to Butler, “our affect is never merely our own: affect is, from the start, communicated from elsewhere [...], and we can only feel and claim affect as our own on the condition that we have already been inscribed in a circuit of social affect” (50).

- 3 As this and similar examples indicate, the concept of affect is often used to mark a distance to our “everyday language of emotion” which, according to Sara Ahmed, “is based on the presumption of interiority” (*Cultural Politics* 8). Here, however, we must be careful not to exaggerate for while it is surely true that *some* structures and phrases of our everyday language encourage us to think of emotions as interior phenomena, our everyday language of emotion is not based on this presumption *in its entirety*. We actually often use expressions that refer to affective phenomena residing “in the air,” as the saying goes, rather than in some interior container. This applies, not least, to expressions about the “atmosphere” of a room. For, as Teresa Brennan has asked: “Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and ‘felt the atmosphere?’” (1). As a phrase used in everyday speech, “feeling an atmosphere” refers to the perception of an exterior, shared intensity that surrounds and affects us without belonging to any one of us. When we feel the atmosphere of a room, our bodies register how affect is communicated from elsewhere. Therefore, our everyday language is not only an obstacle to thinking about affects; it is also a resource that is abundant in expressions that bear witness to the fact that we all sometimes perceive affective phenomena as exterior and shared rather than interior and personal.
- 4 Another expression from everyday speech that refers to the exteriority of affective phenomena is talking about being *in* a certain mood. As Rita Felski and Susan Fraiman have emphasized, “we think of ourselves as being in a mood (and not the other way around); we are enveloped or assailed by a mood” as if we found ourselves in “a kind of affective atmosphere” (vii). According to Martin Heidegger, such enveloping moods, or such affective atmospheres, are neither optional nor transient. On the contrary, as human beings we are always already in *some* mood or another. Heidegger could therefore note, “it seems as if, so to speak, a mood is in each case already there, like an atmosphere, in which we are steeped and by which we are thoroughly determined. It not only seems as if this were so, it is so” (qtd. in Dreyfus 171).
- 5 Following Heidegger’s association of moods and atmospheres, we can note that just as there is no moodless way of being, there are no atmosphere-free environments. As inhabitants of urban environments, we move through a series of perceptible atmospheres every day. While one atmosphere prevails in the workplace, another prevails at home, and a third in the theater. What Heidegger described as *Dasein*’s being-in-the-world (53ff.), we may therefore now, by dint of contemporary affect theory, translate into our bodies’ being-in-atmospheres. For as bodily beings we always already find ourselves in some atmosphere or another. As Lauren Berlant has emphasized, our “bodies are continuously busy judging their environments and responding to the atmospheres in which they find themselves” (15). This does not imply that we are always *conscious* about our atmospheric conditions or know how they affect us. Often atmospheres only emerge in our consciousness when we recall a certain situation in which a particular atmosphere prevailed. But we only have such memories because our bodies registered these atmospheres while we were in them, i.e. because our bodies were busy judging and responding to them.
- 6 Although we are always immersed in atmospheres that affect our mood, most of us find it difficult to describe the precise character of a certain atmosphere or to explain exactly how it affects us. According to Peter Sloterdijk, this is so because “we live in a culture that is practically incapable of talking about [...] the atmospheres in which we move” (*Sonne* 142, my trans.). He has argued that European culture—and we can safely

expand this to hold for Western culture in general—is characterized by a comprehensive oblivion of atmospheres:

Because the nature of atmospheres is neither of the same kind as that of objects nor as that of information (and because atmospheres seemed impossible to master), they were left aside by the ancient as well as the modern European culture of rationality in its long march into the objectivization and informationalization of all things and states of affairs. (*Sphären II* 145, my trans.)

- 7 Due to this leaving aside of the atmospheres in which we move, we have no tradition, at least no long tradition, for atmospherology. Nevertheless, at the margins of our Western “culture of rationality,” numerous *literary* works have examined the characteristics of shared atmospheres, described what makes up their “tone” or “color,” considered how they are generated and circulated, and narrativized the ways in which they affect the people they envelop and assail. In a culture where the examination of our atmospheric conditions has generally been left aside, literature may therefore turn out to be a treasure chest of atmospherological insights.
- 8 Although we can find insights about enveloping moods and affective atmospheres in literary genres as diverse as the epic poetry of Dante and the realist novels of Balzac, short stories seem, due to their very brevity, to be particularly disposed to highlight and examine shared atmospheres. Compared to the novel, the short story is not particularly well suited for representing the psychological “depth” or development of a character. As Charles E. May has noted, “the very shortness of the form prohibits the realistic presentation of character by extensive detail” (176). Knowing this, writers of short stories have mostly invested their ingenuity in other aspects of narrative. According to Susan Garland Mann, this applies to the short story cycle as well. She has thus observed that “as far as character is concerned, there is much less emphasis on a protagonist in the short story cycle than is generally the case in other fiction” (xii). Rather than describing the depth or development of a protagonist, short stories and short story cycles tend to describe particular *situations*—mostly shared and affectively charged situations—in which some crucial event occurs. Rather than observing the inner emotions of a single character, they attend to the affective circumstances of more characters.<sup>1</sup> Like affect theory, short stories are generally more interested in intersubjective vibrations, shared atmospheric conditions, or circuits of social affect, than in the private emotions of a solitary subject. For this reason, many short stories and short story cycles will undoubtedly be propitious objects for literary analyses inspired by affect theory.
- 9 The aim of this essay is to demonstrate that Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) is a propitious object for such an analysis. Theories on affects and atmospheres are—this is my basic thesis in the following—extraordinarily productive for an analysis of Poe’s story: on the one hand they can help us understand the many descriptions of affective atmospheres, and, on the other hand, the text itself can help us develop new concepts and revise existing ones in order to contribute to the ongoing theorization of affects and atmospheres. Apart from affect theory and new phenomenology, I have included some Poe studies focusing on atmospheric phenomena, although they have generally been less helpful in this specific context—not because Poe scholars have failed to notice the atmosphere enshrouding the House of Usher, but because they have neither had nor developed the conceptual tools necessary to theorize it.<sup>2</sup>

- 10 In the following, I will make use of related concepts such as affect, atmosphere, mood, and climate, and propose new concepts such as affective emission, affective ecosystem, and affective possession. This profusion of concepts has two main reasons: first, some concepts are simply more accurate or helpful than others in specific contexts; second, we need to expand our critical vocabulary in order to overcome the incapability of talking about atmospheres. Only such an expansion can help mend the lack of a “cultural-theoretical vocabulary specific to affect” to which Brian Massumi, not unlike Sloterdijk, has pointed (27).
- 11 In this specific context, the concept of “atmosphere” has turned out to be particularly productive. Not only because Poe’s story explicitly refers to the “atmosphere” of the House of Usher, but also because the term “atmosphere” refers unambiguously to the kind of shared, exterior phenomenon under investigation in Poe’s story, whereas a term like “mood,” according to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, can also refer to “an inner feeling so private it cannot be precisely circumscribed” (3). Furthermore, the phenomenon under investigation in Poe’s story is, strictly speaking, an atmosphere rather than an affect. For although the two concepts share a family resemblance, they are not identical: an atmosphere is confined to a specific location and has an unbroken spatial extension, whereas an affect can be more dispersed and circulate via signs pertaining to specific groups whose members are scattered.
- 12 Unsurprisingly, my focus on the atmospheric circumstances in Poe’s story implies that several themes will be left aside. For example, the following essay neither interprets the entombment of Madeline Usher nor tries to explain why the House of Usher falls in the end. Instead, it starts out by examining the narrator’s descriptions of the atmosphere that pervades the House of Usher (II) and then investigates the ways in which he is affected by it and how he tries to identify its sources (III). Next, it demonstrates that although the narrator turns out to be sensitive to the atmospheres of artworks (IV), he rejects the other main character, Roderick Usher’s, mystic interpretation of the atmosphere as evidence of the sentience of things (V). Finally, it argues that the narrator cannot express his growing feeling of being possessed by the atmosphere in a disenchanted, scientific language (VI), and thus concludes that Poe’s story mirrors a contemporary conflict between a disenchanted, scientific worldview and a re-enchanting, mystic worldview, neither of which were able to understand the nature of affective atmospheres (VII).

## The atmosphere of the House of Usher

- 13 To begin with, we may observe that “The Fall of the House of Usher,” like most short stories, does not describe its characters in extensive detail.<sup>3</sup> The three characters—the unnamed homodiegetic narrator, his boyhood friend Roderick Usher, and Roderick’s twin sister Madeline—are all rather thinly sketched, and we hardly get any information about their “inner life.” Although the narrator *does* tell about his impressions and the feelings they evoke in him, he only tells about his impressions of the present situation, i.e. he only describes his bodily responses to the affective atmosphere in which he finds himself. The two other characters, Roderick and Madeline, are both observed from the personal point of view of the narrator, so we have no privileged access to their inner life. Instead of describing the depth of its characters, however, Poe’s story focuses on the affective atmosphere in which they are all immersed. This is undeniably a central

theme right from the beginning. Thus, as the narrator, at the beginning of the story, approaches “the melancholy House of Usher” (397), in which he intends to stay for “some weeks” (398) in order to visit Roderick Usher, he immediately registers the atmosphere that seems to hover over the place:

About the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity—an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn—a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued. (399-400)

- 14 Occurring at the very beginning of the story, this description brings a phenomenon which mostly exists as a faintly registered background into the foreground—a maneuver that is reinforced by the conspicuous repetition of the word “atmosphere.” Usually, atmospheres are background phenomena. According to Sloterdijk, they constitute a “mute background ambience” as long as they are not made explicit (*Sphären III* 65, my trans.).<sup>4</sup> Unlike sudden emotions of, for instance, fear or rage, atmospheres can easily exist without coming to our attention. Similar to Sianne Ngai’s descriptions of “moods like irritation and anxiety,” atmospheres “are defined by a flatness or ongoingness” that is “less dramatic” than instinctive emotional responses to, for example, immediate danger or obvious injustice (7). According to Martha Nussbaum, we react instantaneously to objects that cause, for instance, fear or rage, and she has therefore claimed that emotions are “closely connected with action” (135). Atmospheres, however, are less dramatic, less object-oriented, and less goal-directed than the emotions Nussbaum examines. They do not call on any specific action. Instead, as a background ambience, they linger on and seep into you. Hence, the atmosphere does not make the narrator act in any particular way. At first, he just registers and describes the melancholic, gloomy, gothic atmosphere that seems to hang over the place. Rather than giving it a name and adding it to the catalogue of classic emotions, he associates it with multiple adjectives that point to its tone and color: decayed, gray, silent, pestilent, mystic, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued.
- 15 Rather than being *directed at* objects, this multifarious atmosphere is *generated by* objects. The “pestilent and mystic vapor” that enshrouds the House of Usher is not a passing cloud but a phenomenon that continuously “reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn.” The atmosphere surrounding the House of Usher is thus confined to specific objects and a specific place and therefore has a relatively well-defined spatial extension. Although it may not have a clearly demarcated border, it nonetheless distinguishes an inside from an outside: it is “peculiar” to the “mansion and domain” and “their immediate vicinity” and has “no affinity with the air of heaven.” It constitutes a specific air region or pneumatic zone which is defined by a prevailing mood. Poe’s description thus seems to anticipate Gernot Böhme’s definition of atmospheres as “spatial carriers of moods” which “fill the space with a feeling tone, somewhat like a fog” (22, 29, my trans.).
- 16 The vaporous atmosphere that surrounds the House of Usher is paralleled by a less vaporous but equally object-generated atmosphere inside the house. The atmospheres outside and inside may be separated by the walls of the house but they seem to be identical in kind. One continuous atmosphere seems to pervade everything. Thus, after the narrator has entered the House of Usher, a valet conducts him to a room which he describes in the following manner:

The room in which I found myself was very large and lofty. [...] Feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way through the trellised panes, and served to render sufficiently distinct the more prominent objects around [...]. Dark draperies hung upon the walls. The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered. Many books and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to give any vitality to the scene. I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all. (401)

- 17 Inside the House of Usher, the atmosphere is generated by manmade things: draperies, furniture, books, and instruments bathed in “feeble gleams of encrimsoned light.” We usually think of such things as self-contained. According to our inherited ontology, things have a certain extension and a number of properties. Certain properties however, in particular so-called secondary properties such as smell, color, and sound, *transcend* the extension of the things to which they belong. This is what Böhme has called “the ecstasy of things” (31, my trans.). We might thus think of smell, color, and sound, not as properties contained in a thing, or as co-extensive with that thing, but as ways in which that thing is present in a room and *adds* tone and color to it. In other words, whenever smells, colors, or sounds (including silence) are present in a room, there are always also affects in the air. Reading Poe’s tale with this in mind, we may think of the objects as generating a certain feeling tone that seems to saturate the air in the room. The smell of the dark draperies, the color of tattered furniture in the encrimsoned light, and even the absence of sound from the abandoned instruments—all of this adds up to “an air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom” which makes the narrator feel he is breathing “an atmosphere of sorrow.”

## Feeling the atmosphere

- 18 Although neither the outer nor the inner atmosphere of the House of Usher provokes any immediate action on the narrator’s part, this does not imply that they do not affect him. On the contrary, as soon as he approaches the House of Usher, his body begins to judge and respond to the atmosphere in which he finds himself. He describes how “with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit [...] There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart” which “unnerved me” (397). His heart immediately responds to the atmosphere as if it was a suspended string that was touched by it—a metaphor that is suggested by the opening epigraph by Pierre-Jean de Béranger: “Son coeur est un luth suspendu; Sitôt qu’on le touche il résonne” (his heart is a suspended lute; as soon as it is touched, it resounds).
- 19 The German word *Stimmung*—“of which the English ‘mood’ is but a pale and one-dimensional equivalent,” according to Fredric Jameson (38)—implies this meaning: the connected verb *stimmen* thus means to tune an instrument as well as to put somebody in a certain mood. When used about humans, *stimmen*, and especially *gestimmt werden* (to become tuned or to be put in at certain mood), suggests that we are like suspended strings that resound in a certain tone color as soon as they are struck and begin to vibrate. Some of this may be captured in the English term “attunement” which is sometimes used to translate *Stimmung* although it has somewhat stronger connotations of harmony and accord than the German word.
- 20 Far from being harmonious, however, and from being associated with any aesthetic enjoyment, the atmosphere into which the narrator enters assaults and unnerves him. He is pervaded and overpowered by it. He does not even feel the “delightful horror”



which for Edmund Burke was the “truest test of the sublime” and occurred if one was at “certain distances” to a terrifying object, so that one did not feel threatened by it (24, 86). There is nothing delightful about the “terror” (399) the narrator feels. On the contrary, he is overpowered by a “dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime” (397). Far from being an object of aesthetic enjoyment, the atmosphere *hits* his body and evokes a kind of mimetic response in which the exterior atmosphere is translated into an interior “iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart.”<sup>5</sup> The initiator of the so-called New Phenomenology, Hermann Schmitz, has frequently described such mimetic, bodily responses to felt atmospheres.<sup>6</sup> Defining feelings in general as “borderless outpoured atmospheres” (*Gegenstand* 296, my trans.), he has, for example, suggested the following explanation:

Feelings [i.e. borderless outpoured atmospheres] touch by means of bodily impulses which they impose on those who are affected by them. Sorrow, for instance, becomes mine [...] by sitting on my chest or depressing me in some other perceptible way. The melancholy or serenity of a landscape becomes my feelings when something in me (one often says: my heart) opens up or shuts off, contracts or expands, in a bodily perceptible way. (*Gegenstand* 303-4, my trans.).

- 21 The atmosphere in which Poe’s narrator finds himself affects him in a similar way: it seems to be an exterior intensity or force that flows into him, turns his blood to ice (“there was an iciness”), makes his heart heavy (“a sinking”), and nauseates or infects him (“a sickening”). Like sorrow that sits on one’s chest or melancholy that makes one’s heart contract, the atmosphere of the House of Usher has a bodily perceptible influence on the narrator *in spite of* its vague, airy, impalpable character. This may not be easy to explain within the framework of a culture of rationality—to the narrator it appears to be “a mystery all insoluble” (397)—but the perceptible influence of the atmosphere is nonetheless undeniable.
- 22 While the narrator is deeply affected by the atmosphere he enters, Roderick Usher, who has lived in it his entire life, is thoroughly determined by it. It even appears to have had a physical impact on his appearance. The narrator, who has not seen him for “many years” (398), registers that he has altered “terribly” (401): the “now ghastly pallor of the skin,” the “miraculous lustre of the eye,” and “the silken hair” with its “wild gossamer texture” makes it impossible for the narrator to “connect this Arabesque expression with any idea of simple humanity” (402). Roderick ascribes his terrible condition to the “condensation of an atmosphere” which, he claims, had resulted “in that silent yet importunate and terrible *influence* which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family, and which made *him* what I now saw him—what he was” (408, emphasis added). As the word “influence” indicates, Roderick feels that something has “flown into him” from the outside. This is what Sara Ahmed has called an “outside in” model of emotion (*Cultural Politics* 9), and what is going on when we “feel an atmosphere.” The reverse model, however, which Ahmed calls an “inside out” model of emotion (*Cultural Politics* 9), is also at work in the House of Usher. After the narrator for some time has tried to alleviate the melancholy that tortures Roderick, he gives up this endeavor because he realizes that Roderick, far from just being a passive victim of the influence from the atmosphere, also *contributes* to generating, or at least to maintaining, it:

As a closer and still closer intimacy admitted me more unreservedly into the recesses of his spirit, the more bitterly did I perceive the futility of all attempt at cheering a mind from which darkness, as if an inherent positive quality, poured



forth upon all objects of the moral and the physical universe in one unceasing radiation of gloom. (404-05)

- 23 Just as sorrow seemed to pour forth from the things in the House of Usher, “darkness,” according to the narrator, “poured forth” from Roderick “in one unceasing radiation of gloom.” He too exudes sorrow. He too emanates darkness and melancholy. Just as the things that surround him, he permanently transcends his body’s spatial extension and adds tone and color to his surroundings. If the air that he breathes is pestilent, dull, sluggish, stern, and saturated with irredeemable gloom, then it is partly because he has contributed to making it so himself. It is, in other words, partly *his own* affective emissions that fill the air and give it its dark feeling tone. Poe’s story therefore seems to anticipate Teresa Brennan’s claim that “we are not self-contained in terms of our energies” because “energetic affects [...] enter the person, and the person’s affects, in turn, are transmitted to the environment” (6, 8). Such transmissions of affect are described throughout “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Read through the lens of affect theory, Poe’s story thus tells us that the human skin is a permeable membrane or a porous border that is perpetually crossed by affects: from the inside moods unceasingly pour forth, and from the outside affectively charged air continuously flows in. What came first in the case of Roderick—the “terrible influence” of the atmosphere on him (Ahmed’s “outside in” model) or his own terrible contributions to the atmosphere (Ahmed’s “inside out” model)—remains uncertain. The only thing that is certain is that the circulation of negative affect in the House of Usher has turned into a vicious circle.<sup>7</sup>
- 24 Drawing on the notion of climate as synonymous with atmosphere, Sloterdijk has described the circulation of affects as follows: on the one hand we are all “weather-makers” who “continually practice rain- and sun-magic” and on the other hand we all live in “antropic climates” (i.e. climates generated by humans) that “impregnate its inhabitants” (*Sphären II* 148, 143, 149, my trans.). Something very similar is going on in the House of Usher: Roderick continuously practices a kind of rain-magic which contributes to the dark and vaporous climate which then, in turn, impregnates them all and triggers an “iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart” in the narrator. Like all human beings, the characters in Poe’s story are both producers and recipients of the “antropic climates” in which they live. Like all human beings, they participate in a “circuit” of affect that is larger than any one of us, as Butler stressed.
- 25 As participants in the local circuit of affect in and around the House of Usher, the characters are influenced by the saturated air they breathe in a conspicuously *direct* and *unmediated* manner. Poe’s story therefore seems to contradict Ahmed’s claim that “it is the objects of emotion that circulate, rather than emotion as such” (*Cultural Politics* 11). In the House of Usher, affects circulate *as such*. Here, “air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom” emanates from the things themselves, just as darkness pours forth from Roderick as if it was “an inherent positive quality,” and in return the affectively charged atmosphere enters directly into the characters. Within the confines of the spatially delineated atmosphere of the House of Usher, affects do not need objects (or signs) to be transmitted between different elements, and they do not circulate as parts of an “affective economy” in which the circulation of objects generates “affective value” (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 44-49). Instead, they circulate as parts of a coherent *affective ecosystem* in which affects circulate as such.

## The mystery of atmospheric phenomena

- 26 The narrator is generally mystified about the influence this affective ecosystem has on him. How can anything so powerful come out of thin air? What is it exactly that affects him so? Can it be anything other than a figment of his imagination? Already when he first arrived at the House of Usher, he felt confronted with “a mystery all insoluble” for “while, beyond doubt, there *are* combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth” (397-98). Nevertheless, in order to come to grips with his bewilderment, and in an attempt to understand the intangible and illegible power under whose influence he seems to be, this is exactly what he tries to do: to analyze it. He begins by scrutinizing the landscape from which it seems to derive:

I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed tress—with an utter depression of soul. (397)

- 27 Rather than indulging in the overall impression of the scene before him, the narrator goes through its separate elements. The many dashes in the text as well as the conspicuous repetition of “upon [...] upon [...] upon [...] upon” underscores the cut-up process of his investigation and mimics linguistically the step-by-step movements of his analytical gaze. Like a good scientist he is *dissecting* the landscape in order to identify the cause of the “utter depression of soul” which for some inexplicable reason has come over him. But he does not find the cause for his misery. His method is blind to the phenomena he is in search of. For an atmosphere does not reside in any particular detail of a landscape. Atmospheres are *holistic* in character. Otto Baensch has described the holistic and atmospheric character of the mood of a landscape in the following way:

The landscape does not express the mood but has it; the mood surrounds, fills, and permeates it, like the light in which it shines, and like the fragrance that effuses from it; the mood belongs to our *total impression* of the landscape and can only be distinguished as one of its components by a process of abstraction. (2, my trans., emphasis added)

- 28 As Baensch points out, the atmospheric mood of a landscape can only be perceived as a totality. Atmospheres will not appear under an analytical gaze that moves from one detail to the next. The devil may be in the detail, but the atmosphere is not. Applying the wrong method, the narrator thus cannot read the atmosphere, and the mystery remains unresolved.
- 29 However, when it comes to art, the narrator proves to have a better sense of atmospheric phenomena. As he spends more time with Roderick and listens to “the wild improvisations of his speaking guitar,” he notices a “certain singular perversion and amplification” which Roderick adds to “the wild air of the last waltz of Von Weber” (405). This “wild air,” which is perverted and amplified by Roderick, belongs to the narrator’s *total impression* of *Weber’s Last Waltz*, not to any particular detail in it. It is an attempt to verbalize what makes up the overall atmosphere of the musical composition. And like the mood of a landscape, the “wild air” of *Weber’s Last Waltz* cannot be reduced to its elements. As Mikel Dufrenne has emphasized, all artworks have an “atmosphere” or an “affective quality” which *cannot* be decomposed: “We cannot reduce to their element the melancholy grace of Ravel’s *Pavana pour une enfant défunte*, the glory of Franck’s chorales, or the tender sensitivity of Debussy’s *La Fille aux*

*cheveux de lin*" (327). Like the moods of landscapes, the atmospheres of artworks are undividable affective totalities.

- 30 An even more revealing example of the narrator's sensitivity towards the atmospheres of artworks occurs in the succeeding scene in which he inspects some of Roderick's paintings and feels "an intensity of intolerable awe" arising out of them (405). One painting in particular captures his attention, and he goes on to describe it in more detail:

A small picture presented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel, with low walls, smooth, white, and without interruption or device. Certain accessory points of the design served well to convey the idea that this excavation lay at an exceedingly depth below the surface of the earth. No outlet was observed in any portion of its vast extent, and no torch, or other artificial source of light was discernable; yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout, and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendor. (405-06)

- 31 Like the "wild air" of *Weber's Last Waltz*, the "intense rays" of Roderick's painting do not belong to any particular detail in the artwork, and they are certainly not depicted in it; they belong to the *total impression* of it. As the text explicitly states, the "intense rays [...] bathed *the whole* in a ghastly and inappropriate splendor" (emphasis added). This impression of the totality of the painting is, of course, an effect that is produced by its individual parts, but these parts can only produce the total effect by transcending themselves, or by being "more" than they are according to traditional ontology. The parallel to the room in which the narrator first registered the interior atmosphere of the house is hard to miss: just as the things there transcended themselves, added tone and color to the room, and thus generated "an atmosphere of sorrow" (401), the individual elements of Roderick's painting similarly transcend themselves and generate a mysterious "flood of intense rays" that "bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendor." In both cases materials transcend themselves and generate an atmospheric totality or intensity that affects and mystifies the narrator.
- 32 Theodor W. Adorno has defined "the atmosphere of the artwork" as "that whereby the nexus of the artwork's elements points beyond this nexus and allows each individual element to point beyond itself" (*Aesthetic* 369). According to this definition, the artwork is not literally beyond itself, but it does *point* beyond itself, and in that sense it transcends its tangible here and now. However, we might also say that the nexus of the artwork gives each of its elements the ability to radiate or emanate—and that pointing beyond oneself and radiating affect are not mutually exclusive processes. In fact, Adorno sometimes *did* describe artworks as radiating. Thus, he wrote about Kafka's writings that "each sentence is literal and each signifies. The two moments are not merged, as the symbol would have it, but yawn apart and out of the abyss between them blinds the glaring ray of fascination" (*Prisms* 245). Not unlike this "glaring ray of fascination," Poe's narrator perceives "a flood of intense rays" arising out of Roderick's paintings.
- 33 Finally, in one of Roderick's rhapsodies, entitled "The Haunted Palace," the narrator notices "the under or mystic current of its meaning" (406). It seems to point beyond its literal meaning while *simultaneously* giving the impression that a "mystic current" flows beneath its surface and thus gives it an air of enigma. Like the "flood of intense rays" that "rolled" through Roderick's painting, some intensity seems to flow through the rhapsody. To the narrator, the atmospheres of all these artworks are as enigmatic as the atmosphere he first encountered in the landscape surrounding the House of Usher:

just as it was a “mystery” to him that the “combinations of very simple natural objects” could “have the power of thus affecting us” (397-98), so it is equally a mystery that the combinations of tones, colors, or words can generate wild air, intense rays, and mystic currents. In other words, the artworks *participate* in the affective ecosystem of the House of Usher and thus contribute to its mysterious character. What the art interpretation scenes add to the narrator’s education in atmospherology is the insight that atmospheres are not necessarily natural or unintended phenomena but can also be artistically created. In this way, the three art interpretation scenes make up a transition, approximately in the middle of the text, which prepares the narrator (as well as the reader) for Roderick’s strange interpretation of the atmosphere of the House of Usher as artistically created—an interpretation that will be examined in the following section.

## Between science and mysticism

- 34 Succeeding the art interpretation scenes, the narrator describes how suggestions arising from Roderick’s rhapsody “led us into a train of thought wherein there became manifest an opinion of Usher’s” (177), which he goes on to describe in the following manner:

This opinion, in its general form, was that of the sentience of all vegetable things. But, in his disordered fancy, the idea had assumed a more daring character, and trespassed, under certain conditions, upon the kingdom of inorganization. (408)

- 35 If all vegetable, and even inorganic, things have sentience, then they must also be able to *feel* the atmosphere. Roderick thus seems to regard the things around him as being caught up in the same vicious circle as he is, being simultaneously a cause and an effect of the dark and pestilent atmosphere. They are all part of the same affective ecosystem in which negative affects circulate through all elements. And just as he, as a result, is about to wither away, so are they. What made the things sentient, according to Roderick, is explained in the following way:

The conditions of the sentience had been here, he imagined, fulfilled in the method of collocation of these stones—in the order of their arrangement, as well as in that of the many *fungi* which overspread them and of the decayed trees which stood around [...] Its evidence—the evidence of the sentience—was to be seen, he said [...] in the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and the walls. (408)

- 36 Roderick here reads his surrounding environment as an artwork: just as the “nexus” or interconnection of the artwork’s elements generates an atmosphere, a wild air, a flood of rays, or a mystic undercurrent that runs through it, like blood in veins, and gives it a certain vivacity or “life” which is present in each individual element, so the “method of collocation” of the stones of the House of Usher and the “order of their arrangement” as well as that of the trees and *fungi* give it a certain vivacity or “life” which is present in each individual element as sentience. Seeing the House of Usher as an architectural artwork, created by some absent master, Roderick ascribes a kind of mystic life to it—a life that is similar to that of the music, painting, and literature he has produced himself. In a review published less than two years after “The Fall of House of Usher,” Poe similarly compared the literary artwork to a building: “It may be described as a building so dependently constructed, that to change the position of a single brick is to overthrow the entire fabric” (qtd. in May, *Theories* 65). Therefore, the entire story may

also be read as an allegory of reading: just as the narrator enters the mysterious atmosphere of the House of Usher, the reader enters the mysterious atmosphere of the literary construction.<sup>8</sup>

- 37 Whether we interpret the house literally or allegorically, Roderick fails to make a crucial distinction: to him there is no critical difference between the mysterious atmospheres of artworks and a mystic life of things. He therefore slides tacitly from the realm of aesthetic experiences into a mystic worldview where things have sentience and respond to affective atmospheres. This is clearly a fallacy: while things and plants may be said to *give off* affect, they do not *take in* affect. As Ben Anderson puts it, “affective atmospheres” may “occur [...] across human and non-human materialities” (78), but they are not *felt* on both sides of that distinction. Plants neither feel nor grow better because you talk to them. Only humans (and some other animals) *feel* affective atmospheres. By cancelling this distinction, Roderick drifts off into a mysticism that is nourished by reading writings by authors such as Swedenborg, Robert Fludd, Campanella, and others (409).
- 38 The narrator quickly rejects Roderick’s mystic interpretation of the atmosphere as “fancy” (408). As his dissecting analytical gaze has already revealed, he is a child of the Western culture of rationality. From the beginning, he has been skeptical even towards his own perception of the atmosphere of the House of Usher, which he calls “a strange fancy” caused by “the rapid increase of my superstition” (399). After describing it, he is furthermore “shaking off [...] what *must* have been a dream” (400). Nevertheless, it seems undeniable that there *is* something in the air, and his perception of the atmosphere thus gets in conflict with his scientific outlook. He is caught up in this ambivalence throughout the story, and he accordingly describes Roderick’s opinion about the sentience of things as one of his “fantastic yet impressive superstitions” (410).
- 39 Although he cannot subscribe to Roderick’s mysticism, he cannot entirely resist it either, and towards the end of the story he begins to feel *infected* by it, even though Roderick seems increasingly far away:
- There were times, indeed, when I thought his unceasingly agitated mind was laboring with some oppressive secret, to divulge which he struggled for the necessary courage. At times, again, I was obliged to resolve all into the mere inexplicable vagaries of madness, for I beheld him gazing upon vacancy for long hours, in an attitude of the profoundest attention, as if listening to some imaginary sound. It was no wonder that his condition terrified—that it infected me. I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions. (410)
- 40 What the narrator interprets as the burden of “some oppressive secret” or the “vagaries of madness” we might also interpret as an expression of Roderick’s increasingly unveiled mysticism: if there is a secret life of things that is not noticeable by the ordinary use of our senses, then Roderick might, educated by mystical literature, try to use his “sixth sense” to access it or try to “become one” with it through a kind of meditative attention. The scientifically inclined narrator does not notice this, but he does feel “infected” and “terrified” by the “condition” Roderick is in. This affective infection paves the way for an even more dramatic affective *possession*. What first appeared as a “less dramatic” background atmosphere (Ngai 7) thus turns increasingly dramatic.

## Affective possession and the language of superstition

- 41 The narrator's infection can be described by dint of the concept of affective contagion, which has recently been taken up by a number of scholars. Anna Gibbs, for instance, has argued that "bodies can catch feelings as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another, evoking tenderness, inciting shame, igniting rage, exciting fear" (1). According to Ahmed, however, "the concept of affective contagion does tend to treat affect as something that moves smoothly from body to body, sustaining integrity in being passed around" (*Happiness* 39). This is not the case in Poe's story. When the narrator "catches" Roderick's affective emissions, he does not simply reduplicate his feelings one-to-one. They do not sustain their integrity. At this moment, Roderick is far from being in a state of terror, but his "condition" nonetheless terrifies the narrator. It may do so because he fears that Roderick is turning insane or because he feels that his "impressive superstitions" are infecting him like a virus. In any case, he does not reduplicate Roderick's feelings one-to-one. In the House of Usher affective contagion does not imply that human beings simply *take over* the feelings of others but rather that they *take in* their affective emissions.
- 42 In the narrator's case, the affective infection seems to weaken his power of resistance significantly. While he has hitherto been able to keep some distance to the influence of the atmosphere, the infection makes him increasingly defenseless and vulnerable. What was initially felt as "an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart" now turns into a feeling of being outright possessed by a foreign force:
- Sleep came not near my couch—while the hours waned and waned away. I struggled to reason off the nervousness which had dominion over me [...]. But my efforts were fruitless. An irrepressible tremor gradually pervaded my frame; and, at length, there sat upon my very heart an incubus of utterly causeless alarm. (411)
- 43 By referring to an incubus, which is a kind of demon, the narrator not only evokes the then famous painting by Henry Fuseli entitled *The Nightmare* (1781), but also associates his condition with that of one who is possessed by a demon.<sup>9</sup> He thus refers to the world before "the disenchantment of the world," as Max Weber has famously called it, that is, to a pre-modern world filled with spirits, demons, and other "mysterious incalculable forces" (155, 139). This was a world that fascinated many romantic and gothic writers and also inspired Fuseli's painting, but it was also a world that was imbued with magic and superstition. It was, for instance, common in the centuries preceding the Enlightenment to believe that demons could actually possess human beings—a belief which lay behind many witch trials insofar as witches were considered to be either possessed by, or have some other, often sexual, intercourse with demons (Muchembled 52f.).
- 44 The implications of the image of the demonic incubus can be illuminated by a distinction introduced by Charles Taylor: drawing on Weber, he has distinguished between the "buffered" self of the modern disenchanting world and the "porous" self of the earlier enchanted world (37-38). While our modern "buffered" self is viewed as a relatively sealed off, self-contained, and autonomous self, the earlier "porous" self was felt to be open to all kinds of invasive forces: "The porous self is vulnerable, to spirits, demons, cosmic forces" and its "porousness is most clearly in evidence in the fear of possession" (35, 38). After his infection, the narrator of Poe's story is in a similar situation: he too feels porous and vulnerable. He feels fear-ridden and hag-ridden by



some alien force sitting upon his “very heart,” and the pre-modern way of interpreting such feelings offers him a palpable image to understand and express his feelings, namely the image of an incubus or demonic spirit, which, not unlike a possessing affect, is a being that resides in the air but nonetheless can influence (literally: flow into) people and take over their normal self.

- 45 Thus, if affective *contagion* causes an either pleasant or unpleasant feeling of being infused and permeated with another person’s affect, the affective *possession*, which the narrator perceives, causes an unsettling and frightening feeling of being taken over and losing all control. In order to express his feeling of being possessed, the narrator draws on the imagery of the “fantastic yet impressive superstitions” that prevailed in the enchanted world, that is, before the Enlightenment. To him, this seems to be the only imagery *available* for understanding and expressing the unsettling feeling of being taken over by some exterior affective force. In other words, even the analytically and scientifically inclined narrator has to resort to the old language of spirits and demons in order to explain (even to himself) how the atmosphere affects him. He may reject Roderick’s mysticism as superstitious, then, but his own fantasy is equally permeated by the imagery of superstition.
- 46 With the rejection of the doctrines of demonology in the course of the Enlightenment, perceptions of air-borne forces were *generally* rejected as figments of the imagination—and not reinterpreted as affective atmospheres. As the notion of the buffered, self-contained, autonomous individual gained in strength during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, it not only liberated new generations from the fear of being possessed by demons but also occasioned a *repression* or *oblivion* of the experiences of affective atmospheres, which—although misinterpreted—were still present in the earlier ideas about spirits and demons.<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, hardly any new imagery and new conceptualizations were developed in order to understand and express perceptions of affective atmospheres by means of a disenchanting vocabulary. As a result, the narrator visualizes and verbalizes his feeling of being taken over by an affect that is communicated from elsewhere by means of a language from a superstitious past.

## A sundial and a resource

- 47 Towards the end of the story, the discrepancy between Roderick’s mystic or imaginative worldview and the narrator’s more scientific or rationalistic outlook comes to the fore as the atmosphere suddenly seems to turn visible:
- The under surfaces of the huge masses of agitated vapor, as well as all terrestrial objects immediately around us, were glowing in the unnatural light of a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which hung about and enshrouded the mansion. “You must not—you shall not behold this!” said I, shudderingly, to Usher, as I led him, with a gentle violence, from the window to a seat. “These appearances, which bewilder you, are merely electrical phenomena not uncommon—or it may be that they have their ghastly origin in the rank miasma of the tarn.” (412-13)
- 48 Two models of explanation are in conflict here: According to Roderick, “the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and the walls” is “the evidence of the sentience” of things (as quoted above), and if this atmosphere now turns “distinctly visible” his fanciful theory seems to be confirmed. According to the narrator, however, there must be some rational, scientific explanation, be it that the



atmosphere is some “electrical phenomena” or be it that it is a result of the “rank miasma of the tarn.”<sup>11</sup> One of these explanations may in fact be true in this particular case, but at the same time, they also reveal the problematic character of the narrator’s attitude towards the atmospheric phenomena he perceives. Although he does not always succeed in his endeavor, he generally tries to rationalize or explain away *all* atmospheric phenomena: he either reduces the atmosphere in which he moves to a purely physical phenomenon that can be explained away by the already existing means of science, or he reduces it to a product of his imagination. He repeatedly rejects his own bodily perceptions of the atmosphere as dream, fancy, or superstition, and when the influence of the atmosphere grows too strong to be denied, he can only picture it by means of the outdated imagery of spirits and demons, which only increases his suspicion.

- 49 If we regard Poe’s story as a part of a larger historical context, we may observe that the discrepancy between the two main characters of the story mirrors a contemporaneous discrepancy between two contrasting worldviews, or two conflicting frames of interpretation, prevalent in Poe’s time. On the one hand, the heritage from the Enlightenment is clearly present in the narrator’s suspicious, analytic, and scientific attitude: within his frame of interpretation, even his own bodily perceptions of affective atmospheres are stubbornly rejected as figments of the imagination for which there must be some better, some rational, explanation. On the other hand, contemporaneous currents of Romanticism are obviously present in Roderick’s imaginative, re-enchanting, and mystical attitude: within his frame of interpretation, bodily perceptions of affective atmospheres are naively taken to be an evidence of a mysterious life of things.<sup>12</sup> With the narrative elaboration of this discrepancy, Poe’s story acts out his contemporaries’ inability to understand the nature of the affective atmospheres in which they live. Having at their disposal only the poor choice between a narrow-minded culture of rationality and an unchecked culture of fantasy, they either deny the very existence of affective atmospheres or misinterpret them as indications of a mystic life of things.
- 50 In this way, Poe’s story simultaneously reflects and criticizes the contemporaneous culture from which it only *seems* to be detached by taking place in a distant and apparently secluded mansion far away from civilization. The fact that the story does not represent contemporary society in a *realist* manner does not mean that it is disconnected from it. On the contrary, the elaboration of two antagonistic frames of interpretation, embodied in the story’s two main characters, narrativizes a larger intellectual antagonism between two prevailing worldviews and reveals the blindness inherent in that antagonism. In spite of its apparent detachedness, Poe’s story is what Adorno once called “a philosophical sundial telling the time of history” (*Notes* 46): on its very surface, that is, in the collision between the rationalist narrator and the imaginative Roderick, we can read the historical moment. Regarded as a historico-philosophical sundial, Poe’s story shows us that contemporary culture was split in two conflicting worldviews, neither of which was able to comprehend the nature of their atmospheric conditions.
- 51 Reading Poe’s story like this contradicts the established way of interpreting the short story’s relation to its sociocultural context. Normally, short stories are considered to be extraordinarily detached from society. Frank O’Connor has thus argued that “the short story remains by its very nature remote from the community—romantic,

individualistic, and intransigent” (21). On a more general level, Charles E. May has noted that “the form’s disengagement from a contemporary cultural background has, much to chagrin of social critics, always been a perceived characteristic of the genre” (175). I believe, however, that we must be careful not to interpret short stories’ seeming “disengagement” from their “cultural background” naively. As “The Fall of the House of Usher” demonstrates, even short stories that seem to have little to do with their sociocultural context may actually be scenes upon which significant contemporaneous antagonisms are acted out and revealed.<sup>13</sup>

- 52 Reading “The Fall of the House of Usher” as a historico-philosophical sundial does not imply, however, that the story is *only* a critique of contemporary blindness towards our atmospheric conditions. For Poe’s short story is *also* an instructive example of the fact that literary works have often examined the characteristics of affective atmospheres, considered how they are generated and circulated, and narrativized the ways in which they affect the people they envelope and assail. Poe’s story thus indicates that literature, and perhaps short stories in particular, may be one of the best *resources* we have for developing an informed, theoretical atmospherology. For as Poe’s story shows, literary works can not only inform us about the imagery and vocabulary available for understanding and expressing perceptions of enveloping, assaulting, or possessing atmospheres at different historical periods; they can also contribute to the ongoing theorization of affects and atmospheres. Stories such as “The Fall of the House of Usher” contain numerous meticulous descriptions of anything from affectively saturated situations to the aesthetic atmospheres of artworks, and they abound in narratives informing us about the ways in which our affective emissions contribute to the affective ecosystems in which we live. If we lack a vocabulary for describing, and reflecting on, affects and atmospheres, as Sloterdijk and Massumi have argued (as quoted above), then literature seems to be a good place to find inspiration for developing such a vocabulary. Examining literary works can help us develop new concepts (such as affective emission, affective ecosystem, or affective possession) and refine already existing ones (such as affective economy or affective contagion), which is what I have tried to do in this essay.

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## NOTES

1. According to James Nagel, this applies to the short story cycle as well: "Although the cycle can be used for the *Bildungsroman* [...] just as frequently it lends itself to the exploration of a family or a community [...] rather than the internal life of a single individual" (16-17).
2. One of the first to thoroughly investigate the atmosphere in "The Fall of the House of Usher" was Leo Spitzer, who linked Poe's story to "ideas concerning *milieu* and *ambiance* which were being formulated at his time" (359). I. A. Walker has since linked it to contemporary theories of "Febrile Miasma," that is, to the gases from stagnant water or decayed matter (588). Gerhard Hoffmann has interpreted it as a literary description of a "mood-invested space" (2). And more recently Matthew A. Taylor has interpreted the story's atmosphere as a force "which might actually reside in things and then possess persons" which means it undermines the idea of our "putatively autonomous self" (214). Inspired by affect theory, but without examining "The Fall of the House of Usher," Jonathan Elmer has argued that Poe's writing opposes the sentimental novels of his time by producing an "ambiguous affect" in the reader (108). Also inspired by affect theory, Adam Frank has argued that Poe's stories "produce 'Passions' in the reader" in accordance with his "well-known poetics of effect" (51).
3. As Adam Frank has recently pointed out, this is typical to Poe's stories in which "the persons [...] tend to have nothing readers skilled by realist writing would recognize as three-dimensional or well-rounded characters, as Poe's writing is not interested in delineating idiosyncratic surface features to index buried or ingrained character traits" (54).
4. Peter Sloterdijk has argued that our atmospheric conditions have been increasingly foregrounded during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not primarily due to new theories but due to technical "air

design” and other kinds of practical “explication of atmospheres” (*Sphären III* 177, 126, my trans.). As prominent examples, Sloterdijk describes the use of gas during WWI and the development of air-conditioned indoor environments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (*Sphären III* 89-260).

5. Matthew A. Taylor has argued that “the house’s ‘atmosphere’ quickly becomes the narrator’s own” (214). I believe, however, that it is more accurate to talk about the narrator’s mimetic response to the atmosphere than to assume a one-to-one reduplication of the atmosphere in him since he is not fully determined by the atmosphere but also brings his own skeptical-analytical mood.

6. The book in which Hermann Schmitz first developed his theory of bodily perceptible atmospheres is *Der Gefühlsraum* (1969) which was published as volume 3.2 in his *System der Philosophie* (1964-1980).

7. Leo Spitzer has claimed that Poe’s story was “determinism made poetic, ‘atmospheric,’” i.e. that it was a “poetic expression” of the idea that the atmosphere determines its inhabitants (360). He thus stresses what Ahmed has called the “outside in” model in Poe’s story while neglecting the equally present “inside out” model.

8. Without unfolding its implications, Charles E. May has similarly suggested that the opening scene “simulates the process by which the reader enters into the patterned reality of the artwork [...] what he perceived is what short story writers such as Eudora Welty and Elizabeth Bowen have called the ‘atmosphere’ of the story” (*Poe* 104).

9. The sexual connotations often associated with incubi are not present here. According to Robert Muchembled, incubi were thought, especially from the twelfth century onwards, “to seduce human beings, usually by appearing to them in the form of a handsome young man or beautiful young woman” (29).

10. Teresa Brennan has similarly argued that “after the seventeenth century the concept of transmission lost ground” and that “the earliest Western records of the transmission of affect [...] make them demons or deadly sins” (17, 97).

11. I. A. Walker has argued that Poe was familiar with theories about the influence of gases from stagnant water and decayed matter and that the mental state of the characters can be “traced back to the stagnant tarn and its miasmatic ‘atmosphere’” (589). This is, I believe, a reductionist interpretation which reduces the many sources of the atmosphere to one single, physical source that can be explained by the means of traditional science.

12. John H. Timmerman has similarly proposed “to relate the story to a larger conflict that Poe had been struggling with for some time: how to balance Romantic passion with Enlightenment order” (238). However, whereas Timmerman argues that “Poe sought nothing less than the delicate symbiosis between the two” (239), I argue that he sought primarily to demonstrate how the split between the two resulted in a particular blindness towards affective atmospheres.

13. Similarly, though without elaborating it, Jonathan Elmer notes that “Poe’s ostensibly psychological tales [...] are in fact profoundly responsive to social reality” (20).

## ABSTRACTS

Les intensités émotionnelles ne relèvent pas uniquement de la « vie intérieure » des individus ; elles peuvent également se trouver, d’après le dicton, « dans l’air », c’est-à-dire en tant qu’atmosphères partagées qui nous enveloppent, nous pénètrent et nous affectent. De telles atmosphères affectives sont omniprésentes dans la nouvelle « La Chute de la Maison Usher »

d'Edgar Allan Poe (1839). La Maison Usher est non seulement explicitement voilée d'une atmosphère qui lui est propre ; l'intrigue tout entière est centrée sur la manière dont cette atmosphère affecte les personnages de l'histoire et la manière dont ils interprètent son influence. Par conséquent, les travaux récents sur l'affect et l'atmosphère dans les études littéraires et culturelles sont extraordinairement productifs pour une analyse de la nouvelle de Poe : d'une part, ils peuvent nous aider à comprendre les nombreuses descriptions des atmosphères affectives, et d'autre part, le texte peut nous aider à traiter des théories existantes et développer de nouveaux concepts afin de contribuer à la théorisation en cours sur l'affect et l'atmosphère. S'appuyant sur un certain nombre d'analyses approfondies de Poe, cet essai propose en conséquence de nouveaux concepts tels que l'émission affective, l'écosystème affectif et la possession affective. En outre, il s'agira d'avancer que la nouvelle de Poe révèle la raison pour laquelle ses contemporains furent incapables de comprendre la nature de leurs conditions atmosphériques.

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