Atmosphere in Education:
Tagore and the Phenomenology of Spheres

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Abstract:

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1940), Asia’s first Nobel laureate, was convinced that nothing influences children’s education and upbringing more than the ‘atmosphere’ in which they grow up. He argues that children learn many things by absorbing them unconsciously. In the experimental schools he founded in India, he shifted the focus from the teaching content to creating the conditions that help intensifying children’s connection with the world. The creative and aesthetic potentialities of ‘atmosphere’ are vital in all forms of education. Tagore’s notion of atmosphere is currently gaining new specificity thanks to a range of philosophical reconceptualizations of atmosphere. In this paper, I will compare Tagore’s philosophy of ‘atmosphere’ with concepts that are more commonly used in education today, such as ‘ethos’ and ‘climate’. I will then take the concept forward by comparing it with Sloterdijk’s spherologies and thereby adding a new dimension to his conceptualization of spherology. By comparing Tagore’s ‘atmosphere’ with concepts and ideas of philosophers and social scientists, we will get a better grasp on its importance and scope.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, philosophy, education, school, children, atmosphere, Sloterdijk, spherology, climate, ethos.
What is learning? Rabindranath Tagore realized over a century ago how vital it is that we move away from rote learning and focus on connecting new information and realizations with our previous way of thinking through the mechanisms of accommodation and assimilation and through active learning. He knew that true learning does not mean adding facts to our collection of knowledge, but that what is at stake is to widen our understanding and to thereby connect with the world through knowledge, as we will only then be able to understand and apply what we have learnt. Learning, to him, did not only mean to absorb the world into ourselves and into our thinking, but also to put ourselves into the world by acting in the world and actively changing and creating it. Both directions, inside out and outside in, aim for a more intensified connection between ourselves and the world.

For Tagore, the connection between self and the world is a spiritual achievement and the highest aspiration for the development of our personality. This belief has its roots in Indian philosophy and is expressed by the ancient words: *tat tvam asī* – ‘That art Thou’ or ‘the individual soul is the All, the Ultimate Reality’. Tagore draws the conclusion that all learning potentially contains a spiritual aspect. He therefore argues that the best way to teach such connection with the world and thereby help to develop children’s personalities is not through textbooks but through the influence of the students’ relationship with teachers and the impact of their personality and, most importantly, the influence of the ‘atmosphere.’

**Tagore’s creation of an ‘atmosphere’ as foundation for spiritual development**

Rabindranath Tagore uses the term ‘atmosphere’ often in his writings. In Bengali, he employs a variety of concepts, such as *পরিবেশ* (paribesh), which comprises of environment, climate and the atmosphere in which one is born and brought up. He also uses the term *প্ররিবেশ* (pratibesh) in regard to geographical surroundings or environment, yet this term only refers to the physical environment. Tagore most often speaks about *হাওয়া* (haoa), which means air and also stands for conditions that breed an atmosphere.

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3. e.g. ‘যক্ষগুলীর হাওয়ায় সুদূরের পরে অবজ্জা ঘটিয়ে দেয়, এইটেই সর্বনিহিতে’ (Rabindranath Tagore, রক্তকারাবী/ *Raktakarabi* [Red Oleander] (India, 1963); or ‘আমাদের শিক্ষালয়ে...’
In his English essays, Tagore uses the term *atmosphere* throughout. He talks about the ‘atmosphere of aspiration […] for the expansion of the human spirit’. He says how grateful he is for ‘the literary and artistic atmosphere which pervaded [his family] house’. In the school and university he founded, he aims to create an ‘atmosphere of learning’ and ‘living aspiration’ as well as an ‘atmosphere rich with the sense of divine presence’, which inspires spiritual growth through the presence of ‘the burning flame of spiritual life, in surroundings suitable for such life’, an ‘atmosphere of love, that we call *maitri* in Buddhist language’, ‘an atmosphere of naturalness in our relationship with strangers, and the spirit of hospitality’, and an ‘atmosphere of … natural beauty’. He regards the creation of this atmosphere the most important aspect of his education: ‘But one thing which I cannot make plain to you is the atmosphere, - that is the best part, the principal feature of my institution.’

Tagore’s focus on atmosphere is unusual. Although current practices vary considerably regarding religious education, most of them share a focus on content and on learning about religion, rather than on the spiritual development of the student. Learning from religion and moral reasoning are also part of the intended learning outcomes, yet they are usually restricted to reflections about the taught content.

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4 In English, he occasionally also uses the term surroundings, environment and culture.


10 Ibid., p. 258.


14 Ibid., p. 568.
Tagore’s outlook is very different; because he does not focus on content, he sees a separate class that teaches spirituality and religion as neither necessary nor useful. He argues that spirituality should never be a separate subject that is ‘administered through the academic machinery of education’.\textsuperscript{15}

Religion is not a fractional thing that can be doled out in fixed weekly or daily measures as one among various subjects in the school syllabus. It is the truth of our complete being, the consciousness of our personal relationship with the infinite.\textsuperscript{16}

Tagore describes most forms of knowledge as food, which can be ingested. Yet for spiritual learning, he uses the metaphor appetite, which can ‘only be strengthened (...) by bringing harmony into our bodily functions’.\textsuperscript{17} He believes that every educational activity has the potential to further spiritual education. This point is strengthened by Tagore’s claim that education categorically conveys values; that there are, by definition, no secular values, as values and ideals inevitably involve a belief in something higher and have a moment of transcendence; and that therefore all education and learning contains and transmits spiritual values. The terminology he uses for spiritual education includes and goes beyond that of social and moral education. For example, instead of speaking only of learning social skills, he calls it love and compassion (maitri), referring to the ideals cultivated in Buddhism. He considers the education of ideals and emotions, the formation of the soul, as the most important educational task.\textsuperscript{18}

Tagore’s concept of spirituality consists of the recognition and active connection with the All. We can reach this connection through three different paths: through knowledge, action, and love. For example, knowing about the world can make us understand it in different ways, through which we can establish a deeper connection. While knowledge is recognised as a most crucial part of education, Tagore values action and love as equally important. In contrast to knowledge, action and love help us not only to establish a connection with the world by bringing the outside into ourselves, but by bringing ourselves into the world.\textsuperscript{19}

Tagore tried to help children develop spiritually by founding a school that followed the model of the traditional Indian ashram or tapovan, where children would not be distracted by worldly comforts, but could instead learn to call all beings and plants their ‘kith and kin’\textsuperscript{20} as they would grow

\textsuperscript{15} Tagore, ‘Religious Education’, p. 258.
\textsuperscript{16} Tagore, \textit{Thoughts from Rabindranath Tagore}, section 188.
\textsuperscript{17} Tagore, \textit{Thoughts from Rabindranath Tagore}, section 120.
\textsuperscript{19} Kupfer, ‘Inside out, outside in’.
\textsuperscript{20} Tagore, ‘Religious Education’, p. 258.
up in a place where there are ‘no artificial barriers between man and nature’, according to the old ideal, gurus and disciples sought spiritual unity and perfection and thereby created an atmosphere in which religion can develop in a natural way and influence those who live in this place. Tagore believed that when such an atmosphere is created, spiritual growth happens effortlessly for the children, as they are growing towards the emancipation of their minds into the consciousness of the infinite, not through any process of teaching or outer discipline, but by the help of an unseen atmosphere of aspiration that surrounds the place and the memory of a devoted soul who lived here in intimate communion with God.

As we have seen earlier, Tagore often uses allegories relating to eating and digestion when he speaks about education, the development of knowledge and the use of action. For the realms of love and spirituality, he uses more ethereal metaphors, namely, breathing: ideally, the atmosphere should make spiritual learning as easy as breathing. Any kind of awareness of breathing is already a bad sign and may indicate a malfunction, and artificial support means diverting from the right path. Instead of giving ‘artificial support’, an atmosphere should be created in which religious expression, spiritual connection and ethical righteousness are natural and lived by teachers who act as role models.

Experience of this spiritual world, whose reality we miss by our incessant habit of ignoring it from childhood, has to be gained by children by fully living in it and not through the medium of theological instruction.

Learning unconsciously or subconsciously is a general feature of Tagore’s pedagogy. He differentiates between children and adult ways of learning and argues that adults learn in a focused manner—for example, by choosing books, looking for clear explanations and being motivated by a clear aim—, while children need indefiniteness, surprises and discovering the world first-hand without a clearly prescribed purpose. He terms the children’s natural way of learning ‘method of nature’. Through this method, he says, children are able to learn even the most complicated skills such as their first language more quickly and joyfully than adults could achieve.

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21 Ibid., p. 257.
through focused methods.\textsuperscript{26} To enable children to learn according to the ‘method of nature’, Tagore tries to create an atmosphere of freedom for children, in which they can follow their own interests and be surprised by what they encounter:

Our purpose wants to occupy all the mind’s attention for itself, obstructing the full view of most of the things around us (...) The child, because it has no conscious object of life beyond living, can see all things around it, can hear every sound with a perfect freedom of attention, not having to exercise choice in the collection of information.\textsuperscript{27}

Tagore focuses much more on unconscious education than any other educationist I am aware off. He argues that, because most learning for children happens unconsciously, the most important condition for learning is the atmosphere that children live in: ‘Because when we are young our subconscious mind is more active than our conscious mind, and this imbibes its life from the atmosphere.’\textsuperscript{28}

Yet we need to return to the question of what atmosphere means. It seems to be a vague concept. Ethos, environment, culture and climate are terms that are used much more often in educational contexts today. All of these terms differ from the concept of atmosphere: An ethos consists of principles and values that have been prescribed top-down and that may not be lived reality but an ideal. Climate, in the context of education, can refer to general behaviour, emotions and values, but is very often limited to a mere learning climate and mostly focuses on academic issues. Culture is the closest concept to atmosphere as it is the most comprehensive concept and it includes norms, values, beliefs and traditions of the school members. However, the term is often confined by academic objectives (e.g., creating a positive learning culture) and can also refer to many other issues such as cultural background.\textsuperscript{29} Environment is the only one of the three concepts that includes the physical world, as atmosphere does, yet it is also very much limited by this physical reference and often refers only to the provision of particular learning material.

To gain a better understanding of how atmosphere differs from these concepts, let us look at the cluster of words Tagore uses alongside the concept. The three terms that he uses most regularly in this context are living, spirit and natural.

Tagore frequently uses the term living when he describes the educational institutions founded by him. He uses the allegory of building a living

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{26} Kupfer, ‘Inside out, outside in’.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Tagore, ‘The Schoolmaster’, p. 505.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Tagore, ‘To School Children’, p. 569.
\end{itemize}
nest versus a cage, a theme that he elaborated most distinctively in his *Parrot’s Tale*, which demonstrates his opposition to rigid structures. Instead, a school should be a continuous and collaborative co-creation:

this institution should be a perpetual creation by the cooperative enthusiasm of teachers and students growing with the growth of their soul; a world in itself, self-sustaining, independent, rich with ever-renewing life, radiating life across space and time, attracting and maintaining round it a planetary system of dependent bodies.

Tagore’s use of the expression *spirit* implies a spiritual connotation of the concept *atmosphere*. It is rarely used in the original sense of the *genius loci* (I found this use only in one instance, referring to the presence of his father) but rather as an *esprit de corps*, referring to the capacity of people to pull together persistently and consistently in pursuit of a common purpose. An example is ‘the spirit of hospitality’.

Tagore’s ideal atmosphere is not defined by a top-down prescription of principles. Rather, he believes that students and teachers alike should create and be inspired by this atmosphere continually and collaboratively, for example by engaging in care of nature and the local community, by offering hospitality to international guests and by participating in hands-on learning. Only through living principles of care, creativity and aspiration do these principles become established as a matter of course and common sense.

Was Tagore successful in creating an atmosphere that enabled children to grow spiritually through creativity and through caring for other people and nature? After his first visit to Santiniketan, W.W. Pearson writes that he found there to be an atmosphere that made self-realisation possible. He describes the receptivity of children towards the spiritual, the influence of nature as well as the personality of teachers, but emphasises the absence of inflexible dogmatic teaching.
The role of gurus and spiritual, cultural, creative and ecological activities

For the creation of an atmosphere, the personality of teachers and their way of living is of utmost importance. Tagore wants to employ real gurus, who are prepared to teach from their heart, rather than schoolmasters, who merely deliver a curriculum. He complains about the lack of good teachers.34

In today’s education, the personality and emotional make-up of teachers and principals are still considered to be crucial influences for improving the culture and emotional atmosphere of schools.35 However, many contemporary educators are opposed to the importance of charismatic leaders in education and worry about the danger that comes with their power. They therefore aim to replace reliance on personality with professionalization. If Tagore’s ideas on atmosphere were to be applied today, this would be an area that would require careful consideration to find a balance between spontaneous and personal teaching on the one hand and professionalization on the other.36

Tagore avoids professionalization in the sense of fixed structures and prescribing systems. He believes that deinstitutionalisation is a prerequisite for more personal encounters and influences and for living, creating and learning holistically. Yet this also implies that the quality of the school and its educational abilities depended on the personalities of those who live there. Furthermore, Tagore argues that a school without fixed structures works well only when it is small, for which reason he repeatedly has had to reduce the number of students in his school.

Tagore’s focus on atmosphere that allows spontaneous ad hoc teaching and that embraces the previously mentioned ‘method of nature’ which Tagore believes to be the best educational practice for children, is unusually strong, but not completely absent in other philosophies. Charlotte Mason emphasized the role of atmosphere, and Platon writes about syzein, living together, which the famous German educationist Hartmut von Hentig re-discovers for his pedagogy. Von Hentig emphasizes the importance of this

for the children’s spiritual development and argues that ‘syzein (…), example and awareness of experience’ enable religion to ‘enter school unannounced in the form of the unexpected, the unspeakable, the intentionless’.\(^{37}\)

While Tagore emphasizes the spontaneous and natural development of an atmosphere from within, he also establishes some routines. Routines have an ambivalent stance in Tagore’s thinking. He does believe that routines can hinder us to see clearly and vividly and thereby hamper our spiritual development. Yet Tagore also recognizes the need for external rituals, as he believes that vagueness, unspecificity and abstraction do not touch us personally, emotionally and spiritually and therefore do not have a lasting impact on our mind. In his school, Tagore incorporates routines and addresses spiritual questions directly through celebrations of many holidays and the seasons with religious songs and stories, and by learning the Gayatri mantra\(^{38}\) with the purpose ‘that we train our minds to cross the line of separation from the rest of existence and realize advaitam, the highest unity that is infinity, anantam’.\(^{39}\) On Wednesdays, everybody came together in the mandir (temple) of the ashram to sing and listen to a sermon, which was in accordance with Tagore’s syncretic Religion of Man that rejects sectarianism and dogma. Though Tagore often delivered the sermons,\(^{40}\) he was ambivalent about his own preaching, as there is a danger of becoming dogmatic. He believed that it is more important to ‘light up oneself’, instead of merely holding a light for others. On the other hand, he also recognised that big questions such as ‘what then?’\(^{41}\) need to be discussed. In the evenings, plays and music were performed, which taught the children about culture and religion, and every morning and evening, children meditated for a quarter of an hour. However, it should be noted that

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This is also the position of Rainer Maria Rilke, who sees this as the only way to bring religion into school, see Rainer Maria Rilke, ‘An die Vereinigung für Schulreform, Bremen.’ (Rilke: 1905): <http://www.rilke.de/briefe/000505.htm> [accessed 12 March 2016].


Tagore was undogmatic about these meditations: While everyone had to sit still under a tree, he did not prescribe or judge if children should meditate on Brahman or watch squirrels instead.

Mornings and evenings fifteen minutes time is given them to sit in an open space composing their minds for worship. We never watch them and ask questions about what they think in those times, but leave it entirely to themselves, to the spirit of the place and the time, and the suggestion of the practice itself. We rely more upon the subconscious influence of Nature, of the associations of the place and the daily life of worship that we live than on any conscious effort to teach them.⁴²

Tagore does not see the meditation practices as a direct route for spiritual development or a necessary step to connect with God, as he does not separate spirituality from everyday life and does not believe that one could simply practise it for twenty minutes a day: ‘The search for God is not only an act of meditation but is pursued in daily life in acts of sacrifice and compassion.’⁴³

Spiritual education is therefore much more comprehensive than meditation and religious teaching. In his address on occasion of the first anniversary of Sriniketan, Tagore gives some examples of activities that contribute to the spiritual atmosphere and thereby to the children’s evolvement of spirituality:

This religion of spiritual harmony is not a theological doctrine to be taught ... it can only be made possible by making provision for students to live in infinite touch with nature, daily to grow in an atmosphere of service offered to all creatures, tending trees, feeding birds and animals, learning to feel the immense mystery of the soil and water and air. Along with this, there should be some common sharing of life with ... the humble workers in the neighbouring villages; studying their crafts, inviting them to the feasts, joining them in works of co-operation for communal welfare ... In such an atmosphere students would learn to understand that humanity is a divine harp of many strings, waiting for its one grand music.⁴⁴

Two important features of Tagore’s spiritual education are ecology and internationalism, as unity with other people and with nature are both facets of and paths to our unity with the world.

Tagore has often been described as a prophet for peace; for example by Bertrand Russell, who quotes Tagore’s poem ‘Where the mind is without fear and the head high’ in his Philosophy of Pacifism (1915). Tagore was convinced that tolerance and peace cannot be created through teaching but only through encounters and sharing everyday life with people of other

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cultures and religions, through which intercultural competences and understanding are developed and prejudices and racism are counteracted. Recent studies confirm Tagore’s view. While the contact hypothesis alone is not sufficient to reduce prejudices, it has been shown that cooperative living and work play a key role in doing so.\textsuperscript{45} Tagore initiated projects that promoted a shared commitment to improve the welfare of the surrounding villages and encouraged hospitality towards international guests (instead of seeing foreigners as a problem). Tagore was not only extremely forward-thinking for his own time. We can still learn from him today in terms of welcoming multiculturalism and religious plurality.\textsuperscript{46}

Tagore argues that ecological awareness too, is not developing through teaching but through an atmosphere that is shaped by the presence of nature and the care for it through the people who live there; for example, through gardening, outdoor classrooms that allow teachers and students to spontaneously react to what is happening in nature, and celebrations of the seasons. He emphasizes that spiritual closeness of nature through direct experience is more important than scientific understanding.\textsuperscript{47} According to Tagore, nature reveals to us the inner unity of the world and, through its beauty as well as transience, enables us to develop a perspective on the world that dissolves the focus on our narrow self and thereby opens the path to develop to universal man.

Various studies have confirmed that teaching ecological facts on a mere cognitive level is not educationally effective, but that knowledge needs to be applied, learned practically and affect emotions to bring about changes in thinking and behaviour.\textsuperscript{48} Hartmut von Hentig argues:

\begin{quote}
If a child has never sown a seed and discovered and cherished the plant growing from it, if it has never climbed a tree, has never dammed a stream, has never made a dangerous fire... – how should the conservation of species, the ecological balance, ‘nature’, this monstrous abstraction of all abstractions, be close to its heart?\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

While many contemporary schools around the world try to integrate nature into classes by teaching about it as well as doing projects on recycling or having eco clubs, small and irregular projects have shown to only have a


small effect on ecological behaviour, while more frequent and more intensive experiences with family and friends correlate with stronger changes in ecological behaviour.\(^5\) Yet Tagore’s ‘atmosphere of nature’ enables children to have a more intensive experience of nature than nearly any other educational approach, with the exception of German \textit{Landerziehungsheime} and some British country boarding schools in the tradition of New Education,\(^51\) and, to some degree, Steiner schools, and the relatively new forest nurseries\(^52\) and forest schools. In most other schools, applied ecological education has become more important than it was before, but it does remain marginal in spite of threats of climate change and environmental disasters.

Tagore’s school and university are famous for their open-air classes, but also for the importance they give to the arts. Similar to the other areas I mentioned above, he tries to create an atmosphere in his school that inspires children to become creative themselves.

Tagore sees creativity as an important part of our personal and spiritual development. He argues that by creating we are able to express our \textit{surplus},\(^53\) which is the determining factor that brings humans close to God the creator\(^54\) and that leads us to freedom and fulfilment.\(^55\)

Man has not only discovered scientific truths, he has realized the ineffable. […] Wherever man has seen the manifestation of perfection, — in words, music, lines, colours, and rhythm, in the sweetness of human relationship, in heroism — there he has attested his joy with the signature of immortal words. I hope and trust that our students may not be deprived of these messages; not for the sake of enjoyment only, but, so that our country may be blest by receiving the benefit of an education which will give us the right


and power to tell others that being born into this world we have seen the beautiful, we have realised the sublime, we have loved the loveable.\textsuperscript{56}

Tagore sees artistic expression and creative appropriation of the world as essential conditions for the development of children’s personality: ‘in education, the most important factor must be the inspiring atmosphere of creative.’\textsuperscript{57} He believes that the ability to create is as important for human vitality as food and health\textsuperscript{58} and that it enables us to feel fulfilled and reach bliss. Hence, he sees it as vital to support children in their creative expression and appropriation by creating an atmosphere that enables them to experience and try themselves out in art, craft, music, dance, literature, dramatic performances and festivals. The arts should not only receive a ‘tolerating nod’ but a ‘place of honour’ in education.\textsuperscript{59} Tagore writes about how he raised interest in music in his pupils:

When I first started my school, my boys had no evident love for music. The consequence is that at the beginning I did not employ a music teacher and did not force the boys to take music lessons. I merely created opportunities when those of us who had the gift could exercise their musical culture. It had the effect of unconsciously training the ears of the boys. And when gradually most of them showed a strong inclination and love for music I saw that they would be willing to subject themselves to formal teaching, and it was then that I secured a music teacher.\textsuperscript{60}

How to build a creative atmosphere or creative culture is a topic that is discussed more frequently in business than in education. A comparison of books, websites and blogs on the topic and a look at creative businesses such as Google and Pixar show that in business, ideas on how to establish a creative atmosphere are, to a large degree, similar to Tagore’s. These ideas include giving people freedom to do things their own way and empowering them by giving them autonomy and responsibility—Tagore did this, for example, by introducing the self-government of students and by encouraging children to find solutions to problems themselves. Experts on creating creative atmospheres emphasize the importance of providing plen-


\textsuperscript{59} Tagore, ‘Centre of Indian Culture’, p. 488; Rabindranath Tagore, Creative Unity (New Delhi: Rupa, 2002 [1922]), p. 201; Tagore, ‘The Place of Music’, p. 45.

\textsuperscript{60} Tagore, Personality, p. 175-6.
ty of space and unstructured time for exploration, fun and joy—which is exactly what Tagore tried to provide with his outdoor school. Experts also highlight that innovation and creativity have to be directly encouraged and that creative efforts have to be appreciated openly. A helpful strategy for that is when people inspire each other, which is exactly what Tagore tried to achieve in Santiniketan.

**Atmosphere in the arts, philosophy and social and cultural sciences**

We have now gained a glimpse of the various facets of the atmosphere that Tagore created in his educational institutions. In the beginning of this paper I said that atmosphere and content are contrasting concepts, yet I contradicted that when I tried to describe the atmosphere Tagore created, as I looked for the content, the externally visible features of the atmosphere. But atmosphere very much ignores details. If we are looking at atmospheric paintings, for example by Monet or Turner, their aspiration to create atmosphere was achieved by actively suppressing details and instead, by focusing on the whole, trying to capture temperature, moisture and movement of the air. We also do not perceive atmosphere through analysing details, but grasp it intuitively and unconsciously. If we are going somewhere, we immediately have a feeling about a place. The architect Juhani Pallasmaa defines atmosphere in the following way:

> Atmosphere emphasizes a sustained being in a situation rather than a singular moment of perception. ... Atmosphere is the overarching perceptual, sensory and emotive impression of a setting or a social situation. It provides the unifying coherence and character for a room, space, place, and landscape, or a social encounter. It is ‘the common denominator’, ‘the colouring’ or ‘the feel’ of the experiential situation. Atmosphere is a mental ‘thing’, an experiential property or characteristic that is suspended between the object and the subject. Paradoxically, we grasp the atmosphere of a place before we identify its details or understand it intellectually.

Atmosphere is also a commonly employed term in theatre and in literature, where it is appreciated as necessary to establish integrity and continuity. A particular atmosphere can either be sustained throughout the entire work or can continually be recreated, yet it always has the quality of imagined permanence. Elaine Scarry argues that the imitation of persistence and ‘givenness’ is necessary to enter imaginary spaces in their full spatiality. In

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61 In architecture, the interest in atmosphere has only recently emerged.
theatre, the atmosphere that is created through the dramaturgy is a crucial factor for involving the audience in the performance.63

Until recently, atmosphere has played hardly any role in other disciplines. I would like to argue that this might change. In cultural theories and philosophy there has been a turn to a direction that I think could lead to making atmosphere a more important term than it has been until now. In social and cultural theory, there has been a development from the focus on space, which is more abstract, to place, which has stronger social connotations. The spatial determinacy of the social, and vice versa, has frequently been researched.64 In philosophy, a sustained effort to capture atmospheres can also be found. Take for example the multi-volume work on Spheres by the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk.65 He writes:

I’ve always felt that there is a split in the European tradition between the language of philosophy and the language of art and literature that is based on the suppression of atmospheric knowledge. ... My ambition was to bring the atmospheric dimension back to the perception of the real.66

In his mammoth work Spheres, Sloterdijk—coming from a phenomenological background—analyses history and relationships of humans with other humans, with systems and with processes, by replacing a predominantly temporal enquiry with a spatial interpretation. In his analysis, he uses the concepts of micro-spheres or bubbles (referring to the discovery of self), globes (describing the exploration of the world) and foam (designating the poetics of plurality).

In the first part on bubbles, Sloterdijk repudiates the possibility of solipsistic existence and thereby refutes the Western subject-centred metaphysical tradition as well as Heidegger’s conception that Dasein in its original state means loneliness. Instead, Sloterdijk thinks Dasein as a spatial being-together, and argues that even in the micro-sphere of the uterus, humans are not separated but have an ‘original company’ (Urbegeleiter), the placenta, with which the unborn child coexists.67 Being separated from this togetherness after birth requires subjects to search for new forms of spatial

65 Peter Sloterdijk, Sphären: Mikrosphärologie (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998).
67 Peter Sloterdijk, Sphären III: Schäume (Frankfurt am M.: Suhrkamp, 2004), chapter 5.
togetherness, which is the reason for the emergence of new spheres. While spaces are always shared and the topoi of humans are shaped by the strong relations between humans and their surroundings, the formation of foam takes this further. Foam consists of ‘agglomerates of bubbles’ that are connected and have a shared isolation. Society therefore is ‘an aggregate of micro-spheres (couples, households, companies, federations) of varying formats, which, like individual bubbles, border each other in a mountain of foam, and stratify themselves under and above each other without becoming either within reach of each other or becoming effectively separable from each other’.  

Speaking with Sloterdijk’s phenomenology of spheres, Tagore’s school could be conceived as a micro-sphere that is part of the society or foam. The terminology “bubble” instead of micro-sphere, invites us not only to analyse the atmosphere in this sphere, but also to react to a criticism that Tagore has received for his educational institutions. Quite a few critics have said that Tagore’s school is a place that isolates children from the real world—a ‘bubble’. Indeed, Tagore writes that particularly in the first years of life, in the phase of brahmacarya (from age seven), children should be separated from their usual life and live in simplicity. Tagore realized that he was criticized for this. Yet he argues:

We should never believe that simplicity of life might make us unsuited to the requirements of the society of our time. It is the simplicity of the tuning-fork, which is needed all the more because of the intricacy of strings in the instrument. In the morning of our career our nature needs the pure and the perfect note of a spiritual idea in order to fit us for the complications of our later years.

It should be noted that every school is to some degree divorced from what the realities of everyday living that students experience after they leave school. Tagore is convinced that a normal urban school, although it brings children in touch with prevailing ideas and ways of living, will not enable them to connect to what he believes is most important. Children might, to use a modern term, become more streetwise and exposed to consumerism (and, back then, exposed to colonialism), to urban culture, traffic and technology as well as to their parents’ preconceived expectations of their future careers. Yet such an environment would, in Tagore’s opinion, divorce them from some of the crucial aspects that are required so they can realise their true potential and develop spiritually. An ashram in nature, though, allows them a deeper connection with other people within the ashram with the rural population, with their own culture and with nature.

We could argue that the outer membranes of the ashram-bubble are permeable. This makes connection to the foam around it possible, yet it, at

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68 Ibid., p. 55; my translation.
69 Ibid., p. 59; my translation.
the same, enables a connection of a much deeper kind. For Tagore, spirituality is all about our connection with the world, with the absolute, the universal, with Brahman. And he is certain that we can reach this, when we, first of all, connect personally with what is around us. Through this, we can then reach beyond the immediate to the more abstract, towards the universal. ‘We can only love that which is profoundly real to us’,\textsuperscript{71} argues Tagore and renders this more precisely in \textit{Personality}:

But this knowledge of the unity of soul must not be an abstraction. It is not that negative kind of universalism which belongs neither to one nor to another. It is not an abstract soul, but it is my own soul which I must realize in others. I must know that if my soul were singularly mine, then it could not be true, at the same time if it were not intimately mine, it would not be real.\textsuperscript{72}

This connection is the foundation for developing our personality and growing spiritually. By applying Sloterdijk’s spherology to Tagore’s ashram, we are adding a new dimension to his conceptualization of spherology, and that is the spiritual, the power to connect to the whole that is already part of ourselves and that we realize even more through our connection with the world. This aspect is present in Sloterdijk’s thinking (though certainly not called spiritual), when he argues that inside and outside are always present at the same time, that the outside ‘carries inner worlds’\textsuperscript{73} and that humans are never interiorizable solipsistic selves but always connected to others, but Sloterdijk did not exhaust the analysis of this. However, he uses a word from a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke as inspiration for the title of his recent book that builds on his spherology—the word being \textit{Weltinnenraum} (inner-world-space). One of the verses is:

One space spreads through all creatures equally - inner-world-space. Birds quietly flying go flying through us. O, I that want to grow! the tree I look outside at’s growing in me!\textsuperscript{74}


\textsuperscript{72} Tagore, \textit{Personality}, p.88.

\textsuperscript{73} Sloterdijk, \textit{Sphaerien}, p 28.

Analysing and rethinking atmosphere

How is it possible to analyse atmospheres for the positive effects they create?

Bakery smells in the supermarket, music in train stations and shops, candle light in spas and restaurants – they all serve the purpose of creating an atmosphere that creates desired behaviour, emotions and associations. Research (for example in environmental psychology) shows the effect of one or a few more variables in the environment on the outcome in terms of behaviour and emotions, and the results of these studies have been heavily exploited in retail design.

Environmental psychology is a very limited tool to try and understand the atmosphere that Tagore created in his school, as it is focusing only on external factors and objects. This takes us to the root of the problem that we have with the concept of atmosphere: The English term emphasizes (if perhaps limited by) external factors. We have discussed some of the external factors of that played a role in creating the atmosphere of Tagore’s school, such as nature and the presence of the arts. Yet we have also seen that Tagore sees atmosphere as going beyond this, as being inexplicable, beyond words. A large part of the atmosphere was created through the personality of the teachers and himself, as well as the students – through their activities and words but also through their beliefs, thoughts and emotions. All of these factors come together and create an atmosphere that is larger than all the factors added up.

As Martin Heidegger has demonstrated in depth, most Western languages are deeply infused by the Cartesian division between inside and outside. This becomes most apparent in the concept of atmosphere, which is related to the inside but linguistically trapped in the outside. The German term Stimmung is unique in Western languages because of its semantic breadth that merges inside and outside and combines aspects of objec-

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77 Classical music is played in some train station to deter ‘unwanted people’ like youngsters and drug addicts; cf. Björn Hellström, ‘Theories and methods adaptable to acoustic and architectural design of railway stations.’ In *Twelfth International Congress on Sound and Vibration* (Lisbon, 2005).


itive atmosphere (or the French ‘atmosphere’ or the Spanish ‘atmosfera’) with subjective mood (or the French humeur or the Spanish humor). 79

Stimmung is neither produced by the outside nor the inside. Instead, Heidegger argues, ‘Stimmung descends on us’, and ‘rises as mode of Being-in-the-World from this mode itself’. 80 We are neither the authors nor the witnesses of an atmosphere 81 but are part of it in many different ways through corporeal and emotional reactions, observation of other people (e.g. at a party or a music or sports event) and through visual and textual information, but also in ways that are more difficult to discern. The other way around, Stimmungen colour perceptions and emotions and induce memories and thoughts and affect behaviour as well as our posture. 83

Stimmungen encompass both atmospheres and moods. Psychological and sociological studies on moods go beyond narrow causal analysis and recognize the complexity of the problem. Examples are the gestalt theory; Stimmungsheuristik or mood heuristics; emotional framing; and transactional theory. 84 In education, they have been applied through concepts such as mood-repair. Yet there is only little thorough research that analyses the school’s atmosphere in its complexity with individual moods and the environment, even though it has been recognized that the failure to implement school reforms pivots on a lack of understanding of school culture. 85

Today’s researchers are struggling to access the diffuse concept atmosphere, yet Tagore already deliberated the concept of ‘atmosphere’ most thoroughly. That a non-Western person is ahead in these reflections might not be surprising, as the division between object and subject and interior and exterior might be less strong in Indian languages and is also more fluid in Indian religious philosophies and humoral pathology.

81 Bude, p. 39.
82 Hermann Schmitz, ‘Gefuehle als Atmosphaeren’, in Atmosphaeren, ed. by Hermann Schmitz (Freiburg/Muenchen, 2014), pp. 30-49 (p. 31-33).
83 Bude, p. 42
84 Ibid., p. 43.
85 Seymour B. Sarason, The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1971).
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