


## Atmospheres, Environments, and Affects

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**Abstract.** Over the past decade, the debate on atmospheres has grown among philosophers (see, e.g., Schmitz 2016; Böhme 2017; Griffero 2017; Jagnow 2024; Fernandez Velasco and Niikawa 2025). Examples of atmospheres are the joyful atmosphere exuding from a lively party; the shady atmosphere of a run-down back alley; the poignant atmosphere of Venice, Italy. Many scholars characterize atmospheres as having an intrinsically affective dimension. I argue that this claim is tempting and natural, albeit ultimately not convincing. I put forward the hypothesis that the reason why atmospheres may seem intrinsically affective has to do with the fact that atmospheres are properties of environments. Environments are typically experienced from within and a look at some contemporary media practices reveals that there is a quite widespread assumption that environments experienced from within typically produce affective reactions in experiencers. I suggest that (a) the correlation between the experience of affective responses to environments and the experience of atmospheres of environments is confused with the obtaining of the relation whereby an atmosphere causes one to have an affective response; (b) the view that atmospheres produce affective responses in experiencers is overgeneralized and thus transformed into the claim that atmospheres invariably produce affective responses in experiencers.

**Keywords:** atmospheres; environments; affectivity.

## <sup>ES</sup> Atmósferas, entornos y afectos

**Resumen.** En la última década, el debate sobre las atmósferas ha crecido entre los filósofos (véase, por ejemplo, Schmitz 2016; Böhme 2017; Griffero 2017; Jagnow 2024; Fernández Velasco y Niikawa 2025). Ejemplos de atmósferas son la atmósfera alegre que emana de una fiesta animada; la atmósfera sombría de un callejón trasero deteriorado; la atmósfera conmovedora de Venecia, Italia. Muchos estudiosos caracterizan las atmósferas como dotadas de una dimensión intrínsecamente afectiva. Sostengo que esta afirmación es tentadora y natural, aunque en última instancia no convincente. Propongo la hipótesis de que la razón por la cual las atmósferas pueden parecer intrínsecamente afectivas tiene que ver con el hecho de que las atmósferas son propiedades de los entornos. Los entornos se experimentan típicamente desde dentro y una mirada a algunas prácticas mediáticas contemporáneas revela que existe una suposición bastante extendida según la cual los entornos experimentados desde dentro suelen producir reacciones afectivas en los experimentadores. Sugiero que (a) la correlación entre la experiencia de respuestas afectivas a los entornos y la experiencia de las atmósferas de los entornos se confunde con la obtención de la relación según la cual una atmósfera causa una respuesta afectiva; (b) la tesis de que las atmósferas producen respuestas afectivas en los experimentadores se sobregeneraliza y se transforma así en la afirmación de que las atmósferas producen invariablemente respuestas afectivas en los experimentadores.

**Palabras clave:** atmósferas; entornos; afectividad.

**Sumario:** 1. Atmospheres as nested relations between joint subject-object potentialities; 2. Atmospheres, a-moods, and fusions of properties; 3. Assessing Fernandez Velasco & Niikawa and Jagnow: atmospheres are properties of environments and are not affective properties; 4. Affective reactions to environments experienced from within; 5. References.

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Over the past decade, a debate on atmospheres has developed among philosophers (see, e.g., Schmitz 2016; Böhme 2017; Griffero 2017; Jagnow 2024; Fernandez Velasco and Niikawa 2025). Examples of atmospheres are the joyful atmosphere exuding from a lively party; the shady atmosphere of a run-down back alley; the poignant atmosphere of Venice, Italy. Philosophers working in the phenomenological tradition, such as Gernot Böhme and Tonino Griffero, typically characterize atmospheres as “quasi-things” that are neither entirely subjective nor entirely objective (atmospheres are typically predicated of places, but it seems that subjects somehow contribute to their production), that emerge out of a combination of aspects of environments (such as the smell, lighting conditions, and dilapidated architecture of a run-down alley), and that arouse affective reactions in perceivers (we typically say that a run-down back alley *feels* shady). Recently, analytic philosophers have joined the debate on atmospheres, seeking to provide accounts that are firmly grounded in current research on metaphysics and affectivity: Pablo Fernandez Velasco & Takuya Niikawa (2025) defend a metaphysics of atmospheres, while René Jagnow (2024) puts forward a view of how atmospheric experiences are elicited and of how paintings can elicit them too. The first paper is about what atmospheres are. The second is about what it takes to experience them, not only when within an environment (the standard case of atmosphere experience) but also when faced with a pictorial representation of something. Interestingly, both Fernandez Velasco & Niikawa and Jagnow agree with phenomenologists in characterizing atmospheres as having an intrinsically affective dimension. However, as I shall show below, this claim is not convincing. Still, as I shall argue, it is tempting to think of atmospheres as bound to producing affective reactions. The reason for this, as I shall suggest, is likely to have something to do with the fact that atmospheres are properties of environments. Environments are typically experienced from within and, as I shall show, a look at some contemporary media practices reveals that there is a quite widespread assumption that environments are particularly well-suited for producing affective reactions in experiencers.

The paper is structured as follows: to familiarize the reader with the notion of atmosphere, in the first two sections I present Fernandez Velasco & Niikawa’s and Jagnow’s proposals, which I take to be the most thorough contributions to the debate on atmospheres put forward so far. Then, in the third section, drawing from Voltolini (in progress), I argue that both Fernandez Velasco & Niikawa and Jagnow correctly claim that atmospheres are properties of environments, and wrongly claim, in accordance with typical phenomenological accounts of atmospheres, that atmospheres are intrinsically affective properties; finally, in the fourth section, I discuss the link between the experience of an environment from within and the affective reaction to that environment.

## 1. Atmospheres as nested relations between joint subject-object potentialities

Fernandez Velasco and Niikawa’s paper discusses the metaphysics of atmospheres. Taking inspiration from Griffero (2014a; 2017; 2022), among others, they begin by exploring the view that atmospheres result from the unification of various affordances of an environment. Affordances, they explain, “are the possibilities of actions that can be directly perceived and that often solicit the very actions when being perceived (Siegel 2014; McClelland and Jorba 2023).” (Fernandez Velasco and Niikawa 2025: 4–5). A door handle, for instance, typically allows for perceiving the affordance of grasping it to push or pull the door. And, according to, e.g., Griffero, an environment such as that of a party, which presents various affordances (for chatting, dancing, consuming alcohol, singing, and so on), unifies those various affordances in a joyful atmosphere. Griffero’s key idea is, I take it, that perceiving atmospheres is: (a) perceiving various affordances (b) as unified (whatever this might mean). Fernandez Velasco and Niikawa explain that, on the one hand, affordances are relative to agents, because

(1) whether an action is possible in an environment depends on the properties of the agents in question, in particular their agentic capacities (Gibson 1979; Scarantino 2003) and (2) whether the possibility of an action being (easily) perceived depends on the habits, interests and other cognitive conditions of the agents (McClelland and Jorba 2023).

On the other hand, they remark, affordances have an objective side, as they are invariant features of the environment: their existence does not depend on an agent realizing them (see Gibson 1979: 121).

The view that atmospheres are unified sets of affordances, however, does not wholly satisfy Fernandez Velasco and Niikawa, for two reasons (2025: 7–8). In the first place, because it overstretches the notion of affordance. Objects can afford activities – such as pushing or pulling a door – but this is just one way in which they can appear significant to us. In particular, objects exuding atmospheres appear significant to us, but do not typically suggest possibilities for action. Rather – I take it, as Fernandez Velasco and Niikawa are not explicit on this point – they appear significant to us because of the atmospheres they produce. So,

accounting for atmospheres in terms of affordances amounts to wrongly applying a notion designed to make sense of objects that suggest actions for making sense of objects that suggest atmospheres.<sup>1</sup>

In the second place, Fernandez Velasco and Niikawa highlight that there is a tension between thinking, as Griffero does, that atmospheres arouse feelings, and thinking, as Griffero also does, that atmospheres are unified sets of affordances, because affordances for action allow for perceiving the possibility of an action without actually performing the action, and one would then expect the same to be the case with atmospheres, which should allow for merely perceiving possibilities of feelings without actually arousing them.

Fernandez Velasco and Niikawa thus put forward an alternative notion of atmosphere, characterized by two main features: first, rather than merely unifying various affordances, an atmosphere is something that occurs when there is a *nesting of affordances*: they explain that “at this high level, specific, low-level actions are not identified. What are identified are high-level relations among possibilities for action” (14) – this view is inspired by Roy Dings (2021). The advantage of the “nested affordances view”, then, is that it does not stretch the notion of affordance to account for atmospheres. The second feature Fernandez Velasco and Niikawa attribute to atmospheres concerns the fact that the high-level relations between affordances that we grasp when perceiving atmospheres “are grasped corporeally and affectively” (Fernandez Velasco and Niikawa 2025: 14). How so? Experiencing nested affordances, they explain, is experiencing a “field of affordances” (a notion that has its roots in Gibson and Crooks 1938: 454-455).

The experience of the field of affordances is that of the environment calling us to act in a certain way (Dreyfus and Kelly 2007) and of our felt body attuning to the call. These embodied action tendencies of our affective lives are “modes of bodily attunement” (Fuchs 2013), and they determine our engagement with the affordances around us (Hufendiek 2017). *This grasping of action affordances affectively is quite different from simply undergoing the feeling that affective affordances (in Griffero’s construal) invite. Even if we do not partake in a cheerful atmosphere, we still feel the atmosphere corporeally and affectively...* our affective engagement with affordances doesn’t happen just at the lower level of reaching out for a cup, but also (perhaps primarily) at the higher levels. Affective experience can be not just about a particular affordance, but about the field of affordances as a whole (Kiverstein et al. 2019). [Fernandez Velasco and Niikawa 2025: 12-13, my italics].

The advantage of the “felt field of affordances view”, then, is that it explains why we do not need to be in a certain mood or experience a certain feeling when detecting an atmosphere, while explaining why atmospheres have, nevertheless, affective character.

Having put forward a notion of atmosphere that is true to the spirit of Griffero’s proposal, but more viable, Fernandez Velasco and Niikawa (2025: 15-20) proceed to tackling the main topic of their paper: the metaphysics of atmospheres – a topic that is not discussed in depth in the phenomenological literature. Now, since they understand atmospheres as high-level relations among affordances, to discuss the metaphysics of atmospheres they look at metaphysical accounts of affordances.

Traditional accounts of affordances, they explain, are either relational or dispositional. According to the former, affordances are relations between aspects of physical environments and either individual agents (Chemero 2003) or groups of agents sharing a form of life (Rietveld and Kiverstein 2014). Affordances, thus, vary depending on subjects or forms of life. Dispositional accounts, on the other hand, ground affordances more firmly in environments: affordances are properties of environments, which exist independently of what individual agents or groups of agents sharing a form of life do; however, to exist, affordances require complementary abilities on the side of the subjects (Turvey 1992; Scarantino 2003; Heras-Escribano 2019).

Fernandez Velasco and Niikawa argue that a potentiality account of affordances, such as the one recently defended by Barbara Vetter (2020), presents the advantage of reconciling relational and dispositional accounts. In the first place, Vetter conceives of affordances as “real, objective, nomological possibilities based on actual states of affairs (rather than on our knowledge of them) that are constrained by the intrinsic properties of the object in question” (Fernandez Velasco and Niikawa 2025: 17).<sup>2</sup> This is in line with the objectivism of dispositional accounts. In the second place, Vetter argues that while some potentialities are properties intrinsic to objects (e.g., a key’s potentiality for opening a lock of a certain shape), other potentialities can be seen as relations between fitting potentialities of objects and subjects (e.g., a key’s potentiality for opening a lock of a certain shape fits a lock’s potentiality for being opened by a key of a certain shape; together, they jointly have the potentiality for one to open the other). According to Fernandez Velasco and Niikawa, affordances are potentialities of this latter kind – and this, obviously, is in line with relational accounts of affordances.

<sup>1</sup> The affordance view of atmospheres might still account for a sub-set of atmospheres, those resulting from interactions between the perceiver(s) and the environment (consider, e.g., the happy atmosphere of a party arousing from the partygoers’ dancing, chatting, laughing, etc. inside the party’s environment). Assessing the viability of this hypothesis goes beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> According to Vetter (2020: 15-18), affordances are characterized by graded possibilities, based on actual states of affairs, such as the graspability of a mug, the floodability of a room, etc. Contrast this with the view that affordances are based on our *knowledge* of actual states of affairs, as they are to be understood in terms of counterfactual conditionals (Scarantino 2003).

I conclude that, as they take atmospheres to be nested relations of affordances, Fernandez Velasco and Niikawa then see atmospheres as nested relations of joint potentialities, i.e., relations between other relations, where the latter obtain between fitting potentialities of objects and subjects. Which joint potentialities? On the one hand, environments' potentialities for provoking certain actions and bodily responses in certain subjects. On the other hand, agents' potentialities for performing certain actions and having certain bodily responses. An environment's and an agent's potentialities, together, give rise to the joint potentiality for the environment to make the agent act and react in certain ways. I suggest that, according to this view, for instance, the shady atmosphere of a dark street with dilapidated buildings is a relation between a number of joint potentialities, such as: (a) a dark street's potentiality for making a subject feel wary and uncomfortable (or something along those lines) and a subject's fitting potentiality for feeling wary and uncomfortable (or something along those lines) when in a dark street; and (b) dilapidated buildings' potentiality for making a subject feel wary and uncomfortable when confronted with them and a subject's fitting potentiality for feeling wary and uncomfortable when confronted with dilapidated buildings.

## 2. Atmospheres, a-moods, and fusions of properties

Let us now look at Jagnow's account of the experience of atmospheres. He defends three main claims: (a) that experiences of atmospheres are *sui generis* types of affective states: affective states different from moods or emotions, because they can be experienced without having the relevant emotion or mood; (b) that "ambient sensible qualities, play an important role in determining the overall phenomenal character of atmospheres" (22); (c) that some paintings produce atmospheres thanks to the fact that their pictorial space is depicted as filled with ambient light – an "ambient sensible quality". For the sake of this paper's argument, I shall just concentrate on claims (a) and (b).

Let us start with (a). Jagnow (2024: 21) subscribes to Jesse Prinz' influential proposal that distinguishes between emotions, that are representational states about objects, and moods, which are representational states about "how we are doing in life overall" (Prinz 2004, 185). Furthermore, Jagnow suggests that, to make sense of the fact that we can experience an atmosphere of, say, excitement, without being in an excited mood, or feeling positively affected by an environment in a way that makes us feel excited, we ought to distinguish between the case when an affective state causes a mood or an emotion, and the case when an affective state is experienced in relation to an atmosphere. The latter experience takes place when we perceive certain qualities of a space which, under appropriate conditions, elicit an atmospheric mood in us (an "a-mood"). An a-mood is a *sui-generis* representational affective state, because its content has two aspects:

One aspect is world-directed and represents the surrounding space, say, for example, as expressing gloominess or excitement. The other aspect is directed at the subject, representing the subject to itself as being affected by the atmosphere in ways that correspond to the expressive qualities of the surrounding space. Expressive qualities are usually taken to be expressions of emotions or other affective states. For example, given certain features, a face is said to express happiness or anger. Now, the surrounding space cannot actually be in a gloomy or excited a-mood. I therefore suggest that when we experience an atmosphere, as, say, gloomy or excited, we project the affect of the a-mood onto the surrounding space. [...] Since the content of the a-mood has two aspects, we experience ourselves as, say, in a gloomy or excited a-mood, and simultaneously project the affect of this a-mood onto the surrounding space. As a result, we experience the surrounding space as gloomy or excited, and we experience ourselves as affected by these expressive qualities." (21)

The above passage requires some unpacking, which Jagnow does not provide. Let me give it a try. According to Jagnow, we represent atmospheric environments as: (a) expressing feelings or moods (this is why we may say that Venice is poignant and that a certain party is happy); (b) affecting us in virtue of those feelings (this is why we may say that we feel Venice's poignancy and the party's happiness). This, however, is not how things stand. In the first place, environments cannot express feelings or moods, because they are not subjects who can experience feelings or moods. From this it follows that environments cannot affect us in virtue of the feelings or moods they express. Still, Jagnow explains, environments can affect us in virtue of their atmospheric properties, and when they do so they produce a-moods in us – i.e., affective states that do not amount to proper moods or feelings. To put it in terms of Jennifer Robinson's (2007) distinction, environments cannot *express* moods, but they can *be expressive of* moods: to have a certain atmosphere is, for an environment, to be expressive of a certain mood. According to Jagnow, to describe the mood an environment is expressive of, we describe the a-mood the environment elicits in us in terms of the corresponding mood the environment would express if it actually expressed a mood.

Let us now look at (b): Jagnow claims that it is the "ambient sensible qualities present in a scene" that are key to atmospheric experiences

because we experience them not just as individual sensible qualities, but rather as fused together in a way that results in a new and distinctive phenomenal character. [...] we recognize an atmosphere by recognizing the



distinctive phenomenal character that results from the fusion of the ambient sensible qualities. This also explains how experiences of atmospheres can persist even if certain individual ambient sensible qualities change. [22].

What are ambient sensible qualities? They are qualities that we perceive as divorced from particular objects and as, instead, permeating the space surrounding objects. While we perceive, say, the redness of a flower, the blueness of the sky, and so on, we perceive, for instance, the delicate light tones permeating the area occupied by a certain park at dawn, or the lively sounds permeating a city street. The latter are ambient sensible qualities. Importantly, since ambient sensible qualities are perceived as fused together, thus producing an experience with a certain phenomenal character – the peaceful park, the vibrant street – it is possible that experiences with the same phenomenal character be produced by different arrays of ambient sensible qualities. For instance, a certain street might feel vibrant both as a result of a combination of human voices, trumpet sounds, and car noise permeating it and as a result of a combination of human voices, clarinet sounds, and sounds of barking dogs permeating it.

To recap, according to Jagnow, atmospheres are expressive properties of environments. When we experience those properties, (i) they affect us; (ii) we represent the environment as expressing a mood; (iii) we represent ourselves as affected by such mood. What really happens, however, is the following: (i) environments have atmospheric properties, which do not express moods, but are expressive of moods; (ii) environments affect us in virtue of their atmospheric properties, producing a-moods in us.

### 3. Assessing Fernandez Velasco & Niikawa and Jagnow: atmospheres are properties of environments and are not affective properties

In this section, drawing from Voltolini (in progress), I argue that while both Fernandez Velasco & Niikawa and Jagnow correctly predicate atmospheres of environments, they wrongly claim, in accordance with typical phenomenological accounts of atmospheres, that atmospheres are intrinsically affective.

As we have seen, Fernandez Velasco & Niikawa claim that atmospheres emerge from environments presenting nested affordances and Jagnow argues that atmospheres are “ambient sensible qualities”, i.e., qualities that we perceive as divorced from particular objects and as, instead, permeating the space surrounding objects – thus, he takes atmospheres to be properties of environments. No matter the metaphysical differences between the two views (as we have seen, the former understands atmospheres as subject-object dispositional properties, while the latter understands them as properties of environments), both claim that atmospheres emerge from environments. This claim squares well with the view of atmospheres that is widespread in the phenomenological literature.

I have no qualms with the claim that atmospheres emerge from environments. We typically predicate atmospheres of environments and this is also true, I believe, of when we claim that, say, a Christmassy atmospheres emerges from a certain piece of music: namely, what we mean is that, while listening to that piece of music, the space around us appears to be permeated by a Christmassy atmosphere (incidentally, this is why Christmas music is played in shops well in advance of Christmas time to boost shopping).

Despite their metaphysical differences, Fernandez Velasco & Niikawa and Jagnow also agree on another claim: that atmospheres have intrinsically affective character, even though we do not necessarily need to experience certain feelings or to be in certain moods while experiencing atmospheres. According to the former, experiencing an atmosphere is experiencing a field of affordances, which involves having an affective reaction to what we experience – an affective reaction that is, however, distinct from a feeling or a mood. Not dissimilarly, according to the latter, experiences of atmospheres are *sui generis* types of affective states: affective states different from moods or emotions, because they can be experienced without having the relevant emotion or mood. Again, the claim that atmospheres are intrinsically affective, albeit they do not necessarily elicit feelings or moods, squares well with the view of atmospheres that is widespread in the phenomenological literature.

The claim that atmospheres are intrinsically affective, albeit they do not necessarily elicit feelings or moods is, however, controversial. While it is correct to argue that atmospheres do not necessarily elicit feelings or moods (we don't need to feel happy to, say, experience the happy atmosphere of a party), it is, as I shall explain, doubtful that atmospheres are nevertheless affective. -

Let us first look Fernandez Velasco & Niikawa's proposal. Their view, as I understand it, is comprised of two claims: (i) that, at the metaphysical level, atmospheres involve not only physical properties of an environment but also the affective agency of the subject experiencing it; (ii) that, at phenomenological level, atmosphere perception is affective, albeit it need not elicit feelings or moods in the experiencer. Importantly, the two points are disjoint, and we do not need to engage with (i) here. I contend that, no matter what view one holds on the metaphysics of atmospheres, there is no rationale for (ii). Why insist that atmospheric properties are, phenomenologically, at some minimal level, intrinsically affective, while at the same time granting that they need not elicit typical affective responses in the experiencer, when it would be more straightforward simply to claim that atmospheric properties are not intrinsically affective? The thesis

that, metaphysically, atmospheric properties involve the affective agency of the subject does not entail the phenomenological claim that the experience of atmospheric properties is, at some level, affective.

As for Jagnow's claim that atmospheres are intrinsically affective, despite not eliciting feelings or moods, it is supported by his view of expressivity, according to which experiencing expressive properties amounts to having an experience with an affective tone, and a representational content with two aspects: on the one hand, we project the affective tone onto the object that possesses the expressive property, thus representing it as expressive of a feeling or a mood; on the other hand, we represent ourselves as affected by the object in virtue of its expressing a feeling or a mood. However, it is equally possible to conceive of atmospheres as higher-order perceptual properties of environments that are neither expressive (in Jagnow's sense) nor affectively valenced.<sup>3</sup> This view squares more intuitively with the observation that one may be completely emotionally detached and still experience atmospheres. So, why follow Jagnow when a simpler route to the understanding of atmospheres is available?

Let us take stock. Concurring with Voltolini (in progress), I suggested that atmospheres are correctly predicated of environments; moreover, I submitted that it is preferable to conceive of them as of higher order properties of environments which have no intrinsically affective dimension. Two things remain true, however: in the first place, that the so far prevailing view of atmospheres casts them as intrinsically affective – to reiterate, this is the view that grasping, say, the poignant character of Venice involves being moved by the city at some level and most scholars agree on it (in addition to the two papers discussed here, see also, e.g., Griffero 2014b; Schmitz 2016; Trigg 2021); in the second place, that it is quite intuitive to conceive of atmospheres as bound to producing affective reactions. Admittedly, one may not participate in the joyful atmosphere of a lively party, and one may remain indifferent to the shady atmosphere of a run-down back alley, or the poignant atmosphere of Venice, but it seems, nevertheless, that those are not the standard ways in which one experiences those atmospheric places. The next section further discusses the link between atmospheric experiences and affective ones.

#### 4. Affective reactions to environments experienced from within

In this section, I argue that: (i) there is a widespread assumption that environments are particularly well suited to produce affective reactions in the experiencers when they are experienced from within; (ii) given that atmospheres are predicated of environments, it is likely that something like the view that environments experienced from within are particularly well suited to produce affective reactions in the experiencers grounds the intuition that atmospheres are intrinsically affective.

With “environments” I refer to portions of the three-dimensional world and to simulations of the three-dimensional world (such as those provided by virtual reality technologies). Sometimes, spatial properties of those environments are such that they prominently figure in the emergence basis of atmospheres. The poignant atmosphere of Venice, for instance, is clearly grounded in, among other things, the ancient and partially worn-off look of its buildings. Other times, however, spatial properties of the environment do not figure prominently in the emergence basis of an atmosphere, and what is prominent are, instead, properties of an event that takes place in the environment. The joyful atmosphere of a party, for instance, may be grounded in the music heard within the party's environment, as well as in the actions (e.g., dancing, chatting) of the participants who inhabit the environment.

With “environments experienced from within” I refer to portions of the three-dimensional world and to simulations of the three-dimensional world experienced from subjects who inhabit them and can explore them, as opposed to environments that subjects merely contemplate from a distance. Contrast, on the one hand, a labyrinth as experienced from the inside, with, on the other hand, the same labyrinth contemplated from the top of a hill with an eagle's eye vantagepoint. Contrast, also, a party taking place in a room as experienced from the inside with the same party as, say, observed from windows overlooking those of the room where it is taking place.

In support of (i), I offer the following remarks, concerning three contemporary environment-based media which are renowned for their capability of producing affective reactions in their public: virtual reality, installation art, and Theatre of The Oppressed plays. Some virtual-reality works offer *plank simulations*: they allow the public to have a simulated egocentric experience of balancing on a narrow wooden plank high above the ground; the experience typically produces affective reactions of fear and anxiety. The plank simulation is used to highlight the link between the fact that virtual reality presents simulations of environments that one experiences egocentrically from within and the fact that while engaging with those environments from within experiencers are particularly prone to react affectively to them (Balcerak Jackson and Balcerak Jackson 2024: 18-19). The view that virtual reality environments are particularly effective in

<sup>3</sup> This view was thoroughly explored and defended by Elisabetta Sacchi in the talk “In Defense of a Perceptual Model of our Apprehension of Atmospheres” delivered at the “Philosophy of Atmospheres” Conference, University of Turin, 27-29 November 2025.

producing affective reactions is widespread, and filmmaker Chris Milk has even described virtual reality as an “empathy machine”.<sup>4</sup> Virtual-reality works such as Alexandro Gonzales Iñárritu’s *Carne y Arena* (2017) or Anagram’s *Goliath* (2021) – to name just a couple – revolve around the affective potential of this medium. The former allows the public to experience the USA/Mexico border from a perspective close to that of a migrant crossing the border from Mexico, who is exposed to the dangers of walking in the desert and encountering the border police – experiencers arousing fearful feelings, even when just simulated. The latter is a first-person narration of the story of a man suffering from schizophrenia, who lives in isolation in a psychiatric institution and connects with other people by playing multiplayer games. The narrative element is, however, not dominant; rather, the work presents a collection of scenes in visual styles deeply different from each other, some evoking episodes from the man’s life, others in the form of playable minigames. This is meant to bring the egocentric experiencer closer to the person who suffers from psychosis, generating in her confusion and anxiety, thus making her somehow understand, at the experiential and affective level, what it is to have schizophrenia.

Let us now consider installation art: works in this art form present the public with environments that are appropriately experienced from within (see, e.g., Bishop 2005; Caldarola 2020) – in other words, the experience of installation art is egocentric, just like the experience of virtual reality. Installation art, too, often makes it easy for its public to react affectively while experiencing it; furthermore, the presence of the public within the space of installation works, and the possibilities of interaction afforded by the works, seem crucial for many works of installation art to exert their affective power (Caldarola and Leñador 2024: section 5). Take, for instance, Olafur Eliasson and Minik Rosing’s *Ice Watch* (2014) – a work that has been installed in a variety of public spaces around Northern European cities. The installation is comprised of twelve ice blocks which were originally free-floating icebergs in Greenland. The ice blocks are arranged in a circle, Stonehenge- and watch-like. Throughout the duration of the installation, the ice blocks slowly melt down, while the public is allowed to walk around them and touch them. The whole scene is tinged with sadness, and quite a few spectators have been seen embracing the ice blocks, as if they were mourning their departure. Being around the melting blocks of ice is, it seems, more affectively engaging than looking at pictures of melting icebergs – a subject of much recent artistic photographs, which however, unlike *Ice Watch*, are not renowned for their remarkable affective potential.

Finally, consider Theatre of The Oppressed works. Theatre of The Oppressed is a form of community-based interactive theatre, developed by Augusto Boal in the 1960s. While in earlier productions the interactive aspect of these works consisted in the public yelling out suggestions to actors following a prewritten script which merely sketched out the narrative arc of the play, in later productions the interactive character of the works consisted in the fact that members of the public were cast in the role of actors and brought on stage. Here, I am interested in the latter cases. Importantly, Boal’s goal was to produce transformative experiences in the public of his plays – typically, members of disadvantaged communities. The works represented real-world conflictual scenarios familiar to their public, whose members were invited to play and contribute creatively to both the characters with which they identified and their antagonists. Participants were prompted to find ways to solve the conflict at the center of the play during their participatory performance. By having members of the public take part in plays where key conflicts found a resolution, and even find themselves in the shoes of their real-life antagonists, Boal aimed to “create empathy and trigger enough of an emotional response to activate the audience into positive actions” (Bullard 2025: n.p.). Thus, I submit that Theatre of The Oppressed is yet another case in which an environment experienced from within (by members of the public doubling up as performers) has been conceived as particularly well-suited to producing affective reactions in the experiencers.

As we have seen, atmospheres are correctly predicated of environments, and environments are sets of objects which are typically experienced from within. As the above examples show, different art forms that present the public with environments that are meant to be experienced from within clearly exploit those environments’ high capability for arousing affective reactions in those who explore them. This suggests the hypothesis that environments experienced from within are typically considered especially effective at producing affective responses. I propose that the reason why it is natural to think of atmospheres as intrinsically affective might be grounded in the view that environments experienced from within are really good at engaging experiencers affectively. More specifically, I suggest that, behind the claim that atmospheres are intrinsically affective, the following invalid argument might be at work:

(P1) Environments experienced from within are particularly suitable for arousing affective reactions in the experiencer.

(P2) Atmospheric properties are properties of environments.

(C) Atmospheric properties are intrinsically affective properties.

<sup>4</sup> <https://youtu.be/UxhY9iKP3DI?si=pcvh3OJQ0x9fce8Z>

While both (P1) and (P2) are true, (C), however, does not follow from them. Rather, the conclusion that follows from (P1) and (P2) is (C\*): Atmospheric properties of environments experienced from within and/or some other properties of those environments and/or other factors make those environments particularly suitable for arousing affective reactions in the experiencers.

As for why one might be tempted by the invalid argument I reconstructed, I believe this has to do with the fact that the existence of a correlation between two phenomena can be confused with the existence of a causal link between the two, as well as with a slip towards overgeneralization. The correlation between the experience of affective responses to environments and the experience of atmospheres of environments is confused with the obtaining of the relation whereby an atmosphere causes one to have an affective response. Moreover, the claim that atmospheres produce affective responses in experiencers is overgeneralized and thus transformed into the claim that atmospheres invariably produce affective responses in experiencers.

I thus submit that the claim that atmospheres are intrinsically affective is unwarranted: in the first place, we should not confuse the (purportedly) high capability of an environment experienced from within to engage us affectively with the much stronger claim that an environment experienced from within necessarily produces affective reactions in those who experience it. Furthermore, even if this were true, it would not amount to proving that it is the *atmospheric* properties of such an environment that invariably provoke such affective reactions. Other properties of the environment, for instance, might be responsible for this – e.g., expressive properties which are both different from atmospheric ones and such that they invariably produce an affective reaction in the experiencer. Consider a row of houses sitting on top of a bare hill and arranged so that, when seen frontally from a small distance, they recall the shape of a smile; assume, for the sake of the argument, that anytime one sees the “smiling row” one is prompted to react affectively to it (usually, positively so); finally, imagine that, on a sunny spring day, a lively atmosphere exudes from the row of houses and that from one’s small-distance, frontal viewpoint, one can see flowers blooming in the front gardens, people cycling around, and trees casting beautiful shadows on parts of the otherwise sun-lit façades of the houses. Suppose one feels a bout of happiness while looking at such a scene: how can one be sure that their affective reaction isn’t prompted by the fact that the row appears to be smiling, just like any other day, rather than by the fact that there is a lively atmosphere exuding from that scene on that particular day?<sup>5</sup>

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