

Depicting Berlin's Atmospheres: Phenomenographic Sketches

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Introduction

- 1 Berlin, summer 2017. As we ponder together a publication project about atmospheres, we start questioning our everyday situations and experiences through this specific concept. Some readings about Berlin's history also change our impressions about the city around us. Out of our fragmentary observations, we work towards composing a bigger picture. What sorts of atmosphere may be considered as characteristic of contemporary Berlin's social life? Looking back on the notes and drawings we produced that summer, we focus in this paper on four different scenes, in order to engage with "phenomenography" as a practice necessarily entangled in geographical and historical contexts, existential points of view and idiomatic "graphic" devices.
- 2 "How does it feel to be here?", echoes Erving Goffman's "What is it that's going on here?" ("What's going on here?"), phrased in the opening pages of *Frame Analysis* (1974). With that somewhat impressionistic and seemingly innocuous question, anthropologist Albert Piette introduces himself as a "phenomenographer" (Piette, 2009; 2016). Trying to turn it into a method guiding both observation and the effort to describe, one sees, however, that the question involves first and foremost, more than mere "feelings" and, underlying them, body sensitivity, as well as the numerous affects and emotions that surround us and others. Since most of these affective qualities, present in a "climatic" way in every situation, remain below the threshold of conscious perception, how could one hope to grasp them as "phenomena"? The notion of atmosphere seems a promising resource to answer that question. As part and parcel of daily routines and habits, "ordinary affects" (Stewart 2007) and daily atmospheres are actually felt but unnoticed. In this regard, the work of ethnographers in situation is not so far off from that of the artist or writer (see also de Certeau 1984; Frers & Meier 2007).

Scholars are meeting the challenge of elaborating their gaze and implementing specific means to report on their own sensorial experiences without neglecting their tactile, sonic, olfactive, affective and emotional dimensions – those aspects which usually escape conscious thoughts and reflexivity (see the seminal works of Howes, 2003; Ingold, 2011; Laplantine, 2015).

- 3 In the light of social psychology, of philosophical pragmatism (from William James, John Dewey and George Herbert Mead to Richard Shusterman), as well as Maurice Merleau-Ponty's or Alfred Schütz's phenomenology, many social scientists have explored the emotional texture of social life (see for instance Katz, 1999; Cefai, 2010). Far from excluding the ability to think and act in situations, emotions lay at the heart of our practical attitudes: they guide our perceptions and "transactions" with perceived environments, since they contribute to adjusting our conduct and organizing our experiences. As we navigate or inhabit the public spaces and places of a large city, for instance, sensitivity and affects guide our most basic perceptions and categorizations (Lofland, 1999; Bégout, 2005; Frers & Meier, 2007). This phenomenological process occurs as an ongoing series of multiple tacit adjustments and accommodations (or "attunements", see Stewart, 2011), more likely than through conscious perceptions. Unlike enjoying a panoramic sight of a city, experiencing an atmosphere in an urban public space remains open-ended, ambivalent and gradual. Ordinary atmospheres may become encompassing and captivate us for a few minutes, but as a rule, they often lack unity and coherence. A support and guide to our habits, they also make up the core of our collective attachments and personal choices, maintaining a porous relationship with our most thoughtful deliberations about where to go, where to live, with whom to hang up. Such pervasive qualities explain why the term *envelopment* (Frers, 2007) appears so relevant to describe atmospheres. Although urban atmospheres have led to specific studies (Thibaud, 2002; Albertsen, 2019), they remain a disputed topic for geographers (Gandy, 2017). The discussion also attracts some philosophers who explore the conceptual connections between aesthetics and political theory (Shusterman, 2019). This broad context calls for situated case studies to test the concept on the field, including phenomenographic approaches to urban situations and to collective behavior in urban public places.
- 4 In cities as elsewhere, "what it feels like to be there" depends to a large extent on who we are and where we speak from. Using drawing and writing as ethnographic devices, we attempt to provide the reader with a trace of what happened at specific times and places. This includes the line of Indian ink, the hues of the watercolors, as well as on-site conversations triggered by details of what caught our attention and were thus injected into our experience. Chunks of local and national history, economics and urban theory impregnated our perceptions by shifting our focus to other sensory dimensions. These conversational and graphical back and forth processes have been weaving the fabric of stories that encapsulate those phenomena. Moreover, we chose here to reflect on casual situations connected with that status and its ordinary contexts, instead of specifically exploring other social worlds. Other perspectives of fieldwork in Berlin would throw another light upon the vast diversity of situations and atmospheres which one can explore throughout the German capital.
- 5 The paper relies on Maxime's ethnographic drawings. Drawing refers to perspective and imaging processes – both access to reality and the transmission of a gaze in a situation (Taussig, 2011; McGuirk, 2013; Sage, 2018). The resulting picture is rooted in a

shared and vivid bodily experience that it may communicate in a specific way to the viewer: neither sociological methods nor literary descriptions can exhaust this way of thinking through images. The drawing process itself allows the artist to perceive differently. Indeed, through the action of drawing, the act of looking at something through the filter of one's expectations opens up to an act of "seeing", as Andrew Causey puts it (2016). The composition work can be seen as similar to that done in the written fieldnotes – it constitutes a processual synthesis that makes us see reality through definite "situations", defined by their pervasive qualities within the unified perception field of the "experience" of the subject (Dewey, 1980, chap. 3). This is why drawing has also been described as an "attunement" (Sage, 2018). It engages the observer in a sensory and motor action, interweaving the mind and the situation through the action of the pencil on the sketchbook (Mc Guirk, 2014). As John Berger noted, drawings and sketches, more than paintings or photographs, give access to the gesture and the embodied perspective of the artists (1953). Attitudes and actions, but also the surrounding setting and the enveloping atmospheres, are captured with different levels of detail, from simple presence to more elaborate gestures. On-the-spot drawing is not restricted to capturing scenes according to immediate vision: it combines an evocation of atmospheres with a denotation work. As the situation is concentrated both in its spatial and temporal dimensions, the resulting drawing is both a field note and an image that can support the presentation of the ethnographic experience. It is a mnemonic tool for capturing atmosphere that allows descriptions to be reworked and textually augmented with additional layers of references to the history and geography of the place: it is a prominent support for telling stories.

Sitting on the street in Weser: the "safe space" of the group of peers

Illustration 1: Weserstrasse, 07/19/2017. Youth group in front of Späti International. Indian ink and watercolours on cardboard



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- 6 “Späti International” is a store for beverages, tobacco, and snacks. It is located in Weserstrasse, a street in the Neukölln district that leads to Hermannplatz. This place, or more precisely its immediate surroundings, has become a regular meeting point for Jan, Maxime’s flatmate, and his friends. Until some ten years ago, the northern district of the municipality of Neukölln alongside the former East-West border and the Wall remained impregnated with the atmosphere of the 1990s. A historic workers’ district, Neukölln has hosted, and continues to host, various phases of immigration until the very last years (now mainly from the Middle East and in particular Syria). It was home to a difficult mix of old generations of immigrants from before 1990 and more recent immigration, mostly from Turkey and the Middle East (Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt). Some streets were less safe than others, and the reputation of the neighbourhood on a citywide scale remained quite low: it was associated, rightly or wrongly, with a higher poverty rate than the rest of Berlin and a higher frequency of crime cases. Such insecurity was denounced, and commonly correlated with the high rates of drug abuse in the district.
- 7 Times have changed. The Weserstrasse and its surrounding blocks have become a hip place in Berlin (so much to attract the attention of the *New York Times*, *The Guardian* or *Le Monde*). Vintage boutiques, trendy bars and fusion gourmet restaurants, as well as coworking areas, are gradually replacing the dark “pubs” (*Kneipe*, old neighborhood working-class bars), local shops and artists’ studios that used to populate part of the ground floor. Most residents of those “old” buildings have changed (*Altbau* refers to houses dating back from before the Second World War). The calm of the low-traffic streets within the blocks, the relative geographical centrality of the neighborhood and the proximity of the canal (*Landwehrkanal*) all make it a pleasant area to live in. It has

become extremely difficult to get an apartment there. Rents have increased to get as high as in Mitte or in some bourgeois districts in the west of the city.

- 8 Jan had a smile on his face when he warned Maxime that he and his friends would meet at “Späti International”. Indeed, it may seem slightly out of place for a young man of his social class to meet around a “Kiosk”. These local convenience stores are omnipresent in Berlin: the city counts about a thousand of them. They are open until very late at night – that is why people call them *Späti*, an affective diminutive of *Spätkauf* [“late purchase”] – and they are mostly run by Turks or Middle Easterners. The plan of Jan’s friends is to drink beers purchased at the store on the spot, on the pavement of the sidewalk. When we arrive, at around 9 pm, the group has already settled down. Night falls and the greenish lamps of the small shop window seem to attract young passers-by, literally “lighting up an atmosphere” (Bille, 2014); they create a little island of shared presence over the street and the neighboring corner. The flow is almost continuous at the checkout, but there is no waiting or overcrowding. People meet there before going elsewhere together. The street is not crowded: with almost no traffic, the scene is rather quiet. Around the next corner, twenty metres away beyond a darker section of the block, another kiosk and two restaurants are busy as well. Jan’s group is the largest that evening, with about fifteen people, all in their mid- or late twenties.
- 9 What is the specific atmosphere here? At first sight, the light-heartedness and casualness would strike any observer used to other European metropolises – starting with Paris and London. Here, there seems to be no troublemaker, no discrimination by wallet or credit card. Neukölln’s public spaces on summer evenings seem available to these uses or ways of occupying the premises, without distinction or perceptible discrimination. The core members of Jan’s little crew have known each other since childhood. They attended the same high school in a well-off residential area in the green suburbs of Munich. They moved here to study in early 2010s, just before the rental market exploded. They hang out almost exclusively and always go out together. Architects, orchestral musicians, scriptwriters, journalists, some students, other young professionals... most of them completed their master’s degrees from prestigious universities. If the members of the group seem to be indefatigably committed to each other, this does not isolate them from the outside world. Tonight, the small group consists of about half of friends of friends. This blending adds the spice of new opportunities for new acquaintances, professional, friendly or romantic experiences. The excitement of new encounters and flirtation are heightened by alcohol, as the evening progresses – the supposed sexual license of Berliners contributes to the city’s reputation and legend. At 2 am, we are still there, talking about all sorts of things.
- 10 The current moment in the life of the neighbourhood seems inextricably linked to the atmosphere of this particular evening, which is in fact hard to access if you do not belong to the small social group. A stable nucleus carries with it its social customs and its ways of behaving, a shared trust that makes it what Jan calls his “safe zone”. Among the shared convictions, they enjoy a certain independence from prevailing social norms, a critical spirit inspired by local theatre traditions. Most of them frequent the Volksbühne, a famous left-wing theatre and, at the time, still popular remanence of East-Berlin. The desire to display their offbeat mindset is in line with their relative lack of resources. Their designated playgrounds are interstitial spaces: smoky bars and clubs that are still obsolete and precarious – or skillfully decorated according to that style

with worn-out sofas and scraped wallpapers. As soon as the weather allows it, a good option to spend the evening while being faithful to these criteria is to sit on the street, on a bridge or by the canal. And if possible near a spot where you can buy drinks at a price that suits student budgets – a common practice throughout Europe and beyond, from the Plaça del Sol in Madrid or the Pratello district in Bologna to the “Minibar” scene in Ankara (Altay 2007). The exact location, the spatial configuration and the local history are irrelevant: it is the openness of the situation, both economic, social and aesthetic, that allows this temporary envelopment (Frers 2007) to pop up in this specific place. The recurrence of similar ephemeral uses gradually transforms the neighbourhood by making it more desirable to wealthier peers, while excluding or pushing back further, in fact, other possible uses. They will irremediably change the pre-existing balance by importing criteria of economic and symbolic value based, implicitly, on the partitioning and segmentation of urban space. At an intuitive level, this situation thus “suggests” a possible fragmentation: an atmospheric yet real division of space. It is more symbolic than strictly physical, more implicit than consciously performed, but the division line remains clearly perceptible to all. The atmosphere of “inclusiveness”, tightening the members of the small group together, is tacitly embedded in their collective behavior, in their bodily attitudes, their ways of talking and of sitting on the floor late at night, making it possible to occupy the street as a mere extension of their domestic space. This recalls the “tactical” production of social space that de Certeau has described, acknowledging the everyday users of the urban setting an active role in modeling their environment, “turning it to their advantage” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 30).

- 11 The picture that Maxime has drawn on the spot includes multiple perceptible clues on which our ordinary categorizations of the social life of a place are grounded: the number of people present, the qualities of interactions and exchanges of glances, the languages spoken, the acoustic volume and the content of the conversations, the duration of the observed sequence, the air temperature, the clothing, the scale and outline of the built forms, and, perhaps most importantly, the light intensity. The central character, an orange-colored-haired young woman who goes by the nickname “Feli”, has obtained from Maxime some art supplies and started painting a portrait: the impact of the observer is depicted here, his activities entangled with those of the observed.

Jazz concert at the Donau115 club

Illustration 2: Donaustrasse 115, 07/25/2017, 21:30. First set of the Stemeseder-Andrsziewski-Banner Trio. Indian ink and watercolours on paper



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- 12 A friend is in town, less familiar with the city than we are. Choosing the right venue for the evening is in itself a demonstration of taste and skills for scouting the best atmosphere, most suitable for the moment. We agree on meeting at Maxime's favorite jazz club: the Donau115. This tiny local, a former neighbourhood shop with a typical store window, opens four to five days a week. The concerts are accessible for a very low financial contribution – a handwritten sign mentions that everyone is invited to pay between five and ten euros. The drinks do not cost more than elsewhere (€ 2,50 a beer). With a surface area of just 25 square metres, most instruments do not require amplification. At 8:30 p.m., when the concert begins, latecomers often have to make do with a standing spot by the door. The bravest will sit on the carpet in front of the drum set or right behind the pianist's stool. Because of the crowd, the bar is impossible to reach after the beginning of the concert. In these promiscuous conditions, the smoking ban that remains in effect until the end of the session is a blessing.
- 13 The music has already started when we walk in the venue. The musicians stand close to each other. The double bass player always stands in the corner. From the opposite angle, where Maxime finds a good position to draw, sitting on a kind of small platform that allows him to slightly overlook the stage, the sound of the bass is round and full. The intimate feature of the atmosphere of the place is above all due to the physical proximity between the musicians and the spectators, and the limited capacity of the venue. The pianist's performances are stunning; the musical level is often very high since the musicians are either professionals or music students from the best schools in town. The attractiveness of the district has helped to make this small club in northern Neukölln a beacon for the new generation of jazz musicians. It has been endorsed by

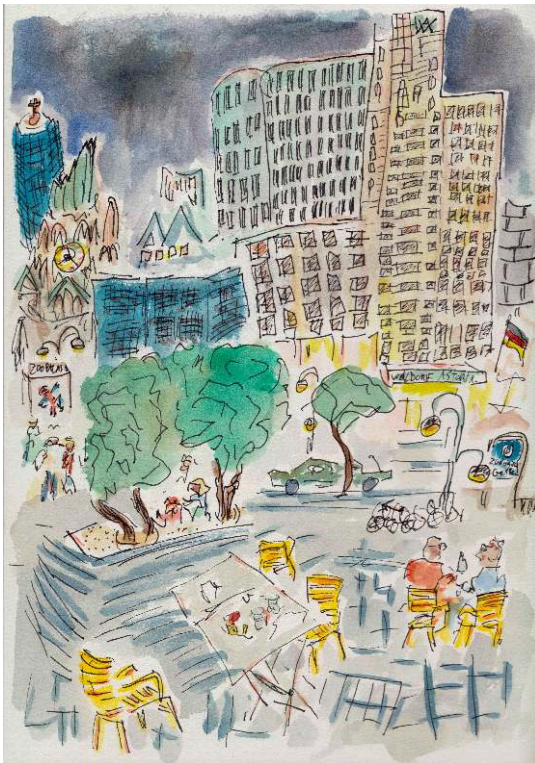
the specialist press, even at the international level (McCulloch, 2016). Young student musicians and independent professionals, picked by demanding programmers, tend to constitute a select audience, cultivating a certain awareness of its own distinction, through the intensive use of social networks. However, the accessibility of the place and the absence of a formal admission fee contribute to maintaining an atmosphere very different from what one could usually associate with a jazz club. As in the previous case at nearby Weserstrasse, one may question the trend towards social homogeneity of the public – unified by higher education and the common use of English – increasing the distance from the rest of the neighbourhood. Nevertheless, a certain generational mingling is to be noted and during the evenings we attended, what struck us above all was the quality of listening and concentration of this audience throughout the entire concert.

- 14 A jug circulates between two songs, to collect the contributions of the spectators. At the end of the concert, part of the audience goes out to smoke or get some fresh air on the “terrace” – a portion of the sidewalk of this cobbled, sparsely trafficked residential street. The light of a lamp post percolates through the trees. The conversations are going well, the musicians seem satisfied, they mingle with the small crowd that welcomes them with an air of complicity and the appropriate deference. Inside the club, in which some people now light up cigarettes, a small group of about ten friends, close acquaintances of the trio that just played. Caught up in a conversation, Maxime joins what happens to be an impromptu birthday party and gets to meet Laura, the pianist’s girlfriend, a young woman that we can see leaning at the bar on the picture. They find out during the conversation that she is working with a colleague of his from university. They will meet again randomly several times at Donau 115.
- 15 What is the main atmospheric feature of this situation? First of all, a particularly intense experience of shared listening pleasure. The limited space compels bodies and minds to be very attentive and careful: it is both easier to concentrate on music and more difficult to ignore your neighbours. As in other more formal acoustic music venues, the slightest deviation is perceived by the entire audience, but also by the musicians. If you do not have the chance to be elbowed down at the bar when the concert starts, you can’t order a drink for the duration of the set. The same goes for the toilets: you will have to wait for the break. The fluxes are therefore particularly sharp between the audience and the artists – the applause moments are part of the show and the audience knows that they have the lead at that moment of the game. This continuous interaction is facilitated by the constraint of the space itself, which is more related to a domestic scale than to the one commonly associated with entertainment venues. The phenomenon reaches what the theatre performance specialist Erika Fischer-Lichte has termed “radical presence”: the performance is constituted by this intense interaction between the public and the artists, which gives the musical moment a particular texture (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 108).
- 16 Despite the relatively easy access to this venue, the audience is not very diverse and in particular, mostly constituted by the more recent inhabitants of the district. This atmosphere that seems relaxed and informal, is actually not that loose; people share of minimum necessary minimum codes, sitting silently and side-by-side in a confined space to listen to an hour of music, without dancing or participating except as a spectator-listener. These attitudes are highly coded, they differ from venue to venue, and they relate to the quality of the musical experience (Burland & Pitts, 2012).

- 17 At Donau115, the island or “bubble” atmosphere was precisely what made the venue a success. Its rarity is a remarkable phenomenon – and has even been given its international distinction by critics. Like so many others, the club has been nevertheless a victim of its own popularity; in an attempt to expand it, the owners broke down a wall and gained twenty additional square metres. The objective was twofold: to allow more people to enter, and to provide the club a bar that would remain accessible during the concerts – also facilitating the entry and exit of spectators. In this new configuration, sound amplification has become necessary. The distinctive atmosphere of the club suffered greatly from this “opening” of its small room and the lifting of the constraints that gave it all its charm. Indeed, the simple and remarkable acoustics of the place has given way to a more delicate situation, which the club’s modest resources have not allowed it to master by calling on the services of acousticians and sound technicians. With the increased complexity of the space, corners favour chatter during sessions. The bar’s new location and wider footprint make it a central element in the space, which has a significant impact on the attention and sound quality of the music. After several rather disappointing evenings, we did not return to Donau115 again.

Mid-evening derive at Bahnhof Zoo

Illustration 3: Zoologischer Garten, around 10 pm, 07/21/2017. Indian ink and watercolours on paper



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- 18 Another evening in July. We cycled to the Charlottenburg district, almost ten kilometres west from our homes, to the end-of-year party of the local art school – the Universität der Künste. Our friend Jan and his gang are excited: the institution enjoys

great prestige among young Berliners aspiring to an artistic career. Earlier that evening, Jan was pessimistic: it would likely be impossible to get in at this time. While we lock our bicycles in front of the building, we are already turning down the challenge. We are not disposed to endure the 500 metres long waiting line.

- 19 Looking for an alternative place to spend the evening, we start walking in a spontaneous “*derive*”. We head towards Bahnhof Zoo, the train station which is a stone’s throw from the zoological garden. Dumbfounded, we hesitate for a brief moment in front of the Zoopalast cinema. Shall we give a chance to Luc Besson’s latest blockbuster? Its flashy posters illuminate the street, competing with those of Spiderman’s latest opus... The appalling reviews quickly consulted online prevent us from doing so.
- 20 We sit down for a few minutes at a terrace for a drink, just before closing time. Contrasting with our own habits in more familiar parts of the city, the place feels soulless to us in every way: the layout of the wide street plunged in neon-lights, the rough materials and severe textures of the anonymous glassy architecture, the views onto the reasonably noisy traffic, even the attitudes, the clothes and the gestures of passers-by. The poor vegetation, shrivelled shrubs, is forced into fixed bins, embedded in the ground without offering any good option to seat to anyone who would or could not choose to consume and pay. Narrow yellow plastic roto-moulded sets of tables and chairs are placed on smooth concrete slabs near wide, sparsely used sidewalks, for the users of a small coffee shop. Maxime takes out his drawing gear and starts composing the image in pencil, while Olivier starts taking notes and photographs, unconvinced by this “urban”-themed setting, intended in a very straightforward way for a mainstream approach of global tourism. The luxury hotels across the street are subsidiaries of major international franchises; they duplicate mass-produced establishments which offer exactly the same services in Dubai, Singapore, Vancouver or Atlanta. Those tall buildings vaguely mimic the architecture of American golden age skyscrapers – minus the crowd, the energy and the hectic pace of urban life. No residential buildings are in sight, only offices, hotels, commercial banners. If “the inhabitants of the city are also, always, producers of its atmosphere” (Böhme, 2017, p. 295-296), where have they gone?
- 21 Not far from there, towards the Kurfürstendamm, which tourist guides pretend to compare to the Champs-Élysées, there is a curious vestige: a ruin-monument. The Memorial Church, the *Gedächtniskirche* built under William II and destroyed by the bombings in 1943, was only half rebuilt on purpose. It became later on an icon of the economic vitality of West Berlin, a “free” city occupied by the Allied powers. Despite its shadowy surroundings, this neighborhood was one of West Berlin’s epicentres during the 1970s and 1980s, particularly its nightlife (including drugs and prostitution). The staging of the ruins somewhat echoes romanticism and a fascination for the marks of the passage of time. The renewed commercial architecture with department stores and renowned luxury brands uniformized the atmospheres of *these* streets, stressing their distinction from most other areas of the city. This difference is what we feel physically at that time. Bearing our habits from other parts of town, we sense that we do not belong there. Such a feeling is well expressed by the term *enveloppement*: it is climatic, contextual and encompassing. In other words, it is a matter of atmosphere, and that atmosphere is partly a matter of perspective. In our eyes, at least, the display of the same signs as in any tourist destination or airport terminal impacts the district with an atmosphere of sterility, even an exhaustion of urban vitality, at the opposite of what

the city was a century ago. Are we the only ones to feel such “unease” (Frers, 2007: 26-27)? At the scale of this particular time of the night, at least, no sign of discontent is really visible in other people’s behavior. But we have not been staying longer than a couple of hours.

- 22 We climb the steps leading to the shopping centre bearing the unlikely name of “Bikini”, whose stores have already closed. Adjacent to Berlin’s zoo, this is one of the city’s newest shopping malls. It was built according to the latest codes of entertainment and didactic thematization, much in the taste of the forced smiles demanded from employees. Positive and playful slogans are arranged in several places and at various scales. Their moral injunctions deserve detour and reflection: “*We are creating ourselves endlessly*”; “*And now I’ll do what’s the best for me*”. Another way of using the first person, quite enigmatic, even puzzling, if not threatening; to us, it sounds more Orwellian than joyful. After walking through the upper gallery up to the outdoor terrace, we notice a kind of cocktail bar on the second floor, almost empty. The space is distended, the ceilings are too high, the lighting banal and commonplace. Here again, everything seems to us a little constrained, deprived of any authenticity.
- 23 What is meant here by authenticity? The lively experience of a city stems from conditions inherited on the long term: architectural and urban configurations that others have shaped by throughout history (Sennett, 1991; 1994). Berlin has kept a strong international radiance ever since the beginning of the last century, when it was at the same time a huge industrial center, a capital city and an artistic and cultural hub, as well as an open laboratory for urban planning and political alternatives. This “Chicago on Spree” was also, in the 1930s, the fourth most populous city in the Western world, facing unprecedented demographic pressure and threatening density rates. Navigating through the quiet streets of 2019 Berlin, this seems like a remote past. However, the troubled history of the last century, although many of its traces are currently disappearing, remains physically perceptible through the significant distances and proportions, the polycentric urban layout, the open horizons and the wide gaps that persist in many neighbourhoods (although their decline over the past twenty years, in the city centre at least, is striking). Does this fragmentation transform the city’s atmospheres? Arguably, Berlin has not finished negotiating the contradictory and painful legacies of its history (Zischler, 2016). Examining its social life from the perspective of sensorial atmospheres, our first-person descriptions also incorporate the feeling of absence which still affects many places of the city (Shusterman, 1997; Ladd, 1998).
- 24 The surroundings of the Zoo station were once a lively district, mixing shops, business and leisure. In these emblematic public places, workers, employees and the bourgeoisie, Germans and foreigners, Berliners and newcomers rubbed shoulders, day and night. It was also a difficult neighbourhood to live in, with its share of gloomy, poorly maintained areas, and their allotted prostitution, drunkenness and drugs, wandering and doubt. All this has been erased, cleaned, and not only by history and by architecture, but also by deliberate transformations of authorized or tolerated uses in the vicinity of these places. Rules, be they written or tacit, take their part in the creation and monitoring of urban atmospheres. We are chased off the terrace by an employee who piles up the chairs. Maxime barely has time to finish the colors.

Tempelhof: urban landscape as public space

Illustration 4: Tempelhofer Feld, around 7 pm, 07/22/2017. Indian ink and watercolours on paper



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- 25 Unlike most parks in Berlin, the Tempelhofer Feld, surrounded by metal fences, closes its gates at nightfall. As a counterpart, during its opening hours, it provides a unique accessible space with unobstructed views, walking and running areas on every side. Although the park is closed to car traffic, it is not cut off from it, both visually (particularly to the south) or acoustically. Passers-by and walkers, pedestrians or cyclists also experience mutual exposure as they remain visible from very far away. This situation is balanced by the permanent possibility of omnidirectional movement: there seems to be no real obstacle. The feeling of the passing of the seasons, already strong in Berlin where the variations in luminosity are so wide, is particularly intense. In the winter, the park becomes a snowfield where cross-country skiers appear in the distance. The tactile perception of the air becomes essential in the cold: it directly affects breathing, the skin of the face and hands, the ability to walk.
- 26 From the point of view of sensory experience, Tempelhof differs from any other place in Berlin (where the topography generally offers very little relief, just as its architecture seeks verticality only by exception) by the felt movements of the air. The wind that drives the clouds keeps some of the sounds away from the city while amplifying the range of others. The volume of air in motion makes the dimensions of this sea of greenery sensitive. Often, we went together to Tempelhof to throw and catch boomerangs. This practice inherited from the Australian aborigines makes the movement of the air palpable by the trajectory described by the projectile. It requires a large open space and a certain amount of breeze. One must insert the instrument into the wind stream by a vigorous gesture and adapt the direction of the repeated throws

to the wind direction. We use the numerous landmarks at the horizon to keep and adjust the bearing. In the distance, the skyline includes a few office buildings and construction sites of new condominiums, some factories, a mosque, a bell tower, the Alexanderplatz "Fernsehturm"; closer, on the edge of the field, the airport radar tower and the massive body of the main building built by the Nazis close the circle. The site gives both high visibility and acceptability to the complex history of the city, many traces of which (starting with the Wall and its no-man's-land areas) have been so degraded over the past twenty years.

- 27 Many people use the extensive surfaces of the former airport as a playground: basketball, soccer, baseball, frisbee, running, rollerblading, cycling, even fencing. Skateboarders equipped with sails and kites used to practice their slaloms between pedestrians until two years ago. An accident has put an end to this cohabitation and those fast drivers now have to stay on a portion of the less frequented track. Musicians use it as a practice room. Besides, every weekend, two large portions of the field are dedicated to family barbecues and for hours, the smell of grilled meat pervades those areas. Berliners seem here to be able to experiment concretely, to feel, "the re-defined space [as] an unintended production" (Altay, 2007: 65): the size of the park and its limited sectorization provides enough gaps and free space to allow a constant mix of heterogeneous uses. Tempelhof is perceived as a space of freedom where body movements can unfold without restriction in a context that is both relaxing and stimulating. Jennifer Bell (2012), also reports that the architecture and history of the site are regularly held by its users for reasons of "fascination", "curiosity" or even "inspiration". These comments refer to the leisure function of the park and its preservation as a "free" space (the double meaning of the word also playing strongly in German, with the expression "Tempelhofer Freiheit" put forward by militants). The recent history of the site reflects the social fragility of a city whose institutions have strongly encouraged cultural, artistic, tourist and especially real estate development without considering its consequences. In the years following its opening in 2010, Tempelhof has become an interesting and revealing feature and now appears as a space open to experimentation and flexibility.
- 28 Thus, the insights from the sensory approach to such an open space at the heart of the city do not only address aesthetic issues. The park's central position in the city certainly plays an important role in its frequentation, as it is accessible by the double Ring of the S-Bahn and a high-speed railway, connected by nine gates near six underground stations and many bus stops, and open to bicycles. However, the supply of outdoor recreational and wooded areas in Berlin is already so considerable in almost every sector of the city (almost a third of the administrative area is composed of lakes and parks) that Tempelhof's excellent accessibility is a less decisive factor than the intrinsic sensory qualities of the place, probably connected with its perceived symbolic meanings. What strikes the visitor is the size of the plateau's surface and the clear view, even though the place remains defined and contained by the immediate proximity of the urban hustle and bustle. The immense mass of the central building also contributes to organizing and orienting the perception of the site at every point. This open field can become a remarkable surface for projecting emotions, and as such, a particularly enjoyable set of atmospheres. The sensorial qualities of that place enhance the qualities of city-dwellers' ordinary experiences through their most basic properties: duration, mutual visibility between people, omnidirectional bodily movements, and most importantly the sounds and the colors of the Feld, with their constant and calm

variation along the rhythm of the day (with the changing sunlight), and the year (one season after another). By making these perceptible at a large scale, such remarkable atmospheric qualities connect the city and its inhabitants with the ordinary natural processes that also compose its landscapes.

- 29 Tempelhof's atmospheres are plurivalent and open. The park, now the largest public space in the city, has become a precious crossing point and meeting place. Just as the numerous activities unfolding here, dozens of different perspectives and atmospheres are coexisting peacefully within this generous space. Different moods, attitudes or feelings peacefully rub shoulders without entirely ignoring each other since all remain mutually visible. The "Feld" enables this open flexibility, once so common in Berlin, which now tends to decline in the central districts of the capital. In our eyes, as well as in many observers' and users', its immense "void" offers an expanded but preserved form of urban public space in its own right, a surface that remains both clearly circumscribed and open on all sides.

Conclusions

- 30 We have focused on four ordinary situations of urban public atmospheres, arguably representative of some aspects of contemporary Berlin's social life during the summer. Indebted to American pragmatism, to psychology of perception and to social psychology, as well as the work of Erving Goffman (1963; 1974) or Harold Garfinkel (1967), many ethnographers have imported phenomenological issues and insights into their own protocols of inquiry. Howard S. Becker (1998), Isaac Joseph (1998) or François Laplantine (2015) have notably inspired our phenomenographic attempts, providing methods, attitudes and a whole vocabulary to engage in situated descriptions that may account for the affective and emotional textures of urban interactions in public. These authors display applied observation procedures that emphasize the material dimension of field work: note-taking, drawing, photography and video, as well as books and reference documents are not simply "raw" data to be used. Nor are they ways of illustrating a series of arguments that could be conceived and formulated independently of actual encounters and perceptions. Rather, as media of sensory evocation and memory, they offer the possibility of juxtaposing and comparing distinct situations. Descriptions record an exploration made of multiple cumulative experiences instead of an abstract and artificially isolated moment. Insofar as we lay them down on paper or on screen, they become the subject of an initial reflexivity which attests to an orientation of the gaze and the beginning of an investigation on the propensity of living atmospheres to envelop us.
- 31 Taking such ways of observing and transcribing towards the purpose of an actual phenomenography, we attempted to describe "atmospheric" qualities: that is, rather than isolated or singled out affects and emotions, to get a holistic sense of what could be felt, shared and sometimes discussed by people present at a given place and time. Such tentative descriptions result from a physical commitment in a situation which differs as little as possible from the sensitive commitments and ordinary attachments that city dwellers experience on a daily basis while frequenting public spaces (Lofland, 1999; Thibaud, 2002). If the reflexivity specific to writing or drawing necessarily leads to a distance and sketching of a story, a descriptive and graphical narrative approach may consider reducing this gap in order to approach a concrete rendering of the

perception of atmospheres – which is also the case of landscape descriptions or literary descriptions of places. For that reason, we did not choose exceptional or spectacular situations but rather easily accessible settings and activities to scrutinize some of Berlin's atmospheric phenomena from our own perspective.

- 32 Berlin, so permanently marked by the traces of absence, disappearances and emptiness left by history (Shusterman, 1997; Huyssen, 2003), is now exposed to a certain artificial saturation of “cultural” and “artistic” signs (Masci, 2013) that contributes to increase the fragmenting and segmenting of its public atmospheres. It has been argued that this complex process is putting its diversity “on trial” (Bocquet, 2014). Instead of the “green archipelago” that Ungers and Koolhaas envisioned in 1977 (Ungers & Koolhaas, 2013), the city now tends to make up an archipelago of distinct atmospheres (Rohe, 2014) that are slowly separating from each other, isolating and partitioning themselves, as in many metropolises today. This segmentation, which appears mainly due to commercial and financial gain-driven purposes, puts both the resident and the critical observer at risk of missing the importance of what it means to be there. In Berlin, arguably, the fragmentation of atmospheres also results from the increased selective separation of the city from its complex and manifold historical past: between the West and the East, between the successive countercultures which were active since the pre-war period, between the different phases and challenges of the migratory waves that make up the population, as well as the ongoing conflicts of memory. In some cases, collective amnesia and the deliberate cutting off of the contradictions of one's own history may threaten urban vitality in the long term. Could one sense this through some of the city's atmospheres? This question remains open and will require further specific investigation.
- 33 On the scale of a street (Weserstr.) or a tiny concert hall (Donau 115), on the scale of a neighbourhood (the Zoologischer Garten station) or that of a gigantic urban park (Tempelhofer Feld), our atmosphere-driven approach suggests that human activity may grow with more vigour and robustness in unplanned interstices than in engineered spaces. In places where freedom of movement and spatial constraints inherited from other times and uses coexist, the rarity of such gaps makes them all the more precious for the social vitality of urban public places. The open spaces that have for many years distinguished Berlin and its landscapes have become very vulnerable to speculation and interested appropriation. Some of these places, such as Tempelhofer Feld, are now defended by “citizen” efforts; others live on through the mere proliferation of uncontrolled and unplanned uses. The phenomenographic approach, in parallel to sociological inquiry, may draw attention to population and capital movements, changes in use, codes of conduct, and ways of behaving in public. Most importantly, it makes one aware of those changes. Addressing ordinary urban atmospheres invites us to focus on everyday situations by questioning, as Dewey called for a century ago, the quality of our experiences.

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ABSTRACTS

This article proposes an ethno-phenomenographic record combining writing and drawing. It examines a few contemporary atmospheres of the city of Berlin. We describe a selection of specific situations from the angle of sensorial experience and contextualize them with sociological, geographical and historical elements. Tackling some atmospheres characteristic of a city at a certain period of its history is not the same as trying to grasp the ways of living in it; therefore, our approach is neither sociological nor geographical per se. Elaborating on four specific cases and reflecting from our own perspectives, we will examine the hypothesis of a fragmentation of Berlin's atmospheres, exploring the ambivalent meanings of such assessment. The method is ethnographic: we base our descriptions on direct observation and we confront our respective experiences in places physically circumscribed by architecture and urban forms, interspersed with multiple presences and interactions during the observed time sequences. The overall objective is also cooperative and interdisciplinary: the sharing of our own points of view and perceptions through drawing, speaking and writing as processes of building an account of urban phenomena, without erasing differences in perspective. Through this very partial selection of seemingly representative atmospheres over one Berlin summer, we sketch a nuanced portrait of the city that does not exclude criticism.

Cet article, en combinant l'écriture et le dessin, s'intéresse aux atmosphères contemporaines de la ville de Berlin. Sans prétendre les saisir toutes, nous décrivons une sélection de situations sous l'angle de l'expérience sensorielle en les contextualisant avec des éléments sociologiques, géographiques et historiques. Aborder des atmosphères caractéristiques d'une ville à une

certainne période de son histoire, ce n'est pas essayer d'en saisir les modes de vie : notre approche n'est donc ni sociologique ni géographique à proprement parler. À partir de quatre exemples concrets et limités, nous examinons plutôt l'hypothèse d'une fragmentation des atmosphères berlinoises, en explorant les significations ambivalentes d'une telle évaluation. La méthode est ethnographique : nos descriptions sont fondées sur l'observation directe et la confrontation de nos expériences respectives dans des lieux physiquement circonscrits par l'architecture et les formes urbaines, entrecoupés de multiples présences et interactions au cours des séquences observées. L'objectif est aussi coopératif et interdisciplinaire : le partage de nos points de vue et de nos perceptions, sans effacer les différences de perspective, enrichit mutuellement nos regards sur cette ville. Avec cette sélection très partielle d'atmosphères représentatives au cours d'un été berlinois, nous esquissons un portrait nuancé de la ville, qui n'exclut pas la critique.

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Mots-clés: atmosphère urbaine, Berlin, description ethnographique, dessin, fragmentation, perception

Keywords: urban atmosphere, Berlin, ethnographic description, drawing, fragmentation, perception

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