

The 'vibe': 'Atmosphere' and its temporality

Lorenz Gilli

University of Siegen, Germany

To describe the experience of certain sonic 'intensities' and collective 'energies' on dancefloors, EDM scholars have commonly used the vernacular term 'vibe' (Thornton 29; Fikentscher 80–82; Sommer 73; St John; St. John 77–81; Rietveld; Witek; Garcia). By drawing on the work of two German phenomenologists – Hermann Schmitz and Gernot Böhme –, I will conceptualize the 'vibe' as an 'atmosphere'. Both 'atmosphere' and 'vibe' are understood as fleeting sensations, related to sound, sociability, and space. However, their temporal dimension is rarely investigated. By adding the term 'situation', I hope to offer some insights into the temporality of the 'vibe'.

Schmitz defines an atmosphere as "the complete occupation of a surfaceless space in the region of experienced presence." (Schmitz et al. 255) Friedlind Riedel explains this idea of 'occupation of surfaceless space' specifically for sound: "sound does not appear as an object in the world with a defined location and surface, but rather, charges an entire place or situation with sonorous intensity due to what Schmitz terms its surfacelessness." (Riedel, 'Atmosphere' 91)

This concept already indicates some aspects of the 'vibe' that have been identified in scholarly literature. The vibe is understood as a mood, a feeling or an affective charge. As such, it is something that is experienced in its presence – and it's not a material entity (Fikentscher; Garcia). Böhme describes atmospheres as 'pure phenomena': they only exist as long as they appear, and they are not appearances *of something* (Böhme 62). The vibe charges an entire place such as a club or the dancefloor and affects it as whole. As Maria Witek puts it, with the vibe "subjectivity is not just shared between people but is diffused across a greater, and partially non-human whole". Similarly, Riedel states that an atmosphere "allows for the ways in which a multiplicity of bodies is part of, and entangled in, a situation that envelops it" (Riedel, 'Atmospheric Relations' 4).

In the work of Schmitz and Böhme as well as in the work that investigates musical experiences with the concept of 'atmosphere' – be it in religious contexts such in the work of Friedlind Riedel (Riedel, 'Lines of Becoming') or Anne Holzmüller (Holzmüller), or in EDM-contexts such as Witek's recent paper "Feeling at one" – the concept of atmosphere is conceptualized primarily as a spatial phenomenon. Again, Schmitz defines atmosphere as "the complete occupation of a *surfaceless space* in the region of experienced presence." However, temporal questions related to atmosphere, such as how and why it changes over time, are seldom addressed. Furthermore, what exactly is it that undergoes these changes?

The lack of temporality in the concept becomes apparent in some of the studies mentioned: When discussing the normalization and canonization of the religious hymns the Closed Brethren perform on a weekly basis, Friedlind Riedel introduces the concept of "smooth and striated space" by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari for explanation. This addition appears necessary as the concept of atmosphere does not account for temporal changes. In her paper, Maria Witek describes the dramatic change of the vibe due to a considerable change in the lighting of the club *Berghain* in Berlin. Because of a thunderstorm, the bright emergency lights have been kept on for five hours. DJ Dustin Zahn recalls, that "10 minutes before I took over, they fixed the light situation and the crowd went crazy. With the lights off, a new vibe took over and $\frac{3}{4}$ of the dance floor was topless. There was no separation of class, sex or race: just skin, dancing and great, positive vibes." (qt. in: Witek 102) Witek emphasizes the change of the vibe from one moment to the other and she points out, that the vibe cannot be controlled, but is subject to chance – a thunderstorm in this instance. Therefore, the author acknowledges the temporality of the atmosphere. However, she suggests that somehow the vibe is a direct product of specific factors in the objects concerned: when the lights change, the vibe changes. This mirrors Kai Fikentscher's claim that the vibe can be "created, shaped, changed and maintained" (Fikentscher 80) – most importantly through the synchronization of the dancing bodies to the music. In this perspective, the temporality

of the atmosphere is conceptualized as an effect of something rather than an intrinsic characteristic of the atmosphere itself.

But what if there is no change in the materiality or the object? Timothy Morton points to the fact that “[a] shower of rain is atmospherically different if you stand in it for two hours, as opposed to five minutes.” (Morton 166). This illustrates that even when there is no change in the object – it is always the same shower of rain – its quality can vary considerably over time, like from ‘refreshing after a hot day’ to ‘annoying and freezing’. If Morton’s example is applied to an EDM-context, we could think of a minimalistic techno-track or a sequence of very similar tracks in an DJ-set, that initially captivates and impresses the audience, creating a good vibe. After some time, however, the excitement might decrease, feelings of boredom or monotony may arise and eventually the vibe feels kind of ‘worn out’. How can we conceptualize such a change of atmosphere when nothing on the object-side has changed?

Before I go into trying to answer this question, I should clarify my reason for using a hypothetical example, not an empirical one: It seems to me that numerous scholars – including myself in my ongoing PhD-project – tend to attribute the change of a vibe to changes in the object-side. Apart from the short provocation by Morton, I could not find any empirical example in the literature that would address such temporalities without referring to changes in the object-side. Therefore, my talk can also be understood as a call both to myself and to other scholars to pay attention to such examples.

So: How can we conceptualize such a change of atmosphere when nothing on the object-side has changed? In other words: are atmospheres inherently temporal – and if so, how can we conceptualize their temporality? A possible but unsatisfying answer would be to position the change in the subject: it is the state of mind or mood of the individual human being that changes over time. But that would undermine both the concept of ‘atmosphere’ as well as the experienced quality of the ‘vibe’: it is something diffused across objects and subjects and it is something encompassing all (or at least: many) of the present people. Hence, my suggestion is to differentiate between ‘atmosphere’ and ‘situation’. ‘Situation’ is another key term in Schmitz’ philosophy, and he is very keen on differentiating atmospheres from situations, although both are connected phenomena (Schmitz). However, not all situations are tinted with an atmosphere, and not all atmospheres are set in situations.

A situation is understood as a “totalit[y] with internally diffuse meaningfulness of states of affairs, programmes and/or problems characterised by cohesion and integrity” (Schmitz et al. 251; Riedel, ‘Lines of Becoming’ 88). The described setting at *Berghain* is such a situation: the dancefloor is a totality characterized by cohesion and integrity, in contrast to other situations in *Berghain* such as the *Panorama Bar* (which is the second floor in *Berghain*), the entrance hall or the toilets. Internally, this situation is ‘diffusely meaningful’ because it is not clear which single factors and elements contribute to the situation and its distinctiveness, and how. There are certain states of affairs such as the architecture, the heat, the crowd, the characteristic of the music etc., certain programs that people have, such as dancing and having fun, and certain problems that appear, such as the bright emergency lights.

This situation now is capable of attracting a certain atmosphere, or we could also say: a certain atmosphere is now able to settle into a situation. However, it is important to note that the two are distinct concepts: while a situation can be fabricated as a specific arrangement of architecture, lights, decoration, music etc., and with a specific formation of programs and problems – an atmosphere, on the other hand, cannot be fabricated. Atmospheres are fleeting and ephemeral, and as such they can settle into a situation and imbue them with a certain feeling or mood. In other words: by fabricating a certain situation the emergence of a certain atmosphere or vibe can be facilitated – but it cannot reliably be produced.

In the example of *Berghain*, the situation with the bright lights allowed for a certain atmosphere to settle, and when the club went from brightly lighted to completely dark, a new situation emerged and thus a new atmosphere could be attracted. But atmospheres can also leave or fade out of the same situation: after some time, the atmosphere fades out of the shower of rain and it fades out of a series of too similar tracks in a DJ-Set. In this case, a new situation with new problems and programs emerged: the *problem* of the collective experience of a ‘worn out vibe’ induces a *program* onto the DJ to intervene in his*her DJ-Set: to change the pace or the key, or to play something with more melodies, or something harder, etc. By actively changing the situation and its *state of affairs*, eventually a new atmosphere can be attracted by the new situation and new vibe can be experienced on the dancefloor.

Regarding the connection between situation and atmosphere, these two examples present opposing relations: in the *Berghain*-example, the dramatic change in the lights dramatically changed the entire

situation, and thus led to a change in the atmosphere. In short: the atmosphere followed the situation. On the contrary, in the example of the monotonous DJ-Set, the atmosphere has changed without any dramatic change of the situation, and only this changing of the atmosphere has led to a change in the situation; in this case, the situation followed the atmosphere.

It must be noted that this distinction between the two examples is largely theoretical and simplified, whereas in reality, atmospheres and situations are intertwined in a complex manner. But with this schematic opposition, I hope to provide a useful heuristic framework for exploring the 'vibe' and its temporality in electronic dance music cultures.

Bibliography

- Böhme, Gernot. *Asthetik: Vorlesungen über Ästhetik als allgemeine Wahrnehmungslehre*. Fink, 2001.
- Fikentscher, Kai. *'You Better Work!': Underground Dance Music in New York City*. University Press of New England, 2000.
- Garcia, Luis-Manuel. 'Feeling the Vibe: Sound, Vibration, and Affective Attunement in Electronic Dance Music Scenes'. *Ethnomusicology Forum*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2020, pp. 21–39. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2020.1733434>.
- Holzmüller, Anne. 'Between Things and Souls: Sacred Atmospheres and Immersive Listening in Late Eighteenth-Century Sentimentalism'. *Music as Atmosphere: Collective Feelings and Affective Sounds*, edited by Friedlind Riedel and Juha Torvinen, 1st ed., Routledge, 2019, pp. 218–37. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780815358718>.
- Morton, Timothy. *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Riedel, Friedlind. 'Atmosphere'. *Affective Societies: Key Concepts*, edited by Jan Slaby and Christian von Scheve, 1st ed., Routledge, 2019, pp. 85–95. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351039260>.
- . 'Atmospheric Relations: Theorising Music and Sound as Atmosphere'. *Music as Atmosphere: Collective Feelings and Affective Sounds*, edited by Friedlind Riedel and Juha Torvinen, 1st ed., Routledge, 2019, pp. 1–55. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780815358718>.
- . 'Music as Atmosphere. Lines of Becoming in Congregational Worship'. *Lebenswelt. Aesthetics and philosophy of experience.*, no. 6, 6, June 2015. *riviste.unimi.it*, <https://doi.org/10.13130/2240-9599/4913>.
- Rietveld, Hillegonda C. 'Journey to the Light? Immersion, Spectacle and Mediation'. *DJ Culture in the Mix: Power, Technology, and Social Change in Electronic Dance Music*, edited by Bernardo Attias et al., Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, pp. 79–102.
- Schmitz, Hermann, et al. 'Emotions Outside the Box—the New Phenomenology of Feeling and Corporeality'. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, vol. 10, no. 2, June 2011, pp. 241–59. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-011-9195-1>.
- . 'Situationen und Atmosphären: Zur Ästhetik und Ontologie bei Gernot Böhme'. *Naturerkenntnis und Natursein: Für Gernot Böhme*, edited by Michael Hauskeller et al., 1. Aufl, Suhrkamp, 1998, pp. 176–90.
- Sommer, Sally R. "'C'mon to My House": Underground-House Dancing'. *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2001, pp. 72–86. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1477805>.
- St. John, Graham. *Global Tribe: Technology, Spirituality and Psytrance*. Equinox Pub, 2012.
- St John, Graham. 'Trance Tribes and Dance Vibes: Victor Turner and Electronic Dance Music Culture'. *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance*, edited by Graham St John, NED-New edition, 1, Berghahn Books, 2008, pp. 149–73. JSTOR, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qd62m>.
- Thornton, Sarah. *Club Cultures. Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*. Polity Press, 1995. *Open WorldCat*, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:101:1-201410053682>.
- Witek, Maria A. G. 'Feeling at One: Socio-Affective Distribution, Vibe, and Dance-Music Consciousness'. *Music and Consciousness 2*, edited by Ruth Herbert et al., Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 93–112. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198804352.003.0006>.