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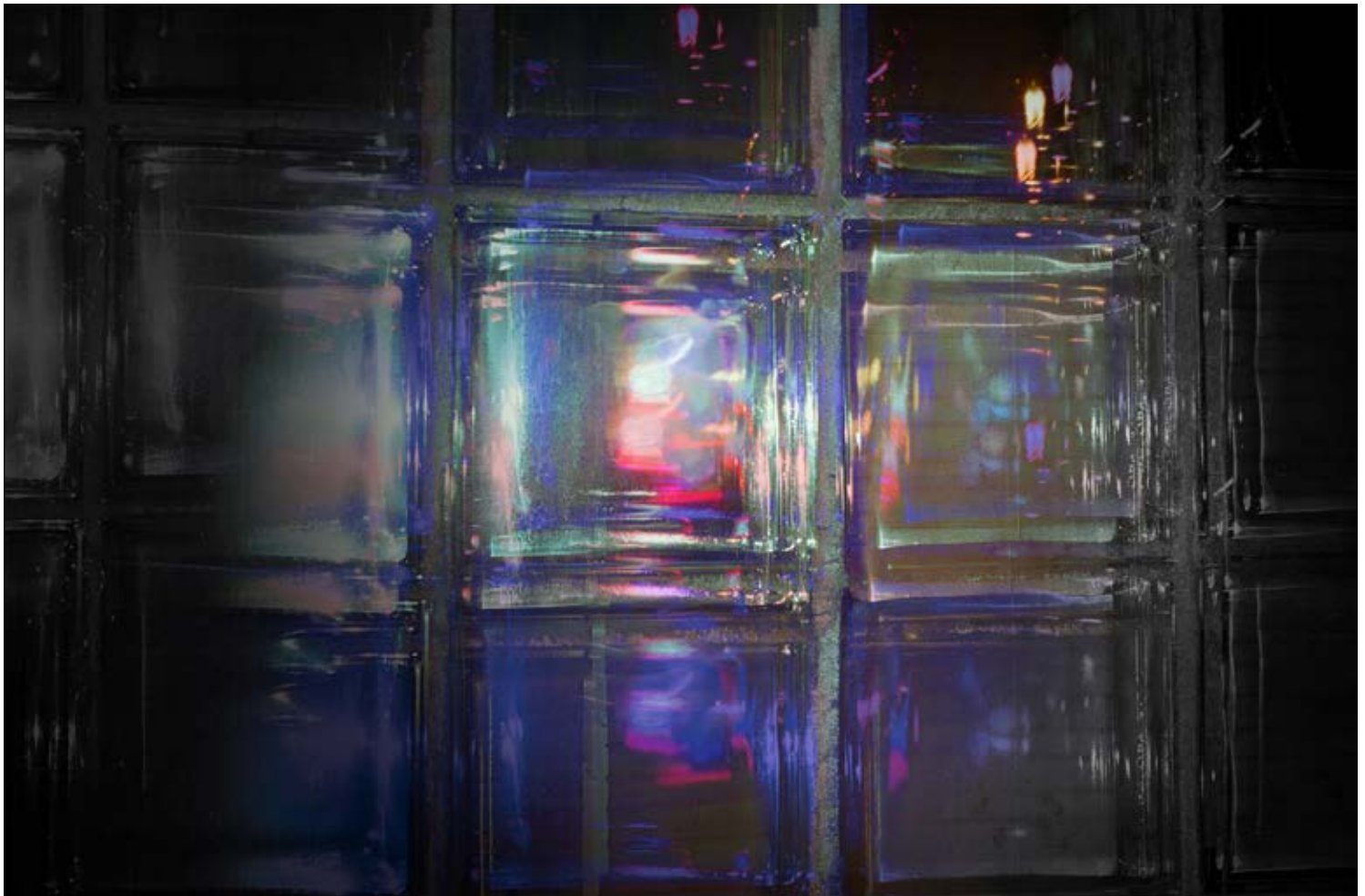
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Like a Fugitive Love Bettina MATHES



Everybody who has been in psychoanalysis (or psychoanalytic psychotherapy) knows something about the transformative power of projection. Patients do it, therapists

Atmospheres of Projection: Environmentality in Art and Screen Media
By Giuliana Bruno
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do it. Projective identification, transference, screen memories, mirror stage, dream screen, etc. – back and forth; all the time.

Everybody who has been doing psychoanalysis also knows something about the healing power of revising one's vocabulary: finding new descriptions for past experiences, breathing new life into old words and concepts. Again, this is as true for the analyst as it for the so called patient. However, when it comes to projective processes therapists are, generally speaking, rather disinclined, if not averse to renovating their vocabulary; a vocabulary that is grounded in the discourse of mechanical reproduction, relying on the cinema as model to describe and explain psychic processes. It is precisely this 20th century cinematic orientation, I believe, that makes it difficult for the contemporary analyst to adjust their professional stance in a digital world replete with screens and projective environments that have moved far beyond the

cinematic apparatus. Not surprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has left many therapists unprepared to relate to screens in non-defensive ways. Reports from the world of tele-therapy usually focus on loss, on what doesn't work and isn't possible. There's disappointment, overwhelm, frustration, resentment; there's anger at the screens we now work on a lot of the time. Screens are experienced as obstacles to be overcome, preempting 'real' connection and 'real' intimacy; the implicit assumption being that reality happens when the therapist has potentially first-hand access to the physical body of the patient.¹ While most therapists seem to feel helpless in front of their screens, some have somewhat angrily disqualified screen-analysis as "a degraded sensory experience", where corporeality is lost and voices are disembodied entities; as "relationship lite", and as "working with a condom on"² (unprotected sex as the model for what goes on in therapy?). In a recent article entitled "The derangement of the atmospheric unconscious" working on screens is presented as a consequence of the "hazy, deranged ambience of modernity".³ I think as clinicians we can do better than this. I believe that we can come up with a more realistic and benign vocabulary of what screen relations are and can be. If anything, the psychoanalytic setting has always been a form of projective reality.

So, in the spirit of updating (and uplifting) our projective vocabulary, I want to begin this review essay with a number of psychoanalytically inflected terms: 'projective imagination', 'atmospheric corporeality', 'becoming screen', 'relational transit', 'projective empathy', 'environmentality'. Needless to say, none of these terms can be found in a psychoanalytic dictionary. Whereas they feature prominently in Giuliana Bruno's absorbing and, frankly, quite unforgettable new book *Atmospheres of Projection: Environmentality in Art and Screen Media*—conceived and written before the Covid pandemic.

As the title suggests, the book re-configures projection in terms of atmosphere and environmentality as a spatial rather than visual phenomenon. Not satisfied with the narrow, because one-directional and somewhat negative view of projection as the expulsion of unwanted feeling states, Bruno goes deep into history, philosophy, science and (contemporary) art to re-think and rejuvenate 'projection' by reconnecting it to its origins in alchemy, magnetism, cartography, and architecture. What she brings back from her archeological expedition is a dynamic, wide-ranging and most of all humane re-description of projective practices. Projection, Bruno shows, is a supreme technique to overcome walls, borders and defensiveness.

Bruno treads lightly. She wonders, explores, and probes; she demonstrates, suggests and indicates – and occasionally she’s an advocate. But she refuses to carve out sharp edged definitions, as this would, I think, contradict the fluid and fugitive quality of projective atmospheres she wants us to recognize. Here’s three out of many variations of what projection might be(come):

“Projection is about being immersed in an environment of screening and absorbed in an atmosphere beyond representation. A sympathetic exchange [...] which forms a seam between the animate viewer and the inanimate screen” (p. 102).

“As this book aims to demonstrate, projection is a space of potentiality in which many forms of mediation and interaction are made possible in an atmosphere that is itself a transitory site, an intermediate space – a moving between internal and external, subjective and objective, private and public.” (p. 7).

“A projective act can [...] become a vital form of commonality, and so in speaking of atmospheres of projection I hope also to launch a conversation on forms of communing, communality, and collective practices.” (p.13)

Bruno urges us to think of projection as a creative force, a vehicle of communication and at the same time, and importantly, as an atmosphere, something fleeting that can be felt, that envelops and transforms, acts on bodies and objects. Seen this way, projection is the opposite of lost corporeality and disconnect. Rather, it is a relational possibility, and a forward looking process by which we can make contact with what surrounds us in order to imagine a kinder, more open future. Bruno’s term to describe this creative potential is “projective imagination”.

Taking contemporary psychoanalytic conceptualizations of projection as one point of departure, Bruno’s focus is not on individual acts of projection but on projection as a response to what is ‘in the air’. When she wonders what would happen if “we imagined that relationality, not individuality, comes first, and reformulated the idea of projection accordingly” (p.63), Bruno is reminding psychoanalysts that we do indeed have quite a bit to draw on. To name just three: there’s Melanie Klein’s often misunderstood notion of projective identification, there’s Winnicott’s ideas of the mother’s face as mirror, the baby’s necessary illusory capacity directed at the breast, and the role of the environment mother; there’s, of course, Jessica Benjamin’s concept of ‘The Third’. However, as *Atmospheres of Projection* makes exceedingly clear, psychoanalysis has

not taken enough interest in linking projection to creativity and environmental transformation. For example, C.G. Jung’s research into the alchemy of projection as a transmutation of substance has been marginalized, if not excluded from psychoanalytic discourse; and in some psychoanalytic circles the mere idea that ‘projective identification’ might be a useful concept to understand intersubjectivity will immediately shut down the conversation. This defensiveness is, I think, at the heart of many psychoanalyst’s fraught relationship with screens.

Projection, Bruno argues, begins when an object can be used as an active surface, when the object becomes a screen, as it were. “Becoming screen” is a relational process in which a surface becomes enlivened, endowed with receptivity and responsiveness (p.74–78). Thus, for Bruno a screen is neither an obstacle nor a dead object but a (moving) surface-space that elicits a projective response, and facilitates transformation. Screens can be hard or soft, solid or hazy, flat or curved, impermeable or porous, still or moving. They can act as threshold, door, window, partition, and filter. Clouds, air, steam, smoke, weather, and landscapes have historically lent themselves to “becoming screen”. Screens bring up questions of transparency and privacy, edges and boundaries, they test the relationship between plane and circumference. Digital screens are especially capable of playing with frame and framing due to their capacity to have multiple windows open at the same time.

Thinking of projection as a medium for imagination opens up a world of possibilities. One of the most fascinating (and useful) ideas Bruno introduces is “projective empathy”, with empathy (*Einfühlung*) being understood as a “spirit that moves in space” (p.81), as something that not only occurs between individuals but “especially between persons and (art) objects” (p.79). Here, empathy is a kind of casting oneself forward into the material environment in an effort to resonate with it. It is “a form of ‘transport’: a psychic passage set in motion not simply with physical beings but also with material space, including such things as the surface of the earth, settings and locales, forms and formations, tints and tones, hues and shapes” (p.80).

At this point it becomes clear that projection is intimately bound up with what we call ‘atmosphere’, ‘*Stimmung*’ (attunement, tonality, literally ‘voice-ing’) and ‘ambiance’. Words and concepts with a long history themselves. Related to projective empathy insofar as they conceptualize the material and psychic container we call the environment. *Stimmung*, for instance, implies the animation of the inanimate, “a form of communicating that is diffuse, suggestive, pervasive and, at the limit, so infectious as to be contagious” (p.90), “the atmosphere that one breathes in,

the milieu in which one is incorporated, the sense of opening to others in empathy, and hence also the medium that connects the subject with the environment” (p.91). In a sense, ‘becoming screen’, ‘projective empathy’ and ‘*Stimmung*’ are different terms for atmosphere, which Bruno relates to ambiance and milieu, and describes as a vaporous and luminous immersive environment in which “boundaries between bodies, distinctions between bodies and matters, human and nonhuman, can be not only negotiated but crossed” (p.50). An atmosphere is vital, fluid, mixed; like a mood it can be comforting, volatile, infectious, disturbing and moving – all at once. Katherine Joyce’s (Ingrid Bergman’s) famously transformative visit to the hot volcanic springs near Naples in Roberto Rossellini’s *Viaggio in Italia* (discussed in Bruno’s *Atlas of Emotion*⁴) is a mesmerizing filmic visualization of an atmosphere of projection.

Combining projection and atmosphere Bruno arrives at “environmentality” – yet another angle from which the author approaches projection as a medium of transformation and relationality. This evocative term describes an imaginative force that has the ability to transform matter aesthetically, experientially and psychically. Environmentality reminds us that our mind is inside and outside at the same time, impactful and receptive.

In Part Two of *Atmospheres of Projection* (chapters 5–11) Bruno turns to contemporary art where, as she argues convincingly, we are given an opportunity to make contact with the atmospheric forces of projection. How? In their art artists expose the mechanisms of atmospheric projection and becoming-screen. I don’t have the space here to discuss Bruno’s brilliant interpretations of contemporary artists and their installations. The chapters on Cristina Iglesias and Giorgio Andreotta Calò alone make the book worth owning. The final chapter is an homage to nebularity. Haze, mist, fog, smoke, clouds and weather share the ability to overcome borders, to create and shift atmospheres, to bring about transformation. At the same time, the nebulous is “a necessary condition for the act of perception”, which it also perturbs. “I would go so far,” Bruno writes, “as to claim that haze is the manifestation of perception itself, understood as a movement in time and space—a phenomenal ‘perturbation’” (p.277). Here, it seems to me, Bruno makes the implicit claim that absolute transparency, favored by certain architectural firms and urban planners, is a form of aesthetic totalitarianism.

Where the first part of the book takes us on a journey to several archaeological sites, Part Two introduces a more lyrical register. I found myself moved (sometimes to tears), carried by the interplay of Bruno’s intimate knowledge of contemporary art and the superb photographic reproductions of the

art works she discusses. Almost as if Bruno had given herself permission to become atmospheric and environmental - and to convey to the reader that, perhaps, projection and atmosphere are two words for ...love.

Atmospheres of Projection is an admirable accomplishment. Bruno presents to us a kinder, fonder, more open-minded and more relational way of speaking about projective processes and screen environments - processes and environments whose very qualities are 'up in the air', more affective than verbal. As psychoanalysts and psychotherapists we have much to learn from Bruno's tender and fearless scholarship. Can we reconsider our defensive relationship with projective screens? Might we become aware of our very own projective desires and fears? Will we re-formulate what we mean by projection, screen, environment? Or, will we turn psychoanalysis into an analog religion?

I cannot end without mentioning that as a material object *Atmospheres of Projection* is itself a handsome projective environment. Divided into 11 chapters this square book contains numerous high quality still photographs of contemporary art installations discussed in the book. The cover, featuring a beautiful still photograph of Agnes Varda's stunning installation 'Bord de Mer', is pleasing to the touch and the eye. Even though the book is divided into two parts, the boundary between the two sections is fluid so that readers may open the book at a random page and feel held by what they're given. There's none of the annoying

'I'll prove you wrong'-argument so commonly found in academic books in the humanities. Bruno is genuinely curious how far into the 'atmosphere' she'll be able to take projection and screening ...and not lose touch with the reader. In fact, *Atmospheres of Projection* is like a space ship taking us on a journey through the expansive universe of the arts of projection and screening. We're voyagers, never voyeurs.

Last not least, *Atmospheres of Projection* is a gentle yet insistent objection to the silently agreed upon assumption (at least among psychoanalysts) that the psychoanalytic vocabulary offers useful ways to think and speak about the arts (is indeed as old as psychoanalysis itself), whereas the vocabulary of the arts has little of substance to offer to the practice of psychoanalysis. How wrong we are. Bruno's book makes it abundantly clear that as psychoanalysts we must apply ourselves to the obvious fact that the visual arts have a far more sophisticated vocabulary of projection, screens, transferences, and ambiance than psychoanalysis does. Projection is "like a love that is fugitive" (30), Bruno writes almost in passing; and psychoanalysis, I want to add, began as a project to trace and understand fugitive love. Freud, it seems to me, was on to something beyond himself and his time when he set out to analyze Wilhelm Jensen's novella *Gradiva: a Pompeiian Fantasy*. For Freud, the question was: is Gradiva a fantasy, a ghost, a real person, a delusional projection? Giuliana Bruno asks us to step forward further in order to "redefine projection

as the relational transmission, transfer, and transport that creates and transforms an atmosphere in psychic terms" (p.50) and, ultimately, to re-engage with this fugitive love making use of the empathetic environment of screen media, "where transparency flirts with opacity" (p.206).

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ENDNOTES

1. For recent interventions see for example Harris, et al. 2020, Sayers 2021, Leutrum 2022. Ehrlich 2019 offers a persuasive, clinically informed analysis of common objections to tele-analysis.
2. The remark is mentioned as a comment from a colleague in an opinion article by Lori Gottlieb (2020), and has since been cited widely.
3. Adleman, D. / Vanderwees, Ch. (2020), online publication.
4. Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion. Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film*, Verso 2018.





NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

William Fried, Ph.D., FIPA is a psychologist and psychoanalyst who practices in New York City. He was formerly the associate director of psychiatry residency training and the director of training and education at the Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn, New York. Dr. Fried has published papers on clinical psychoanalysis, group therapy, applied psychoanalysis, mental health education and training, and has written essays for the exhibits of prominent artists. His book, *Critical Flicker Fusion: Psychoanalysis at the movies* was published by Karnac in 2016.

William Gottdiener, Ph.D., ABPP, FIPA is a licensed and board certified clinical psychologist, psychoanalyst, and tenured full professor of psychology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice of the City University of New York (CUNY). Dr. Gottdiener received his PhD in clinical psychology from The New School for Social Research. He is the Director of Clinical Training of the Clinical Psychology Doctoral Program of the Graduate Center—CUNY that is housed at John Jay College. He is the chair of the Division 39 Fellows committee and he was also previously President of the Division 39 Psychoanalytic Research Society. He has published over 50 articles, book chapters, commentaries, and reviews and is on the editorial boards of the journals *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, and *Psychological Bulletin*. He is an APA Fellow in the divisions of Addictions, Clinical Psychology, General Psychology, and Psychoanalysis, and he is a Fellow of the International Psychoanalytic Association. He was honored by Division 39 with its prestigious Research and Scholarship Award in 2015.

Bettina Mathes, Ph.D. is a psychoanalyst and psychodynamic therapist in private practice in Vienna and Granada. She is also a translator, published writer and cultural historian. She has published widely on psychoanalysis and the visual arts, and was faculty of Humboldt University, Berlin, Penn State University and the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

Hélène Tessier, LL.M., D.E.A., Ph.D. is a psychoanalyst, a member of the Canadian Psychoanalytic Society and the International Psychoanalytic Association, and a lawyer member of the Quebec Bar. She is a Full Professor in the School of Conflict Studies in the Faculty of Human Sciences and Philosophy at Saint Paul University (Ottawa). She is the Vice-President of the Scientific Council of La Fondation *Jean Laplanche/Nouveaux Fondements pour la psychanalyse* and the author of publications on Laplanche's work and their epistemological and ethical implications.

Bryan Batista-Thomas, LCSW, MA, is a psychoanalytic candidate at IPTAR and a graduate of Performance Studies from NYU Tisch School of the Arts, where he focused on the queerness of temporality, the performativity of epistemology, and oral traditions. He is currently preparing a manuscript provisionally entitled *Readings of Jean Laplanche in Process: Conversations Amplifying Differences* (forthcoming Routledge 2024). Bryan works full-time in private practice.