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To answer a demand: aesthetics in economy

Abstract

I suggest asking why we should bring aesthetics and economy together, a question I will in the end reverse and ask if it is possible not to bring them together. In relation to Critical Theory and Phenomenology represented especially by Gernot Böhme's work on aesthetic capitalism and the concept of atmosphere I suggest that aesthetics, viewed as sensorial cognition or perception, enables us to approach economic interests that today are present in any aspect of our environment. Similar to how cultural artefacts traditionally were of importance for influencing communication and education, and to how the theory of the cognitive aspect of this influence became aesthetics, we should see how any cultural artefact influences us today with strong economic agenda and aesthetics as an offer of a critical approach creating awareness of this influence and how to relate to it.

Keywords

Perception, Atmosphere, Globalization

1. Introduction

Why should we combine aesthetics with economy? Answers can point in different directions. Some aesthetic artefacts, in particular art-works, represent a high economic value but that should as such not represent a problem for aesthetics unless the value becomes determining for aesthetic qualities and art moves into business (Perniola 1983: 135 ff.). Perhaps aesthetics should not be too narrowly related to art and it is more a matter of what is just art-like or in particular ways sensuous appealing and we end up finding branches such as marketing aesthetics (Schmitt, Simonson 1997). Fashion, styling and beauty-products obviously represent large markets and could all be

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labelled aesthetic. Often the notion is used and the characterization can become one of aestheticization (Welsch 1996).

Before addressing the difficulty of what we talk about when we say aesthetics, I will emphasize the question I pursue which is how aesthetics could be considered an approach to analysing implications of the omnipresence of economy in contemporary practices and discourses. It is because aesthetics offers something addressing that question we should combine it with economy. To elaborate on what the offer is, some assumptions and characterizations must be made.

One assumption is about the omnipresence of economy. If we begin with art we find an invasion of economic interests into the arts and the art-world that enables, in the words of Mario Perniola, the transformation of the artist's faeces into gold (Perniola 1983: 135) where *la merda d'artista* obviously refers to Piero Manzoni's canned faeces from 1961 that were valued equal to the price of gold and since have by far exceeded that value. Or when Banksy's *Girl with balloon* that in 2018, after being sold, was shredded in protest of the art market to then only after the happening (leaving open the question whether it was intentionally that it was only partly shredded) to be considered of possible even higher value. Leaving art, we can think of how goods are accessible, and trade happens everywhere without a need for us to go to a marketplace; we are almost always only a simple swipe away from shopping on a mobile device. And political discourses almost inevitably include references to economic prognosis, costs of activities, austerity or spending on projects. While economy in relation to market and politics is of little surprise we should look more into when it finds the way into any aspect of our modern lives, from experiences in an experience economy to how we feel – our pleasure and well-being – in what William Davies calls the happiness industry (Davies 2015). It indicates how almost everything, and “almost” cannot be upheld here, is included in an economic perception. The elimination of “almost” is done by the surveillance capitalism that takes an interest in any aspect of our lives as we can potentially capitalize on them (Zuboff 2015, 2019).

The presence of economy in any activity can be named globalization following Peter Sloterdijk (2005: 14 ff.). He sees how Western thinking has undergone a transformation from an antique idea of the sphere as the perfect shape characterising the universe and being the ideal of perfection in our thinking, to become related to the unlimited expansion of a European culture beginning in the 16th century, to

lately become a mode of thinking, translating everything into a unit for measuring its value: capital. While capital may not appear as perfection for thinking like the spheres did, it does appear as a means of understanding and validating thinking. Human existence becomes a matter of capability of spending and freedom of choosing between products or being able to produce oneself (Sloterdijk 2005: 26 ff.). It reveals itself also in the metaphors we use: I can ask if anyone will buy this assumption, if they will invest time in considering it, believe they may profit from my arguments or if this perspective pays off?

My perspective on the omnipresence of economy is hence not concerned with the empirical aspect but with how we perceive ourselves and the environment. This perspective moves beyond the obvious economic interest in how something can be included into possible profit making – when it becomes apparent that “[w]hen your company or product provides specific experiences that customers can see, hear, touch, and feel, you are adding value and you can price that value” and that “an aesthetically attractive identity enables premium pricing” (Schmitt, Simonson 1997: 21). Empirically this is nothing new; approaching it from philosophy is to point out that what we pay attention to is conditioned by how we learn to perceive and this learning process is deeply embedded in cultural practices, practices that have become permeated with economic interpretation and rationale.

A prominent aspect of forming our perception is our sensorial relation to the environment. This sensorial relation is what makes aesthetics of interest when we are careful to understand aesthetics as sensorial cognition rather than a matter of evaluation of specific, often art-related, qualities and forms of appreciation, related to beauty. This is another assumption made to my suggested answer as to why aesthetics should be combined with economy. Sensorial cognition, i.e. the sensuous aspect of perception, the emotional reactions to the environment, and the bodily presence in the world, are elements in aesthetics and elements essential for our world-relation. Aesthetics was and is a discipline for characterising our presence in the world, how we are affected by the environment and how we on that background act in the world.

My argument for combining aesthetics with economy is hence that a philosophical analysis of the importance of the sensorial for knowledge should include attention to how that sensorial element is subject to economic interests, and similarly how an interest in econ-

omy becoming present anywhere should pay attention to aesthetics as a discipline offering assistance for critical analysis.

My first step refers to Gernot Böhme's *Critique of aesthetic capitalism* (2017) which is a continuation of his previous discussions of aesthetic economy (Böhme 1995: 62 ff., Böhme 2003) and a contribution to older analysis within Critical Theory. I will also suggest why it is urgent to follow this critique by giving some concrete examples of the omnipresence of economy. This brings me to introducing atmosphere into the discussions, a concept from the phenomenological tradition in particular developed by Böhme to emphasize the sensuous and bodily presence which we will have to see as exposed to economic interests. The concept of atmosphere that Böhme sees as a particular perspective within aesthetics, or even a new aesthetics (Böhme 1993), helps to clarify how economy can be addressed from the side of aesthetics. On that background I can lastly suggest aesthetics, in this particular sense of perceptual form and skill, as an important approach to analysing and understanding implications of the omnipresence of economy.

2. *Aesthetic economy*

The assumption of an omnipresence of economy in contemporary culture is of course disputable, as any assumption is, but also one I believe is not too controversial. We should keep in mind that what we today know as economics was called political economy before the 19th century which made the political implications explicit. Such implications relate to how economy concerns distribution, not only of goods but also of powers affecting how we organise our lives. Aesthetics as it is introduced here has to do with how such distribution of what affects us also affects how we sense and perceive and we should, like Jacques Rancière, talk about a distribution of the sensible (Rancière 2004).

Two steps are required for my argument. The first is about the view on economy I take; the second is to exemplify what motivates saying economy is omnipresent and necessitates the introduction of aesthetics into economy.

a) To establish a foundation for the argument I will, in the most general terms as I do not pretend to go into detailed discussions on economy, say that economy is about scarcity which calls forth the

need for a distribution of goods. Where there is no scarcity there is no economy – such a place may be limited to fictive places, it would be Paradise, but it also characterises traditional ideals for a noble class. They would not deal with economic issues, not in public, as they were as noble exactly beyond such profane matters. Economy deals with distribution of what one is dependent on and a noble person is qua noble independent.

Goods have to be distributed to answer needs, at least this is a characterization Böhme makes use of taking it from the Hegelian characteristic of bourgeois society as a system of needs (Böhme 2017: 11). If we begin with needs, it gives occasion to ask a question Hannah Arendt decades before Böhme put very briefly: “how to attune individual consumption to an unlimited accumulation of wealth” (Arendt 1998: 124)? Somehow the individual consumption has to become unlimited as well, otherwise the created wealth will exceed the needs and transcend the economy. This problem of growth and accumulation of wealth is also known to Marx as he points at the importance of capital to transform natural needs into historically created needs, where labour “appears no longer as labour, but as the full development of activity itself, in which natural necessity in its direct form has disappeared” (Marx 1973: 251). To explain a continuing growth exceeding our apparent natural needs, we will have to understand how a cultural transformation takes place that transforms these needs into something that appears to be beyond the original necessity, yet is something we cannot help pursuing.

Böhme uses the classical Marxist terminology of use and exchange value for developing the point and to distance himself from others in Critical Theory asking the same question such as Wolfgang Fritz Haug in his 1971 book *Critique of commodity aesthetics* (Haug 1986). Haug’s critique emphasizes the *appearance* of use-value over the *factual* use-value and he sees how this sensual appearance that creates fascination also implies that it becomes a means of power to control the public with (Haug 1986: 17). The sensorial layer of fascination is added to products and becomes decisive for accumulation of capital because it creates imaginary needs resulting in a higher exchange-value. Advertising helps establishing this fictive need for specific products through aesthetic means and forms the commodity aesthetics that makes the economic value exceed the use – the expensive cutlery by a famous designer does not have a different use-value

from the simple, anonymous and user-friendly set, but it receives a far higher exchange-value.

What the fictive character of advertising can accomplish is a matter of debate. The defenders of advertising view this, mainly Marxist critique, as an exaggeration of the power of advertising (Leiss, Kline, Jhally 1997: 34). Advertising, they believe, is about matching consumers' needs, but to create them would be more of the dream of marketing. The target group is far too complex and the knowledge about efficient communication too poor – market research is anything but exact and “after reviewing the literature one is tempted to conclude that in no other domain has so much effort yielded so little insight” (Leiss, Kline, Jhally 1997: 37). Advertisers will of course give the impression it is different, but they may in fact be more concerned with giving the clients the impression that advertisers have expertise concerning consumers rather than demonstrating actual knowledge of them (Lury, Warde 1997). Advertising may prove poor in creating needs for a specific product, but, viewed more generally, it may add to facilitating particular, common ideas and views that contribute in creating a particular world-interpretation and relation.

Böhme criticizes Haug for ignoring how commodity culture's staging of products through advertising, branding and other strategies creating fascination around them, gives rise to a different kind of use which does not answer false needs beyond basic needs (Böhme 2017: 25). The decisive point for Böhme is that the seduction of brands to make consumers prefer one label to another becomes itself the value for consumers and not merely added value. It becomes a form of identification and expression for individuals, hence of real value to them, despite how shallow and meaningless others may find these forms of expression. Buying the cutlery is not only to buy a tool for eating but also to buy a prop in the staging of how one presents oneself. Mario Perniola could years before write about the semiotic design where the connotative aspect, this chair signals the style of my home and a social progression, dominates over the denotative, this is an object to sit on (Perniola 1983: 139 ff.). Functionality is then not how Functionalist thought it to be. The superfluous, in their view, ornamentation receives a function as an identity-marker. A similar praise of ornamentation appears with the postmodern critique and the aestheticization that emerges from the abundant society in the second half of 20th century.

Böhme can, with reference to Jean Baudrillard, say we are here not dealing with something added to consume, but with consumption as such, with “a use value of the exchange value” (Böhme 2017: 26). However, Baudrillard’s interest is in signs and not the sensorial and bodily elements of aesthetics becoming constitutive of one’s reality. Baudrillard misses, according to Böhme, the effect of the staging of products. To criticise the staging of products as something superfluous misses, according to Böhme, that needs are no longer about sustaining a simple, physical existence to which a stage value is a fiction added. It is essential to understand that modern consumer society is insufficiently explained in terms of being a system of needs. Needs can be answered and hence cannot explain the continuing growth in consumption. Instead of needs, we must see how the fundamental drive is desire (Böhme 2017: 14). Needs can be satisfied while desires give rise to new desires and are thus not coming to their conclusions. Needs are transformed into desires and should, as such, be seen as redefined needs when capitalism “develops beyond the satisfaction of elementary needs and serves the unending intensification and stage-setting of life” (Böhme 2017: 68). A desire for staging oneself becomes a fundamental need in contemporary capitalism.

In spite of Böhme’s criticism of Haug, I believe we find similar points when Haug stresses the independent character of the commodity aesthetics as a world of illusions “in which one sees one’s desires and believes them to be real” and where “[a]ny other world, different from that provided by the commodities, is almost no longer accessible to them” (Haug 1986: 52). Haug calls it a technocracy of sensuality which refers to how illusions create emotions and narratives that become too dominating for alternatives to have much chance. They also form our perception. Perhaps Haug does not fully explore that implication of a technocracy of sensuality, but he does see how the idea of a manipulating dominance of phenomena of a modern scientific rationality enables a separation of different aspects of the product, creating what Haug calls a second skin becoming the object of attention and desire (Haug 1986: 50). Everything in the social sphere becomes such independent desired images and images are not only about objects for consumption but also cultural objects and political parties (Haug 1986: 31).

b) I will now return to the assumption of the omnipresence of economy which brings us back to the opening references to experiences, happiness and surveillance.

Throughout the twentieth century we have witnessed an intensified communication and staging of products to influence consumers. With no attempt of a historical view, we could probably point at a beginning with the arcades in Paris as Walter Benjamin could write about them. Later a line of different approaches to shopping will show a growing awareness of the many aspects of consumers' awareness and experiences, to include not only the display of products but the general environment, the employees, the meeting with the product beyond the shop, the narrative surrounding it – and a line of other elements (Schmitt, Simonson 1997: 283 ff.). Discussions on this emerge, one finds an overview in Mary Jo Bitner's *Servicescapes* (Bitner 1992), and expand far beyond shops and markets, making Anna Klingmann argue for how Western-influenced cities should adopt a market approach to position them in mutual competition, for which she also uses the popular suffix “-scape” to name it *Brandscapes* that “constitute the physical manifestations of synthetically conceived identities transposed onto synthetically conceived places, demarcating culturally independent sites where corporate value systems materialize into physical territories”. Places are then transformed, carrying a cultural identity “to dynamic processes of identity production controlled by a global brand industry”. Brandscapes link “identity, culture, and place” (Klingmann 2007: 83).

Advertising and publicity offer, John Berger says, the buyer an image that “makes him envious of himself as he might be” (Berger *et al.* 1972: 132); or more emphatically: “the publicity image steals her [the consumer's] love of herself as she is, and offers it back to her for the price of the product” (Berger *et al.* 1972: 134). A few years prior, Guy Debord could characterise society as a society of the spectacle, where commodity fetishism replaces the perceptible world with images which appear as the perceptible *par excellence* (Debord 1992: § 36). Any appeal to authenticity is to appeal to what is also formed by society and history and the abundance of modern consumerism exceeds any organic development in social needs and falsifies the social life (Debord 1992: § 68).

The value of emotions is apparent on social media and takes here a further step towards the omnipresence of economy. A crucial element on social media is activity. The “likes” we give to texts, pictures, films and other activities of other users. “Likes” can be measured to have an effect on users' attitude, interest and approach to something, as experiments made with the emotional content in Facebook

users' News Feed demonstrate (Kramer *et al.* 2014). The online activities give information of an unseen scale of what goes, not without problems, under the name big data. It concerns not simply a large number of data, but a qualitative different form of data that are heterogeneous, unstructured, agnostic and trans-semiotic of nature (Constantiou, Kallinikos 2015: 15). Instead of making data-collection to answer specific questions, it is about collecting data from which different patterns emerge. Keeping in mind the little insight gained in market research, it may not appear as a surprise that such data can be of interest as a new way of approaching possible knowledge of consumers.

A motivation for the use of such data is the opportunity it gives for giving users what they want. However, the user may not yet know what is wanted but the collection of data enables not only "to automate information flows *about us*; the goal now is to *automate us*" (Zuboff 2019: 8, emphasis in original). It appears as the dream of creating users' desires is here to come true. It is perhaps a conclusion to a long journey that started with the product and its surroundings at display, grew into the creation of an ambience and atmosphere for both product and shopping experience (Kotler 1973-74), became designed ambiances for a branding strategy to satisfy the consumer and user, which can finally be achieved more directly. Through surveillance of data patterns emerge which leads to the question: "what forms of surplus [of data] enable the fabrication of prediction products that most reliable foretell the future?" (Zuboff 2019: 198). While foretelling the future is impossible, data about users can be used to feed them with massive information which enables a more direct influence on the user's interests. By surveillance, we should be careful not to think of it as surveillance of people like one could imagine a totalitarian regime would do. It is surveillance of the track of data we leave behind us. Such surveillance and collection of data Shoshana Zuboff calls Big Other: "a ubiquitous networked institutional regime that records, modifies, and commodifies everyday experience from toasters to bodies, communication to thought, all with a view to establishing new pathways to monetization and profit" (Zuboff 2015: 81). What we do and believe is of our own choice is now carefully designed for us, predicting, based on our previous activities, what we want. We become overloaded with designed options that carefully eliminate others to ensure we chose the path designed for us. We become subject to "commoditized behavior modification" and power

is “now identified with ownership of the means of behavioral modification” (Zuboff 2015: 82).

3. *Atmosphere and perception*

If a product we use can give us satisfaction when it serves its function and such satisfaction is worth pursuing, and it seems fairly uncontroversial to say we do pursue forms of satisfaction in contemporary society, why focus on the functionality of a product or even the surrounding arrangements and not directly on the formation of our perception?

This question combines the focus on perception and desire of the aesthetic economy with the omnipresence of economic interests targeting perception and behaviour. It brings us back to the relevance of aesthetics and to why it is of importance for these discussions.

The way I take is via the concept of atmosphere as developed by Böhme. It plays a surprisingly small role in his critique of aesthetic capitalism. We meet it mainly when he gives a shopping mall as an example. If we go back to his earlier article on aesthetic economy, atmosphere is what gives something a particular appearance through which it is staged (Böhme 2003: 72). Perhaps the most clear and elaborate characterization he gives of atmosphere is found in the book *Asthetik* from 2001, which is a line of lectures on aesthetics as a general doctrine of perception. He explicitly emphasizes that aesthetics is about sensorial cognition and perception with a concern for the relation between environmental qualities and human states (Böhme 1993: 114), which, despite calling it a new aesthetics, places this understanding in a tradition from Baumgarten (Böhme 2001: 11 ff.).

I believe it is important to emphasize how atmosphere is not about an addition to something, a certain arrangement of objects creating an atmosphere, but a concept of perception (*Wahrnehmung*, see Böhme 2001: 29 ff.). Atmosphere challenges our ordinary understanding of perception as object-oriented, in which we perceive something as something. Instead of being an act of identification, we learn that perception is about something's presence and how we sense or feel (*spüren*) it as present (Böhme 2001: 39 ff., 45 ff.). The presence of objects and people affect us, and atmosphere is about making us aware how we are affected by the environment in opposition to a belief that we are indifferent subjects confronted with the

objects around us. Furthermore, it must be emphasized that it is not a matter of how objects may exercise different influences on us; the point is to say the subject is never left unaffected and neutral. Atmosphere is the first moment in perception which leads to analysing what characterizes the elements in this moment and to what they do to us. It is the latter I pick up here. It is explicitly dealt with by Böhme, but we may find it more elaborated in Tonino Griffero's atmospherology (see e.g. Griffero 2014, 2018). It points towards how we are fundamentally affected and formed by objects of perception which I suggest should lead to investigating what the implications may be of the interests and ideologies embedded in them – like the economic view on things.

The state of being affected is, in particular, put forward by the characteristic of attunement – the common English translation of the German *Befindlichkeit*. Böhme relies on Martin Heidegger who introduces this concept in his *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and time*). Attunement addresses what should be seen as a necessary condition in our world-relation. Without going into difficulties of the translation here, where a reader familiar with German reading the English translation finds oneself in very different linguistic ambiances (I have addressed this briefly in Friberg 2019), I only wish to stress how *Befindlichkeit* is about finding oneself somewhere (e.g. *ich befinde mich hier*) and at the same time always finding oneself in a particular condition (e.g. *ich befinde mich wohl*, see Böhme 2001: 81). Atmosphere draws attention to how we, in being present, are subjects to how the presence of the environment makes us being present in specific ways.

As a phenomenological investigation of perception, the approach by Böhme as well as Griffero is about characterising perception and questioning the legitimacy of an object-identification as the primary act in perceiving which we encounter in most common sense understandings as well as a wide range of philosophical work. If we leave this view, implying an opposition between a perceiving subject and the perceived object, we may instead see a tension between elements in perception, between on the one hand the presence of something affecting us while perceiving and on the other hand how we also exercise an effect on it. Within the act of perception we prioritise elements to perceive, including which to ignore and suppress. Suppression happens when one reduces the multi-sensorial relation that “colours” the present phenomenon to a neutral observation that is object-oriented. In this act we acknowledge specific expectations of

what to know and how to know it that guide the perception (see Merleau-Ponty 1968: 15). Atmosphere, as a perspective on perception, bears similarities to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's investigation of our world-relation and "the prereflective and preobjective unity of my body" (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 141 ff.) when he asks us, before dealing with facts, to "situate ourselves within the being we are dealing with" and to "put it back into the fabric of our life" (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 117). He urges for a "perceptual faith" where we "do not yet know what to see is and what to think is" (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 158), which is to pursue the phenomenological strategy of exercising *epoché*.

My intention is not to discuss the possible similarities between Böhme's, Griffero's and Merleau-Ponty's investigations of perception. It is to emphasise how these investigations and the introduction of atmosphere as an aesthetic concept addresses fundamental questions about perception. This is of course a questionable view on aesthetics, but one that stays within the neighbourhood of other recent investigations. One example is Martin Seel's work on aesthetics of appearing, which also investigates aspects of perception paying attention to the presence of something (Seel 2000: 38 ff.). He stresses the importance of distinguishing between the fixation of something as something and the aesthetic appearance, i.e. the sensuous awareness of what is present and not fully to determine (Seel 2000: 47 ff.).

The point about atmosphere is, hence, not to enrich an intellectual identification of something as something with sensorial aspects, but to question the view that the sensorial represents an enriching addition to the object-relation. The sensorial is not for including a possible enrichment of our perception that can create fascination and be considered a positive, affluent and intensified aspect of our world-relation, perhaps for the sake of appreciation. The point about atmosphere is exactly that the sensorial aspect is no addition, but an aspect of any perception. An ideal of a neutral and object-oriented perception belongs to a particular, methodological ensured approach, but it cannot be considered a characterisation of perception as such. Even the methodological neutralized perception may, in fact, be subject to sensorial influence.

Economic interests target the sensorial and move beyond sensorial appeal as an element of fascination and seduction in products and environment and into any perception whatsoever including designing our online existence. They become still more influential components in our world-relation and a question becomes how to handle this

challenge. It is a question to which atmosphere as an aesthetic concept can offer assistance.

4. *Atmosphere, aesthetics and economy*

Atmosphere has become a particular research field resonating beyond aesthetics, not least in architecture and urban planning, and in relating disciplines such as sociology, human geography and anthropology. Without elaborating on terminological nuances, we notice that in this context we often find the notion of *ambience* used, and then often spelled *ambiance*, probably due to the strong French influence on the establishment of this research field. However, there is not an established terminological difference between *ambience* and *atmosphere* (see e.g. Thibaud 2015: 40) and I will not argue for significant difference – I have elsewhere very briefly suggested a difference in intimacy where *atmosphere* is more intimate and directly embracing us than *ambience* (Friberg 2012) – but here I use both interchangeably.

Jean-Paul Thibaud has written more influential texts on *ambience*. He suggests we are witnessing a “‘setting of *ambience*’ in urban spaces” where “every effort is made to create an *ambience*, to channel sensations and to make people feel a particular way” (Thibaud 2015: 39). Among more examples, such as “the process of ‘heritagization’ of historic town centres, the privatization of gated communities, the new scenes of the creative city, and the functional atmospheres of public transport facilities” (Thibaud 2015: 39), he includes a favourite example of many in this context, the shopping mall, which also Böhme gives particular attention (Böhme 2017: 84 ff.).

The studies of *ambience* are studies in the multi-sensorial dimension of the environment, which makes it obvious that architecture and urban design play a significant role, as we are permanently related to designed objects and environments in particular by being *in* spaces that are never neutral but affecting us. They are tuned spaces (*gestimmte Räume*). Space is not something to be confronted with, as if it is something only visual – a space is not merely seen, but sensed, by being bodily present in it (Böhme 2006: 109, 114 ff., see also Grffero 2014). This has significance for not only characterising the effects of a space being a tuned or affective space; it is a question of perception as such. Again, there is parallel to Merleau-Ponty’s reflec-

tions on the understanding of space, in light of how the painter views things, and on how Descartes struggles with constructing spatial perception in his *Dioptric* because he ignores the full presence of things and how spatial experiences precede the construction of spatial perception (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 44 ff.). We find Merleau-Ponty pointing at the same aspects of space that later Böhme, Griffero and Thibaud will emphasize, like space is not something we see as an exterior surrounding the point of vision, but is experienced from within and we are encircled by it (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 59). Depth is not merely a third dimension of a geometrical space, but a certain relation between things and an experience (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 65).

Because it is a matter of perception as such, we ask for more than a description of different sensuous and emotional effects of the environment. Thibaud can as well emphasize how our perception is always within a context which it cannot be dissociated from and where “the contextual dimensions are an integral part of perceptual activity” (Thibaud 2011: 205). Ambience unifies the elements in perception and precedes the object-identifying understanding and, in Thibaud’s description, forms a background or a basis for the perceptual differentiation that proceeds from a feeling of something being present to conclude that we have a perception of something (Thibaud 2011: 212). In this way he sees ambience as more than a sensibility towards the multi-sensorial aspects of the environment: “ambience is in no way an object of perception [...] we do not perceive the ambience, we perceive on the basis of the ambience” (Thibaud 2011: 210) – what Griffero would call to perceive atmospherically (Griffero 2014: 31 ff.). Hence an interest for the urban design may be less the design of an environment that causes feelings of pleasure, wellbeing, satisfaction or whatever is deemed appropriate; the design is more directly a design of the feelings.

This designing can be taken in more ways. Of course, it is mostly done with objects, but as the props on stage are not of interest but rather the atmosphere they create, so is it also the ambience which is something in between objects we take an interest in and not the concrete elements making the ambience (Thibaud 2015: 41). What may be considered of value and perhaps the most valuable part of the environment in modern Western cities is the ambience and the feelings it provokes. When a neighbourhood of poor-quality houses have been modernized what comes to matter for the market is often the

idea of authenticity and charm rather than the functionality of modern facilities.

In more extreme cases, feelings and moods could be addressed directly without “props” but instead through chemicals, through pharmaceuticals. A happiness industry will happily make use of chemistry. If pills can have antidepressant effect or stimulate performances, they represent market opportunities for those who want a shortcut to achieve desired emotional states (Davies 2015: 161 ff.). The economic value of emotions seems here to come to an extreme conclusion.

Antidepressants may give the impression we are led away from aesthetics. But if we again emphasize the focus on sensorial cognition or perception, we have to say that the emotional effect of what we today will consider a line of art-works such as the spectacle with sculptures, paintings and music in the church is, in principle, not different, though qualitatively of a different kind, from the spectacles of contemporary consumer culture. The educational or seductive interest in the audience differs – the salvation of the soul or satisfaction through consumerism may possibly be as contrary as we can imagine in what is thought to signify happiness, but they both see happiness as the end.

We move here from the organisation of the environment, like the creation of an ambience in the church and in public spaces in general, to staging of life-styles through products, narratives and any possible means for targeting our feelings and emotions. Such targeting of feelings would traditionally be considered, in relation to communication, as elements within rhetoric and in education and would be limited to where those interests were displayed and exercised. Communication and education have their specific places to be practiced. But economy today has no limit and intervenes anywhere possible for profit. Hence, to combine aesthetics with economy is not different from interests within aesthetics in formulating a critique of cultural phenomena.

5. Conclusion

Böhme seeks with the critique of the aesthetic economy qua critique to find an answer to why the material surplus of late capitalism does not form a basis for changing the conditions for creating this same

surplus, which is created through a massive global suppression. Instead, we find how the material surplus as emancipation from material necessities has created new necessities that become a permanent dissatisfaction, appearing in desires that “cannot be permanently satisfied, but only temporarily appeased” (Böhme 2017: 11). The answer to these questions lies in the forming of our perception, and this formation, that takes place through the influence of the environment, is in principle no different from how sensorial artefacts traditionally have been essential for education. We only find that the effects of the church that would have made an extraordinary impression on the average visitor generations ago are effects modern economic interests wish to bring into any moment of our lives.

When atmosphere is about a tuning of the environment that affects anyone present, we should also speak of tuned individuals. Our perception is tuned by the environment and with means enabling a permanent surveillance of our activities when using electronic gadgets comes also means for a permanent influence exercised to form our perception. And here we tend to forget, or do not pay attention to, how using does not only signify an active use, as the mobile device in a pocket also leaves a trail of data behind about where it has been, for how long, possibly with whom, i.e. other devices, what transactions were made etc. The ideal of the orator, to know the audience, is taken far beyond what good sense of fellow people would mean, and into unlimited data about the audience used to then target supposed interests by addressing and enhancing specific desires. What becomes of economic interest and importance is related to our sensuous and emotional states, our moods, and our preferences and desires are then formed accordingly.

A critical approach then becomes one of creating awareness of how we perceive, when economic interests take possession of our perception and interpretation and influence what and how we relate to the environment. Perception is subject to the appropriation of a globally and omnipresent technique of desires, taking possession of the forms and goals of our thinking and we find thinking to only appear as a technique – a technique of enhancing consumption and contributing to economic growth rates.

The question seems then not to be whether we should include aesthetics into economy to understand how economic interests permeate not only needs and desires but also our perception and world-

relation in general; the question is rather if we can allow to not include aesthetics.

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