Re-reading Whitehead Through the Pre-reflective Experience of Atmospheric Processes

Une relecture de whitehead à travers l'expérience pré-réflexive des processus atmosphériques

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Introduction

- 1 Entering the room from the brightly lit floor, my eyes need to adjust to the murky view. The large windows in the back bring the backsides of some commercial buildings into sight, the sky is tinted in a dark blue. The only light in the room comes from a few scattered lamps with different color filters and a light source that seems to be located around the corner, behind a half-closed curtain. When I walk around the corner, I see an aquarium illuminated by four theater lights and I hear a motoric hum coming from inside the water. I move closer and see water bubbles disturbing the otherwise still and even surface, resulting in a gurgling sound. For a moment, everything seems to stop – the motorized hum, the bubbles. The water surface calms; only a few last ripples remain before they dissipate as well. Then, abruptly, everything re-starts again, the humming motor sounds more audible this time, large bubbles burst the water surface, and the deep sound of the bubbles is mixed with higher pitched tones, caused by small droplets that separate from the water masses and fall back into the water body. The water body is in greater unrest now, little waves form on the surface, colors of light blue and white mix into it. Just a few breaths it seems and a shimmer dislocates from the water surfaces, a thin layer of fog separates and lifts into the air. It is a magical event. Observed from that close, it seems almost as if the water would take a long outbreath. As the fog continues to rise, it forms cloudlike structures that begin to differentiate. The upper part of the cloud begins to disperse into different directions, to resolve in the air. In the thick middle of the cloud-becoming, parts begin to layer,

thereby creating more density, a shift in color from grey to a murky white. On another end, some particles of the gaseous zone begin to separate from the surrounding mass and fold into themselves, striving upwards into the air, creating smoke-like structures. I stretch my hand out and hold it inside the mist. It is cold, the movement of the fog feels like gently brushing over my skin, leaving moist. A gentle turnaround of my hand and the fog disperses for a few seconds, before it returns to envelop my hand.

- 2 The instances of experience that I am describing here are the outcome of a micro-phenomenological self-interview about my encounter with the installation of the experimental platform *Affective Atmospheres* (see figure 1). The piece was created by the artists Nima Navab (Concordia University in Montreal, Canada) as part of a workshop on atmospheres as media that we organized together. Witnessing the coming into being of this atmospheric environment, after hours of theorizing about its compounds and potential effects, the actual sensual experience of it was wonderful. Alfred N. Whitehead's words come to me, "Philosophy begins in wonder. And at the end when philosophic thought has done its best the wonder remains" (Whitehead, 1968 [1938], p. 168). Micro-phenomenology, undertaken as an interview method, helps to gain access to parts of experience that we usually do not notice, helping me to trace how my feeling of wonder emerged from the sensual perception of the different phase changes in the medium water as an expression of a new, embodied understanding of a climatic event. In what follows, I will take different encounters with the installation as a starting point to develop a new perspective on Whitehead's process philosophy through the questions and methods of micro-phenomenology. Furthermore, I will show how Whitehead's philosophy can offer productive impulses to the still relatively new discipline of micro-phenomenology.

Figure 1: Affective Atmospheres

Source and copyright: Nima Navab

- 3 Central to micro-phenomenology is a special interview technique which I shall outline briefly. The goal of the interview technique that was developed by Claire Petitmengin (2006) is to access the pre-reflective dimension of subjective experience and to make the interviewee thereby aware how it is that they experience in a particular moment. The dynamic of a micro-phenomenological interview follows a strict structure: First the subjective experience is evoked, that is, it is made present to the experiencing subject. Usually, the interview is about an experience that lies in the past. It might have happened a few days or a few seconds ago. To evoke the experience, the interviewer asks the interviewee to give a detailed description of the experience: When took it place and where? When remembered, how is it remembered? Are colors present? Once the evocation of the past experience is stabilized, the interviewer asks further questions to shift the attention of the interviewee away from the content of experience (the what) towards the way the experience unfolds (the how). For this, questions are asked that aim at two particular dimensions of experience, the diachronic and synchronic dimension (Petitmengin, 2006, p. 248). Questions that aim at the diachronic dimension of the experience, how the experience unfolds in time, direct the attention towards particular moments of the experience. A typical question for this line of investigation would be “what happened when you did x?”. The synchronic dimension can be described as the descriptive categories that make up the experience. A classical question in this category would be “are you experiencing the event from a first-person perspective or are you looking at it as if it was a screen or picture?”, or “what color does x have?”. In guiding the interviewee in this way through a specific subjective experience, they become aware of how the experience itself unfolds, independently from the content of experience. Although typically performed by an interviewer and an interviewee, the micro-phenomenological method is regularly used in form of self-interviews, which apply the same line of questioning. In this case, as Petitmengin explains in one of her workshops that I participated in, the micro-phenomenologists usually interview themselves about a particular experience and record the questions and answers either in writing or audio/video taping.
- 4 Whitehead’s process ontology and micro-phenomenology both approach experience before it can be judged or categorized, and taken together they open up a set of questions. What does the knowledge we gain through the interview method about how experience is composed tell us about the value of subjective experience in our crisis-ridden and ubiquitously networked times? What possibilities for reflection open up if we gain greater awareness for the pre-reflective dimension of our experience? To respond to these questions, I take my experience of atmospheric processes in the installation, which are usually too subtle to become the object of our reflection, as a starting point. *Affective Atmospheres* is meant to serve as more than a mere example in my argumentation. An exploration of sensual experience and meaning-making helps me to situate atmospheres and atmospheric perception as a component of new conceptual attempts at the relationship between humans and their environments. The collaborative process that lead to the creation of *Affective Atmospheres* started for me with the question of how it is to experience phase-shifts in a medium like water that lead to fog and clouds. Unlike our relation to fixed objects, when we watch the processes of water turning into bubbles, turning into fog, and finally clouds from afar, we are able to sense the qualities of these different states of the medium with our own body. My interest in water, fog, and clouds emanates from a shift in the humanities and

social sciences towards the elemental. Media scholars like Jussi Parikka explore the elements that compose media (2015), such as minerals, or argue, like John Durham Peters, to understand sky, sea, fire, and earth as media for communication (2015). Geographer Peter Adey discusses the elemental as a force and a force field that impact what and how we perceive and feel (2015), and anthropologist Kathleen Stewart writes about the ways atmospheres register in our everyday infrastructures (2014). In these examples, the elemental is not to be understood as an essence, as a substance, but as chemical and material processes that compose through a relation that is itself not static, but rather a doing, a relating, of which living bodies are a part. At this point, Whitehead's philosophy becomes valuable as it offers an ontological framework to describe materiality as relational and as composed of concrete processes (Roberts, 2014, p. 969). Whitehead opposes the separation of essence and perceivable qualities that is fundamental to substance thinking, and instead assumes that our perception of the world is the outcome of an ongoing relational process, in which we as perceivers and the world as that which we perceive, come together in experience. Since this does not really happen at the level of the senses, Whitehead develops the term prehension (1985 [1929]). Prehension means the coming together, the taking of an other into one's own constitution of experience. In this line of thought, matter is not just there, it does not just participate in processes either. Instead, materialities are themselves processes (McCormack, 2010, p. 642). While this gives a new perspective on the role and capacities of nonhuman entities it also allows for a non-anthropocentric take on the materiality of atmospheres, which will be central to this article.

- 5 Taking the impact of elemental processes on the pretext of our meaning-making in experience seriously (Jackson and Fannin, 2011, p. 436–437), I want to use the micro-phenomenological method to examine the micro-processes of subjective experiences which are normally not part of our conscious experience. The exploration of the aesthetic experience of atmospheric phenomena with micro-phenomenology and Whitehead's process philosophy not only provides a new perspective on Whitehead's theory and its connection to aesthetic experience, it allows for further discussion, I would argue, of the relation of subjective experience and ethical questions in times of global crisis. While Whitehead gives us an understanding of subjectivity that is not fixed but arises from the experiential encounter with the world, micro-phenomenology provides a structured way to analyze subjective experience adding a reflective component to it.

Sensing Atmospheric Processes

- 6 The narrative passage at the beginning of this article reflects my encounter with an installation which was created particularly for the experience of elementary processes and phase shifts in a watery medium. For this purpose, we used an aquarium that was about 32 square feet in size that reached the chest height of an average person. At its base, we placed 30 ultrasonic atomizers, which converted high-frequency sound waves into energy. Submersed in water, the vibration of energy waves coming from the atomizers broke the unified state of the waterbed, which led to either the formation of bubbles on top of the water's surface or the transformation of water into fog or small clouds, depending on the pace of the vibration. We attached tiny ventilators to the corners of the aquarium as well as on top of the water surface that would turn the fog

into miniature tornados or smoke blowing from a chimney (see figure 2). Mounted to one wall of the aquarium and just a few inches on top of the water surface was a heating plate that warmed up the air and thus led to localized micro changes in the fog. The activity of the atomizers and ventilators was digitally controlled and thus gained an unpredictable character. The various formations of mist and clouds of different textures could be visually observed throughout the space.

Figure 2: Affective Atmospheres

Detail: Fan.

Source and copyright: Nima Navab

- 7 In sum, *Affective Atmospheres* composed an aesthetic milieu that intensified material processes on different layers, made them sense-able: the water turning into bubbles, turning into fog, composing clouds. The condensing water vapor, thickening, moving upwards to disperse or to accumulate, displayed various forms and degrees of thickness at different spatial points without ever separating from its milieu. The milieu that gave rise to these observable material patterns swept into the sense-able realm – its humidity, temperature, shifting intensities – the sum of which being the conditions for the formation of fog and clouds. *Affective Atmospheres* presented a milieu in which atmospheric processes expressed a sense of their own becoming and, at the same time, their openness to be affected. As Florian Sprenger points out, the terminology used to describe environs (*Umgebungsbegriffe*), particularly environment, milieu, and surroundings (*Umwelt*), signal a reciprocity of that which surrounds and that which is surrounded, so that one cannot be described without the involvement of the other (Sprenger, 2019, p.9). The experiences I describe here thus arose from an interdependence of my sensory body, the installation and its atmospheric components, and the climatic conditions of the space that envelop all of them.

- 8 The aesthetic milieu that was thereby composed would frame the unfolding of a phenomenal event, allowing the perceiver to become familiar with the ways vapor would move over the water bed, form clouds, and disperse into the air. Yet it was impossible to tell where one movement begins or ends, where the water stops being water and begins becoming vapor. Our common notion of the event as something that takes place at a particular place and at a particular time got thereby challenged. Furthermore, through allowing a close contact and sensual intimacy with contingent motion of the water, vapor, and clouds, we could in this way renew our sense of wonder about the movements of natural phenomena, the manner in which they move (Schonig, 2018, p. 53). This wonder seemed to be rooted in the body and spark the desire to engage with the vapor, to trace the shifting boundaries of its material composition with the body. Through observing the ways ventilators and body movements impacted the movement of the fog, we, the human participants of these events, quickly started to manipulate these very conditions to impose certain movements on the fog. Creating gusts of wind using our hands, arms, or objects like paper, we also learned to vary our applied force in such a way that a greater diversity of cloud formations was created. One could say that in becoming sensitive to its affectability, we mapped our bodies onto this processual medium and provoked particular structures. This also entailed moments of surprise. Perceived effects of elemental becomings didn't always match our own sensual perceptions. The heating plate impacted the localized atmospheric milieu in such a way that the fog above the plate formed structures that differed from the rest of the fog. Its movements seemed faster, its form more smoke-like and even its color seemed darker. After taking a closer look I realized that the fog closest to the heating plate dissolved in part, liquified and fell as water droplets back onto the plate, making a hissing sound as it evaporated again. The fog-like structures on top of the heating plate created a contrast to the surrounding cloud-becoming in its density, structure, and movement speed (see figure 3). When I held my hand on top of the heating plate the first time, I expected to feel the heat being emanated – instead, what I felt was the cold dampness of the fog, and only after a while, as my skin cooled down to the temperature of its humid surrounding, I detected the warmth coming from the plate. The aesthetic milieu *Affective Atmospheres* allowed us to engage with this play of appearances, sense-abilities, and the inter-becoming of phenomena and milieu, of foreground and background. These processes encompassed not only the physical processes of the material, how water would turn to bubbles, mist, and clouds, but also atmospheric processes that would impact these phase-changes, such as air flow inside the space.

Figure 3: Affective Atmospheres

Detail: heating plate

Source and copyright: Nima Navab

Accessing Pre-reflective Layers of the Experience of Atmospheres

- 9 In this section I will analyze the different phases of my experience within the atmospheric milieu as they surfaced in the micro-phenomenological self-interview further, using Whitehead's process philosophy. Additionally, my attention to pre-reflective aspects of my experience provided by the micro-phenomenological self-interview will help me to explicate some parts of Whitehead's philosophy that usually remain rather abstract. Although Whitehead's relevance for contemporary theory is widely acknowledged, his writing often seems to remain rather unapproachable. In this regard it is helpful to remember that Whitehead did not intend to formulate a universally applicable method, but emphasizes in several instances that any philosophical method only makes sense in relation to the underlying question. And the question Whitehead addresses in *Process and Reality* is how to explain our experience as such. Experience not as conscious experience – for Whitehead, conscious experience represents the exception rather than the rule – but experience as “an ontological concept that is implicated in all events, whether ‘psychological,’ ‘biological,’ ‘chemical’ or ‘physical.’” (Stenner, 2011, p. 2). Although Whitehead aims to “present a system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted” (Whitehead, 1985 [1929], p. 4) his philosophy is to a large extent speculative. This is partly due to the fact that the experience he wants to explain is not reduced to conscious experience, indeed not even reduced to experience had by a human subject. This includes experience of non-human, even non-organic entities as well as pre-

reflective, non-conscious processes in human experience. Our limited understanding of experience associated with conscious experience goes back for Whitehead to the “bifurcation of nature” (Whitehead, 1985 [1929], p. 289). This bifurcation splits reality into an objective reality and its subjective perception, which leads to a dichotomic relation of subject and object, and, in the following, allows the object’s utilization. Consequently, Whitehead turns away from the phenomenological method and takes instead a speculative, metaphysical course. As Gaskill and Nocek point out, Whitehead introduces a new contrast between “‘perception in the mode of presentational immediacy’ (i.e., the *sensa*) and ‘perception in the mode of causal efficacy’ (the vaguely felt process by which the past enters into the constitution of the present)” in order to protest “the exclusive reliance on sense-perception [...] and to turn our attention to how these modes diverge, combine, and gain relevance in relation to particular questions about knowledge and experience.” (Gaskill and Nocek, 2014, p. 13). The differentiation between perception as pure sense perception and perception of causal relatedness allows him to approach the complexity of experience at different levels. It is important to note that the two modes are not preserved for higher-order organisms alone, such as human subjects. What we call “higher cognitive functions,” including representing, planning, and monitoring in humans, is enabled by the relational function of what Whitehead calls symbolic reference. Symbolic reference brings that which is gathered in pure sense perception and in interpretive causal efficacy, into a “unity of feeling” (Whitehead, 1985 [1929], p. 168). What is perceived in pure sense perception becomes what Whitehead terms “datum” – a determined component of experience (*ibid.*, p. 47) that can be further identified and objectified. With his emphasis on perception as encompassing different modes, Whitehead steps away from strong notions of subject and object, which he replaces with the term “occasions of experience” (*ibid.*, p. 189). Occasions of experience always encompass both subject and object, as they emerge from experience. Engaging with what I call pre-reflective experience – experience at the brink of conscious grasp – ought thus to account for the relationality at the base of experience, before we come to consciously reflect or act on what we perceive. In explicating my subjective experience with the atmospheric milieu, I make a first step towards tracing some processes of experience as described by Whitehead in my own experience. But, as Whitehead pointed out, our experiences through the senses make up only a very small part of this process, and the identification of this part with the whole of experience is for Whitehead one of the biggest fallacies of philosophy. To avoid this fallacy, I will pay close attention to the relationality of these experiences and the role my body plays as one aspect among others in relating to the world in a meaningful way. This means to be sensitive to the limitations of sense perception, to our memories and concepts that structure how and what we perceive, how we navigate the world (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). For this purpose, I will rely on research on embodiment and aesthetic experience, in particular by philosopher Mark Johnson.

- 10 My inquiry begins with my experience as I revisited it in the micro-phenomenological self-interview. Micro-Phenomenology wants to account for experiences that we usually are not aware of, or rather the dimension of experience that makes up the *how* of our experience. With this focus, micro-phenomenology deliberately moves beyond the emphasis on phenomena and thereby the often-discussed limitations of phenomenology. Developed by Claire Petitmengin, the micro-phenomenological interview follows a particular structure that aims at identifying personal

interpretations of the experience and steering the attention away from them. At the same time, it does not claim to unveil an objective account of experience. But Petitmengin and her colleagues have formulated assessment criteria that help identify the subtle and ambiguous subjective states the interviewee describes, and how they belong to the actual experience or are projected onto it (Petitmengin, 2006). However, a strict discrimination of experience and projection is neither possible nor aimed at, since projections, interpretations, representations belong to our experience of sense-making—but they can be used as prompts to analyze the underlying processes in pre-reflective experience.

- 11 For Whitehead, experience is a constitutive, creative, and processual activity. What he calls the actual entity, for example the clouds forming on top of the aquarium, or the aquarium, or me as a human subject, can be prehended and thereby potentially felt by another entity in its becoming (Whitehead, 1985 [1929], p. 19). The aquarium and the clouds become a component of my feeling, of the way I experience in that moment. The aquarium and the clouds become ingredients (they “ingress” as Whitehead puts it) of my experience. Once prehended, the aquarium and the clouds, are objectified, they turn into “representational fixations of sub-representational events: photographs of becoming. This is because events, not being repeatable, are also not recognisable, continually caught up, enmeshed in the passage of nature” (Toscano, 2008, p. 107). The difference between the aquarium and the clouds that I am interested in lies in the simple fact that the clouds resist my objectification. They continue to transform, to involve my senses in different ways. The continuous transformation of the clouds allows me to get a sense of an aspect of concrescence that usually escapes our awareness: the fact that the objectification, what they end up being as part of my experience, is not previously fixed. Whitehead emphasizes that each entity in its becoming is a multiplicity that can enter in many ways into determination (Whitehead, 1985 [1929], p. 24). It carries a certain indetermination in the way it can be actualized. It is my way of prehending it, that determines it. Although I am able to determine certain aspects of the clouds, their more or less precise position in space, their color – other qualities I am unable to fixate: the ways their density changes under the influence of air flow and temperature changes, the speed with which they move upwards or start creating waves. So how can I explicate this process of sense-making in my engagement with the elemental processes, that entail observations, sense-perceptions, body-mapping, and surprise, in such a way that the underlying assumptions about the relation of humans and their environment that are enfolded in the phenomenological pre-text can be made accountable?
- 12 Here, the concept and method of micro-phenomenology come into play. If our statements about our experience are understood as abstractions in the Whiteheadian way, not as representing reality but “as processes that ‘vectorise’ experience” (Lapworth, 2015, p. 2), that selectively foreground different elements in our sense-awareness (*ibid.*), then one achievement of micro-phenomenology is to have found a method able to retrace the process of abstraction and to highlight the structures and conditions of its emergence. Micro-phenomenology is based on the assumption that subjective experience is generally pre-reflective, meaning not that it is unconscious but that it is only not yet conscious (Petitmengin, 2007). One reason why we are generally not aware of our subjective experience is that our perception is usually focused on the objects that surround us and their affordances. For example, we generally focus on the words we put down on paper in writing and not on the feeling of the pen in our hand,

its weight, the pressure we apply with it to the paper, and so on. As Petitmengin explicates, subjective experience is not abstract or conceptual but embodied and concrete, it is pre-discursive, and thus prior to a separation of sensorial experience into distinct modalities (Petitmengin, 2007, p. 55). One assumption in micro-phenomenology is that in this pre-reflective dimension of experience, certain micro-acts organize our attention and how we make sense of the encounter with the world. If, for example, I hold my hand in the fog over the heat platine and I am surprised to find that the fog is cold and not warm, then it comes to the fore how my prior knowledge organized by embodied experience organized my perception at that particular moment. A micro-phenomenological inquiry into subjective experience can thus be instructive for a better understanding of how assumptions about the relationship between humans and their environment materialize and, potentially, how they can be changed in an engagement with an elementary, processual medium. This possibility is further supported by Petitmengin's statement that the value of an experience is often prior to its representation: before we for example recognize and name a memory, we have an intense feeling which does not belong to a specific sensorial register (2007, p. 57). This feeling is not characterizable through distinct properties, like color, or form, but describable with varying qualities such as degrees of intensity or directionality.

- 13 So far, I have covered two different approaches towards experience: Whitehead's metaphysical, rather abstract inquiry into experience, and the practical and empirical approach of micro-phenomenology. Both approaches have in common that experience is taken as a concrete actuality and not a phenomenon about whose possibility we need to speculate from an idealistic perspective. What use are they, then, for describing the actual experience of engaging with the elemental processes in *Affective Atmospheres*? And what would such an attempt to do so tell us about the ways the relationship with the environment is enacted?
- 14 For Whitehead, the path is clearer. The way weprehend an actual entity such as the uprising fog on top of the aquarium is not random but idiosyncratic due to the subjective form of our prehension (1985 [1929], p. 19). The subjective form is *the way, the manner* in which I perceive the fog, which is different from person to person. It depends for example on my spatial relation to the fog—if I focus on it directly with my visual gaze, perceive it in a peripheric way, or feel its temperature and humidity with my skin—but also on my expectations, the ideas that I have about fog and clouds. While the way of perceiving the fog is different from person to person, the fog itself remains the same – it is an actual entity prehended in different ways, it ingresses each perceiver due to the subjective form by which it is prehended. In this process of ingression lies the creative potential for Whitehead (*ibid.*, p. 23). The same fog ingresses different perceivers in multiple ways, and so diverse ideas are formed that resonate with the pre-existent, interior sense of fog. Micro-phenomenology focuses on precisely this manner of prehending an actual entity: in asking questions that maneuver the subject of experience away from objectifying what has been perceived and towards *the ways* of experience, the subjective form of prehending an entity like the fog can be laid bare. The way this is achieved is by continuously diverting the attention of the interviewee from the content of their experience – the *what*, which usually absorbs attention entirely – to the *modes* of experience of this content: the *how*. These modes of experience usually have no specific sensorial register. Instead they are transmodal (Petitmengin, 2007, p. 64). I experienced my encounter with the fog forming diverse structures at least visually, proprioceptively, and auditive. And what made my

attention shift between these registers were sensed degrees of intensities. The micro-phenomenological interview shifts the attention of the interviewee towards these different zones of experience.

- 15 The challenge now is that micro-phenomenology, as a method, must demonstrate that the verbal representation of the subjective experience actually corresponds to the pre-reflective experience. For this purpose, Petitmengin and her colleagues developed a set of assessment criteria to ensure that what the person reports is actually part of the evoked experience (*ibid.*). Examples are the use of present tense in describing the experience, the use of coverbal gestures, and so on. In the end, one could object, the assessment of the authenticity of the reported experience depends on the subjective reading of the interviewer, and that is indeed the case. The use of language to describe pre-reflective experience that forgoes linguistic representation is not a contradiction for micro-phenomenology, because it is assumed that there is a relationship between experiential processes and linguistic concepts.¹ Therefore, taking the concepts and metaphors used to describe an experience in the interview as the starting point for the inquiry, their genesis is traced back towards the underlying experiential process. One can thus assume a certain parallelism of experiential processes on the pre-reflective level and their linguistic representation. This idea about a correspondence of experience and linguistic representation can also be supported by Whitehead's conception of experience. Crucial for Whitehead's philosophy of process is the assumption that when it comes to experience, the very small always coordinates with the largest scales, "all related experience must exhibit the same texture" (1985 [1929], p. 4). This is the presupposition for his endeavor to trace all experience back to the basic operation of the concrescence, for which conscious experience is not pre-conditional. Thinking with Whitehead, we can thus argue that the reports of the interviewed subjects can indeed express the basic processes of pre-reflective experience, because they follow the same structure. But the research of micro-phenomenology can also help to re-contextualize and thereby concretize aspects in Whitehead's philosophy that would otherwise remain rather abstract. The next section will pay some attention to that purpose.

Accounting for Pre-reflective Phases of Experience

- 16 Following the philosopher Mark Johnson, our body constitutes not only the basis for experience but also of thought and language. As embodied beings, we engage meaning viscerally, it comes to us via patterns, images, concepts, qualities, emotions, and feelings (2018, p. 1). It is thus in the gestures I developed in engaging with the fog, the water, and the clouds, that I had a meaningful experience – not in a linguistic sense, not yet fully conscious, but pre-reflectively unfolding. According to micro-phenomenology, gestures are not only used to transmit information – rather, they are linked to internal process of accessing meaning that has not yet been fully conceptualized. As Petitmengin explicates, "a felt meaning may have a precise location (chest, stomach, head) inside the body. But most of the time, the transmodality of the experience is accompanied by a certain permeability of the border usually felt between the interior and exterior spaces" (2007, p. 68). This trans-modal experience that Petitmengin also describes as a flow of experience (*ibid.*) is then transmuted by "micro-acts" of distinction, identification, recognition, and categorization, that allow for them to

become consciously grasped and linguistically expressed. Similarly, Johnson explicates the process of meaning-making with the concept of “image schemas”, such as verticality and scalar intensity: “Image schemas like these are pre-reflectively meaningful to us because they mark basic qualitative determinations of our day-to-day experience and they constitute recurring patterns of experiential change, given the nature of our bodies and environments.” (2018, p. 18) With Whitehead’s philosophy we can not only explain how it is that these schemas become meaningful to us as conscious subjects, but also trace this process back to the smallest instances of experience, whose conscious compression for Whitehead represents only the tip of the iceberg and not a necessary condition.

- 17 Now, what Petitmengin and her colleagues want to understand with the micro-phenomenological interview is how these micro-acts precisely operate, and what the mechanisms and stages of this process are. For Whitehead, this is the operation of concrescence: entities are in a continuous process of becoming, in which already actualized entities are being felt, prehended, and thereby enter into the composition of the prehending entity (Whitehead, 1985 [1929], p. 7). Concrescence is not straight forward and not to be confused with the actualization of an essence. Multiple prehensions happen constantly on different levels of complexity, whereby pure potential enters into forms of determination particular to the subjective form of the prehending entity (*ibid.*, p. 23). This process could be aligned with what Petitmengin describes, when she talks about the micro-acts forming distinctions within the flow of experience in order to make them available to consciousness. In Whitehead, the order is brought about by certain patterns in the actual entity that stand out as relevant to the subjective form of the prehending entity. Due to this subjective form, the actual entity is thus prehended in one particular way, which integrates it into a certain kind of order (Whitehead would call it in the case of human subjects, a personally ordered society) (Whitehead, 1985 [1929], p. 23). The very small always coordinates with the largest scales. Applied to my own experience, this means that I learn to anticipate how the cloud moves across the waterbed, prehending its movement within the aesthetic milieu, when I learn to adjust the force and directionality of my hand movements that push the cloud formation in a certain direction. The Micro-phenomenological interview seems to zoom in on this very process. By placing the *how*, the way of experience, in the foreground, expanding it diachronically, an aspect of experience, which Whitehead terms so abstractly the “subjective form” (*ibid.*, p. 23) becomes tangible. Micro-phenomenology allows to get a glimpse of the ways we encounter an event, however small and fleeting, and of the complexity of our internal processes of sense-making.
- 18 Another question that micro-phenomenology addresses becomes more clear in this context: does the pre-articulated dimension of our experience, which for the moment is almost a terra incognita, have different strata, different degrees of differentiation (Petitmengin, 2007, p. 77)? With Whitehead, these different degrees of differentiation lie at the heart of the process of becoming. It can be simply put as the coming together of an entity in its process of becoming and actualized data that is, perceptions determined in the process of becoming and thereby objectified. The data is given, not as a fixed essence, but as pure potentiality. To reiterate what I stated before, data is indeterminate, it can be prehended in multiple ways. But due to the subjective form of the entity in its becoming, it will be prehended and thus determined in one particular

way. As already mentioned above, this process happens continuously and on all levels of becoming. It happens on the level of my cells, as it happens in my sensual experience of the fog enveloping my hand. The potentiality of the data comes with a certain kind of lure, a lure for feeling, which is the motor of concrescence. Whitehead describes this lure as an intensity that can be felt and that gives relevance to an anticipated future. In what follows, I will explicate why I think that the particular lure of atmospheres can make us pay attention to processes of meaning-making that are relevant for our crisis-ridden and ubiquitously networked times.

The Stakes of Atmospheric Awareness

- 19 Whitehead's process philosophy as well as micro-phenomenology suggest that our experiences are not synthesized and integrated into an existing whole, but rather that they take on the form of atomic spatio-temporalities that connect to one another. These spatio-temporalities do not pre-exist in the world, separated from an entity in its becoming, but are formed and integrated through what Whitehead calls prehension. In this way, experiences that we are not aware of still impact what we feel, think, and do. What Johnson calls image schemas – the qualitative determinations of our day-to-day life – highlight this operability of pre-reflective experiences. As Johnson points out: "Image schemas are not merely skeletal patterns of bodily perception, orientation, and motion. They are also intimately connected to values, emotions, and feelings" (2018, p. 19). The chief value of Johnson's account, for our purposes, is his explication of these schemas as rooted in the body and to account for meaning-making as fundamentally relational. The bodily experience of relations and acting in dynamic environments, like that of *Affective Atmospheres*, can thus be a way to exemplify and describe Whitehead's process of concrescence. If we assume now that our pre-reflective and non-conscious experiences have an effect on the rational faculty of the human being (Damasio, 2000), a necessity of critical reflection on the instrumentalization of affects in our everyday life becomes self-evident. And while some scholars (e.g. Hansen, 2015) have already paid attention to the limiting effects this has on our ability to reflect on our actions and their consequences, I would like to take this opportunity to point out the enabling possibilities that go along with becoming familiar with atmospheric processes and the ethical dimension of aestheticized environments.
- 20 There is no doubt that our day-to-day relations with our environments are atmospherically charged. In capitalist environments such as supermarkets, it is the lighting conditions, the design and ordering of the rows, music, and fragrances in the air that are supposed to influence our consumption patterns. Another example are religious environments like houses of prayer and how they create a certain atmosphere that we are able to recognize. They seem to generate a certain feeling in us that we associate with such places, regardless of our own spirituality. But atmospheres also influence us in other situations, when we socialize with people, or even in our own home. They are part of our everyday life and most of the time not recognized (Böhme, 2016). In my process-oriented and embodied approach I want to emphasize that atmospheres do not just denote a certain mood that hovers over a situation like an invisible veil. I deliberately include aspects such as air quality, airflow, humidity, light, etc., in the conceptualization of atmosphere. By this I do not mean to take a purely phenomenological, nor a meteorological perspective, but with reference to Whitehead I

suggest a non-anthropocentric perspective to the study of atmospherics. Whitehead granted non-sentient physical entities the capacity toprehend, to “feel” causal relations with their surroundings. Plants, for example, feel changes happening in their surroundings and act upon them. The plant prehends and turns towards the sun. Likewise, the water droplets that make up the cloud above the water basin in *Affective Atmospheres*, prehend the air draft and make the cloud move over the water bed. As Debaise points out, “Whitehead’s notion of feeling (is) central to a coherent metaphysics that pertains subjectivity to all things” (2017, p. 42). All forms of life have feelings, humans, plants, micro-organisms, clouds. Using Whitehead’s notion of feeling allows us thus to commit to a radical reconceptualization of matter – not as something static but as a process. In disrupting our common way of thinking about matter, Whitehead’s philosophy opens up “new ways of grasping those material processes that subtend and exceed political representation” (Roberts, 2014, p. 970) and thereby offers a way to point towards nonhuman agency without losing relevance for political concerns. That is because agency itself is understood as something that never is but that occurs, as happening in relations. “What Whitehead gestures towards, then, is not a ‘more-than-human’ politics per se (Whatmore, 2006), but rather a mode of thought attuned to its own nonhuman consistencies” (Roberts, 2014, p. 973). Engaging with environments that shift our awareness towards such subtle processes that constitute our constantly evolving relationships with the world, can make us more familiar and able to critically reflect on the ways these relationships affect our thoughts and actions. They can, I propose now with philosopher Luce Irigaray, allow for new forms of subjective experience that are necessary to take on the ethical task of sharing place (2017, p. 51). For Irigaray, this place is never attained, it is always set in the future. Her philosophy is not one of balance and wholeness but of difference and process. The other and the self cannot be reduced to a thing. The limitations of one’s own self and that of the other must be respected and transcended towards a shared place that can never replace the own place. To enable such a rooting of the self in its own place, a place also of reflection, while at the same time expanding towards the other, whose difference is never subsumed, we need “practices of place” that cultivate subjectivities, habits of relational becoming, of returning to the self in reflection (Wheeler, 2010, p. 14). Part of this, as Irigaray points out, is a cultivation of sensory perception and touch that allow the other to remain different (Irigaray, 2017, p. 49).

- 21 Atmospheric perception, the attention to atmospheric processes, their shifting intensities and spatio-temporal relationships and how we become aware of them through different senses, can provide such a space for encounter of the other. This other, in my example, is a climatic phenomenon: the fog arising from the waterbed, moving in different directions and forming various patterns in relation to airflow, humidity, and surrounding temperature. Observing the fog, feeling its coolness and wetness with my skin, sensing the draft coming from the ventilators, as it disperses the fog, making me even more conscious of the cool temperature and wetness of my skin. Exploring the fogs affectability with hand movements, or through blowing more or less air into it, I was able to familiarize myself with environmental processes and my own interrelation with them. My place of reflection that opens up in these engagements is not that of a self-sustainable subject opposed to objects that it perceives, but that of an embodied being that continuously makes sense of the world on different levels of experience – some available to conscious thought, some only present as an underlying tone, and others happening in my gut, in my cells. It is also not the subject of the mere

spectator, the phenomenological subject, for which the purpose of the phenomena is to be perceived by it. While the encounter with the emergent cloud formations suggests the possibility to sensually experience them at will and to impact their movements, the limitations of these possibilities become apparent as well. The installation is not an oversized spectacle but happens directly in front of me. The unpredictability of the phase changes, which depend on the activity of the atomizers and ventilators, stands in contrast to an alleged control of the climate phenomenon by a human individual. A limitation also persists in the direct encounter with the wet medium itself: even though I have learned through playful engagement, which hand movements and speed result in formations in the fog closest to my idea of a tornado, these formations are far from perfect representations. Every formation holds difference and is fleeting, every gesture is different, following an atmospheric lure. In my direct engagement with the fog, the belief in a perfect tornado quickly evaporates.

- 22 Atmospheric familiarity is not the same as atmospheric control. Atmospheric familiarity is defined here as an empathic link between processes of meaning-making and encountered processes that are part of the doings of the world. It is an ingression of atmospheric processes into my experience, or, as psychologists Asma and Gabriel put it (2019, p. 182), an internal simulation of external aspects of a space. These can be visible structures of the fog, but also rhythmical changes in its movement. Through such an internal simulation human subjects are able to compose together with their environments an atmospheric continuum that interrelates spatial aspects and their affordances with behavioral and emotional responses (Canepa *et al.* 2019, p. 8). This includes meteorological aspects of space. The temperature, light intensity, humidity, and so on, impact our internal bodily functions and our sense-perception of the external world at the same time and help us to navigate it (*ibid.*, p. 4). An atmospheric continuum composed of such elements should therefore be regarded as fundamental to human experience, given that how and what we perceive in an environment is connected to the atmosphere of a place (*ibid.*, p. 23). Therefore, a heightened awareness for atmospheres and familiarity with their affects might impact our attention, behavior, and expectations. Shifting our attention from an object – such as the fog as a thing in itself – to the ‘background’ of its appearing – such as the qualities of the surrounding air that allow for the fog to form – can lead to a playful gaze and exploratory behavior (Houlgate, 1993; Baron, 2008 cited in Chebotareva and Rask, 2018). It is through such bodily exploration and play, that we form new relations with the world, make new experiences, and learn about how it is that we make sense of the world. If propositions, following Whitehead, offer a “lure for feeling” that allows for new modes of existence to come to expression (Whitehead cited in Manning, 2020, p. 67), then encounters that are able to renew our wonder about the manner events unfold in our experience hold ethical-aesthetic potential. Micro-phenomenology has shown to enrich our subjective experience and might be able to further heighten our awareness for a “quality of relation that tunes the environment away from the interpersonal,” which has the human subject at its center, towards a “more-than human ecology” (Manning, 2020, p. 60). If we extend the possibility to affect and to be affected not only to (human) bodies but to climatic processes and the levels of relationality with these processes that come to light, then the other comes into play in two respects: on the one hand, as the other with whom we share sensitive environments, and on the other hand, as the other who is affected by these environments in different ways. Paying attention to the differences in how these

affections play out on either side of the relational dyad of that what surrounds and that what is surrounded, ultimately brings into play the need for new forms of caring for different others – both human and non-human others – and the environments that are shared.

Conclusion

- 23 In this article, I have argued that micro-phenomenology and an engagement with atmospheres give a new perspective on Whitehead's theory that allows to further highlight aspects of our experiential engagement with the world that speak to ethical questions at a time when we are confronted with our role as part of a species that is believed to have catastrophic effects on planetary scale. I believe that we need new possibilities of subjective experience, ones that account for its limitations and the need of critical reflection. The goal is to account for subjective forms of experience that acknowledge the micro-processes of meaning-making that are part of it; it is to resist both concepts of an immersed phenomenological subject and an autonomous, self-contained, rational subject. It is also the germ of the meaning-making process. Whitehead helps us to understand that the world that we encounter and make meaning of, is in no way to be placed as something separate from us and still, due to our subjective form, we are what can be addressed as individuals. An individuality that does not depend on consciousness and is not reserved to humans. Micro-phenomenology provides a structured way to analyze these underlying currents of experience and to add a reflective component to subjective experience. Exploring my encounter with the cloud installation using the method of micro-phenomenology, allows then also to highlight aspects in Whitehead's philosophy and to highlight its relevance for contemporary explorations of experience.
- 24 While I have chosen an art work to describe the phases of experience, any day-to-day experience would have served this purpose as well. The embodied experience of climatic processes is part of our everyday life, without us being aware of it. Often, we can tell that it is going to rain by the way the wind blows. We also know the necessary motions and force behind a splash of water that we push over a water surface. Through our embeddedness in our environment, we are already intimately familiar with climatic and elementary processes without necessarily being aware of the processes that enable and maintain this relationship. It is an important achievement of micro-phenomenology to have shown, that any instant of experience can be analyzed to lay bare the patterns of meaning-making – which are, in the sense of Whitehead, prehended in the particular manner of the experiencing subject. In numerous micro-phenomenological interviews that I have done, I have found structures of experience similar to those I describe in my encounter with the fog. There is a felt sense that seems to be part of subjective experience that also emerged in my engagement with the atmospheric processes that are part of the installation *Affective Atmospheres* that informed my playful gestures and fed my enjoyment when possible movements-with the fog became actualized. Johnson says that “the ‘felt sense’ testifies to the more-than-linguistic, more-than-conceptual dimensions of meaning-making.” (2018, p. 212). And it is this felt sense that we can cultivate through paying attention to our subjective experience as part of our scholarship as well.

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NOTES

1. See also Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who argued that concepts structure what we perceive, how we navigate the world.

ABSTRACTS

This article explores new perspectives on Alfred N. Whitehead's process philosophy through a micro-phenomenological investigation of the experience of atmospheres. Whitehead's philosophy and micro-phenomenology are both interested in something before it becomes a perceivable quality, yet from a different angle. Atmospheres, always at the brink of our awareness, are taken as a field of possible experiences that opens up when the perception of objects is replaced by processes. An exploration of sensual experience and meaning-making enabled by atmospheric media through process philosophy and micro-phenomenology helps situate new conceptual attempts at the relationship between humans and their environments. I will pay special attention to those parts of experience that impact assumptions about the relationship between humans and their environments and will suggest that atmospheric awareness offers opportunities for critical reflection and acceptance of difference. I propose that a new perspective on Whitehead's philosophy through micro-phenomenology provides fruitful connections to contemporary research on experience and meaning-making. In explicating my subjective experience with atmospheric processes, I make a first step towards tracing the processes of experience as described by Whitehead in my own experience and thereby offer a way to acknowledge subjective experience that might inspire a wider range of scholarship.

Cet article explore de nouvelles perspectives sur la philosophie du processus d'Alfred N. Whitehead à travers une investigation micro-phénoménologique de l'expérience des atmosphères. La philosophie de Whitehead et la micro-phénoménologie s'intéressent toutes deux à quelque chose avant qu'il ne devienne une qualité perceptible, mais sous un angle différent. Les atmosphères, toujours à la limite de notre conscience, sont considérées comme un champ d'expériences possibles qui s'ouvre lorsque la perception des objets est remplacée par des processus. Une exploration de l'expérience sensorielle et de la création de sens permise par les médias atmosphériques à travers la philosophie des processus et la micro-phénoménologie permet de situer les nouvelles tentatives conceptuelles de la relation entre les humains et leurs environnements. Je propose qu'une nouvelle perspective sur la philosophie de Whitehead à travers la micro-phénoménologie offre des liens fructueux avec la recherche contemporaine sur l'expérience et la construction du sens. En expliquant mon expérience subjective des processus atmosphériques, je fais un premier pas vers le traçage des processus d'expérience décrits par Whitehead dans ma propre expérience et j'offre ainsi une façon de reconnaître l'expérience subjective qui pourrait inspirer un plus grand nombre de chercheurs.

INDEX

Mots-clés: atmosphère, philosophie du processus, micro-phénoménologie, expérience esthétique, incorporation

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