“Un Uncertain Atmosphere”: Towards a Sensorial Reading of Strange Films

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What I intend to discuss here is the articulation between three different dimensions of the cinematic experience that are connected by means of the notion of “ambience”—I use this neologism as a necessarily imperfect translation of the German word “Stimmung”: the problem of film genre, the role of sound and music in the elaboration of filmic atmospheres and the issue of the spectator’s body as a machinic entity interwoven with cinema’s technological apparatus. My main goal is to argue for the development of new forms of film criticism that are better equipped to deal with the non-hermeneutical aspects of cinematographic experience. I believe we can find one interesting critical tool in Gumbrcheht’s notion of *Stimmung*. A technique for reading the Stimmung in artworks enables us to connect the spectator’s body and its affections, normally absent from much film criticism, with the problem of film genre. It is therefore important to begin with a brief discussion about film genres because it is precisely in genre films where the material and corporeal dimensions of film experience manifest themselves more clearly. Here, in fact, we can say: the more stereotypical, the better. In genres such as Science Fiction and Horror not only the issue of special effects, i.e., the most technological components of film, gains preeminence, but also the problematic of the body in its most material and pornographic dimensions becomes of central relevance.

It is perhaps no coincidence that these genres always tended to be frowned upon, given that the whole of our philosophical tradition has valued the spiritual in detriment of the bodily. The academic endeavor was always particularly averse to everything related with bodily functions. There is something deeply disturbing in the conjugation between the ethereal universe of mental life and the passions of the body. Perhaps that’s one of the reasons why the character of professor Erika Kohut, in Michael Haneke’s “The Piano Teacher”, strikes us as a detestable figure. How can we reconcile her sophisticated love for Schubert and Schumann with the terrible masochistic perversions that afflict her psyche? That’s why I was always seduced by marginal intellectual enterprises such as Dominique Laporte’s “History of Shit” or Juan Orbe’s “Borges Abajo”, a
magnificent study on the role of latrines, guts and fecal matter in one of the most ethereal and metaphysical writers of postmodernism, Jorge Luis Borges.

In fact, the relationship between academics and cinema was always problematic. As guardians of the spirit and the humanistic tradition was it not their mission to uphold the immaterial values of good art? It is worth remembering that the first serious academic work on film theory continually stresses the moral dangers of cinema. At a time when movies were seen as a banal distraction for the masses, Hugo Münsterberg wrote in “The Photoplay” about the rupture of our “moral balance” by means of the “realistic suggestions” of film. The representation of crime and perversion is too great a risk for social life, states the Harvard professor of Psychology. After all, “the possibilities of psychical infection and destruction cannot be overlooked” (p. 222). However, perhaps unaware of it, Munsterberg was also the first thinker of the technological and material components of the cinematic experience. According to him, cinema is an “objectification” of our psychic faculties, and techniques such as the flash-back and the close-up translate into images our mental processes of memory and attention onto the film screen. By turning cinema, already in 1916, into a materialization of human psyche, Munsterberg offered contemporary media scholars an interesting theoretical apparatus. To be more precise, it was mainly the German thinkers of the so-called “German media theory” who sought inspiration in Munsterberg to elaborate a cybernetic view of the relationship between the cinematographic apparatus and the human organism. For Friedrich Kittler, for instance, Munsterberg demonstrated that “the transformation of a psychic apparatus into film-trick transformations is lethal for the mind [Geist] as such. Mathematical equations can be solved in either direction, and the title "psychotechnology" already suggests that film theories based on experimental psychology are at the same time theories of the psyche (soul) based on media technologies” (p. 246).

In other words, cinema “kills” the soul. It reduces the Geist to a series of technological procedures, which can be later visualized on a blank screen. It is only because there is a relationship of structural similarity between psyche and technology that such a theory can be formulated. Within this context, the term “psychic apparatus” takes on a very literal meaning, given the essential equivalence professed by cybernetics between organisms and machines. What
should be of interest in Munsterberg is not primarily how he would interpret such and such film, but rather how he sets out to investigate a certain material-technological dimension of the spectatorial experience.

Something similar could be said of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, in case he decided to devote some of his writings to the exploration of cinema. In fact, it’s a pity that Gumbrecht almost never offers us cinematographic examples or illustrations of his theses. Even his analysis of Death in Venice focuses on Thomas Mann’s novel, but not a single line is dedicated to Visconti’s film adaptation. But what exactly is Gumbrecht referring to when he highlights the peculiar “Stimmung” of Death in Venice? For Gumbrecht the whole book transpires a feeling of death in life. I quote: “it is the evocation of a certain fin-de-siècle decadence in all its complexity—all the nuances, smells, colors, sounds, and, above all, dramatic changes of weather—that has made this work so celebrated” – pg. 7). In her Dictionary of Untranslatables, philosopher Barbara Cassin elaborates on the difficulties of translating the German notion of "Stimmung". The word seems to manifest an interesting and complex combination between its musical sense (stimmen often means "to tune an instrument") and a mental disposition. In other words, "Stimmung" may indicate a state of harmony or attunement between outside (the environment) and inside (body/mind). This notion has a long literary tradition and occupies an important position in Heidegger’s philosophical vocabulary. It has recently reemerged in the field of aesthetics. In Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: on a Hidden Potential of Literature, Gumbrecht denounces the exhaustion of interpretation practices in literary criticism and suggests that analytical strategies based on the investigation of “ambiences” should replace them. Such a “reading for Stimmungen” consists in the exploration of the material aspects of the artwork, the non-hermeneutical component at which we can only point our finger in a “deictic manner”. In fact, we can only point at it, because, as a singular material quality, it cannot be ultimately described with concepts. For Gumbrecht we now live in a “presence culture” (as opposed to “meaning cultures”), in which the body and all material phenomena occupy a privileged position in our daily experience. In such a culture, at least among the nonprofessional readers of literature, the dominant
mode of cultural consumption would be much more geared towards atmospheres than meanings. In other words, while film and literary criticism still operate mostly according to hermeneutic procedures (with the “aid of the soul”, one could say), contemporary popular readings of cultural products seek for their material and entertainment values.

I should open a parenthesis here. I've always wondered about the cover of *Production of Presence*. It's a strange cover for an academic book, with this big picture of Gumbrecht, as if he were a Hollywood actor or a celebrity. Academics are usually shy; they don't show off like this. They don't usually display big photos of themselves on the cover of their books. However, now I realize that this is in perfect alignment with Gumbrecht's ideas. He doesn't want to be seen as a thinker of the hermeneutic tradition, where the body of the author should completely disappear to make room for his spirit. He doesn't want to be regarded as a guardian of metaphysics, but as a materialist thinker that derives important consequences from the materiality of the body and from the physical presence of the scholar. In fact, this reminds me of a very curious episode in cinema history, the phenomenon of “MacMahonism”. The *Cinéma Macmahon* was an important cine-club in Paris founded by Pierre Rissient after the war. They had a journal, called *Présence du Cinéma*, and were responsible for the creation of what Joan Hawkins sees as one of the strangest cults in cinema history – the “Charlton Heston cult”. Michel Mourlet, the coeditor of *Présence du Cinéma* wrote a very intriguing piece, arguing that Charlton Heston’s physical presence, with the “somber phosphorescence of his eyes” and his “prominent cheek bones” creates and aesthetic power and a mystique that not even the worst director can degrade. In fact, according to Mourlet, “his presence in any film – no matter what it is – suffices to incite beauty”. In other words, Heston “embodies” cinema, since – and I really have to quote this – “by his existence alone, outside of all film, he brings a more accurate definition to cinema than films like *Hiroshima mon Amour* or *Citizen Kane*, whose aesthetic either ignores or impugns Charlton Heston”. This was certainly a Hollywood inspired ‘machista’ culture that was however part and parcel of the French New Wave, as we can see in films like *Breathless* and *Shoot the Piano Player*. In fact, Michel Mourlet’s peculiar essay on the magic
of Charlton Heston was not published in *Présence du Cinéma*, but rather in the prestigious *Cahiers du Cinéma*. This not only is a magnificent demonstration of the paradoxical encounter between low culture and high cinematic art, as Hawkins suggests, but also a very meaningful demonstration of presence phenomena, according to Gumbrecht's definition of the notion. Heston's presence creates a very specific “atmosphere” of machismo and homoeroticism that contaminates the works where he appears and produces a powerful effect beyond any other possible narrative contents of the films themselves.

In that sense, more than just highlighting the profitability of a theory of “Stimmungen” for film, I want to stress its important connections with the issue of genre, for it is precisely in genre films that one may find a privileged domain of analysis for the investigation of “presence phenomena” in current times. In fact, as Joan Hawkins observes, the so-called body genres, such as horror and pornography, “directly address the spectator’s body” (2005, p. 5) and require a mobilization of affects and sensations to a much higher degree than it is usually the case in art films. Body genres are characterized by “an apparent lack of proper aesthetic distance, a sense of overinvolvement in sensation and emotion” (p. 5). However, Hawkins also dismisses the possibility of rigid cultural demarcations, since experimental cinema and the body genres often meet in their shared interest for the material components of filmic experience. Surrealists, for instance, were obsessed with the creative potentialities of horror and pornography. According to Hawkins, “the categorical difference between low and high genres, body genres and elite art—both inside and outside the cinematic beltway—is difficult to define” (p. 7). In fact, it is very often in the context of hybrid or liminal works that the concept of “ambience” proves to be more fruitful. By occupying a strange space situated between the cultural territories of “genre film” and “art cinema”, such works tend to disturb our logical operators and revel in the production of sensations and affects. *Malpertuis* (1971), Harry Kumel’s strange and obscure film also known as “The Legend of Doom House”, is a textbook example of this hybrid category of cinematic works. Although it operates within the traditional boundaries of cinematographic experience – passive spectatorship, projection on a single
screen, temporally delimited exhibition –, a film like Malpertuis undermines the common presuppositions behind the idea of linear narration and focus on the interpretation of meanings by the audience. Besides, as I intend to show, Malpertuis makes a very singular use of sound in order to convey its peculiar atmosphere – and sound is of the utmost importance here.

Even though his academic trajectory as a scholar in Romance Languages leads Gumbrecht to appeal most naturally to literary examples, with Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung and particularly with After 1945, it’s possible to observe an increasing number of references derived from music, painting, theater and even cinema in his work. This is not surprising, considering that most studies dealing with the notion of atmosphere were developed in the field of literary studies, and only a handful approach cinema. I can mention, for instance, Inês Gil’s work in Continental Portuguese, A Atmosfera no Cinema (2006). In that sense, it is a shame that Gumbrecht never mentions Jorge Luis Borges’ most famous and intriguing definition of the aesthetic experience, which can be found in his essay “The Wall and the Books” (La Muralla y los Libros) and perfectly illustrates the notion of Stimmung: “Music, feelings of happiness, mythology, faces worn by time, certain twilights and certain places, want to tell us something, or they told us something that we should not have missed, or they are about to tell us something; this imminence of a revelation that is not produced is, perhaps, ‘the aesthetic event’”. Here, the “aesthetic event” is described as something that cannot be articulated, a sensation or “ambience” rather than a concept that could be translated into words. This poetic definition of the aesthetic event is markedly close to the one Gumbrecht uses to describe the notion of latency in After 1945: “In a situation of latency, when a stowaway is present, we sense that something (or somebody) is there that we cannot grasp or touch—and that this “something” (or somebody) has a material articulation, which means that it (or he, or she) occupies space. We are unable to say where, exactly, our certainty of the presence comes from, nor do we know where, precisely, what is latent is located now” (23). To repeat Borges’ words, we are here dealing with something that “we should not have missed” or that is “about to tell us something”. It is meaningful that the German word for stowaways is blinde
Passagiere, literally “blind passengers”, as we can see in the title of a thick volume organized by Gumbrecht: Latenz, Blinde Passagiere in den Geisteswissenschaften (2011). This is not, of course, because they are blind, but rather because they cannot be seen. They are stowaways in the Humanities (Geisteswissenschaften) for they comprise the (material) elements that the Human Sciences have traditionally tried to conceal and repress, given its almost exclusive focus on the immaterial and spiritual (Geist). That is the reason why Friedrich Kittler, with his customary bombastic rhetoric, proclaims that it is time for us to expel the spirit (Geist) from the Humanities (Geisteswissenschaften): “die Austreibung des Geistes aus den Geisteswissenschaften”. I want to focus on the word with which Borges begins his definition of the aesthetic fact, music, since it will play a fundamental role in the propositions that follow.

Music is important because it constitutes the perfect example of what notions such as Stimmung and Latenz imply. As Gumbrecht explains, we don't hear just with our ears: “hearing is a complex form of behavior that involves the entire body” (p. 3). Each perceived sound is a form of physical reality that “happens to our body” and “surrounds” it entirely. Music offers us the opportunity of an experience where outside and inside, environment and body, undergo a relativization of their borders. When listening to music, my body feels the vibrations; it is “touched” by sound, involved by its “ambience” (in more or less the same way it happens with the weather). Here's how Gumbrecht describes the notion of Stimmung in After 1945: “weather, sounds, and music all have a material yet invisible impact on us” (23).

Gumbrecht’s observations on music are strikingly similar to the reflections of another author whom I consider to be a forefather to contemporary “German media theory”: Vilém Flusser. In his recently translated book Gestures (2014, orig: ), Flusser develops a phenomenology of gestures that is shot through with the concept of Stimmung. By means of a careful analysis even of the most ordinary human actions, such as the gesture of shaving or using a typewriter, Flusser creates a theory of gestuality that continually engages with issues of materiality and bodily presence. The gesture of music listening composes one of the most interesting sections in the book. This gesture, he argues, is not based upon any specific movement, but rather on a general
positioning of the body (Körperstellung) (153). What can be experienced in music listening is not something clearly identifiable (notwithstanding the fact that music is also a code that requires decipherment). It is something that always escapes us, no matter how hard we try to capture it. The gesture of music listening is typically the “horchen”, an attentive listening (“to harken”, in English). It is the word that appears in Rilke's famed verse in The Book of Hours, and by means of which the narrator expresses the attitude of a monk who secretly tries to listen to God without disturbing him: “ich horche immer, gieb ein kleines Zeichen” (I'm always listening, give me a small sign) (1982, p. 11). According to Flusser, the body is permeable to different kinds of flow, and the sound waves capture it (ergreifen), creating a vibration not only of the auricular nerve, but also of the body as a whole. The body concentrates these waves inside of it, as though it had been turned itself into music and music had gained a body. In Greek, Flusser explains, this is called pathein, and its effect is the creation of empathy in the message. In common parlance, this pathetic experience is translated with words like “happiness”, “love”, “desire”, “beauty” and so on. However – and this is a very important observation – “no experience demonstrates as forcefully as listening to music that mind, soul, and intellect are words that name physical processes” (p. 115). For Flusser, the body is a cybernetic black box in which inputs and outputs are produced. When listening to music, man finds himself no longer in a subject-object relationship with the world, but becomes rather pure relationality (reines Verhältnis).

In the cinema, the immaterial dimensions of sound and image often cooperate to produce experiences of corporeal and material order. To be sure, not all cinematographic experiences are focused on the production of such material effects. Perhaps this is precisely the hybrid cultural territory where genre films and vanguard works, popular and elite art, occasionally meet. Belgian filmmaker Harry Kümel promoted this peculiar encounter throughout his career, and it’s no coincidence that he achieved international fame through a horror film. In their extensive study on European sex and horror films from the 1950s to the 1980s, Immoral Tales, Cathal Tohil and Pete Tombs define Kümel's work Daughters of Darkness as a
“heavily stylized vampire film” that is “indebted to the Belgian symbolist artists of the late 19th Century, painters like Fernand Knopf and Leon Spilaert. The color scheme of the film and its hard-edged lighting were deliberately chosen to evoke the dry, still and haunted look of the Symbolists. Kümel [...] shot all the exteriors early in the morning or late at night to give the film a sinister and dreamlike feel” (p. 255).

Daughters of Darkness enabled Kümel to amass the funds required for his next film, Malpertuis (1972), based on a fantastic and surrealist novel by “pulp” writer Jean Ray. Kümel extracts from the novel its most fantastic ingredients and thereby creates a very strange work, a “painterly” film where Flemish art occupies a central position (specially the works of painter James Ensor). After returning to his native town, sailor Yann finds out that his childhood home had been destroyed by a fire in which his parents died. He gets involved in a brawl in a bar and later wakes up in his uncle Cassavius’ mansion. Cassavius is dying and several strange characters, which also dwell in the mansion (supposedly family members), covet his inheritance. After a series of mysterious events, Yann finds out that the inhabitants of Malpertuis are in fact the old Greek Gods, living in a state of decadence. Cassavius had encountered them in an abandoned island on the Ionic sea, and now he keeps them captive in a prison situated outside of time and space.

Actor Mathieu Carriere, who plays the main character, acknowledges that Malpertuis has a camp atmosphere typical of B-movies, but its complexity and sophisticated plot function as redeeming qualities. In an early review published in Séquences (1973), Huguette Poitras acidly criticizes the film’s burlesque and camp inclinations. This is the customary opposition between art film and genre film - in this particular case, horror, a low genre from which the film is saved by its psychoanalytical penchants, which elevate the work to a superior level. More relevant for the purposes of this presentation is Poitras’s use of the word “atmosphere”, in a passage that describes the film as “mysterious and uncertain” (une atmosphère mystérieuse et incertaine), a realm “governed by obscure forces as powerful as destiny itself” (p.23). One could argue exactly the opposite: what makes Malpertuis an interesting work is precisely the combination between its “campy” mood and the complexity of the plot; forced acting and rich
visual references to the universe of Flemish plastic arts; typical B-movie situations, shots and sound elements and the dense, philosophical dialogues of the characters. It is this in-between aspect, indefinably situated in the intersection of horror and sublime, comical and grandiose, erotic and philosophical, genre typologies and experimental singularities, that Malpertuis explores. The director was fully aware of these contrasts and explicitly refers to them by mentioning, in a DVD interview, the tension between his choice of a marginal genre and a respected, canonical actor, Orson Wells, to play the role of Cassavius. The film was selected for the 1972 edition of the Cannes Festival, but bound to failure thanks to the British editor, who tried to lend the work a balanced and organized aspect entirely in contradiction with its original spirit. Kümel himself produced a new montage for the Belgian premiere of the film, adding to its initial sequence a quote from Alice in Wonderland.

The film’s soundtrack was composed by Georges Delerue, who had worked with several celebrated directors, such as Goddard, Truffaut, Bertolucci and Louis Malle. Delerue was particularly gifted for the creation of immersive overtones, which encapsulated the spirit of the movies he worked in. Malpertuis’ musical score gives testimony to his versatility, by combining seemingly predictable and stereotypical structures (as is the case with the crescendos that announce the appearance of some key-characters, such as Cassavius) with bolder and more experimental musical phrases. One interesting example is the opening theme, a particularly “spectral” composition, in which a wind instrument is subsequently combined in the montage with the ship horns anchored in the port where the narrative begins. In an interview for the blog Film Music/Musique de Cinema, Kümel describes his experience with Delerue:

I remember having requested George that he provided me with a parody of the kind of music – if I dare say, “legato romantic”, which was normally expected of him – in order to underline the relative falsity of the love scenes between Nancy and Mathias Crook. He did it with pleasure; he told me he had drawers filled with these sort of old songs (rengaines). Several of them were intended for the Goddards and Truffauts, who appreciated this sort of “syrupy” music, given their lack of musical expertise. Above all, however, we spoke of the musical structure, and even without a musical ear one can recognize the themes, leitmotifs and harmonies that shape the whole. Georges was particularly proud of the grandiose theme announcing the closure of the narrative and which accompanies the “liberation” of the gods. He had imagined some kind of concert for an organ, and this solo
The repetition of these parodic, stereotypical and somewhat kitsch structures seems to highlight the general idea that Malpertuis is a labyrinth from which one cannot escape. To be sure, silence dominates for most of the film, with the occasional sound of echoing steps. The idea is that trying to escape is futile. There seems to be a permanent loop (spatial and temporal) that causes the characters to always return to the beginning of their course. This is what happens, for instance, in the scene where Yann appears to descend a staircase that never ends. When music emerges it is usually with parsimony and almost always expressing a tension between the sublime and the ironic. The use of harps and other instruments of spectral quality, the fairylike feel of the melodies and the deployment of some traditional musical markers of narrative situations (suspense, romance, horror) produce a singular combination, which instills in the audience a feeling of permanent discomfort. This atmosphere seems to impregnate the whole mansion, which is masterfully photographed by Gerry Fischer. With its flickering and ambiguous lights, Malpertuis is a claustrophobic, suffocating environment from which everyone attempts to escape but always unsuccessfully. Perhaps one of the clearest representations of this circular and closed structure is the scene (repeated at least four times in the film) where the family gathers in a room to listen to the (intradiegetic) music coming from a gramophone. The song played by the gramophone should be “C’est n’est qu’un rêve – un beau rêve d’amour” from Offenbach’s opera buffa “La Belle Hélène”. However, on account of legal issues it was replaced by an improvisation: the scenarist Jean Ferry wrote some verses and Delerue composed, in less than an hour, a song based on Offenbach, which was recorded with a small orchestra. Another instance of a perfect combination between montage, narrative and music happens during the cabaret fight, when the movements of the struggling bodies are interspersed with close-up shots of the musical instruments of the band that plays in the nightclub.

This interminable circular structure is what characterizes Malpertuis as a parabola on time and the two great axes of human existence: love and death (as the Gorgon describes herself to another character in the film). The
mansion of Malpertuis, as well as the city where it is located, clearly display the passage of time: they are ruins, debris, phantasmagoric spaces through which almost nobody circulates. The circular mythic temporality (the temporality of the Greek myths), which always leads back to the point of departure, is punctuated by the repetitive situations and musical structures. To go back to Borges, one could say that Malpertuis is a labyrinth made of time (see “The Garden of Forking Paths”). Eisengott (“irongod” or “the god of iron” in German), one of the many mysterious characters of the film, is no other than Chronos, the watchmaker who holds in his hands all the time in the universe. Malpertuis’ atmosphere is therefore the expression of an infernal temporality that repeats itself to exhaustion. The Greek gods long for death, but they can’t die; they strive for transformation, but they can never find it. By the end of the story, when the mystery is revealed, we apparently learn that everything was but a dream or delirium. Yann was committed to a mental institution where psychiatrists attempted to cure his state of madness. A rapid succession of contemporary televisual images enables the transition to a new state of affairs. Was it all a product of Yann’s phantasy? In the end, however, after opening a door, Yann finds himself again in Malpertuis. Steps are heard one more time, but it is a mirror image of the protagonist that approaches, a Doppelgänger of the character imprisoned in a vicious labyrinth of time.

In that sense, it is possible to speculate whether Malpertuis perfectly illustrates Gumbrecht’s thesis about the latency of time that would be characteristic of the postwar period in the West. At least two (if not all three) of the configurations that Gumbrecht attributes to the peculiar Stimmung of this period are present in Kümel’s film: “the first of the three configurations combines the claustrophobic feeling of being locked into a space that has ‘no exit’ with the opposing, yet complementary obsession of being outside a space that offers ‘no entry’” (2013, p. 35). The second can be summarized in the confrontation between the “different forms of desire for knowledge” with the “obstacles and problems that self-understanding faces” (p. 36). It is perhaps no coincidence that Gumbrecht, usually so economic in his mentions of cinematographic examples, appeals to a surrealist film, Buñuel’s The Exterminating Angel, as an example of the first configuration. In fact, Buñuel’s
and Kümel’s works deal both with the suffocating feeling of confinement in space and time that would be a fundamental aspect of the postwar *Stimmung*, according to Gumbrecht.

In the end, the fact that Yann’s alter ego is a computer programmer should not go unnoticed as a particularly poignant irony. If cinema was in fact instituted as an instrumental technology for the regulation and storage of time, as Kittler suggests, all we did ever since was an attempt to mortify and control the passage of time. “If the film called history is wound back, it will become an endless loop. What will soon end in the monopoly of bits and fiber optics began with the monopoly of writing” (xx). What began with writing and kept going with cinema must now end with the computer: “the medium to end all media”; the medium where all information and memory will reside, be it sound, image or text. But is that really and end or just another beginning on a disturbing interminable loop? The notion of atmosphere or ambience enables us to explore the mysterious in-between where the spectator’s body meets the cinematic apparatus and the power of taxonomy loses its grip. It is the strange realm of the encounter between the grotesque and the grandiose, the low and the high, in short: the imminence of a revelation that is not produced.

**References:**


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