

# Air, bodies, affects and quarantines: containing fear and constructing atmospheres of security and tranquillity

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**Abstract.** This article will investigate, based on the idea of “atmosphere”, the possibilities raised by the study of the containment of fear in the case of an epidemic in nineteenth-century Marseille. Following Derek P. McCormack, atmospheres will be understood from different and, as will become clear, complementary perspectives. The first is atmosphere understood in its meteorological sense, that is the zone of gaseous material surrounding our bodies and which will be treated here as something that can play a role in the onset and dissemination of epidemics. The second is atmosphere in an affective sense, a set of “shared feelings and moods in a particular space or environment”. Drawing on the contributions of Gernot Böhme on the aesthetics of the reception and production of atmospheres, it will be argued that the atmospheres of security and tranquillity that emerged in Marseille in the presence of epidemic danger were low-intensity atmospheres with the capacity to last over time. Within these atmospheres, elements of a diverse nature were combined, some continuous and others more exceptional, which, taken together, helped create an affective community.

## 1 On affective atmospheres

According to Jean-Paul Thibaud [1], we might define the notion of “affective atmosphere” as a space-time categorized from a sensory perspective and as a way of connecting the fields of the sensory, the spatial and the social. Conceptualizing the quarantine system from an atmospheric point of view leads us to take into account our direct experience of the world, one that puts aside “its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian or the sociologist may be able to provide”. [2] This approach relates it to phenomenology and one of its most recent critical developments: post-phenomenology. This current of thinking is based on: a) rejecting the acceptance of a subject existing prior to experience to see how the subject is constructed or becomes in or through experience; b) accepting the autonomy of the existence of objects beyond the ways in which these present themselves or are used by human beings; and c) positioning the notion of alterity at the centre of the phenomenological experience. [3]

The concept of “atmosphere” involves a tension between what is and what is not, the visible and the invisible, the material and the immaterial, absences and presences, subjective and objective, causes and effects. [4, 5] In this way, an atmosphere is not something that

exists in a vacuum, but rather is created by things and people, and by the constellations produced between them. [6] Atmospheres are always something spatial, something related to environment or context; always something emotional and also something perceived with all the senses, something between subject and object, the intermediary between both sides. [7] This is how the concept of “affect” is linked since, within this lack of definition, this co-presence between subject and object, the reciprocal potential to affect and be affected comes into play. [8] In this sense, as Anderson explains:

“On the one hand, atmospheres require completion by the subjects that ‘apprehend’ them. They belong to the perceiving subject. On the other hand, atmospheres ‘emanate’ from the ensemble of elements that make up the aesthetic object. They belong to the aesthetic object”. [5]

So, atmospheres, as a concept involving the spatial, the emotional and the sensory, can work in a collective, shared manner, by which they may function through processes of contagion of this emotion [9], or in an individual way. [10] Beyond their importance in the manner in which we perceive and make sense of our experiential worlds, atmospheres have a huge importance for the way in which we decipher them and give them meaning. [11] In this sense we might say that atmospheres exist in a border space “between sensuousness and meaning, between sensory experiences and the semiotic or hermeneutic”. [12]

The following pages will reveal how Marseille, at different moments throughout the nineteenth century, witnessed the ongoing creation of a series of low-intensity atmospheres of significant duration whose principal mood was one of tranquillity and security in the face of epidemic danger. It will also be seen how, in part, these atmospheres were characterised by a ‘constructed’ element in an attempt to contain the fear of the epidemic that was so damaging for the maritime and commercial traffic of this major Mediterranean port.

## **2 On meteorological atmospheres and epidemics**

In recent years, within the social sciences and humanities, much importance has been given to the experience of meteorological phenomena. Of interest, for example, is the vision of Tim Ingold, for whom atmospheric phenomena form part of a field of dynamic materiality which registers in a differentiated manner in the perceptual affordances of sensitive bodies. [13] Also that of Derek P. McCormack in relation to atmospheres which, in his view, should be seen from a combined meteorological and affective perspective. [14] This section will focus in a highly concentrated way on how during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in many of the explanations given for the aetiology and spread of epidemic diseases the atmosphere played a key role.

For the set of theories which, following Hippocratic concepts to a greater or lesser degree, gave importance to environmental variables when explaining the onset of epidemics, the causes of these should be sought in those environmental elements shared by the populations affected, particularly the air. During the eighteenth century, with the aid of new and ever more precise instruments, a shift occurred from a qualitative to a quantitative observation of the atmospheric variables in their relationship with prevailing diseases in different locations. This laid the foundations for surveys of varying scope, such as the one set in motion for the whole of France by Félix Vicq d’Azyr (1748-1794), and a whole series of medical topographies and geographies, whose mission was to connect the sanitary conditions of villages and cities with environmental variables.

For the set of theories that, beyond the aetiology of diseases that might turn into epidemics, considered that these diseases were transmissible, either through direct contact between individuals or via different material objects capable of containing the morbid agent, the atmosphere was also of the greatest importance. If the morbid agent could be transferred,

certain questions were raised: by what means? Is physical contact between two bodies needed or can the agent travel between them through the air? If it can travel through the air, up to what distance? What is the minimum distance between two bodies for them not to become infected? For how long can a human or non-human body retain the morbid agent?

As can be imagined, there was never much unanimity regarding the answers to these questions. The various debates they provoked informed to a major extent the provision of the quarantine stations (lazarettos) that would be built from that moment in time and their location in relation to the cities or territories they served. Some examples are provided through the testimony of John Howard. [15] In his view, people could become affected by plague “by taking in with the breath in respiration the putrid effluvia which hover round the infected object”. Moreover, “these effluvia are capable of being carried from one place to another, upon any substance where what is called scent can lodge, as upon wool, cotton, &c. and in the same manner that the smell of tobacco is carried from one place to another”. For this reason, it was important to avoid the influence of these atmospheres through actions such as social distancing or the relative position of individuals in regard to prevailing winds: “The place appointed for receiving depositions should be so contrived, that the person who takes them may at all times place himself to windward of those who make them”. Finally, by exercising control over the atmosphere through various operations to condition the air and make it healthy once more. Howard refers to the “fumigating of passengers (...) for a person may carry the infection in his clothes, and communicate it to others, without taking it himself”. [15]

It should be noted that, in a contrary sense to the vision of the world in which the surface of the earth functions as an interface between the physical or concrete world and the imaginary – thought – the notion of meteorological atmosphere is understood in this case as something possessing a materiality and agency and not as a metaphor for the operations taking place in it. [13]

### **3 Atmospheres of security and tranquillity in the face of an epidemic danger**

“Many lazarettos are closed, and have too much the aspect of prisons; and I have often heard captains in the Levant trade say, that the spirits of their passengers sink at the prospect of being confined in them. In those of them which I have visited, I have observed several pale and dejected persons, and many fresh graves. To prevent as much as possible these disagreeable circumstances, a lazaretto should have the most cheerful aspect. A spacious and pleasant garden in particular, would be convenient as well as salutary”. [15]

Atmospheres can be addressed from the position of objects or subjects; that is from an aesthetics of reception or production. The conception of atmospheres originated in the aesthetics of reception, approached as something irrational and subjective, grasped as that which affects the subject, provoking in it an emotional state. [7] An approach imbued with the aesthetics of production allows us a rational access to this intangible entity, presenting it to us as something “almost objective”, as Böhme explains using the example of the arts of the stage set and their desire to create an atmospheric background to the action unfolding on stage, in what has been termed the ‘aestheticization of everyday life’. [16] Despite being entities that do not remain identical with the passage of time, atmospheres may be recognized as such by different subjects on account of their characteristics. Moreover, in spite of society being able to recognize them only in a subjective way, they can be communicated in an intersubjective way through language. The prior condition for this is that subjects – the conglomerate of the audience that must sense an atmosphere in a more or less similar way –

needs to have achieved a certain homogeneity through cultural socialization that can guarantee a certain type of perception. It is in this framework, within which a certain type of perception is shared, that an atmosphere can be constructed. Evidently, an atmosphere cannot strictly speaking be made or constructed, since atmospheres – not being things – cannot be built; all that can be brought about is the creation of the conditions – the generators – for it to appear. [15]

What interests us here is an analysis of how, as the nineteenth century progressed, the authorities in Marseille took great pains to create an atmosphere – or better still, a series of atmospheres – of security and tranquillity in the city which was bound up with a political and economic will to maintain mercantile traffic. This involves also revealing how this atmosphere should be understood from a dual perspective: atmosphere as something climatological and something affective.

As the above perfunctory explanations have shown, the materiality of atmospheric air and its unpredictable properties, alongside its capacity to transport pestilential effluvia, was an element of the utmost importance in this attempt to create and maintain an affective atmosphere of calm and security. The construction of lazarettos across the Mediterranean explains the urge to address these contaminated atmospheric wrappers which the boats themselves, as well as their crews, passengers, and cargos, might potentially bring with them. It was a matter of avoiding exposure to this potentially pestilential atmospheric load, for which reason simultaneous action took place on different scales. First and foremost, for their construction, there was a search for sites cut off from the city and, if possible, situated downwind from the dominant winds affecting the city. As regards interior compartmentalization, the idea continued to be the maintenance of pure internal air, which explains the adoption in many cases of the pavilion lazaretto model which, with its tendency towards separation and multiplication of airs, managed to avoid gaseous wrappers from some crews affecting those of others. [17] Finally, there is the interesting application of technical measures, such as fumigations, to change the potential lethal contents of those being treated in these institutions.

On the other hand, it is important to view the quarantine system as a producer of affective atmospheres of security and tranquillity in a series of spaces on different scales. As McCormack explains, the concept of atmosphere is not restricted to any particular scale; it is a matter of space-times that can stretch from the containment of a room to the massive distribution of a planet, passing via distinct intermediate scales. [14] This text will concentrate on the scale comprising the city of Marseille with its lazaretto whose mission, as has been stated, was to contain the spread of the mix of potentially infected atmospheres of its crews and shipments to the healthy atmosphere of the city. This had consequences on the affective level:

*“Cette population de Marseille si impressionnable, qui craint tant la peste, ne s’êmeut pas le moins quand on lui dit que la peste est au lazaret, tant elle compte sur l’expertise des agents de la santé”*<sup>1</sup>. [18]

As may be inferred from the above text, the combined action of the lazaretto, the expertise of its workers and the circulation of news reports about the lazaretto all meant that the inhabitants of Marseille were aware they lived in a meteorological atmosphere free of morbid elements. Marseille’s authorities used these elements as generators for this subtle affective atmosphere of tranquillity and security to keep the city functioning. However, it is clear that sustaining an approach from an aesthetics of production, while concentrating on

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<sup>1</sup> In English: “Marseille’s highly impressionable population, which so much fears the plague, isn’t in the least affected when it learns that the plague is in the lazaretto, such is its confidence in the expertise of its health officials”.

the sovereign power that combines a series of instruments to achieve a concrete atmospheric effect – in this case, one of containment of fear of an epidemic – is useful but not sufficient. Evidently, the cornerstone enabling the emergence and continuity of this atmosphere of tranquillity and security in a port such as Marseille was the coexistence of various elements, among which the existence of the lazaretto, the good work of its employees and the propaganda its authorities produced from all this. In any case, in spite of these causes being necessary for the containment of fear of epidemics and creating the fundamental conditions for the emergence of this atmosphere of tranquillity and security, they remained insufficient. To reach this conclusion we should bear in mind how this atmosphere was able to emerge, its level of intensity and how it evolved and ultimately was able to dissolve.

As far as the intensity of the atmosphere is concerned, it is important to realize, following Angharad Closs Stephens when she speaks about “the atmosphere of nationalism” [19], that the atmosphere we are dealing with here must not be understood as one that is characterized by unbridled passions but rather as a low-density atmosphere with relatively lengthy temporal continuity. This is why, after the generators of the atmosphere were set in motion [7] – the minimum required for the atmosphere to emerge – a whole series of elements constellated together to maintain it, lending it different tones and intensities. Some of these elements operated as a permanent background noise and were perceived solely through their absence. This was the case with the set of sensory perceptions related to the normal functioning of the port and city:

*“Les villes maritimes [se reconnaissent] à l’odeur et au bruit. Où entendre, confondus dans un ensemble constant, comme à Marseille, sans interruption durant le jour et pendant l’année, le cri de la corde sèche dans la poulie , le cri de l’oiseau de mer planant sur le bassin , le bruit d’airain des planches métalliques qu’on cloue au vaisseau , celui du marteau sur l’enclume, celui de la hache dans le chêne , celui des matelots , les mille voix des rameurs se hélant sur une bouée ; par-dessus tous ces bruits , les cloches, et celles des vaisseaux , et celles de la ville : par-dessus les cloches , le murmure du vent du nord ? On la reconnaît aussi à ses odeurs, et chaque odeur est un pays dont elle évoque le nom pour qui la respire. Foulez ses quais ; ces boucaux de riz, à l’exhalaison végétale, ne vous représentent-ils pas les champs de la Caroline ? ce sucre jaune, la Martinique et ses sucreries ? ces coffres de cannelle, Ceylan ? Ces barriques d’huile, les oliviers de la Canée ? L’âme se laisse conduire par des rayons et des parfums. On peut connaître l’Inde sans y être jamais allé ; l’odorat, qui vous y mène, est un sens bien plus aimant que la vue. Marseille est la synthèse odorante du monde”<sup>2</sup>. [20]*

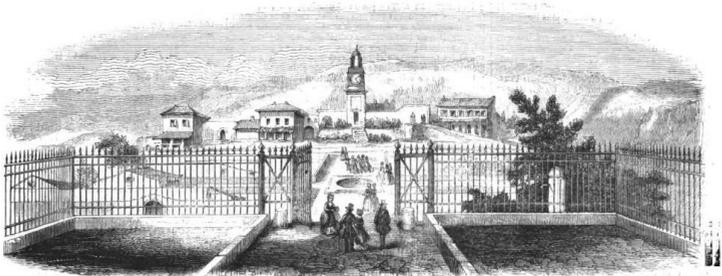
This testimony tells us, in rather idealized fashion, the characteristic aromas and noises of Marseille during periods in which maritime traffic operated normally. Aromas and noises that invaded the city with a set of concrete fragrances and sounds, combining with other elements of the atmosphere and ensuring the citizens of Marseille had no need to worry about

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<sup>2</sup> In English: “Maritime cities [are known by their] smell and noise. Where you hear, in a constant mess of confusion – as at Marseille – all day and throughout the year without interruption – the screech of the wizened rope in the pulley, the cry of the sea bird soaring over the basin, the iron clang of metal boards being nailed to the ship, of hammer on anvil, of axe in oak, of sailors, a thousand voices of oarsmen hailing each other on a buoy; on top of all these noises, the bells –of the ships and of the city: on top of the bells, the murmur of the North Wind? The city is also known by its smells, where each smell is a country whose name it evokes for whoever breathes it. Tread its wharves; these port entries of rice, of vegetable emanation, do they not represent to you the fields of Carolina? This yellow sugar Martinique and its refineries? These cinnamon chests Ceylon? These barrels of oil the olive trees of Chania? The soul lets itself be led by rays and perfumes. You may know India without ever having been there; the scent that leads you there is a much more loving sense than sight. Marseille is the aromatic synthesis of the world”.

epidemics. Its disappearance meant the port had ceased functioning normally, that the epidemic had returned to the city and extinguishing the atmosphere of tranquillity and security now surely transforming into one of fear and anxiety.

Moreover, we are faced with a series of periodic elements that make up a part of this constellation that produces the atmosphere and allows for its spatio-temporal continuity. On the one hand, there was a whole body of information which, during the nineteenth century, appeared in the press regarding epidemics, quarantines and lazarettos that, when published, occasionally reminded citizens of Marseille that they were living in a city protected by a set of among the best quarantine installations in the Mediterranean. In this context it is interesting, for example, to examine the July 25, 1846 edition of the illustrated newspaper *L'Illustration* in which, next to a main article about contagion of diseases, there are various engravings of the Marseille lazaretto showing inhabitants of the city striking relaxed poses as they visit their confined family members. See also the covers of the *Petit Marseillais* from June 4, 1869, and August 8, 1885, to take two random examples of newspaper editions that open with news reports about quarantine in an atmosphere of normality.



**Fig. 1:** Outdoor view of the Marseille lazaretto, from the entrance gate. Source: *L'Illustration, Journal Universel*, VII, 178 (1846)



**Fig. 2:** Cells in which quarantined passengers go to see their friends. Source: *L'Illustration, Journal Universel*, VII, 178 (1846)

On the other hand, it is important to mention moments of greater affective intensity such as the annual prayers and processions commemorating the plague of 1720. These celebrations, according to Max Maurel, reminded the people of Marseille that since that epidemic the plague (*le fléau*) had knocked at the gates of the city but was “confined to our lazarettos – suffocated – and, lacking nutrients, died there”, for which reason prudence advised keeping this sanitary infrastructure. [21] Furthermore, it seems that these events functioned as important landmarks in the creation of an affective community around the

containment of fear of epidemics since, as Shinji Kajitani explains, the aim of religious rituals is to reconstruct the “enclosure”, both individual and collective, when faced with disruptions such as epidemics; for this reason they recall collective atmospheres that stabilize their affective and emotional conditions to create a sense of solidarity among their members. [22] Acts such as the erection, in the church of Saint-Ferréol, of the monument to Monseigneur de Belsunce - one of the *marseillais* heroes of the fight against the 1720 plague – function in a similar way. Drawing on the ideas of Alfred Gell, the main reasons why artworks – in this case, monuments – exist are to create a community around them and act as a totem which, thanks to its own agency, registers the community’s uses and customs, yearnings and anxieties, beliefs and fears. [23]

These periodic actions – reports in the press to show a normality in quarantine operations, religious rites and rituals, alongside other actions such as the construction of monuments – can be understood as elements that fuel this atmosphere of tranquillity and security, helping to preserve it over time and lending it different tones and intensities until its dissolution with the arrival of a new epidemic.

## 4 Conclusion

This text has concisely explored how approaching the subject of fear of containment from an atmospheric perspective enables us to see how meteorological and affective atmospheres can be envisaged as acting together. It has shown how in the case of affective atmospheres of tranquillity and security with respect to fear of epidemics, the latter depends to a major degree on the first. From the perspective of the aesthetics of production, it has explained how the conditions for the emergence of this atmosphere can be created, but that these are not sufficient for it to be maintained. For their preservation over time, these atmospheres of tranquillity and security regarding epidemics require the constellation of other elements. This text has distinguished between those that operate as a sensory backdrop – the smells and noises of a normally-functioning city – and other periodic factors such as newspaper articles, religious rituals and commemorations drawing on the erection of memorials which help give distinct tones and intensities to the atmosphere.

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