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Atmospheres in Film and at the Cinema

Uzak, or the unbearable lightness of the ordinary

Uzak, ou l'insoutenable légèreté de l'ordinaire

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Introduction

- 1 What holds things together (cf. Deleuze and Guattari, 2004 [1980]: 327)? That old, general question keeps resurfacing at every step, as we look for a way to reconcile the individual and society, agency and structure, subject and object, and other longstanding dichotomies. Here is an answer: what holds things together is their immanent tension, an emergent relation that is generated by the 'things' that compose it, while generating them in turn. No relation without bodies, no bodies without relation. Atmosphere, a term once belonging to matters poetic or meteorological, is the name of this immanent tension, in which bodies are 'mixed without being confused' (Coccia 2019 [2017], 51), a tensegrity that expresses the affective and normative infrastructures of co-existence (Sloterdijk 2006). Following this inspiration, this text develops a 'tensional' understanding of atmospheres that puts the emphasis on their *infrastructural consistency* and *overflowing vitality*, two aspects that the popular, phenomenological interpretation fails to address. After positioning my approach in this respect, I dwell on the notion of the 'ordinary', deployed as a strategic concept to explore the way atmospheres unfold in (urban) everyday life, bringing forward a political question concerning their empowering and debilitating effects on the bodies

that breathe through them, and also on an epistemological challenge concerning the task of attuning to, and communicating, this fleeting consistency. The following part of the text makes an argument for the capacity of cinema to answer this challenge: firstly, theoretically, by drawing on Gilles Deleuze's work on cinema, Maurice Blanchot's writing on the 'everyday' and Lauren Berlant's reflections on ordinary affects. Secondly, empirically, by exploring a relevant example: Nuri Bilge Ceylan's third movie, and first international success, *Uzak* [2002].

1. Atmosphere

- 2 The amount of pages that have latterly been dedicated to the concept of atmospheres in the humanities – to the point that some ask whether we are facing an 'atmospheric turn' (see Griffero 2019) – first in German and French, then in English and beyond, means that there is no need to provide a literature review here – the interested reader could find plenty of excellent contributions in this regard (e.g. Adey *et al.*, 2013; Bille *et al.*, 2015; Gandy 2017; Griffero 2019; Thibaud 2020). A few words on where my approach is situated within this field, however, are in order. Within the popular, phenomenological interpretation, developed by the likes of Hermann Schmitz, Gernot Böhme, Jean-Paul Thibaud or Tonino Griffero, atmospheres are understood as intersubjective phenomena that are irreducible to subjective perception, and yet are 'still relative to a subject who feels touched by something partially undecipherable' (Griffero 2014 [2010], p. 35).¹ Atmospheres, accordingly, are both somewhere *in between* subject and object, as terms such as "quasi-object" or "quasi-thing" seek to convey, and somewhere *beyond*, as terms such as "something-more", "more-than" or "*je-ne-sais-quoi*" gesture towards.
- 3 The other, main trajectory of atmospheric thinking has developed within the Anglophone world, often in the field of geography, where atmospheres have been approached through affect theory and a post-phenomenological and 'materialistic' attention to the conditions of their ontological emergence (e.g. Anderson 2014; Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2015; Pavoni 2018; McCormack 2018). For some, this theoretical move is controversial. Mikkel Bille and colleagues (2015, pp. 33-5), for instance, argue that an affect-oriented reading of atmospheres risks overlooking 'the existential in-betweenness of subject and object', and therefore 'los[ing] their material grounding'. Griffero (2019, p. 16) goes as far as excluding it, especially for what concerns the 'Spinozist-Deleuzian interpretation of affect,' from the 'atmospheric discourse', barely concealing his contempt for an approach he deems 'notorious'. I disagree. On the one hand, the two approaches are not necessarily incompatible: quite the contrary. Just as Andrea Mubi Brighenti (2010, p. 70) observed as regards the field of visibility, attending to atmosphere needs *both* 'a phenomenological sensibility towards the here-and-now' *and* 'an ecological sensibility toward the prolongations of the here-and-now in heterogeneous environments', and this requires taking into account the affective element. Peter Sloterdijk's spherology (2007 [1998]; 2014 [1999]; 2016 [2004]), for example, is a compelling, if undoubtedly idiosyncratic, example in this regard (see Pavoni 2018, ch. 2). On the other hand, looking at atmospheres through a 'Spinozist-Deleuzian interpretation of affect' is far more effective when it comes to mobilising them conceptually and strategically *beyond* the subject-object relation, avoiding politically naïve – or slightly conspiratorial – reflections on 'atmospheric

engineering', while providing a properly materialist complement to phenomenology's overly vague descriptions, that are ultimately unable to account for atmospheres' ontological status (Gandy 2017, 358).²

- 4 Pointing the reader elsewhere for a more extensive elaboration of this perspective (Pavoni 2018, pp. 45-68; Pavoni and Tulumello 2023, pp. 215-246), let it suffice here to qualify that my interpretation of atmospheres builds on the Deleuzoguattarian notion of *agencement* [assemblage], Sloterdijk's infrastructural genealogy of atmospheres, and Spinoza's notion of affect, significantly deviating from phenomenological approaches when it comes to addressing the *in-between* of atmospheres – that I explore as a matter of infrastructural *consistency*³ – and their *something-more* – that I assume to be pertaining to their overflowing *vitality*. There are, therefore, three qualities that a materialist approach to atmosphere's consistency and vitality foregrounds, namely: emergence, ordering and excess. An atmosphere *emerges* from a coming together of bodies, tangible and intangible, abstract and concrete; at the same time, an atmosphere is always *ordered* or engineered by forces, structures and values, assuming a certain kind of mood and orientation as a result. Yet, an atmosphere somehow remains irreducible to the relations that compose it, and to the forces that orient it. There is a *more* that each atmosphere carries, a reserve of potential that overflows its present presence and haunts its actual relations as a menacing or promising cloud. This is why an atmosphere can never be reduced 'to a mere aggregate of many rational decision-makers or many phenomenological experiences' (Delanda 2016, p. 9; Protevi 2006).
- 5 Yes, atmospheres do always fall in some kind of ordering, one that is normally dissimulated as being as natural and spontaneous as the air we breathe (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2015, p. 129). They keep vibrating nonetheless, under the spell of an overflowing potential. Atmospheres cannot be said to be stable, then. Stability is the property of a system in equilibrium, where forces are no longer in agitation: an atmosphere with no agitation however, lacking that vibratory liveliness Jane Bennett (2010) so effectively described as regards matter, is a dead atmosphere. Sloterdijk (2016 [2004]) helpfully proposed the metaphor of foam to grasp the infrastructural problem atmospheres encounter: like a foam, an atmosphere's capacity to maintain itself in place depends on oscillating between rigidity, which decreases the resilient capacity of the foam to adapt to change, and flexibility, which decreases the internal cohesion of the foam, threatening dissolution. Reflecting on the notion of *agencement*, David Lapoujade (2017, p. 204) similarly noted that 'an aggregate is the more consistent the more it manages to hold together heterogeneous and unstable terms, [...] the more susceptible to transformation it is, the more consistency it has.' The stable/unstable dichotomy is unable to capture the dynamism of atmospheres. In contrast to stability, which in physics or chemistry indicates a system of equilibrium in which forces are no longer in agitation, the notion of metastability zooms in on the pre-individual field of intensity where the potential energy of a system lies – and therefore its capacity to become (Simondon (1995 [1964], pp. 24-6).⁴ Neither stable nor unstable, then, atmospheres are better understood as metastable configurations, always ordered (engineered) in some way or another, while simultaneously 'excessive' to that ordering. This excess is, in this sense, 'structural', that is, not simply relative to a subject's experience but, more profoundly, to atmospheres' ontological structure (Anderson 2009, p. 79; Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2013, p. 8).⁵ Atmospheres, I suggest, are emergent configurations that harbour an excess of potential – a 'cloud of probabilities', to borrow a term from quantum physics – on which they depend in order to remain

‘alive’: this is the vitalism of atmospheres, or their affective life, as Ben Anderson puts it (2014, p. 8). Attending to such a vitalism is all the more important as the politics of urban life implicitly and explicitly revolves around both the fostering, exploitation and valorisation of such an excess potential, as well as its neutralisation, suffocation and repression (Pavoni 2018).

- 6 Evidently, the notions of order and disorder are rather ill equipped to describe the everyday dynamics through which atmospheres are held together, in the form of a mutually affecting co-traction among its bodies, oscillating between the rigid and the loose, the empowering and the incapacitating, via the immanent, normative tensions generated by customs, laws, rules, relations of production, language games, emotions, senses, institutions, habits, and so on. Better suited appears to be the concept of the *ordinary*, understood as collective, everyday tensional atmospherics of attachment and detachment that is simultaneously connecting, making and being made by the bodies that compose it – resonating with Georges Perec’s notion of infra-ordinary, that is, ‘the background noise’ that holds our life together (1997 [1973]; see also Berlant 2016).

2. The ordinary

- 7 The ordinary is the way things go, an everyday refrain that neither predetermines nor structures, and yet *guides* and *orients*. Everyday life atmo-rhythms are shaped by wider totalising processes, call them capitalism, neoliberalism, nationalism, including the various (class, race, gender, etc.) fractures through which they are actualised. And yet, the correspondence is not linear, causal, self-evident. Traditional Marxist theory of everyday life has often been too structuralist to grasp this nuance, on the one hand lamenting the way that capital structures the everyday into disciplined routines while, on the other hand, gesturing towards the liberatory exuberance supposedly lying beneath those oppressive iterations.⁶ There is neither innocence nor doom in everyday life, however. Its ordinary rhythms escape, by definition, unproductive dichotomies such as order/disorder, difference/repetition, freedom/oppression. ‘The two sides always meet,’ writes Maurice Blanchot. ‘The everyday with its tedious, painful, and sordid side [...] and the inexhaustible, irrecusable, constantly unfinished that always escapes forms or structures’ (1993 [1969], p. 239). The ordinary is the way atmospheres are affectively tuned and aesthetically sensed in more or less lasting, empowering or debilitating ways, as bodies get stuck and unstuck, caught into all sorts of affective attachments in different ways, that is, in the everyday work of negotiating, adjusting, and adapting to this subtle hum. In her remarkable attempt to attune to this intense fragility, Kathleen Stewart wrote that ‘the ordinary is a circuit that’s always tuned in to some little something somewhere. A mode of attending to the possible and the threatening, it amasses the resonance in things’ (2007, p. 12). There is always a pull. What is the ordinary, in fact, if not a pull that we – comfortably or stressfully – *depend on* [*de-*, ‘from’, and – *pendere*, ‘hang’] in order to go about our lives? In Berlant’s words, the ordinary is a temporal zone ‘of ongoingness, getting by, and living on, where the structural inequalities are dispersed, the pacing of their experience intermittent, often in phenomena not prone to capture by a consciousness organized by archives of memorable impact’ (2007, p. 759). This is the fleeting refrain in which we are situated, an excessive force-field of potentiality that may or may not pick up speed, meaning or intelligibility. This is why there is no definition able to grasp it without immediately

losing it: ‘the everyday escapes’ (Blanchot, 1993 [1969], p. 241). There is no mystery involved, however. The ordinary is not only unspeakable, nor simply a *je-ne-sais-quoi* that evades a subject who is unable to decipher it. More profoundly, the ordinary is structurally excessive, and therefore hardly manageable via the static strictures of descriptive language: we cannot literally translate it or realistically portray it. Yet we can attune to it, falling in tune, going along with its rhythm, since we are always part of it. One is always in the suspense of a suspension. There are consequences. ‘To pursue a condition of suspension is a way of posing the question of the present as an atmospheric condition rather than the expansion of anthropogenic powers’, Timothy Choy and Jerry Zee argue, adding that ‘suspension can also be an injunction to an art of noticing, of living in and thinking with atmospheres, their capacities and contents’ (2015, pp. 201 and 213). Noticing, exploring, experimenting with or ‘attend[ing] to ordinary affects is to trace how the potency of forces lies in their immanence to things that are both flighty and hardwired, shifty and unsteady but palpable too’ (Stewart 2007, p. 3). At the same time, this also means exploring atmospheric incapacitations, that is, the debilitating effects atmospheres might have on bodies and on their ability to thrive: ‘atmospheres carry us away in their buoyancy and lightness, or, conversely, they may sink us, drowning us with heaviness, lethargy or exhaustion’ (Adey 2013, p. 293), and unequally so. As Marijn Nieuwenhuis reminds, ‘certain bodies are psychometrically forced to suffer from “saturated air” and “dry air”, while others delight in more hospitable milieux of “clean air”’ (2016, p. 505). Again, it *depends*. How should we grasp these dynamics? How should we explore the ‘slow violence’ (Nixon 2011), the ‘wearing out’ (Berlant 2011), or ‘atmospheric violence’ (Pavoni and Tulumello 2023) that slowly deplete the bodies that breathe through the increasingly toxic atmospheres of contemporaneity? And, at the same time, how should we conjure, to paraphrase Stewart (2011: p. 444, 450), a ‘writing and theorising that tries to stick with something becoming atmospheric [...] approaching the thing that is happening by attuning to it’?

3. Cinema

- 8 According to Deleuze (1986 [1983], p. 206), what characterises the new cinema that emerges from the devastation of the second world war, especially with Italian neorealism, is a novel sensibility to everyday banality, different from the previous cinema’s penchant for a clear narrative constructed around a sensorimotor schema, that is, a coherent correspondence between perception and action. It was not a coincidence, perhaps, that this occurred in the peculiar context of post-WW2 Italy, amidst the psycho-physical and socio-political debris of a country that had both lost and won the war, a contradictory reality that the old narrative genres were no longer able to capture. For instance, in the similar, but far more dramatic context of post-WW2 Germany, Alexander Kluge observed a sort of disconnect between ‘normal time and “the sensory experience of time”’ (quoted in Sebald, 2011 [1999], n.p.), as the country seemingly plunged into a state of collective denial, unable to make sense of the destruction while submerged by the overpowering rhetoric of reconstruction. It fell within an *impasse*, to use Berlant’s term, namely, ‘a space of time lived without narrative genre’ (2011, p. 199). If, in the short term, the extent of the moral and physical destruction of Germany had a sort of anaesthetising effect on its inhabitants,⁷ in the more ambivalent aftermath of Italy, neorealism was able attune to the collective

mood by means ‘of including the elliptical and the unorganised’, that is, the ‘dispersive and lacunary reality’ that inhabited the rubble (Deleuze 1989 [1985], p. 20). Sensorimotor schemata were thus replaced by strolling, the vague and aimless wandering of the actors or the camera itself through unspecific places, *terrain vagues*, factories, brownfield land, any space whatever.

- 9 When ‘our sensory-motor schemata jam or break’, Deleuze writes, ‘a different type of image can appear’, an image able to speak for itself not representationally, but affectively (1989 [1985], p. 20). This is why the attention to the ordinary everyday was crucial, since ‘being subject to sensory-motor schemata which are automatic and pre-established, it [the everyday] is all the more liable, on the least disturbance of equilibrium between stimulus and response [...], suddenly to free itself from the laws of this schema and reveal itself in a visual and sound nakedness’ (*ibid.*, p. 3). In neorealism, in fact, ‘the image no longer refers to a situation which is globalising or synthetic, but rather to one which is dispersive’, as if ‘the line or the fibre of the universe which prolonged events into one another, or brought about the connection of portions of space’, had broken (Deleuze 1986 [1983], p. 207). This fleeting dimension can be gestured at, but never ‘immediately’ grasped or ‘realistically’ described. The ordinary can only be ‘shown’ by tearing away those (optical, auditory, tactile, physical, etc.) clichés that structure descriptive narrations and that in this way invisibilise its atmosphere (Deleuze, 1989 [1985], p. 21). Unavoidably, such a ‘showing’ does not belong to the register of resemblance or representation, nor does it belong to that of the event. The everyday, as Blanchot writes, ‘remains always unactualized in its very realization, which no event, however important or however insignificant, is ever able to produce. Nothing happens; this is the everyday [...] without event’ (1993 [1969], pp. 241, 243). Even when events do take place, the everyday escapes or surrounds them, as an ordinary hum that belongs to other registers, a blurred background noise that plunges the foreground into indifference, that very indifference that, by being indifferent, allows for difference as such to emerge, and yet can never be brought into the foreground, since it coexists, at once haunting and enabling, with the foreground itself. Hence Berlant’s suggestion: ‘a materialism of the atmospheres points to something more solid [than the notion of ‘event’], like “environment”’, one ‘in which structural conditions are suffused through a variety of mediations, such as predictable repetitions and other spatial practices that might go under the radar or, in any case, not take up the form of event’ (Berlant 2011, p. 100).⁸
- 10 This is not to suggest a separation between ordinary and extraordinary, atmosphere and event, however. Every event, or relation for that matter, is immersed into atmospheric attachments that are usually subtle, unperceived, meaningless, but *hold together* nonetheless: ‘ordinary life in ordinary cities, to a large extent, has little to do with us, with our search for meaning or for the meanings we use to motivate or explain what we do’ (Nielsen and Simone 2022, p. 127). Beyond meaning, representation or subjects, since what the everyday boils down to is those tensional co-tractions we call atmospheres, that cannot be represented but that we can only attune to, fleetingly so, by entering into a relation with their organising forces, seeking to capture their immanent tension and unfolding rhythm, and trying to express them aesthetically and affectively. Cinema has the potential to do so. ‘What is specific to the image, as soon as it is creative’, reminds Deleuze, ‘is to make perceptible, to make visible, relationships of time which cannot be seen in the represented object and do not allow themselves to be

reduced to the present' (1989 [1985], p. xii). This is what occurs in the cinema of Ozu with its 'interiors emptied of their occupants, deserted exteriors or landscapes in nature' in which the mere passing of time is shown by 'stilling' life (*ibid.*, p. 16). In such images, 'objects and settings [*milieux*]' – atmospheres – 'take on an autonomous, material reality which gives them an importance in themselves' and are in this way able to 'reveal connections of a new type', that is, the ordinary rhythms made of tensions, co-tractions, attachments, adjustments which do not become events since they are, more precisely, *within* the events, belonging to their imperceptible, meaningless, non-representational, blurred background (*ibid.*, p. 4). This is what cinema can do: it interrupts the image, deactivating its narrative power, in order to release its autonomous potential as an expressive matter that is generative of possibility (*ibid.*, pp. 20-1; see also Agamben, 2008 [1995]). The ordinary affects that compose an atmosphere in this way emerge by means of being 'shown' affectively rather than 'visually'. This is the only way through which an atmosphere can be grasped: by attuning to it.

4. Acclimatisation

- 11 After defining the notion of atmosphere in relation to that of the ordinary and reflecting on the capacity that cinema has to attune to its tensional unfolding, we move to the ways in which the ordinary is experienced and endured – that is, how processes of atmospheric acclimatisation take place. A couple of significant instances may be put forward.
- 12 The first is a classic trope of acclimatisation: a person arrives in a new city from the countryside, or from abroad. This is always a matter of having to attune to its distant rhythms, to make them familiar by falling in tune with them. Reflecting on Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation*, for instance, Jean-Paul Thibaud observes that 'If not much is going on - little action and laconic dialogues - this is due to the attention focused more on the places and landscapes, gestures and faces, silences and lights.' This strategy is meant to let the spectators 'feel the emergence of Tokyo's atmospheres and the transformation of the characters' emotional state' (Thibaud 2023, p. 58): a study in acclimatisation.⁹
- 13 In the opening shot of Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Uzak* [Distant], we see Yusuf [Mehmet Emin Toprak] walking through the snow, away from his village. He is leaving. As recession hit, Yusuf was made redundant by the local factory. He is going to Istanbul to look for a job on a cargo ship. 'Sailors make a lot of money,' he explains to his cousin: 'money in US dollars. And you see the world. There's no economic crisis at sea.'¹⁰ 'Every place ends up looking the same,' the cousin replies. At a *çay evi* [tea house] by the dock, an older worker warns Yusuf in a similar, inauspicious tone: 'At your age I thought the same [...] there's no work and no money on the ships [...] it's an empty dream.' This emptiness, the hollowed quality of Yusuf's desire, is expressed by his inconspicuous wandering around an exceptionally snowy Istanbul. Through his walks, smokes, gazes, he is shown as if running idle, out of tune, without the sense of purpose the rhythm of the city would require. The ships and the women – the job and the love – he follows and gestures towards, unconvincingly, equally embody opportunities that he does not seem able to seize: vague promises bound to remain unfulfilled, as the emblematic shipwreck he bumps into on the first day [fig. 1].

Figure 1 : Shipwrecked promises



Ceylan, Nuri Bilge. 2002. *Uzak*. Istanbul: NBC Film, 110'

- 14 Often, a long shot introduces Yusuf's drifting. We see him from afar, walking slowly towards the fixed camera, as if entering an atmosphere he does not belong to. At other times, he is in the foreground, while the action is unfolding in the background. Either too close or too far, this cinematographic play of *distances* makes him appear as someone who is unable to go with the everyday flow of the city, who is bound to remain on the sidelines, as a somewhat paralysed spectator of scenes that unfold regardless of his presence [fig. 2].

Figure 2 : Gazing at the woman in the street



Ceylan, Nuri Bilge. 2002. *Uzak*. Istanbul: NBC Film, 110'

- 15 Perhaps it is the very atmosphere of this cold and unknown city that is suffocating for his unacquainted lungs. One scene perfectly exemplifies it. Yusuf is in the hall of his cousin's apartment building, waiting for the handyman to bring him a parcel. A woman, whom he had already noticed – with interest – a few scenes earlier, is also there, waiting for the same man. They are both standing. The woman keeps an embarrassed gaze downwards, while Yusuf gazes at her, as if about to say something, and yet utterly unable to do so. At some point the light in the hall shuts down.
- 16 In the darkness, a fixed shot with the main building door in the background shows Yusuf remaining still, in front of the woman, looking at her, his gaze expressing a growing desire to interrupt the thick silence that seems to be paralysing his tongue. A shot/countershot sequence brings the unspoken stillness into the foreground, with the camera lingering on the tired gaze of the woman. Then, the handyman and the light return to release the situation from the impasse. A reversed symmetrical shot, from the main building door's perspective, signals the atmospheric shift [fig. 3, 4 and 5]. The other emblematic scene, in this sense, shows Yusuf following the same woman in the park, looking furtively at her from behind a bush, again still, again unable to break the stillness until, as he finally seems to have made up his mind and is about to move towards the woman, a man arrives and hugs her, forcing him to an abrupt about-turn [fig. 6a and 6b]. Incapable of making things happen, Yusuf is a body that is unable to attune to the city, a body that clumsily moves through the urban atmosphere as if walking at a high altitude he did not acclimatise to: slow, dizzy, short of breath.

Figure 3 : In the hall

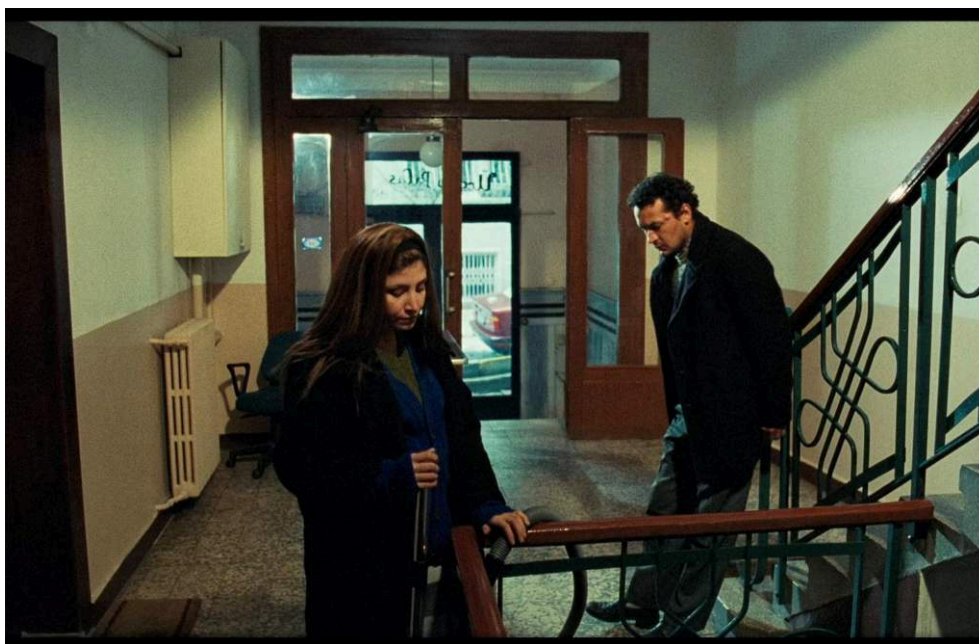
Ceylan, Nuri Bilge. 2002. *Uzak*. Istanbul: NBC Film, 110'

Figure 4 : In the dark hall

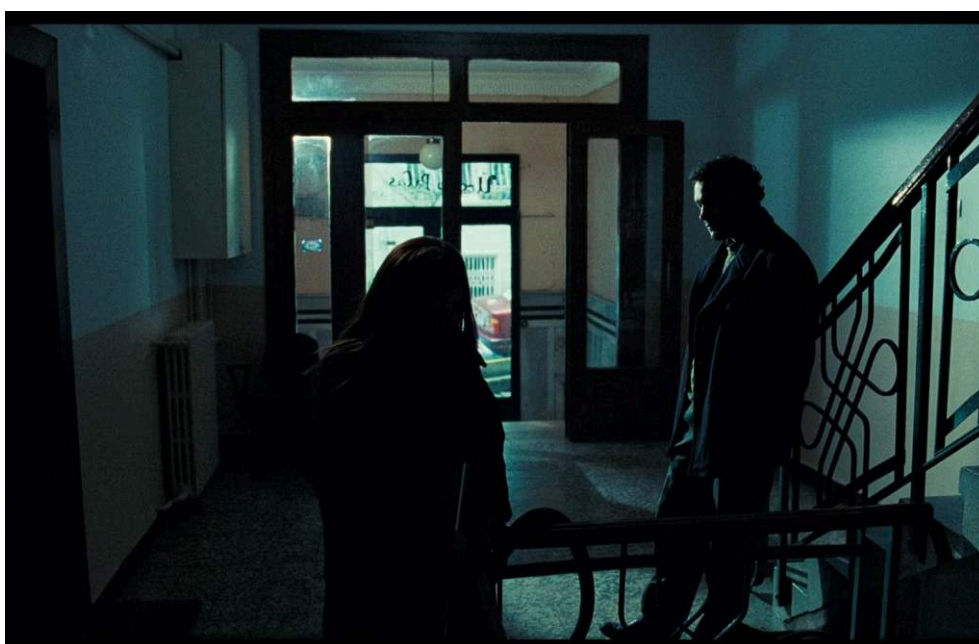
Ceylan, Nuri Bilge. 2002. *Uzak*. Istanbul: NBC Film, 110'

Figure 5 : Woman in the hall



Ceylan, Nuri Bilge. 2002. *Uzak*. Istanbul: NBC Film, 110'

Figure 6a et 6b : Behind the bush



Ceylan, Nuri Bilge. 2002. *Uzak*. Istanbul: NBC Film, 110'

5. Suffocation

- 17 Meet Yusuf's cousin, Mahmut [Muzaffer Özdemir]. His first scene shows him in the foreground, looking at a woman who is undressing on his bed. Her image is blurred. Mahmut is a commercial photographer who has abandoned his artistic ambitions. The books, the music and the films he consumes in his apartment testify to his intellectual tastes, so *distant* from the life of Yusuf, who dozes off as they watch Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, who wonders who that 'Bak' is whose name appears in so many CDs. Yusuf stays at Mahmut's place as he looks for a job. His body, moving slowly but steadily, perturbs the domestic atmosphere, through noise (his being loud on the phone), smell (his stinky shoes, his tobacco), taste (the 'shitty' quality of his cigarettes, his ignorance vis-à-vis Mahmut's cultural references). It is generally his presence, always out of place, out of tune, that is bound to pollute the order and cleanliness of Mahmut's apartment, bound to generate exasperating atmospherics within its apparent tranquillity. The camera subtly suggests these little frictional dramas by firstly showing still interior shots of Mahmut who, whether working, watching the TV or dozing off, barely moves, and secondly by showing Yusuf as clumsily entering and exiting the scene by bringing his turbulence in. It is the resulting, slowly mounting irritation of Mahmut that then conveys the atmospherics generated by this interplay [fig. 7].

Figure 7 : Standing behind



Ceylan, Nuri Bilge. 2002. *Uzak*. Istanbul: NBC Film, 110'

- 18 Perturbation is a phenomenon that an ordinary atmosphere undergoes when its rhythm is disrupted, without this necessarily depending on a traumatic event. The everyday tends to belong to other registers. *Ordinary* traumas can be subtle; they take place as a minor interference that slowly becomes unbearable. And yet, Mahmut's apartment is no idyll. In fact, its atmosphere already feels suffocating, as if his quasi-immobility were a result of a lack of fresh air. This is what the camera's static, patient shots manage to show, by depicting the ordinary and its uneventful scenes, all the

‘predictable repetitions and other spatial practices that [...] do] not take up the form of event’ (Berlant, above), and yet slowly saturate the atmosphere. While Yusuf’s lack of acclimatisation, his being out of tune, is to some extent something to be expected, with him just having arrived in town from the village, the second instance of acclimatisation the film expresses is more subtle. It has to do not with entering – and having to acclimatise to – an atmosphere from the outside, but with the daily practice of enduring an ordinary atmosphere by breathing through its norms, values and forces.

- 19 Atmospheres tend to disappear as habituation sets in, gradually neutralising their excess potential, turning themselves into self-fulfilling prophecies. As this occurs, atmospheres might become gradually unbreathable, although this saturation often goes unnoticed, as when carbon dioxide fills the room without its occupants realising. This may happen because the everyday practice of living on and keeping on to which we remain attached for all sorts of reasons becomes increasingly stressful, depleting – it wears us out. Berlant terms it ‘slow death’, that is, ‘a condition of being worn out by the activity of reproducing life’, in which ‘agency can be an activity of maintenance, not making; fantasy, without grandiosity; sentience without full intentionality’ (2007, p. 759). In this context, the ordinary becomes ‘an impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on’ (Berlant 2011, p. 8). A crisis that becomes ordinary, or perhaps the ordinary itself that enters a state of crisis in which the ontological security of life-affirming norms is under threat and yet one must go about, nonetheless, exposed to being worn out in the process: *living on, not getting better* (Shildrick 2015).
- 20 This seems to be particularly apt to describe Mahmut’s post-traumatic condition. His ex-wife is about to fly to Canada to begin a new life with a new partner. His professional work is repetitive, uninteresting and performed merely for the sake of survival. His artistic ambitions have gone astray, as exemplified by him switching from Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* to an amatorial porn film as soon as his cousin leaves the room. Even his sex life follows a repetitive pattern in which nothing seems to suggest emotional engagement or sexual excitement. Mahmut seems to be living among the ruins of a life that could have been and that is no longer. It is as if the very crumbling of his life has produced a dense dust, breathing through which he finds intensely debilitating. He is ‘stuck in ruefulness’, as Anthony Lane (2004) efficaciously put it. The at times suffocating and alien atmospheres through which he moves – a paradoxical condition in which he appears to be entrapped within an ordinary rhythm that, nonetheless, he seems to find uninhabitable – are epitomised by the blurred background that often characterises his scenes: the woman, as already mentioned, but also the pub or the sea [fig. 8 and 9], blurred things or situations he is shown gazing at, scenes that are ever so *distant* from him or, perhaps, that he is no longer able to put into focus (see White 2011).

Figure 8 : Blurred woman



Ceylan, Nuri Bilge. 2002. *Uzak*. Istanbul: NBC Film, 110'

Figure 9 : Blurred pub



Ceylan, Nuri Bilge. 2002. *Uzak*. Istanbul: NBC Film, 110'

- 21 The ordinary in which he lives is a saturated atmosphere he is stuck in, unable or unwilling (the difference loses value) to enter into novel concatenations. Here, the classic trope is boredom, an affective structure with the consistency of quicksand. It is worth quoting Blanchot at length:

As we discover through the experience of boredom when indeed boredom seems to be the sudden, the insensible apprehension of the quotidian into which we slide in

the leveling out of a steady slack time, feeling ourselves forever sucked in, yet feeling at the same time that we have already lost it and are henceforth incapable of deciding whether there is a lack of the everyday or too much of it – thus held by boredom in boredom, which develops, says Friedrich Schlegel, just as carbon dioxide accumulates in a closed space where too many people find themselves together (1993 [1969], p. 242).

- 22 ‘Incapable of deciding’, or moving, this is Mahmut: ‘We always got stuck,’ he tells his cousin while positioning mouse strips around the apartment, ‘while those fuckers always manage to escape.’
- 23 Spinoza’s philosophy offers a precise ontological framework for exploring such instances of debilitation that do not take the shocking form of the event, but rather unfold in slow and unremarkable ways, as bodies are gradually separated from their power to affect and be affected, becoming weaker, slower, gloomier. For Spinoza, a body is not a substance but a mode or relation that unfolds dynamically in variation, oscillating between concatenations that increase and concatenations that decrease its power to act – what Spinoza respectively refers to as ‘joy’ and ‘sadness’. Joy is the empowering of my ability to enter novel relations and thus to think, feel and live *more*, according to my own nature and constitution. Sadness is the disempowering of such ability: what *separates* myself from my own powers (Spinoza 2002 [1677a], part III; see also Deleuze 1968). The ethical task, in this context, becomes that of forming ‘adequate ideas’ of what is happening to us: understanding, that is, what makes us stronger, and what makes us weaker. Needless to say, rarely do we know what *really* makes us flourish or debilitates us, what is truly joyful or sad. In this social chemistry, relations between bodies are in turn influenced by the individual and social ideas about them, which may or may not be adequate: I may be in love with someone who is poisonous for me, who decreases my power to act, and yet I may delude myself into thinking otherwise. Boredom, in this sense, could be interpreted as resulting from an inadequate understanding one has of his or her powers to act: in the belief that there is nothing left to be done, that life no longer has anything to offer, that we have been separated from our powers, we end up being *actually* separated from them, self-reflexively drawing ourselves into the quicksand of resignation and depression. An inadequate understanding that seems to be indirectly suggested by those blurry images, and that may might be the result of struggling to breathe through a suffocating atmosphere. The emblematic scene here is set in Anatolia, where Mahmut has been carrying out a job assignment. On the way back he stops the car, in the middle of a bucolic landscape. A long shot communicates the photogenic beauty of the landscape. In the subsequent, closer shot of him and Yusuf inside the car, an unusual reverie seems to be animating Mahmut’s gaze: ‘God, what a place to photograph,’ he exclaims. A rare smile crosses his face, illuminated by the sunset light, as he ponders on the best way to shoot the scene. Yusuf proposes setting up the equipment. A few seconds and Mahmut abruptly withdraws: ‘Fuck it, why bother.’ Again, the change of mood is underlined by a symmetrically reversed shot, now showing his face from the other side, in the shadow [fig. 10 and 11].¹¹

Figure 10 : Smiling at last

Ceylan, Nuri Bilge. 2002. *Uzak*. Istanbul: NBC Film, 110'

Figure 11 : Why bother

Ceylan, Nuri Bilge. 2002. *Uzak*. Istanbul: NBC Film, 110'

6. Still

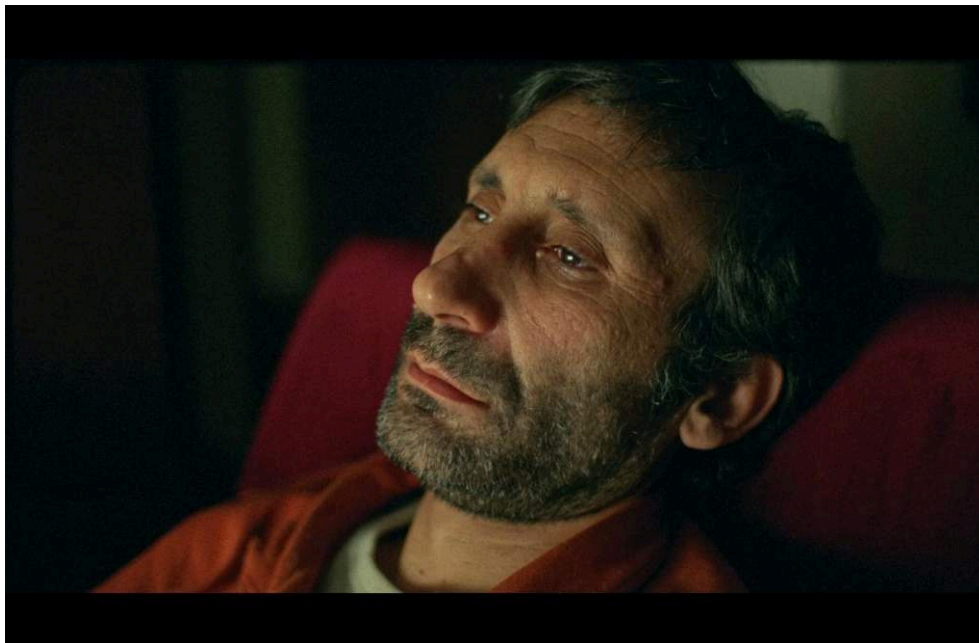
- ²⁴ 'The hero', writes Blanchot, 'while still a man of courage, is he who fears the everyday; fears it not because he is afraid of living in it with too much ease, but because he dreads meeting in it what is most fearful: a power of dissolution' (1993 [1969], p. 244). Mahmut,

this film's perverse hero, embodies the poisonous effect the everyday can have on bodies. With a more sociological gaze than Blanchot's, Morten Nielsen and AbdouMalik Simone point to something similar when observing that:

If the urban is not so much a particular kind of space or time, but rather a field through which both space and time can be differentiated simultaneously in all kinds of ways, then the urban is indifferent to any particular formation or content at any given moment. If this is the case, our ability to consider specific spaces, persons and events within the urban as having stable identities in their own right depends on being blind to this indifference (2022, p. 113).

- 25 Mahmut and Yusuf seem to be unable, in different ways, to be blind to this indifference. Especially the former seems incapable of not gazing into it, paralysed by the indifference the everyday secretes, by turning him into a gloomy, equally indifferent being, incapable of entering a relationship, a concatenation, an intensive attachment. Two scenes best express this condition. In the first, Mahmut is preparing a still life set for a shoot, positioning the object on a flat surface. At some point, he seems to freeze. The ceramic egg slips from his hand and slowly rolls on the ground. Mahmut looks at it transfixed, motionless, his hands becoming blurred as the egg rolls into the foreground. A life at a standstill. Himself becoming a still life. In the second scene, that very night, he has a dream. He is watching blurry static on the television, hypnotised, again seemingly entrapped in a frozen immobility. A lamp begins to slowly fall to the ground, but he will not move. He then wakes up, frightened [fig. 12 and 13].

Figure 12 : Dreaming hypnotised



Ceylan, Nuri Bilge. 2002. *Uzak*. Istanbul: NBC Film, 110'

Figure 13 : Dreaming the falling lamp

Ceylan, Nuri Bilge. 2002. *Uzak*. Istanbul: NBC Film, 110'

- 26 In post-war cinema, writes Deleuze, 'the character has become a kind of viewer. He shifts, runs and becomes animated in vain, the situation he is in outstrips his motor capacities on all sides, and makes him see and hear what is no longer subject to the rules of a response or an action. He records rather than reacts. He is prey to a vision, pursued by it or pursuing it, rather than engaged in an action' (Deleuze 1989 [1985], p. 3). If Yusuf aptly expresses this condition, Mahmut embodies another kind of viewer: motionless, still. A viewer who is seemingly plunged into anaesthetised *stupor*, a condition the film repeatedly expresses by showing him gazing motionlessly at natural, urban or social landscapes just as if he were looking at television static: the sea, the pub customer, the cousin from his balcony, the television itself. Everything is blurred. He is literally *prey* to a vision that does not affect him in any way, a numbness he is unable to awake from, as if inhabiting a toxic, post-traumatic atmosphere in which he 'no longer knows what to do or how to live and yet, while unknowing, must adjust.'¹² Commenting on the cinema of Ozu and Antonioni, Deleuze (1995 [1990], p. 160) observed that, 'with them, the periods in which nothing happens don't fall between two events, they're in the events themselves, giving events their depth.' What, then, when this depth engulfs the subjects to the extent of depriving them of their capacity to act, feel or move? How can this temporal quicksand be shown? *Uzak* does so by managing to be 'continually absorbing, even when not much is happening – which is most of the time', writes Hoberman (2022). We could rephrase it: it manages to be absorbing exactly because not much is happening or, to put it better, because quite a lot is happening that does not pertain to the register of the event. This is what the camera manages to show through its play of contrasts between proximity and distance, focus and blur, stillness and movement. According to what Mahmut Mutman writes, flirting with Jacques Derrida, what *Uzak* manages to show is the distance of the *here and now*, its irreducible flight from the present, and presence. As he puts it: 'If I cannot not give form, the question then becomes *how* to turn back and pay attention to the everyday, that is, to the

inaudibility of the audible, the invisibility of the visible, the distant *here* [...] the distant is then that which is immediate, precisely the event' (2006, p. 107). More than that, what Ceylan's film does 'show' is the suffocating effect this depth – this atmospheric thickness – produces, its surreptitious capacity to debilitate bodies: once the sense is removed from things, what remains is their unreason, their meaninglessness, and its paralysing effect. Then, *why bother?*

7. Empty

- 27 In fact, Mahmut would still like to do something. There is still a spark of energy in him, it seems. When he speaks to his ex-wife the day before she is due to leave, he is about to – being *about to*, this is *Uzak*'s mood, an atmosphere that pre-emptively absorbs the events before they occur – tell her something important, only to withdraw: 'I'll tell you some other time.' The day after, in fact, he is shown as following the ex-wife at the airport, hiding in the car, among the crowd, in a bar, and behind a column, watching her and her partner until they go through the security checks, in a scene that formally parallels the one of Yusuf in the park: here, and there, the woman seems to notice at some point the presence of the awkward observer, while she is carried away by the embrace of a man [fig. 14].

Figure 14 : Behind the column



Ceylan, Nuri Bilge. 2002. *Uzak*. Istanbul: NBC Film, 110'

- 28 In such a stilled and suffocating film, the only outburst of anger comes about as an inevitable unfolding. The domestic atmosphere of Mahmut's apartment cannot absorb the perturbing presence of Yusuf: some storm must ensue, and that promptly happens when he fails to leave the apartment tidy, a particularly serious problem given the seeming obsession Mahmut has for order and cleanliness. In the discussion that follows Mahmut humiliates him, underlining his lack of initiative, independence and pride, and drawing a comparison with his own experience: 'I did everything by myself here, I came

to Istanbul without a cent.’ Yet it is not clear whether he is only talking to Yusuf or to his former self, too. As the shot-countershot sequence goes on, we see in Mahmut’s background the blurred image of Yusuf reflected in the mirror, as if to surreptitiously suggest once more his inability to fit in, his diffracted presence. ‘This town has changed you’, Yusuf rebuts. Perhaps he has a point.

- 29 In his last scene, Yusuf is gazing from the window of the apartment. A boat is slowly disappearing from the scene. Coming back from the airport, Mahmut arrives home to discover that Yusuf has gone. The house is empty again, an emptiness that feels painful, as if the atmosphere has now become more oppressive, as if its emptiness now weighs on his body with more force, his dense dust now fully in view. He goes out. In the last scene he is again gazing at the sea, sitting on a bench, puffing one of those ‘shitty cigarettes’ Yusuf inadvertently left behind [fig. 15]. Everything is distant, *uzak*. What is distant, in fact, are Mahmut’s powers, the powers he has been separated from, in the thick atmosphere of sadness his life has fallen into. In their different and yet equally precarious distances, Mahmut and Yusuf are bodies that have lost their known coordinates, that endure an atmosphere that seems to be slowly poisoning them and that they must bear, nonetheless, living on, keeping on, not getting better.

Figure 15 : Gazing



Ceylan, Nuri Bilge. 2002. *Uzak*. Istanbul: NBC Film, 110'

Conclusion

- 30 Life is a question of consistency and excess: finding a way to keep it together without losing the ability to vary (see Pavoni and Tulumello 2023, pp. 12-20). The first part of this text has been oriented by an epistemological challenge, that of how to aesthetically communicate the ordinary atmospheres of everyday life, including the capacitating or incapacitating effects they have on the bodies that breathe through them. Employing the question opening this text as a strategic compass, I proposed to explore

atmospheres in films by focusing on their infrastructural ‘in-between’ as a matter of consistency, and on their overflowing ‘more-than’ as a matter of vitality – a *tensional* understanding that I posited as an alternative to the aesthetic phenomenological approach that is popular within atmosphere studies, and indeed in this very journal. While analyses of atmospheres in film have so far relied on the latter approach, here I have firstly shown that approaching atmospheres through an ontology of relation – as infrastructure – and power [*potentia*] – as vitality – proves compelling for exploring the atmospheric potential of the cinematic medium, especially when it comes to the existential and political question of breathability; that is, the unequally enlivening or exhausting, empowering or debilitating, condition of living and breathing through atmospheres (Dietrich 2012; Pavoni and Tulumello 2023: pp. 215-247). That also suggests, incidentally, a promising avenue for further research bridging atmosphere studies with contemporary work on the aesthetic of infrastructure (e.g. Toscano and Kinkle 2015; Pavoni 2021). Secondly, I foregrounded the notion of the ordinary as a privileged site for cinematic explorations of the subtle, unnoticed, intangible ways in which everyday life unfolds through the fleeting ‘patterns of undramatic attachment and identification’ (Berlant 2011: p. 100) that hold it together. The interest here has been not only in showing how a given atmosphere is constructed through filmic technique and style, but also in looking at how the cinematic medium is able to explore and convey the everyday dramas of atmospheric adaptation, acclimatisation, suffocation and wearing out, without resorting to narration and representation, but rather attuning to, and eliciting, such a state of uncanny suspension. Thirdly, I suggested a parallel between the focus of Italian neorealism on everyday life in the context of post-WW2 Italy – notably explored by Deleuze – and the capacity of the cinematic medium to capture the form of the experience in contemporary urban life, following and expanding Berlant’s own attempt ‘to inquire into what thriving might entail amid a mounting sense of contingency’ (*ibid.*: p. 11). How can we explore and express the everyday struggles that bodies undergo while having to acclimatise to the increasingly precarious and violent conditions of contemporary existence? The cinematic medium holds the potential to provide an answer, not simply through its proverbial capacity to generate peculiar atmospheres, but also by becoming a means to detect the ambiguous atmospherics of the contemporary (cf. Agamben 2009[2008]). In other words, my concern here has been not so much – or at least, not only – with dissecting ‘how atmosphere functions in films’ (cf. Spadoni 2019: p. 49), but rather with accounting for how films function as detectors of a given epoch’s infra-structure of feeling. Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s *Uzak* has provided a valuable opportunity to test this hypothesis, as a subtle exercise in atmospheric cinema capable of expressing the ‘solitary tiredness’ (Handke 1994 [1989]) in which bodies increasingly find themselves in the dynamics of contemporary life, raising questions that are simultaneously political and aesthetic, and that can be promisingly explored in other cinematic works.

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Films

Ceylan, Nuri Bilge (dir.). 2002. *Uzak*. Istanbul: NBC Film, 110'

NOTES

1. Of course, I am brutally simplifying a complex and multifaceted trajectory of reflection. This is to some extent unavoidable: there is no room here for a deeper engagement with the work of these authors who, moreover, have significant differences: while Schmitz (2023), who should be more precisely referred to as a neo-phenomenologist, a trajectory of thought he himself introduced, insists on the external existence of atmospheres as half-things [*Halbdinge*] made of subject-independent emotions, Böhme (2017a; 2017b) places the emphasis on sociocultural factors, assuming atmospheres to be in-between spaces within an aesthetic that is not limited to the field of art but rather explores modalities of atmospheric 'staging' in the context of capitalism. Griffero (2014 [2010]), for his part, seeks a mediation between these approaches, understanding atmospheres as simultaneously – and therefore partially – objective, subjective and fabricated.

2. In contrast to Bille and colleagues (2015) or Griffero (2019, p. 18), I believe that while there is undoubtedly a vagueness to atmospheres that points to their blurry constitution, this should not

necessarily lead to an overreliance on vague descriptions when it comes to exploring their ontology.

3. ‘Consistency’ is defined by Deleuze and Guattari as a “‘holding together” of heterogeneous elements’ (2004 [1980]: 323). The notion of *agencement* allows us to explore this relation by highlighting its emergence – an *agencement* does not connect bodies, it *makes* and is *made by* them – and exteriority – an *agencement* always harbours a ‘more’ that overflows its state of affairs and permits the possibility of change (see DeLanda 2016; Pavoni 2018, 39-42).

4. As Bardin and Ferrari (2022, 256) explain, ‘Metastability describes systems macroscopically stable but internally characterised by an uneven distribution of potentials and hosting processes that make that stability only apparent.’

5. Elsewhere I argued that Sloterdijk’s otherwise compelling account somehow deprioritises such an ‘excessive’ dimension (see Pavoni 2018, 148-50).

6. For a critique of this tendency, see for instance Doel 1999; Berlant 2011; Pavoni 2018.

7. ‘People drift about with such lassitude’, wrote Stig Dagerman, by then a reporter for a Swedish newspaper, ‘that you are always in danger of running them down when you happen to be in a car’. Quoted in WG Sebald, 2011 [1999], n.p.

8. In contrast to Griffero’s understanding of atmospheres as ‘radically evenemential’ and ‘absolutely “actual”’ (Griffero 2019, 34-5), atmospheres are not reducible to the field of the phenomenal, that they in fact keep haunting through their absent presence.

9. See also Ceylan’s 2006 movie *İklimler* [Climates], which from the title seems to explore questions of acclimation, or lack thereof, in the context of a slowly disintegrating relationship.

10. All quotations are from the film’s English subtitles.

11. This relation between camera movement and atmosphere is typical of Ceylan’s cinema. Recently, when asked about a peculiar camera movement – a camera that, suddenly interrupting the shot/countershot sequence in the discussion between a man and a woman, is slowly raised over the ceiling light – occurring in his latest movie, *Kuru Otlar Üstüne* [About Dry Grasses, 2023], at a Q&A session after the screening of the movie, Ceylan observed that this aesthetic choice had the purpose of communicating ‘a change of atmosphere’ (attended by the author, Cinema Nimas, Lisbon, 17 November 2023)

12. I am paraphrasing from Berlant: ‘After the dramatic event of a forced loss, such as after a broken heart, a sudden death, or a social catastrophe, when one no longer knows what to do or how to live and yet, while unknowing, must adjust’ (2011, pp. 199-200).

ABSTRACTS

The text explores the notion of urban atmosphere, its ordinary rhythm, and the debilitating effects that it might have on the bodies that breathe through it, by looking at Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s third movie, and first international success, *Uzak* [2002]. In the first two sections, the theoretical background is laid out, both presenting a ‘tensional’ concept of atmosphere and proposing the employment of the notion of ‘ordinary’ as a way to explore how atmospheres unfold in everyday life. How can we attune to the fleeting consistency of the ordinary, however? The third section makes an argument for the capacity of cinema to do so, mainly drawing from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Lauren Berlant. In the subsequent sections, *Uzak* is explored by showing how these themes are brought forward through the slow-paced aesthetics of the film.

Le texte explore la notion d'atmosphère urbaine, son rythme ordinaire et les effets débilissants qu'elle peut avoir sur les corps qui la respirent, en examinant le troisième film de Nuri Bilge Ceylan, et son premier succès international, *Uzak* [2002]. Les deux premières sections exposent le contexte théorique, en présentant un concept « tensionnel » de l'atmosphère et en proposant d'utiliser la notion d'« ordinaire » pour explorer la manière dont les atmosphères se déploient dans la vie quotidienne. Comment s'accorder avec la consistance fugace de l'ordinaire ? La troisième section présente un argument en faveur de la capacité du cinéma à le faire, en s'appuyant principalement sur les travaux de Gilles Deleuze et Lauren Berlant. Dans les sections suivantes, *Uzak* est exploré en montrant comment ces thèmes sont développés par l'esthétique lente du film.

INDEX

Keywords: atmosphere, ordinary, rhythm, debilitation, Nuri Bilge Ceylan

Mots-clés: atmosphère, ordinaire, rythme, débilitation, Nuri Bilge Ceylan

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