Ambiances, Atmospheres and Sensory Experiences of Spaces

ATMOSPHERES AND SHARED EMOTIONS

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7 Shared or spread? On boredom and other unintended collective emotions in the cinema

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Audience effects in the cinema

Imagine it's a Saturday evening and you are sitting in your favourite multiplex cinema to watch a comedy. Well, let's call it a *wannabee* comedy, because the film, although trying to create a light and cheerful atmosphere, turns out entirely unfunny. In fact, it is impossible for you to honour the filmmakers' intentions even with the faintest of smiles. Most other viewers are not amused in the slightest either. Even the lone viewers in the third and eleventh row, who had occasionally laughed out loud at what all the others consider lame pranks and poor jokes, have slowly calmed down. An atmosphere of fidgety, heavy silence has filled the cinema hall; you and your neighbour and all the other viewers feel bored *individually* and *in parallel* by what the filmmakers have dared to make you go through.

Now, think of another scenario: it's a grey Sunday afternoon and you have gone down to the local arthouse theatre to see the latest film of a serious art-cinema director. You are trying to concentrate on what's going on up there on the screen. It seems entirely obvious that the film intends to radiate an atmosphere of gloomy, heavy momentousness. Yet you find the whole thing pretentious, even ludicrous. Just when you are about to become seriously impatient, somewhere in the dark someone starts laughing. During the next conceited dialogue passage or drawn-out voice-over rumination, you feel encouraged to giggle a bit contemptuously yourself. Others are gradually joining in as well. Before long, the majority of viewers are laughing or uttering acerbic comments. A light-hearted, if sarcastic atmosphere has engulfed parts of the audience, while you and many of the others *share* emotions like amusement and contempt as you go through them *together*. Other spectators, however, feel put off: they are annoyed by what they consider disturbances and acts of disrespect.

On the face of it, these fictive examples are complementary opposites. In the first case, we encounter dead silence when anticipating explosive laughter; in the second case, we have an unexpected audible response where there shouldn't be one. In the first example, viewers remain quietly bored where rumbustious laughter is intended; in the second example, audiences laugh

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Figure 7.1 Cinema audience 1.

out loud about something meant to be experienced in serious silence. In the first scenario, the emotions are *spread* over individual viewers; in the second, the spectators *share* emotions. But the two situations also have things in common. In both cases, the *artist-intended* atmospheres are countered and trumped by *audience-made* atmospheres (Figure 7.1). And in both scenarios, the viewers go through *collective* emotions, albeit of very different kinds.

Admittedly, the two scenarios are pointed, even forced. But the hyperbole serves a rhetorical function: It helps to highlight aspects we can encounter in different degrees also in more mundane movie-theatre situations. If they ring true at least to some extent, they will allow me to pursue two goals.

First, I want to extend a critique that—despite their indebtedness to it—Gernot Böhme and Tonino Griffero have levelled against Hermann Schmitz's notion of atmospheres: that atmospheres can be *actively* produced and that we can even reconstruct a poetics of atmospheres. Böhme calls this *making* of atmospheres "aesthetic work": "We find this kind of work everywhere. It is divided into many professional branches and as a whole furthers the increasing aestheticization of reality. (…) They include: design, stage sets, advertising, the production of musical atmospheres (acoustic furnishing), cosmetics, interior design—as well, of course, as the whole sphere of art proper" (Böhme 2017, 21). However, and here I see a potential to add to Böhme and Griffero's aesthetics myself, atmospheres are not only intentionally created by artists, architects, or designers who

want to evoke an atmospheric art experience, but also—voluntarily and involuntarily—by *audiences* who collectively perceive an opera, a theatre performance, a concert or a film. Now, I don't claim that this is a revolutionary insight for those who consider the concept of atmosphere of value in aesthetics and beyond. In fact, it only takes a small step—but this step we still need to take.

Second, I aim to add to the discussion about collective emotions and emotional sharing by introducing the term *spread collective emotions*. Both shared and spread collective emotions are a subclass of collective emotions more widely conceived. But while shared emotions have garnered attention recently, spread collective emotions have flown below the radar. As we will see, unlike the amusement of the viewers in the second example, the boredom an audience collectively endures while watching an excruciatingly tedious comedy is not something they share—at least not in the sense I will define it.

In this essay, I will draw on and extend insights from my book *The Audience Effect: On the Collective Cinema Experience* (2018).[1] The explicit goal of that study was to show what scholars throughout the history of film theory had turned a blind eye to; the fact that the co-presence of other viewers always affects our film experience, for better or worse. This audience effect bears significantly on the *atmosphere* in the cinema hall and the *emotions* we undergo as an audience. When we watch a film in a cinema or another co-viewing situation, we constitute and create a social experience that does not precede this event—it comes alive only through us and, during the film, continuously changes with and because of us. Limiting research to the *dyadic* encounter between a single viewer and the film artificially delimits and distorts the discussion about the film experience. Instead, it's important to realise that the collective constellation is always a *triadic* one between individual viewer, film, and the rest of the audience. In a slogan: Watching a film with others is crucially different from watching a film alone. And this goes, *mutatis mutandis*, also for other aesthetic experiences of a collective kind: pop music concerts, operas, theatre, or dance performances, etc.

To channel, from the beginning, the readers' expectations in the right direction, it may be important to underline that I am writing as a film theorist with a decidedly phenomenological inclination and a strong interest in the philosophical concepts at stake in this volume, but I am not a philosopher. I have long been influenced by Hermann Schmitz's phenomenology and have profited from the work of many scholars involved in this volume. As such, I occupy the curious position of an outsider who feels very much at home. But precisely *as* an outsider I hope to add a useful perspective on phenomena that many readers may be familiar with, but may not have connected to what's at stake in debates about atmospheres and shared emotions. With the help of the concrete case of the cinema experience, I hope to shed light on aspects valuable for the larger philosophical debate as well.

Change of atmospheres: an active audience

It's well-known that in Gernot Böhme's New Aesthetics atmospheres play a crucial role—atmospheres in all their rich and variegated colours: serious atmospheres, menacing atmospheres, sublime atmospheres, giddy atmospheres, etc. The specificity of atmospheres is best realised when they stand out and we have not yet become used to them: "they are experienced *through contrast*, that is, when finding ourselves in atmospheres that clash with our own emotional state, or when *entering into* them by moving from one atmosphere to another" (Böhme 2017, 168, emphasis added). Accordingly, Böhme distinguishes between *contrastive* and *ingressive* experiences of atmospheres. Unlike Hermann Schmitz, on whom he otherwise relies to an astonishing degree, Böhme believes that atmospheres can be *produced* by relying on the qualities of things—their ecstasies. By using the Greek word *ecstasies*, Böhme wants to indicate that things—including artworks, images, or entertaining films—radiate into space and thereby contribute to establishing an atmosphere: "*Ecstatics* is the way things make a certain impression on us and thus modifying our mood, the way we feel ourselves" (Böhme 2017, 5; see also Griffero 2014, 96–99).

Even though atmospheres are actively produced, not everything produced actually works. It, therefore, makes sense to speak of *intended atmospheres* in case we recognise someone wanted to create an atmosphere but we nevertheless remain unaffected. This can have *artistic* reasons as when the intended atmosphere of light-hearted cheerfulness of a comedy falls flat and fails to have an effect on us. But it can also have *contextual* reasons, for instance, when we decide to watch a dark horror film in broad daylight on our computer screen and the atmosphere of gloomy darkness dissipates rather like the vampire Nosferatu when hit by the first rays of the morning sun.[2]

Another contextual reason for an intended atmosphere to go awry is co-viewers who experience a film differently and thereby create a contrastive atmosphere. Böhme has gestured in that direction as early as 1998: "It shouldn't be forgotten that in our everyday behavior and our ways of life we always co-produce the atmospheres in which we live." He continued with a comment I take as my point of departure: "The everyday interaction as common participation in atmospheres and its communicative creation—that would be another topic" (Böhme 1998, 12, my translation). It is here that I make my moderate intervention: A film's intended atmosphere can conflict with the atmosphere emerging *in* and *from* the audience and the affective affordances of the film remain unexploited or are appropriated for other means.

Consider how in our first scenario the viewers' expectations are crossed out in more than one way. Not only are the spectators expecting the film to *emit* an atmosphere of cheerful hilarity and humour, but they are also anticipating a receptive cinema audience which *resonates* with this atmosphere

and responds chuckling and cackling wildly. Neither of the two expectations materialises. Yet a distinction between these two corresponding but different atmospheres make sense; this becomes more tangible when we take a closer look at those two viewers in the third and eleventh row for whom the pranks and jokes weren't all that lame; these two viewers, in fact, considered the film as quite funny. The two pitiable spectators find themselves in a different situation, because the intended *atmosphere of the film* had precisely the affective effect they expected all along. What extinguished their laughter, and thus crossed out *both* their expectations, was the fidgety silent *atmosphere of the cinema hall* constituted by the other viewers. Since the laughter of the two lone spectators did not resonate and find an echo, it eventually faded and their appreciation of the film vanished with it. In this respect, laughing in a group of dead-serious, bored, or otherwise quiet people is rather like screaming in an anechoic chamber: the laughter is sucked up in a void of silence—and dies down.

These spectators must feel like the serious observer, in an example that Hermann Schmitz likes to give, who enters the giddy atmosphere of a party: She is well aware of the giddiness that surrounds her, but doesn't feel giddy herself but rather sad and pensive (Schmitz 2003, 251). With Böhme we could say that the affordances of the comedy—their ecstatic qualities—were merely kept "in latency" (Böhme 2019, 166) for the two spectators and the affective effect has been hampered by the hostile surrounding atmosphere. Had they watched the comedy alone at home, they might have enjoyed it more. And, at this point shifting our focus from atmospheres to emotions, they would not have gone through the collective emotion of boredom.

Shared and spread collective emotions

Before I can say more about collective boredom in the cinema, I first need to introduce a conceptual distinction crucial for the following discussion—a distinction between *collective* emotions, *shared* emotions, and *spread* emotions. Following Christian von Scheve and Sven Ismer, I prefer a broad definition of collective emotions and consider them as "the *synchronous convergence in affective responding* across individuals towards a specific event or object" (2013, 406, original emphasis). The definition is wide-ranging because (a) collective emotions and individual emotions do not have to differ qualitatively from one another, (b) face-to-face encounters or other forms of co-presence are not required for the synchronous convergence, and (c) individuals don't have to be mutually aware of each other's emotions. For this broad understanding of collective emotions, it suffices that individuals appraise an event in similar ways, share appraisal structures or concerns, and converge in terms of emotional response. As an example, von Scheve and Ismer refer to a traffic jam: the drivers appraise the situation as obstructing their goals; they have limited potential to cope with the situation; and they share the concern that they might arrive late at their destination. This

leads to a synchronous convergence of anger or frustration, but encapsulated in their cars, the drivers know very little about each other's emotions and affective expressions.

In my view, shared emotions—or what sometimes also goes by the name of "emotional sharing" (Zahavi 2015; Thonhauser 2020), "shared feeling" (Schmid 2008), or "feeling-in-common" (Max Scheler 2008 [1923])—are a particular type or subclass of collective emotions. Together with *emotional contagion* and *feeling together*, shared emotions constitute the three most common types of *affective we-experiences* in the cinema (see Chapter 6 in Hanich 2018). Drawing on the work of philosophers like Hans Bernhard Schmid (2008; 2014), Dan Zahavi (2015), and Mikko Salmela (2012; 2014), I argue that individuals—such as film viewers in a cinema—share an emotion when four necessary and jointly sufficient conditions are fulfilled (for a similar, albeit slightly different account, see Thonhauser 2020).

First, spectators share an emotion when they experience the *same kind of emotion*. Their emotions may not merely be similar, and they must by no means be dissimilar. While this might sound obvious, it is important to underscore that not every affective we-experience is based on the same kind of emotion. When viewers experience the affective we-phenomenon of *feeling together* they go through different, albeit *matching* emotions (Hanich 2018, 178–181; on feeling together, see also Sánchez Guerrero 2016).

Second, the spectators' emotion must also be directed towards *the same intentional object*. Again, this might sound trivial, but we can easily imagine cases in which viewers are simultaneously amused by very different things: while some are amused by how ridiculously pretentious the film is (as in my second fictitious scenario above), another viewer is amused because she has just exchanged a joke with her neighbour and yet another one has received a funny GIF on his smartphone. This also implies that when two viewers share an emotion, they both *immediately* respond to the shared intentional object, and not to each other's *response* to that object. This distinguishes shared emotions from emotional contagion, where the emotion causally depends on someone else's emotions. And it also sets shared emotions apart from affective forms of empathy and sympathy where togetherness is mediated as well: When I feel *with* you (in empathy) or *for* you (in sympathy) I do it, in a sense, *because of* you. In both cases, the other individual's emotion is the object; my response is mediated, not immediate.

Third, for the same emotion to be shared, some form of *mutual awareness* is necessary. Thus, a coincidental case of qualitatively identical emotions running in parallel must be ruled out. When we share an emotion, I must have at least some peripheral idea that you experience the same emotion as I do and that you know that I know it. As Thonhauser puts it (2020, 208): "individuals who are involved in emotional sharing are aware of each other as co-subjects of that affective experience." However, this does not imply that we have to actively focus upon our mutual awareness when sharing an emotion; it can remain at the fringe of consciousness. Nor does the

requirement of mutual awareness imply a strong truth claim: I can be wrong about your emotion just as you can be wrong about mine.

Fourth and lastly, sharing an emotion comes with a certain *loss of distance and individuality* and, thus, an experience of some form of *phenomenological closeness.* Dan Zahavi (2015, 90) also speaks of an "affective bond" or "unification." Only in this case would it be legitimate to say that the sarcastic amusement you and I and all the others go through when we laugh about a preposterous film is *our* amusement. Shared emotions derive from emotions that "open" us to others and even "connect" us to them. Here we can expect different *degrees* of felt closeness and distance and hence, different degrees of sharedness of an emotion (see also Salmela 2012). These degrees of closeness and distance may have to do with the *intensity* of the emotion, but they can also depend on the *kind* of emotion.

This leads us directly to the problem of what a *spread* collective emotion is. Dan Zahavi, in an important article entitled "You, Me and We: The Sharing of Emotional Experiences," has asked, merely in passing, if all emotions can be shared in the same way (2015, 98). In a direct response, Zeyne Okur Güney (2015, 105) has expressed her doubts: "when experiencing emotions such as hate, envy, jealousy, shame, or anger, the distinction between self and other is strongly manifest, whereas in compassion, love, or sympathy it diminishes" I agree: not all emotions allow for a loss of distance and an affective phenomenological closeness to others. Thus, even though both are a subclass of collective emotions, a crucial difference between shared collective emotions and spread collective emotions remains the necessary phenomenological closeness. While it is felt (however, mildly) between those who share a collective emotion, it is missing in spread emotions. In other words, spread collective emotions do not count as an affective *we*-experience. Experiencing a spread collective emotion rather implies that we all have the same immediate emotional response to a shared object or event and are mutually aware of it to some degree, but nevertheless feel individuated and hence (somewhat) detached from each other.

An interesting case in point is collective embarrassment. Imagine a film screening in which, all of a sudden, a very explicit sex scene or even a hardcore pornographic shot appears on the screen. It's not a secret that showing unsimulated sex has become *de rigueur* among art cinema directors like Catherine Breillat, Larry Clarke, Michael Winterbottom, Lars von Trier, Abdellatif Kechiche, Ulrich Seidl, Radu Jude, Gaspar Noë, Bertrand Bonello, and many others.[3] It is not unlikely that this scene can lead to a flash of embarrassment (depending of course on a number of contextual factors: for instance, is it a university screening with students, colleagues, and some superiors, a private gathering at home with a few close friends or a public cinema screening with anonymous co-viewers?). But for the sake of the argument, let's assume that all viewers undergo a moment of embarrassment: it is difficult to imagine that members of the audience suddenly feel more unified or connected to each other. Embarrassment simply does

not seem to be the kind of emotion that lends itself to an affective bond in a cinema setting. Thus, the viewers do not have this embarrassing experience together, but in parallel; to them, it only involves for-*me*-ness, not for-*us*-ness. Hence, it would feel incorrect to call the embarrassment you and I and all the others go through when confronted with a pornographic scene, *our* embarrassment.

To be sure, we don't have to decide *ex cathedra* which emotions allow for phenomenological closeness and hence shared emotions, and which ones don't. There may well be emotions that can allow for both and depend on the social context and the type of co-viewers you watch the film with. An example could be moments of being *sadly moved* by a film (on the emotion of being moved, see Kuehnast et al. 2014; Menninghaus et al. 2015; Cova and Deonna 2014; Deonna 2020). On the one hand, when a film moves an entire cinema to tears and the audience, thus, experiences a collective emotion, the individual viewers need not necessarily share the emotion: Although at this moment the entire audience may be sadly moved, not all viewers have to experience it in a *we*-mode. Some may well go through the emotion in an *I*-mode, as if surrounded by an individualising bubble. On the other hand, some pockets of the audience—say, a group of close friends or a mother and her daughter—may share tears together and feel phenomenologically close to each other (on shared weeping, see also Hanich 2018, 240–242). This shows us that within a given audience, collective emotions can be both shared (by some) and spread out (for others). The latter is arguably the case in collective boredom, such as that experienced by the audience in our first scenario.

Involuntary boredom as a spread collective emotion

Boredom is a widespread negative emotion that has raised considerable interest among philosophers (e.g., Heidegger 1995 [1929/30]; Neu 2000; Elpidorou 2018). But boredom is also an aesthetic emotion and as such has garnered a fair amount of attention in film studies (e.g., Misek 2010; Richmond 2015; Çağlayan 2018; Quaranta 2020; Ferencz-Flatz forthcoming). The reasons for this spark of curiosity among film scholars are plentiful: the rise of interest in emotions; the growing attention to the phenomenology of film experience; and the ascent of slow cinema, by directors like Béla Tarr, Tsai Ming-liang, Lav Diaz, or Pedro Costa, as a vital aesthetic force in global cinema. However, what these studies have sidestepped is precisely the *collective* boredom we are interested in here.

Let us, therefore, hark back once again to my first fictitious scenario of the spectators who are not only underwhelmed by the wannabee comedy but flat-out bored. Following Heidegger's classification of three types of boredom, we can immediately identify it as an example of his first category: "being bored with something" (*Gelangweiltwerden von etwas*).[4] When an atmosphere of booming, but fidgety silence calmed down even the two

viewers who were initially laughing out loud, it drowned their enthusiasm, thus changing their emotions from amusement to boredom. With Heidegger (1995 [1929/30], 103), we can say that the film leaves them *empty* because it offers them nothing.

Boredom's emptiness—its *unfulfilledness*—is the opposite of "a fulfilled time." We, therefore, find ourselves in a situation that foregrounds time and its pace.[5] In boredom, time moves too slowly, lingers, seems to stand still. It becomes obtrusive, and we experience the situation as heavy and stultifying. Heidegger (1995 [1929/30], 97) talks appositely about *das Lastende und Lähmende*, the burdensome and paralysing. As a way out, we seek an occupation to fill the emptiness of time. Since there is little else we can do, we take useless action: We look at our watch; we check our cell phone for new messages; we move in our seats and look around; we flee into daydreaming to play out an alternative movie in our private theatre of the mind. All this to bridge the emptiness between the now and what is our yearned-for goal: the end of the film, or at least the beginning of a more entertaining scene. Inasmuch as all viewers are bored with the supposedly funny comedy and, thus, have converged synchronously in affective responding, they undergo a *collective* form of boredom.

But, and this is crucial for my argument, in boredom the film also seems to *abandon us to ourselves* (Heidegger 1995 [1929/30], 103). Or, as Andreas Elpidorou puts it: "Bored individuals experience *a withdrawal from their environment* and cannot identify with what the environment is offering them" (2018, 460, emphasis added). Thus, the experience of boredom arguably comes with a certain distanciation from the world, an isolating encapsulation, even in the close proximity of others. In fact, we can be bored even when doing something *with* others like playing a boring card game, carrying out a monotonous task or, indeed, watching a tedious movie together. In the following quote Lars Svendsen (2005, 112) uses the term "mood" instead of emotions, but boredom can be both a mood and an emotion for him (on boredom as an emotion, see also Elpidorou 2018): "Experiences become possible by virtue of moods that are suitable for it. Certain moods may incite sociality (e.g., joy), whereas others are more likely to lead to loneliness (e.g., boredom)." This is not to say that boredom always comes with a feeling of loneliness, but it points to our tendency to not experience it in a we-mode. Bored viewers in the cinema lack the necessary closeness to each other that comes with emotional sharing. They are not bored *together* in an emphatic sense, but bored *for themselves* and *next to each other.*

If they were feeling close, they would not undergo the very lack of meaning and emptiness so characteristic of boredom—they would have already chased boredom away. In this respect it's worthwhile mentioning that proponents of a functional account of boredom like Andreas Elpidorou underline a specific purpose of boredom: it motivates us to pursue a new goal when the current one ceases to be satisfactory, attractive, or meaningful. As such, it propels us to follow strategies to re-establish meaning and pursue

pro-social intentions (Elpidorou 2020, 1). Similarly, and with reference to Schopenhauer, Svendsen (2005, 172) claims that boredom can lead to sociality precisely as a diversion from boredom. This means that we sometimes aim to overcome boredom's withdrawal and distanciation from the world and others precisely by seeking out others. This seems to me another clue: boredom in the cinema is a spread collective emotion, not a shared one. We can even find a source of relief and even pleasure when discovering, during the film or afterwards, that others judge it as equally tedious and lame. But again, this does not imply we share the emotion of boredom because the moment we have reached out to others and discovered the relieving fact that others were equally bored, boredom has disappeared, if only temporarily.

Unintended laughter and subgroups in the audience

In the final section, I shall now turn to my so far neglected second scenario and draw attention to laughter as a form of emotional expression that can have a strong audience effect on atmospheres and shared emotions. I will concentrate on instances in which laughter—as a straightforward emotional expression of *being amused*, but also of *contempt*—can create a light-hearted or hostile atmosphere that was neither existent beforehand nor intended by the filmmakers. The scenario will also help to underline how volatile atmospheres and shared emotions can be. Not least, it will show that audiences are often anything but coherent groups, but can consist of protean-like subgroups.

Laughter has a centrifugal spatiality outward and implies a transcendence of the self, in the sense that one *ex-plodes, ex-hales,* and, thus, *ex-presses* a sound from inside out and forward into a space often shared with others (Figure 7.2). As we have seen, in their accounts of atmospheres Gernot Böhme and Tonino Griffero often use the evocative term "ecstasies." Laughter, with all its eruptive, outward-moving, and ex-haling characteristics, has exactly this ec-static quality, too, which can influence and even change an atmosphere. In the following, I will—predominantly but not exclusively—deal with what I call *conversion laughter* (for a typology of ten kinds of laughter in the cinema, see Hanich 2018, 193–207). Here the expression of amused or derisive laughter occasions the *evaluative transformation* of a film that was intended to be serious (or sentimental or scary) and is instead being laughed *at*. In these cases, we can witness a gradual change of atmosphere in the cinema hall from serious to light-hearted, or contemptuous and aggressive. Monica Vitti, no less, once told how the audience turned the premiere of Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960) at the Cannes Film Festival into a deeply hurtful experience for her. Afterwards she was "crying like a baby." What had happened? "[The viewers] were laughing at the most … most tragic sequences, those that we had sweated the most over and believed the most in. And this went on throughout the projection."[6]

Figure 7.2 Cinema audience 2.

However, for my claims about conversion laughter to sound convincing it is important to remind ourselves that laughter does not always have to be strongly eruptive and quasi-automatic. There are instances in which we respond in far more controlled and active ways. While we are often passively "done" by laughter, we sometimes also actively "do" laughter. Laughter, in other words, can take the abrupt form of a bursting explosion, but also the gradual form of a melting erosion (Prütting 2013, 1554). The Hermann-Schmitz-inspired scholar of laughter Lenz Prütting, therefore, suggests a polar continuum: At one end of the spectrum, we find a bursting, overwhelming, quasi-automatic laughter with a maximum loss of autonomy and a minimum of self-assertion. In-between, there are forms of laughter of low intensity in which the viewer's loss of autonomy and his or her self-assertion are balanced equally. At the other end of the spectrum, we can locate fully controlled forms of laughter which imply only a minimum loss of self-control. As an example, we could cite cases when we cognitively *understand* that something is meant to be funny and appreciate this intention with restrained laughter, even though we don't find the scene funny at all. Here the active control is high and we could have just as well inhibited the laughing response and remained silent. Arguably, another case of controlled laughter is the conversion laughter that modifies a film's intended atmospheres, emotions, and meanings.

In general, laughter can function like a performative *value judgment* and evaluate its object along a vertical up-down axis: (1) *Laughing down at* as a

smug sign of superiority; (2) *laughing with* as a sign of equality where one recognises a film or its maker as on an equal level as oneself; (3) *laughing up at* as a subversive act that wants to turn an inferiority position upside down (see also Prütting 2013, 1865/1866). In our case, the first and the last type of evaluative laughter are crucial: laughing down at and up at.

On the one hand, the transformative act of laughter can have a benign-humorous quality. The viewer humorously and ironically transforms a serious film with a light-hearted, campy, tongue-in-cheek change of perspective into something worthy of laughter. Think of the humorous cult surrounding thrash films or failed horror movies such as *Troll 2* (1990) by Claudio Fragasso, Tommy Wiseau's *The Room* (2003), *Birdemic: Shock and Terror* (2008) by James Nguyen or films by Ed Wood like *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959). In cases like these film scholars speak of *so-bad-it's-good cinema* and cite the director's incompetence, but also the temporal and cultural distance as reasons for the audience's humorous response (Smith 2019). These films are *intended* to create an atmosphere of serious sentimentality, uncanniness or scariness, and elicit concrete emotions like being-moved, horror, and terror. However, through a humorous change of perspective some viewers judge them as hilarious and make this audible to the rest of the audience. From its position of superiority, the cult-movie audience laughs *down* at the film, but its benign-positive laughter at the same time appreciates the object and *pulls it up*, as it were, from its low cultural status.[7]

On the other hand, evaluative transformations via laughter can also have a hostile and contemptuous tone. In my second fictitious scenario, the arthouse film and its director seem to flaunt an air of superiority, or at least a high-minded authority. In their overt seriousness, they put themselves on a high cultural pedestal, but this superior position does not seem rightfully earned and the film, therefore, comes across as rather ludicrous. Inspired by the so-bad-it's-good category, we might speak of the *so-pretentious-it's-ridiculous film.* Viewers usually discover the unjustified authority on the level of the film, but their rejection can also be fuelled by promotional and publicity materials, including highfalutin interviews of the director (McLean 2013, 152). Here laughing—Henri Bergson famously ascribed a punishing effect to it—assumes a corrective function: The viewers' laughter violently shakes the pedestal and, in an act of devaluation and degradation, dethrones what was put there undeservedly. As a kind of acoustic, non-verbal speech-act, it implies a negative judgment of taste that evaluates the film as overly pretentious. Since one would rarely expect this kind of laughter alone at home, I consider it a hostile signal to *other viewers*—a signal that communicates an evaluation close to a grammatical utterance like, "What pretentious nonsense!" or "How lame!"

Let's assume that two or three viewers have—rather actively and intentionally—initiated this type of revaluation of the intended atmospheres and emotions. Some viewers, who feel similarly, might consider this as an invitation to join in; they actively laugh *up* at the film and try to subversively

pull it down too. At this point, two other forms of laughter might follow. The first one—I call it *mimicry laughter*—implies a more or less active form of laughing-along-with out of conformity or solidarity. Here viewers mimic the laughter of the others because it either seems too *authoritative* or too *convincing* as a form of evaluative transformation to reject support. The second type of laughter that might follow is *contagion laughter*. In this case, other viewers might be *passively* pulled into laughing together with the initiators in an almost involuntary response to the infectious character of laughter. In this case, laughter is not an act of mimicry; the laughter occurs simply because other people have laughed in an infectious way. Yet also in this case, we might experience a considerable change of atmosphere.

All of this might sound rather schematic and too intentional at times. However, the three steps—from intentional conversion laughter, to more or less active mimicry laughter, to passive contagion laughter—are meant as a mere analytic dissection of what can happen almost simultaneously and in various parts of the audience. Moreover, I certainly don't claim that all of this is collectively orchestrated or deeply thought through; the phenomenon can occur spontaneously and with very limited intentions. Since laughter is such an eruptive, acoustic phenomenon, it is hard to ignore, especially against the background of an otherwise silent auditorium. While the film may attempt to establish an atmosphere of high seriousness (or melodramatic sentimentality, horrifying scariness etc.), the laughter easily disrupts and transforms it. Isn't this exactly a case of "everyday interaction as common participation in atmospheres and its communicative creation" (Böhme 1998, 12)?

This leaves us with the question of shared emotions in our second scenario. Laughter, as an expression of a shared emotion of amusement or contempt, can be an obvious means of making viewers *mutually aware* of each other and phenomenologically "uniting" them (however, briefly).

Let's assume that a group of viewers—or even the entire auditorium—laughs in an amused or derisive way about a film meant to be dead-serious, sentimental, or scary. This laughter is equivalent to a physical outburst that expressively exhales a we-statement. The audience expresses a shared *evaluation*: "This is unintentionally funny or ludicrous *for us*!" But it also voices a shared *emotion*: "We are feeling amusement or contempt *together*!" For a brief moment, those spectators who join in the laughing collective give up their self-control and allow a temporary diffusion of the rigid boundaries of individuality characteristic of what Hermann Schmitz calls *personal emancipation*.

But obviously this collective expression by no means implies that the emotion they share is always shared by the *entire* audience. To drive home this point, I will round off my essay by underlining seven ways in which laughter can affect an audience and create various forms of social relation.

First, our collective laughter can bring about an affectively close *we*, where I laugh with you, you laugh with me and we all laugh with each other.

When laughing together about something ridiculous or contemptible, our subjective social distances decrease, or even disappear for a brief moment in time. We may feel, as it were, centripetally pulled together. This affectively close "we" does not know an "Other" in the auditorium: All viewers feel amused or contemptuous and there is no experience outside to this "we."

Second, laughter can also result in a more oppositional affective audience interrelation of *we-thou* (where the "thou" indicates the second-person singular). Think of a group of friends who were persuaded by one of them to watch our overly pretentious arthouse film, a film she has seen on an earlier occasion and finds particularly thought-provoking and moving. Unlike her, however, the others soon realise they collectively detest the film. They use their—somewhat sadistic, derisive—laughter to spoil the film for her and thus create a confrontational stance that puts them into opposition to and at a felt distance from her. While *they* metamorphise into a momentary "we," they simultaneously try to box *her* into the position of a "thou."

Third, laughter may also evoke an antagonistic experience of *we-ye* (where the "ye" refers to the second-person plural). In this case, laughter pits factions of the audience against each other. For instance, those who derisively laugh together about the—for them: overly pretentious—film might actively position themselves against those silent others who (presumably) find it moving, just as much as these silent others might feel opposed by the aggressively laughing segment. As a consequence, a couple or a group of friends—who are all fans of the arthouse director's work—might exchange glances and signal to one another their anger. In that moment, as a group, they share an emotion that pits them against those they find disrespectful.

Fourth, laughter may evoke a less specific *we-they* experience, in which "they" implies a rather undefined background, a vague outside of the group that remains indeterminate and is not reflected upon. For instance, those who find a pretentious film ridiculous may not intend their laughter to create any opposition but simply express their contempt together. Sharing their humour allows both the creation of a feeling of togetherness and marking the boundaries of the group without making the outside of the group a defining factor (as in the previous two cases).

Fifth, an individual viewer may feel opposed to a particular spectator—an experience we could call the *I-thou* mode (second-person singular). Think of a grumpy husband who laughs derisively down at the film in order to spoil his wife's deeply felt experience; or a viewer moved to tears, getting annoyed by another viewer's degrading laughter. In these moments, the viewers do not experience any shared emotion about the film together, but rather direct their distancing emotions—such as anger or frustration—*at* the other.

Or, and this is my sixth category, a single viewer may feel rejected from or opposed to a bigger group or even the entire audience. We could call this the *I-ye* mode (second-person plural). A case in point would be the mocking laughter of a single viewer who tries to evaluate the preposterous film negatively but no one else follows. At this point, she may unwittingly feel

excluded from the rest while embarrassment wells up in her. Inversely, cowering in his seat we find a young boy who is deeply scared by *Birdemic* or *Plan 9 from Outer Space* and feels isolated and excluded because all the others judge the film as hilarious and laugh at it.

Seventh, and finally, we can imagine an *I-they* experience in which the rest of the audience remains a vague backdrop not reflected upon, comparable to the *we-they* mode above. Here we could think of a viewer who snickers sneeringly to himself about how ridiculously pompous the movie comes across, without targeting the rest of the audience in any pronounced way. The viewer neither feels positively individualised nor negatively isolated because the rest of the audience remains a mere background.

This discussion has tried to accentuate that spectators can—willingly or unwillingly—transform atmospheres in the cinema hall, change a film's intended effect, coagulate into groups sharing emotions, dissolve into clusters whose collective emotions are spread out or feel individually distanced from others. Needless to say, there is much more that can be said about audience effects, but one thing has hopefully emerged: in our discussions about atmospheres and emotions in aesthetics, audiences represent a force to be reckoned with.

Notes

1 I thank Edinburgh University Press for allowing me to reuse material previously discussed in Chapters 6 and 7 of my book.
2 In film studies, the neo-phenomenological term "atmosphere" has not left a big mark yet (in Brunner, Schweinitz, Tröhler 2012, for instance, it doesn't play a role). For film scholars, it is more common to talk about moods and *Stimmungen* (see Smith 2003; Plantinga 2012; Sinnerbrink 2012).
3 See for instance this Wikipedia list: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unsimulated_sex
4 For the viewers in the third and eleventh row, in case they were able to resist the collective boredom and enjoy the movie, the film experience afterwards might have turned out to be an example of the second type of boredom: "being bored with something" (*das Sichlangweilen bei etwas*). For Heidegger, this is the case when someone has successfully whiled away time, but later on realises that the whole experience was empty after all. For an interpretation of mainstream entertainment film as a "cinema that kills time," see Quaranta 2020, 10–13.
5 As Lars Svendsen explains (2005, 127): "Time is usually transparent—we do not take any notice of it—and it does not appear as a something. But in our confrontation with a nothing in boredom, where time is not filled with anything that can occupy our attention, we experience time as time."
6 The interview with Vitti can be found on the YouTube channel of the Criterion Collection: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEJuAnG0ND0. The English translation from the Italian original was taken from the video itself.
7 In reality, the cult-movie laughter is not always benign. It can also be a cruel sign of derision, as Iain Robert Smith (2019, 713) warns us: "It is dangerous […] to simply treat this camp engagement with 'so bad it's good' cinema as harmless laughter at failed intention or to treat it 'objectively' as if […] questions of cultural and ethnic power are not involved."

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