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On resonances of Music and Atmosphere

The Slippery Slope of Causality

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Abstract. *Atmosphere and ambience have almost exclusively been studied as phenomena of space and place. Terms like immersion, surrounding space, environment, lived space, or envelopment are prevalent in research on atmosphere. Music and musical movement, in contrast, despite being a vital point of reference for concepts of atmosphere, involve a rather complicated set of relations to space, however defined. Rethinking atmosphere through music not only brings questions of dynamism, duration and performance to the fore but leads back to concerns with causality. In this paper, I investigate the atmospheric dynamics of religious rituals in Myanmar while drawing upon Schmitz's definition of atmosphere as half-thing. I further a notion of atmosphere as collective situation and dynamic performance.*

Keywords: *music, situation ontology, half-thing, new phenomenology*

The phenomenal spheres of music and sound are key in concepts of atmosphere. To fathom the 'hidden potentials of literature' Hans Ullrich Gumbrecht (2011) founds his notion of atmosphere on the etymological resonance between *Stimmung* as mood and *Stimmung* as musical tuning. So Gernot Böhme, who takes the musical instrument as a prime example of his New Aesthetic in order to conceptualise things not as bounded entities but as ecstatic objects that alter their modes of presence and radiate atmosphere (Böhme 2013). Timothy Morton mobilises concepts from the realm of sound and music, such as timbre and tone, and invokes the field of wind and acousmatics with the Aeolian, to elaborate what he terms ambient poetics (Morton 2007, 34). Hermann Schmitz suggests music to be the prime evidence for his theorem of 'feelings as atmosphere' (Schmitz [1978] 2005, 260); and Steven Connor develops what he terms 'atmospherics' by way of a history of radio sound (Connor 2006).

This list is far from being complete; music and sound seem to provide ample potential to approximate the slippery concepts of atmosphere, ambience, *Stimmung* or mood. This paper delves into the kinship, as explored by Schmitz, between music and atmosphere by critically thinking this link through religious rituals in Myanmar. Anglophone research on atmosphere has hitherto either evaded Schmitz' philosophy or unfortunately misconstrued his work (Anderson 2014; Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2014) not only because of the lack of available translations into English but also because of the ambiguous reception of Schmitz' work primarily through

Böhme (2013). Here, I shall hence put forth my reading of Schmitz' concepts at some length before turning to the rituals in Myanmar where, embedded in the vibrant playing of music, nonhumans or anthropomorphic spirits-like figures incarnate themselves in the midst of local communities.

Atmosphere as half-thing

Rather than taking music, sound or voice as mere metaphoric fields to flesh out atmosphere, Schmitz juxtaposes them with atmosphere and develops an onto-epistemology that aims at doing justice to their idiosyncrasies. Opposing them to a thing-ontology that renders music and atmosphere as mere (aesthetic) qualities of material worlds, he coins the term *half-thing* to accord them a status of their own. Let me quote Schmitz at some length here:

Half-things differ from full-things with regard to two properties. 1. Their duration can be interrupted, that is, they come and go, without there being any point in asking what they did in the meantime. 2. Whereas causality generally is tripartite, subdivided into cause (e.g. a falling stone), influence (e.g. impact) and effect (e.g. the destruction or dislodgement of the object hit), the causality of half-things is two-part and immediate in that cause and influence coincide. A typical example is the voice of a human which one throughout all its sonic permutations hears as the same voice; the sonic wave may increase, the voice, however, does not. If it falls silent, it is pointless to start looking for it and how it passes its interruptions. As a physical object, the voice takes effect via several intermediate stages of influence for instance, sonic waves or electric currents in the neurons [...]. Seen as a phenomenon however, a voice immediately takes effect, just like a gaze by which one is hit, not by intermediate stages of influence (Schmitz 2009, 84).

The idea of half-things has crucial consequences to both the study of music and atmosphere and in the following I shall identify two aspects of half things that I believe are of relevance to a study of music as atmosphere with regard to music in rituals.

First, half-things come and go without changing their place. In an ontology modelled upon things, existence is constrained to the being-in-a-certain-time-and-space, an idea that is easily universalised as paradigm for existence. Yet music and atmosphere continue to escape definitions of existence that rest on localisability in time and space; it is impossible to point at the place of a melody or a sound, and atmosphere eludes any attempt to identify its dimensions, centre, or moorage. Space and place are curious categories when it comes to both atmosphere and music. Is the voice to be found behind the door where you stand eavesdropping or is the atmosphere constrained to the space of the ritual in which a community carries out vital spiritual labour? Even when Euclidean space is rendered deficient for fathoming the peculiar spatiality of music or atmosphere, topological thinking remains tentative. Yet concepts of space have been the dominant paradigm in atmosphere studies. Twisting Schmitz' words, Böhme for instance defines atmospheres as 'feelings poured out *in space*' (Böhme 2013, 263, emphasis added). For him, atmospheres

belong to spaces and, accordingly, to the ‘bodily state of being of subjects in space’ (Böhme 1993, 122). In contrast, Schmitz coins the phrase that ‘feelings are spatially [...] poured out atmospheres’ (Schmitz 2009, 23), where the atmosphere exists not *in* but *as* a space, as a spatial extension (Schmitz 2014, 21). Despite his excessive use of topological terminology, space for Schmitz however only provides a conceptual means to counterbalance what is termed introjection, namely the identification of feelings with a subject’s inside. Notwithstanding the methodological advantage that notions of space provide, when it comes to questions of ontology⁵, Schmitz does not construe atmosphere in concepts of space but identifies them as half-things that exist in *phases of duration*, where movement can no longer be identified as change of location (Schmitz 2014, 31). While acknowledging spatiality of atmosphere, in distinction from Böhme he insists that atmosphere does not belong to space – however defined – but is best conceived of as situation (Schmitz 1998).

Secondly, while things can be separated from their influence, with half-things cause and influence coincide. As half-thing, music is no longer divided into an external physical stimulus of vibration measurable in time and space which then, mediated or grasped by the senses such as hearing and touch, would be translated through culture and traditions into feelings or internal states of a listening subject. In a phenomenological approach, music as half-thing takes effect immediately; it cannot be separated from its influence in the way a stone can be separated from its collision with another thing. Music, in short, has no existence detached from its impact. As a consequence, the notion of half-things subverts the dualism of material world and experienced world. Moreover, the coherence of cause and impact establishes what Griffero terms the authority of atmosphere. Atmospheres, he suggests, ‘exist in the proper sense [...] only in act, as actual facts and not factual facts – that is, only when we sense their authority’ (Griffero 2014, 201). When the atmosphere cannot be separated from its authority, that is, from the impact it has, then consequently atmospheres *are* their impacts. Atmosphere is not an object of perception, rather it *is* the continuous effect that it takes in the bodies present. Atmospheres and music as half-things are, following Schmitz, stirrings, alterations, interventions in the dynamics of the felt-body and consequently only become manifest in performance.

Rituals, or metaphysical parties

Following these conceptual preliminary considerations, I shall turn to religious rituals in Myanmar that centre on the incarnation of *Nats*. *Nats* are vital nonhuman entities that originate in the violent death of a human person. They are dead but will not be reborn and somehow remain in a final intermediary state outside the cycle of birth and re-birth (Brac de La Perrière 2015, 64). Mediated by the narratives recounting the human life and death that preceded their nonhuman existence, most of these *Nats* are not simply amorphous spirits but mythological figures with particular abilities, faults, affectations and afflictions. The rituals, in the course of which these *Nats* incarnate, intend to entertain the co-dependent relations between humans and *Nats* by entertaining the various *Nats* as they incarnate in succession or in a bedlam. Ritual specialists and their assistants, musicians, dancers and onlookers are all

1. Schmitz avoids this term in his writings yet, when challenged by Böhme, he proposes a “situation ontology” (1998).

invested in ensuring that the *Nats* who appear take delight in dancing, eating, drinking, smoking or flirting; in short, they are thrown a party.

As in any secular revel in Myanmar, these metaphysical parties are furnished with lavish decorations, dainty dishes and vigorous sounds either performed by the classical Burmese orchestra or played from popular VCDs where traditional tunes are spiced up with techno beats and synthesized sounds. In fact, the rituals accumulate half-things: musical tunes that are known as *Nat* music (*Nat doe*), a vibrant sound-space sculpted in the meticulous arrangement of loudspeakers to ensure musical ubiquity, the odour of perfume that penetrates and evaporates, the vapour of cooked meal, breezes made visible in wafts of fume, the distorted voices of *Nats* and the sonorous voice of ritual specialists chanting instructions, and, after all, feelings. Each *Nat* comes with 'emotional baggage' with addictions, fears, grief, cravings, jollity or love and longing. This overflowing centrality of half-things is crucial to the intensification of the collective atmosphere throughout the ritual as half-things precisely cut loose the moorings in time and space. Rather than being objects of perception, feelings, sounds, odours, music and wind continue to take *effect* in phases of duration and come to be inscribed in the collective situation of the ritual. Put another way, these particular elements do not induce atmosphere but as half-things pertain to the same ontological sphere as atmosphere and hence enforce a situation that easily lends itself to the unfolding of atmosphere.

Of cause and influence

When the musicians are asked how they know what to play they insist that they follow the dance movements of the *Nats* who have incarnated in the ritual space. The orchestra is seated so as to see the dancing *Nats* and to musically trace their ecstatic movements. The labour of the musicians is to translate the dancing they observe into music. As a *Nat* marches slowly through the crowd the big drum follows him by releasing a solemn rhythm. When a *Nat* leaves and the body in which the *Nat* had incarnated collapses, the orchestra performs a musical figure that frames the radical transformation from being a *Nat* to being a human musically. The dancing *Nat* may even approach the musicians and choose a song to be played; furthermore instruct the orchestra *how* to play the chosen song by gesturing like a conductor, giving commands regarding volume and timbre even rearranging the instruments at their leisure.

In the narrations of ritual specialists and dancers however, the situation appears very different. When music resounds, *Nats* are described as being 'attracted' by the rhythmic voices of drums and gongs, they are 'seduced' by the sonorous swell, are 'invited' by certain musical gestures. Music here yields a situation with a particular program namely the appearance of *Nats* as intrusive agents that insist on entering the ritual ground and on dancing to the familiar tunes and pervasive rhythms. An older villager who has longstanding experience in 'renting his body to the *Nat*' in dance brings this conflicting causality to the point: 'As soon as U Shin Gyi [a famous *Nat* in that region] comes, *Nat* music is played. Let's say, U Shin Gyi comes dancing. The music is playing before he comes. He comes because *Nat* music is played. [...] I only know that he comes dancing.'

Throughout the history of research on possession, theories of music and trance have aimed to identify certain musical characteristics as ‘auditory driving’ (Neher 1962), or culturally specific ritual practices (Rouget 1985) that would induce an ‘altered state of consciousness’ (Bourguignon 1973; Herbert 2011) or a neurological or physiological stimulation (Herbert 2011). While this line of research both in neuroscience and ethnomusicology (Clayton 2009) conceives of music not merely as an object of perception but rather as a powerful force of altering consciousness, what remains an operative logic throughout most of these studies is the conceptualising of music as being something distinct from its influence. Models for trance or possession interpret music as object or force that *does* something to its listeners; and it is for this reason that accounts of the relation between music and listener tend to be explanatory. Furthermore, the split of music and its influence is reinforced through the conceptual separation of music and listening by differentiating between the object of perception and the mode of perception. While music can of course productively be construed as object, the atmospheric dimensions of music are rendered unsayable in a causal constellation of music and mood, atmosphere and perceiver. Put another way, what is so atmospheric about certain situations of music making is precisely the undermining of the difference between cause and mode of influence, between music and listening.

Indeed, what musicians and dancers in *Nat* rituals identify as *Nat Doe* is precisely a kind of music that cannot be separated from its impact, it is a music, I suggest, that unfolds as collective situation with particular programs, problems and state of affairs (Schmitz 2014, 105). Here music is inseparable from the listener who is always already involved in the musical phases of duration. In a fishing village in southern Myanmar an elderly couple tells the story of their childhood friend who played with seashells at the shore, building himself a small set of drums by using the shells as sound boxes. Unaware of the situation that his music elicited, he was immediately taken by a *Nat* who overheard his playing demanding the end of his young human life. In a legend, famous among fisherman in southern Myanmar, a young boy falls prey to the temptation of making music to comfort himself in the loneliness on a remote island uninhabited by humans. The situation invoked in his music involved the *Nats* who dwelled on that island and who were so enamoured of the musical sound that they caught the harp player and transferred him alive into their nonhuman world. ‘Playing musical instruments and dancing must be avoided in the island world. No songs can be sung and the harp cannot be played’, so the musician Thin Maung Shwe comments on the legend. The safety regulations that govern the realm of the sea and seaside acknowledge the atmospheric dimensions of music as half-thing by prohibiting the making of *Nat* music, since the problems and programs that are inextricably linked with such music, are life-threatening.

From Space to Performance

Following the notion of half-things, I suggest that music and atmosphere do not induce an alteration of consciousness or body, much rather they *are* these alterations. When atmosphere is not something that causes a certain dynamic in the felt-body but rather *is* that very dynamic, then atmosphere is manifest as

transformation and inscribed in performance or *Daseinsvollzüge*. The radical estrangement of the human mode of existence in the ritual context of *Nat* festivals indeed manifests as a dynamic performance, as a continuous motion in the entire body that is inextricably linked with musical gestures or what Schmitz terms suggestions of movement, a dynamism that moves the entire collective situation. The appearance of the *Nat* is a shaking and shivering, jumping, spinning, trembling, faltering and falling down. Atmosphere here is not a space to be entered but an evolving, unfolding, collective situation with shared and entangled phases of duration brought about by an entire orchestra of half-things.

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