The Atmosphere of the Living

Gernot Böhme and Adolf Portmann on the Boundaries of Aesthetics and Ethics of Life

Jiří Klouda

The text creates space for mutual interpretation and reinterpretation of the aesthetics of philosopher Gernot Böhme and the phenomenal morphology of biologist Adolf Portmann. Both of these ambitious projects aim to radically reform their disciplines (aesthetics and biology) by breaking away from the subject-centric and logocentric foundations of modern anthropology. Using Böhme's concept of atmosphere, we develop Portmann's notion of self-manifestation and the unaddressed phenomenon of living beings. In doing so, we remove Portmann's categories from their scientific context and limit Böhme's dynamic model of things to living beings. Finally, based on the phenomenology of the living outlined above, we formulate an ethics of relation to living beings. | *Keywords: Atmosphere, Life, Bioaesthetics, Phenomenon, Bioethics, Gernot Böhme, Adolf Portmann*

1. Introduction

The concept of atmosphere, developed in the 1990s by German philosopher Gernot Böhme, represented an ambitious impulse that post-phenomenological philosophy brought to aesthetics. 'Atmosphere' was supposed to radically transform the traditional modern self-understanding of aesthetics and even its place within the philosophical disciplines. The 'new aesthetics' of atmospheres, as stated in the subtitle of Böhme's book, also presupposed a revision of fundamental ontological and anthropological determinations. Our text will therefore first summarise Böhme's basic premises, and we shall then attempt to develop them in contexts to which the author paid only marginal attention. Böhme conceived his concept of atmosphere in connection with philosophical anthropology, he considered the development of the concept of atmosphere to be the 'central theme' of anthropological inquiry (Böhme, 1985, p. 192). In the field of philosophical anthropology, Böhme sought to develop a different strategy for this discipline than what he considered traditional, namely the search for anthropological difference, i.e., drawing a line between human and non-human life (Böhme, 1985, p. 7).

If, according to its author, the theory of atmospheres is to imply an understanding of human that avoids logocentric rationalism, then human reason cannot serve as a distinguishing feature that humans possess exclusively. We will attempt to show that Böhme's project nevertheless retains certain strong affinities with the classical form of philosophical anthropology, insofar as its core is a certain non-reductionist theory of life, or "biophilosophy" (Fischer, 2009, p. 154). So, the question arises as to whether atmosphere can serve as the basis for a newly understood theory of intersubjectivity that will not be limited to the sphere of human subjects.

We can see a sign that our inquiry is on the right track in the fact that Böhme repeatedly refers to Adolf Portmann in his well-known book devoted directly to the aesthetics of atmospheres (Böhme, 1995). Although Portmann is known as one of the pioneers of the aesthetics of the living, he is also unanimously considered one of the founders of philosophical anthropology in its classical form (Honneth and Joas, 1988; Fischer, 2022; Novák, 2024) – which Böhme seeks to overcome. If anthropology and the aesthetics of the living have unexpectedly come together in this way in the concept of atmosphere, then we can expect that the innovative ontological status of atmospheres will transform both of these traditional disciplines.

2. What is meant by Atmospheres?

The concept of atmosphere promises to transcend modern aesthetics in its tradition from Kant to Adorno and Lyotard in a number of respects. The aesthetic experience should cease to be primarily a matter of reflection and aesthetic judgment and return to perception in its original form. Therefore, the most adequate object of aesthetics is no longer to be a work of art in its isolating autonomy from everyday human practice. Seen from the recipient's point of view, atmospheres are spaces of presence that emerge from things and situations and open up to methodically unrestricted perception. Seen from the producer's point of view, the creation of atmospheres is the subject of a number of applied disciplines that aim, in the broadest sense, to present or stage something (architecture, scenography, advertising, cosmetics, etc.).

A prerequisite for a proper understanding of this theoretical model is overcoming subject-object dualism and traditional ontology. Atmospheres fully reign where there is no need to methodically establish a distinction between subject and object as disjointed spheres; they are therefore at home in most dimensions of everyday life. Atmosphere connects the perceived thing with the perceiving person, who thus feels the presence of the thing or situation – as something that literally bodily belongs to oneself.[1] But this is also a way in which the perceiver is present as the one who is a feeling and physically experiencing being, not just as a distanced *res cogitans*.

[1] For this reason, Böhme devotes philosophical attention to the issue of elements such as air and water, which are experienced exemplarily as 'nature that we ourselves are' (our lived body), rather than the objectified nature of science (Böhme 1993).

An adequate ontological understanding of atmospheres, therefore, also requires a revision of the ontology of the thing. We should not understand the thing as a self-identical substantial core that concentrically integrates the thing's own qualities. On the contrary, the being of the thing must be thought of as an ecstatic emergence from itself. All beings spread their own presence in something other from themselves, actively intervening in the space around them and actually co-creating this space. (Even an inanimate object ecstatically comes out from itself, for example, by tuning the colours of its surroundings with its own coloration; its presence enters into the behaviour of living beings in its surroundings, for example, as certain suggestions for movement.) The reason why the prevailing philosophical tradition has mostly overlooked atmospheres[2] lies in the fact that it has found it difficult to find ontological models by which to describe it. Atmospheres were mostly described as feelings, moods, affects, and synaesthetic perceptions, which would not be wrong if it were not disqualified in typical modern thinking as something merely subjective and indistinguishable, which cannot be clearly recognized and is therefore not suitable as an object of theoretical interest. For this reason, Böhme speaks of atmospheres as something 'quasi-objective' in order to counter the prejudice rooted in traditional philosophical thinking. In fact, atmospheres precede subject-object differentiation.

Atmospheres are not a pure, empty medium, as they help shape not only perception but also the existence of the perceiver. Thanks to atmospheres, the perceiving being uncovers the possibilities of its existence in a specific situation, it can 'tune' itself. However, atmospheres are not in a position of something predetermining – an atmosphere can be accepted or avoided. Ultimately, each atmosphere derives its specific nature from the perceiving being and its attitude toward this atmosphere.

Since atmospheres emanate ecstatically from living beings, but also from things and their constellations, Böhme sees great potential for aesthetics in theoretically processing the practical experiences of various fields of design. Perhaps even more important, however, are the socially critical possibilities of such a reformed aesthetics. The concept of atmosphere allows for the analysis of, for example, the architecture of official buildings or the arrangement of public spaces, as well as criticism of the choreography of political meetings and the staging of media appearances.[3]

3. Atmosphere of Light and Approach to Living Beings: Buytendijk and Portmann

After this recapitulation, let us leave aside the possible contribution of the concept of atmosphere to general aesthetics and its social applicability and turn to the specific question of how atmospheres relate to living beings

[2] Traditional aesthetics recognized almost exclusively the atmospheres of 'beautiful' and 'sublime'; W. Benjamin came closest to the general concept of atmosphere as such with his concept of aura (Böhme, 2017, p. 20).

[3] If bodies (e.g., of marine mollusks or fish) are transparent, the internal organs are arranged symmetrically, whereas in opaque bodies they are arranged very asymmetrically. Conversely, markings on the surface of opaque bodies exhibit a symmetrical structure (Portmann, 1957).

and life as such. Böhme himself marginally but repeatedly mentions the work of two 20th-century biologists, Adolf Portmann and Frederik J.J. Buytendijk (Böhme, 1995, p. 42; Böhme, 2017, pp. 95, 97). The following section will therefore present the ideas and research of these authors, insofar as they may be of interest to the theory of atmospheres.

In the first half of the 20th century, Dutch physiologist Buytendijk came up with the idea that organisms are characterized by demonstrative value, actively revealing themselves in various ways as distinct from their surroundings. While organs are usually built strictly for purpose and economy, organisms as a whole are not governed by this economy and invest a lot of energy in building (anatomical as well as behavioural) structures that serve only the 'luxury' of making themselves visible (Buytendijk, 1958, pp. 1–12).

After World War II, Swiss zoologist A. Portmann devoted most of his work to the detailed elaboration and specific verification of this idea, which Buytendijk had only briefly outlined. He based his work on the empirically verifiable fact that in many animals, the structure of their internal organs differs depending on whether their bodies are transparent or not. According to this fact, the possibility of being seen by other beings significantly affects the internal structure and function of organs involved in metabolism and reproduction.[4] It means vital functions that are consensually seen as the most basic. Portmann generalises this principle to the entire field of sensory perception. And consequently, he postulates 'self-manifestation' (*Selbstdarstellung*), the ability to enter the sensory fields of other beings, as one of the vital functions of organisms. Based on that, he seeks to reform the traditional zoological discipline of morphology in such a way that its subject matter is not only anatomical structure, but all perceptible (somatic and behavioural) manifestations spontaneously spread by living beings. Portmann calls the totality of these manifestations of a particular living being its form (*Gestalt*).

In connection with other vital functions, Portmann focuses on proving that self-manifestation cannot be understood merely as a secondary effect of, for example, metabolism. Similarly, self-manifestation cannot be seen as the result of evolutionary selection processes, where a certain form brought an advantage to its carrier (e.g., cryptic coloration in relation to predation or conspicuousness in sexual selection). Alleged primary biological functions associated with self-preservation and reproduction are often integrated and used in a specific way for self-manifestation, i.e., to enhance the appearance of a given being. So, the self-manifestation even appears to be more primary. Portmann argues against reducing self-manifestation to an acquired selective advantage in the struggle for survival by pointing out that all functional structures within the self-manifesting appearance arise only secondarily.

The self-manifestation of a living being always remains to some extent an 'unaddressed phenomenon' that is not intended for the sensory receptors

[4] If bodies (e.g., of marine mollusks or fish) are transparent, the internal organs are arranged symmetrically, whereas in opaque bodies they are arranged very asymmetrically. Conversely, markings on the surface of opaque bodies exhibit a symmetrical structure (Portmann, 1957).

of any other being.[5] (A typical example given by Portmann is the complicated ornaments of deep-sea snails, which no one can see in their environment because none of the deep-sea inhabitants has sufficiently developed eyesight, and moreover, there is not enough light.) Portmann balances here on the borderline between two perspectives. On the one hand, he highlights various striking structures on the surfaces of insects, birds, and mammals (outgrowths, feather crowns, colorful coat patterns) that have no vital function, and considers them a sign of self-manifestation. However, the absence of a functional explanation depends on the current state of biological knowledge, regardless of the fact that these structures may have survived from a past period of evolution when they did have a function. But given that self-manifestation concerns the whole of a living form (*Gestalt*), Portmann is forced to admit that "no one can completely isolate survival functions from self-manifestation functions" (Portmann, 1965, p. 222). From this second perspective, self-manifestation cannot be demonstrated on any specific feature; self-manifestation is perceptible to the senses, yet it is transcendent.

When Portmann occasionally developed the idea of the primary non-addressability of the self-manifestation of living forms, he arrived at a more metaphorical concept of 'space of light' (*Lichtraum*), towards which every living form is oriented. This general relation to the space of light is a condition for the possibility of concrete visual, auditory, and olfactory communication. Portmann acknowledged the (co-)evolutionary origin and usefulness of specific sensory organs and certain perceptible features of living forms for the preservation of individuals and species. In case of self-manifestation, he doubted whether it could be considered a function at all, since it is a general principle of living matter.

The fact that the project of phenomenal morphology remained on the margins of mainstream biology was partly due to Portmann's lack of awareness of the non-empirical nature of such a discipline. At a time when there were no specialized departments of philosophy of biology or biological didactics, he was forced to try to integrate 'self-manifestation in the space of light' into the framework of empirical zoology (cf. Klouda, 2021).

4. Portmann and Böhme interpret each other

At first glance, it is not difficult to see the similarities and differences between the two theoretical models presented above. Both agree on the ecstatic nature of things that operate in another; both consider aesthetic experience important, because according to Portmann, it gives rise to self-manifesting appearance. However, Böhme speaks of the atmospheres of all things, including artifacts and inorganic nature, while Portmann limits self-manifestation to living beings only. For the former, atmospheres always exist in the plural; the latter postulates a single universal space. We also find a number of differences in the description of the effects of atmospheres, or self-manifestation, but these are due to the different areas of interest

[5] The most important texts to this topic are (Portmann, 1965 pp. 212-229; Portmann, 1970, pp. 40–75). Cf. proufound studies by (Wild 2021) and (Conte 2021).

of the two authors. In the following considerations, we will remain within the scope of Portmann's theory, i.e., in the realm of the perception of living beings. However, we will confront the elements that we consider most problematic in Portmann's theory with Böhme's theory, which is, of course, more philosophically elaborated.

Perhaps the most problematic feature of Portmann's phenomenal morphology is his thesis about the primarily unaddressed nature of self-manifestation. The focus of a living being's appearance on the 'space of light' evokes pre-modern metaphysical and mystical speculation and leaves open the question of the ontological nature of this sphere. However, if we view self-manifestation through the prism of atmosphere theory, we can avoid a number of difficulties.[6] According to this view, the self-manifestation of a living being is indeed the space of its presence, which is given to others. However, this presence is not exclusively an affective and cognitive reflection in the nervous system of other beings. Therefore, Portmann connects self-manifestation with the pseudo-objective sphere of light, just as Böhme refuses to reduce atmospheres to subjectivity. Portmann's sphere of light cannot, however, be something completely external, truly objectively distinguishable from the physical existence of living beings. Space in this sense is not a geometric extension, but an illuminated sphere that always belongs to a living being as a living being and in which it bodily finds itself and its environment. In the illuminated space of 'bright' discernibility (which we could call in Uexküll's term *Umwelt*), a being can establish various relationships with other beings of its kind and of other kinds. Therefore, the self-manifestation of the embodied form (*Gestalt*) is intrinsically connected with light, because according to Böhme (cf. Böhme, 2013, p. 137), it is also light that spreads from it like an atmosphere.

A quasi-objective nature of self-manifestation, therefore, has a meaning that cannot be reduced to the state of the recipient. Here, however, Böhme comes up with the claim that it is ultimately the attitude of the recipient that determines the final tuning of a given atmosphere. Portmann himself realized that the facts of self-manifestation (objectively focused on 'light') cannot be easily distinguished in empirical reality from the facts of self-preservation functions connecting living beings with each other. Böhme reckons that the atmosphere is completed by the recipient's attitude, without this contradicting the quasi-objective nature of atmospheres. These remain something external, alien, but which have a place in the life of every (human) being. This does not contradict the understanding of man as an autonomous being; on the contrary, Böhme offers a more realistic understanding of autonomy, according to which the subject "is able to live with moments within himself that he does not cause" (Böhme, 1984, p. 205). In the latter quotation, it is important to note that although atmospheres embrace (human) physical existence, they are not the cause of its homogeneity or integrity.

6 In the second, augmented German edition of *Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, Böhme included two short texts that deal specifically with light as atmosphere (Böhme 2013, pp. 134–158) which are not included in the English version. In these, however, Portmann's ideas no longer play any role.

Let us now try to think about self-manifestation in Portmann in a similar way. All addressed visual, auditory, and other manifestations of living beings, however undeniable their usefulness and however unambiguous their communicative function, will nevertheless remain something that is external, so to speak, to both the emitters and the recipients. The quasi-objective nature of self-manifestation (its addressability to the space of light) can also be interpreted as meaning that no act of cognition exhausts the phenomenon of a living being completely and utterly. Therefore, perception is interpretation and includes room for evolutionary development. Portmann often described the relationship between a living being and its world as a pre-established relationship, or spoke about transcendence of appearance towards self-preservation; to use a more traditional philosophical term, this self-manifestation addressed to the sphere of light is an a priori to all concrete relationships (Portmann, 1965, p. 8; Portmann, 1970, p. 73).

Portmann was ultimately only able to evaluate this view in a negative, critical manner. Understandably, it could not become a positive part of his morphological studies as an empirical fact, which is why this insight manifested itself in his work as an irreconcilable criticism of Darwinian selectionism as the main explanatory principle of the life sciences. This, of course, led to the fact that his phenomenal morphology was being mostly ignored by the professional biological community.[7]

5. A priori of Perception and A priori in Perception of the Living

By comparing Portmann's and Böhme's ideas, we have now reached a common area where living beings can meet. This area is supposed to have an a priori nature in relation to various forms of life, i.e., to function as a necessary condition of possibility. Let us leave aside the question of whether scientific biology would need such an a priori structure for its research. Instead, we will attempt to explain the philosophical consequences of this newly glimpsed a priori area.

We are dealing with a sphere that concerns sensory perception, or rather, appearance and experience.[8] Portmann himself spoke of the self-manifestation of a living being that is accessible to 'naive', non-analytical perception, or he speaks directly of an 'aesthetic attitude'. However, we cannot imagine such an attitude as simple contemplation. If, according to Böhme, the establishment of an atmosphere presupposes an act of acceptance on the part of the recipient, then we must assume this act within the 'space of light' if we want to understand it in the same way as an atmosphere. The atmosphere, something 'in us which we do not cause', enables perception in the most fundamental dimension, which is encountering something else.

7 If Portmann understood science in a more pragmatic sense, according to which its highest virtue is not the possession of fixed knowledge but constant openness to its revision, this would not necessarily lead to his marginalization from the biological mainstream.

8 We would prefer the terminology of appearance and experience to avoid the tradition that understands perception as a causal process between certain organs (receptors) and isolated sensory data. On the other hand, perception is understood more as a physical, motor process, and in this sense, atmosphere is not only an external medium, as it is also the internal 'mood' of the recipient.

Portmann's primary connection of self-manifestation with the sphere of light anchors the perception of living forms in irreducible otherness. This is ultimately always present in any manifestation of life, just as self-manifestation is ultimately non-addressable. To perceive a living being as living means to perceive its fundamental otherness (a priori) before I perceive the fullness of all the details of its appearance. To live – to perceive – means to experience one's own non-identity.

In non-human living beings, we attribute most unlearned animal behaviour to instinct. However, it would be wrong to consider instinct blind and mechanical. If it controls an animal's movements, it guides it like a need, an experienced deficiency (food, partner, etc.), i.e., a certain form of experienced non-identity. In the case of humans, this non-identity will take a different form, but this is not an argument against the above.

Self-manifestation and its experience thus represent a certain parameter in which all living beings participate to some extent and from which they draw the ability to understand themselves and their world. We obtained this transcendental structure together with Portmann through morphological analysis of the structure of living bodies and the way in which they are perceived by other beings. Since we are not starting from human thinking and its inherent necessary contents, as was the case in the prevailing Western tradition, we can assume that such a model may offer certain potentialities. It constitutes a sense of belonging among living beings, which, apart from embodiment and perception, does not presuppose any common basis, any identical core that all living beings (such as DNA) would have in common.

6. Conclusion: From 'New Morphology' to a New Ethics?

Of course, it can be argued that such a theory will always be negative in nature, useful at most as a critical principle. Portmann's morphology was unfortunate in that, as a theoretical discipline, it failed to expand knowledge in its field. However, it might have had more luck if we had transferred its methods to the field of action and ethics. Although it would not be able to formulate general normative principles here either, in this area, the elimination of errors is already an expansion of the field for reflection and action.

If it is true that we never fully and completely recognize a living being in its self-manifestation, then this presents an obstacle to identifying with animals. At first glance, this claim might sound controversial; on the contrary, it seems that identification actually gives us a greater degree of compassion. However, human identification with the genus 'animal' traditionally follows a second step in the formulation of species difference, 'rational' (animal rationale). The species characteristic of 'reason' is hierarchically superior to animality, just as form is superior to matter. Since ancient times, the practice of ethics has consisted in cultivating, taming, or restraining the 'animal' with which we identify ourselves. This, of course, then confirms the systematic disciplining and exploitation of the animals around us. For if we already know animality well from our own (suppressed) inner selves, which we also are in some way, then they can be of no use to us other than for calculated benefit.

However, if we learn to systematically resist such identification and each living form remains a symbol or trace of an unmanipulable 'space of light', then encounters with 'animals' in the atmosphere of their self-manifestation will be a search for our own possibilities and an enrichment of our self-knowledge. Our response and acceptance of the self-manifestation of other living beings may therefore be a feeling of wonder, respect, and perhaps even gratitude, rather than compassion.

The failure of Portmannian morphology, which sought to open up the realm of living forms to an aesthetic approach, did not lie solely in its lack of empirical evidence. To the same extent, this failure was also a discovery of the ethical dimension hidden within the aesthetics of life.

References

Böhme, G. (1985) *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Böhme, G. (1993) 'Leib: Die Natur, die wir selbst sind', In: Schnädelbach H. and Keil, G. (eds.) *Philosophie der Gegenwart – Gegenwart der Philosophie*. Hamburg: Junius, pp. 219–234.

Böhme, G. (1995) *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*. Frankfurth am Main: Suhrkamp.

Böhme, G. (2013) *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*. Frankfurth am Main: Suhrkamp.

Böhme, G. (2017) *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*. London and New York: Routledge.

Buytendijk, F.J.J. (1958) *Das Menschliche. Wege zu seinem Verständnis*. Stuttgat: Koehler Verlag.

Conte, P. (2021) 'Playing Appearences: On Some Aspects of Portmann ´s Contribution to Philosophical Aesthetics', In: Jaroš, F. and Klouda, J. (eds.) *Adolf Portmann, A Thinker of Self-expressive Life*. Cham: Springer Nature, pp. 159–175.

Fischer, J. (2009) 'Exploring the core identity of philosophical anthropology through the works of Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen', *Iris*, 1(1), pp. 153–170.

Fischer, J. (2022) *Philosophische Anthropologie. Eine Denkrichtung des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Baden – Baden: Verlag Karl Alber.

Honneth, A. and Joas, H. (1988) *Social Action and Human Nature*. Cambridge – New York: Cambrigde University Press.

Klouda, J. (2021) 'The New Morphology Between Biology and Philosophy', In: Jaroš, F. and Klouda, J. (eds.) *Adolf Portmann, A Thinker of Self-expressive Life*. Cham: Springer Nature, pp. 199–218.

Novák, A. (2024) *Animal excentricum: Přehled klasiků filosofické antropologie*. Červený Kostelec: Pavel Mervart.

Portmann, A. (1970) *Entlässt die Natur den Menschen? Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Biologie und Anthropologie*. München: Piper Verlag.

Portmann, A. (1965) *Neue Wege der Biologie*. München: Piper Verlag.

Portmann, A. (1957) 'Transparente und opake Gestaltung', In: *Rencontre - Encounter - Begegnung. Contributions à une psychologie humaine, dédiées au professeur F. J. J. Buytendijk*. Utrecht /Antwerpen: Het Spectrum, pp. 355–370.

Wild, M. (2021) 'Portmann, Goethe and Modern Biology: Two and a Half Ways of Looking at Nature', In: Jaroš, F. and Klouda, J. (eds.) *Adolf Portmann, A Thinker of Self-expressive Life*. Cham: Springer Nature, pp. 145–158.

Jiří Klouda
Department of Philosophy and Humanities, Faculty of Arts
University of Jan Evangelista in Ústí nad Labem (UJEP)
jiri.klouda@ujep.cz

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18641059