



Producing atmospheres at the match: Fan cultures, commercialisation and mood management in English football



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ABSTRACT

By focussing on Premier League club, Manchester City, this paper explores the ways in which a shifting flow of atmosphere is generated inside and outside football stadia, generated by events on the pitch, spatial formations, fan culture, and other factors such as weather, season and light. I argue that such atmospheres are co-productions by fans, who play their part in encouraging their team by suspending emotional and social restraint. I also investigate how with the intensified commercialisation of football, there have been recent concerns about a lack of atmosphere. All-seater stadia, sponsorship and corporate provision and the influx of new middle class fans seems to contrast with the packed terraces of fervent working class spectators of yesteryear, where closely packed bodies and loud collective chanting and singing produced a heady atmosphere. Accordingly, I will explore how clubs and fans have devised a range of strategies to manage atmospheres to inculcate greater intensities on match days.

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This paper contends that the atmosphere is a crucial ingredient of the match day experience for football fans. I explore the production and shifting experience of atmosphere in the English Premier League by focussing on the crucial role of fans, the role of the stadium in conditioning atmospheres (here, in the context of changing spatial conditions under which football matches have taken place at Manchester City's home grounds), the sometimes contentious staging of measures devised to stage atmosphere, and fan campaigns based on nostalgia that aim to regain a loss of atmosphere.

The football stadium serves as an enclosed theatre in which the sporting drama of the match unfolds, and it tends to house a particularly responsive audience who are themselves part of the drama and can potentially influence what happens on the pitch. The stadium possesses architectonic qualities that promote and contain levels of noise, and organise the distance between fans, and the closeness of fans to the pitch and players. These spatial contexts contribute to atmospheres of varying intensity that continually emerge during a match. Other ingredients include particular fan cultures, the levels of recent sporting success, and the significance of the match – whether the outcome may crucially determine a club's imminent destiny, whether it stokes particular rivalries or takes place amid recent controversies. In addition, factors such as

the season, the temperature, the time of day and levels of light feed into the flow of atmosphere. Most obviously, the atmosphere varies according the unfolding events that take place on the pitch. Atmosphere is moreover, a co-production that involves players, match organisers and fans. In exploring the importance of atmosphere in the match-day experience, I will subsequently focus on the changing conditions under which contemporary football atmospheres are produced, considering the tensions that emerge when clubs attempt to stage atmosphere, further alienating fans whose are already uncomfortable about stadium relocation, intensified commercialisation and growing regulation. Firstly, however, I outline the key constituents of football atmospheres, the crucial role of fans, and the sense of homeliness that fosters a thick match day atmosphere.

According to Böhme, atmospheres 'imbue everything ...bathe everything in a certain light, unify a diversity of impressions' (2008: 2). McCormack describes them as 'something distributed yet palpable, a quality of environmental immersion that registers in and through sensing bodies whilst also remaining diffuse, in the air, ethereal' (2008: 413). Though difficult to pin down, the 'indeterminate, spatially extended quality of feeling' (Böhme, 1993: 118) that characterises an atmosphere can pervade all spatial scales, from the intimate spaces of the home to a vast landscape. Yet certain spatial contexts are more evidently 'atmospheric' than others. Duff (2010) distinguishes between 'thick' and 'thin' atmospheres, the former replete with a sensual, emotional and affective

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belonging that is embedded over time through repetitive practical, embodied engagement, or occurring in a setting in which a collective upsurge of human (or non-human) activity generates an ongoing intensity. It is not difficult for humans to intersubjectively agree upon the kinds of places that are permeated by powerful atmospheres. Thus, the capacity of atmospheres to generate affects and stimulate emotions varies in intensity. The quiet atmosphere of an ancient gothic cathedral, with its intensities of gloom and the light that punctures it, the interior spaciousness, echoing sounds, reverential believers and aged materialities might seem sombre and overwhelming. A forest full of birdsong or a windswept mountain are also likely to be perceived as thick with atmosphere, but in different ways to the atmospheric qualities of a busy shopping centre, rock festival or top level football match.

Crucially, atmospheres do not simply take over a subject, enveloping the individual without resistance or participation. Rather, they are co-produced between the practices and dispositions of individuals or groups, and myriad other elements from which and out of which they form and re-form. While Böhme alludes to powerful atmospheres as ‘something which can come over us, into which we are drawn, which takes possession of us like an alien power’ (2008: 3), he also insists that they are intermediate phenomena. Thus, an atmosphere constitutes ‘a certain mental or emotive tone permeating a particular environment’, but it is also ‘the atmosphere spreading spatially around me, in which I participate through my mood’. A space may attune our moods but is simultaneously ‘the extendedness’ of our moods (Böhme, 2002: 5). Thibaud similarly refers to how the ‘pervasive quality’ of a ‘situation as a whole... gets inside us’, and we get ‘caught up’ or are oriented towards particular courses of action. Rather than eliciting passivity, atmosphere ‘gives rhythm to our movements and modulates the manner in which we move’ (2011: 209).

I will presently discuss the ways in which atmosphere folds together affect, emotion and sensation in space, but firstly, I focus on ways in which affect has recently been theorised in order to develop the notion that atmospheres are intermediate phenomena (for a fuller discussion, see Edensor, 2012). Specifically, I question the inference in certain accounts that affect is composed of ‘transpersonal or prepersonal intensities’ (Massumi, 2002). To be sure, in the case of football, there is a transpersonal generation of atmosphere at matches involving all those present in the stadium. However, for most fans, so habitual is attendance at home games that they enter the stadium aware of the potentialities of atmosphere, its emergence during the match and their own role in the production of affect. Wetherell points out that notions of affect are not well served ‘by dividing representation from the non-representational, marking out the former as the province of consciousness and deliberation, and the latter as the province of the unconscious and the unconsidered’ (2012: 22). For instance, rather than affect constituting a prepersonal or pre-cognitive quality, football fans anticipate the affective variations in atmosphere that may devolve and acknowledge their partial responsibility in its generation. As Barnett (2008) argues, a neglect of the social and historical contexts for the emergence of particular affects undergirds notions that affect is typified by a ‘mute attunement’ to place devoid of the historical, social and cultural orientations that forge expectations, habits and objectives. No doubt certain very unfamiliar settings might inculcate feelings of affective disorientation, of being overwhelmed by strange and indecipherable practices, scenes and atmospheres, but most encounters with space take place in familiar and habitual settings. By contrast, Wetherell’s ‘practice approach’ focuses on ‘developmental sedimentation, routines of emotional regulation, relational patterns and ‘settling’, and especially draws attention to those affective practices that are ‘densely knotted in with connected social practices where the

degree of knitting reinforces the affect and can make it resistant and durable (2012: 14). Here reiterative affective practices in familiar space can generate stable habits. To foreground the idea that people are regularly immobilized by affects construes a rather virginal subject who is forever entering new and unknown terrain for which all previous experience has left them unprepared. Instead, as Duff points out, prior knowledge and experience means that people are usually already attuned to place before they arrive there, and thus possess a ‘subjective orientation to place, signalling the various affects, moods, and capacities that might be enactable in that place’ or that are ‘awaiting reactivation in practice and interaction’ (2010: 892). Previous encounters with places, people and things thus provide a relational context for how affect and emotion is expressed, anticipated and conceptualized.

To put this in the context of football, Jones (2005) recognises the ways in which affects and emotions of home become sedimented in memory over time. The home from home setting of the stadium is one such location in which a host of habits and familiar interactions with people and space are re-enacted by regular fans on match days. This anticipation and attunement to familiar place prepares fans for an emotional and affective encounter with each other, the match, the stadium and the team in non-cognitive *and* cognitive ways. As Ahmed asserts, ‘what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place (and) ... what connects us to this or that place’ (2004: 27), and aligns individuals with collectives. The collective expressions performed in the historical, cultural setting of the stadium, for instance, sustain the relations between people, and between people and place, as ‘events, relations and impacts accumulate as ... capacities to affect and be affected’ (Stewart, 2010: 338). As I will discuss, if managers attempt to engineer or stimulate these habits through techniques of stage management, this unselfconscious, fan-generated sense of participation can become alienated.

A further contextualising contention is that while recent writing has described atmospheres as ‘affective’ (Anderson, 2009), I argue that it is inappropriate to isolate affect as the key ingredient of atmospheres in this way. The anticipatory attunements to place discussed above further suggest that there is an entangling of an array of emotions, affects and sensations in the production and experience of atmosphere, a thorough melding of these stimuli and intensities. Having said this, I am not inferring that notions of affect are irrelevant and that affect can be collapsed into emotion, for conceptions of affect are useful in foregrounding the spatially distributed qualities of atmosphere. Affect can be conceived as ‘a sense of push in the world... a notion of broad tendencies and lines of force’ (Thrift, 2004: 60) or a ‘set of flows moving through the bodies of human and other beings’ (Thrift, 2009: 88). These claims foreground the distribution of affect amongst different elements across space, and usefully expand understandings about the constitution of the social, prompting consideration about how different configurations of objects, technologies and (human and non-human) bodies come together to form different capacities and experiences. Such relational understandings offer opportunities to explore how such actors emerge, relate and combine to form ‘affective fields’ that produce ‘temporary configurations of energy and feeling’ (Conradson and Latham, 2007: 238).

In contradistinction to these affective configurations, emotion has been conceived as the inter-subjective expression of the feeling of these intensities ‘in a socio-culturally recognizable form’ (McCormack, 2008: 426); that is, emotion is the social translation and expression of an affective charge. Distinctive states of emotion, such as anger, excitement, joy and fear, are characterised as identifiable, communicable, intersubjective states. Yet as Wetherall points out, ‘emotion, like anger or fear, is not an object inside the self’ but, like affect, is *also* ‘a relational pattern... distributed and located across the psychosocial field (2012: 24). Unfortunately, until

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