The notion of atmosphere has recently gained transdisciplinary currency. As a phenomenon invoking the often extolled ineffability, a focus on the atmospheric, as in Manchester, commonly aims at accounting for a dimension of human life that had slipped through the fingers of logo-centric, introjectionist or positivist take on subject-world-interrelations or social dynamics more broadly. Ensuing from the assumption that “atmospheres play a significant role in our intimate, domestic and public lives” the Morgan Centre of Research into Everyday Lives at Manchester University organised a conference entirely dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of “Atmospheres”.

The conference opened with a keynote lecture by Jennifer Mason, Professor for Sociology at Manchester University and founding Co-Director of the Morgan Centre. Starting from everyday weather-talk Mason emphasised the centrality of weather in what she named the “atmospheres in our lives”, coining the term “the socio-atmospherics of weather”. Rather than reducing weather to a mere source domain for metaphors of social relationships, Mason insisted on taking the (physical) reality of weather into account beyond however reducing weather phenomena to meteorological explanation. Drawing on Ingold, she suggested that weather is in the “weave of social relationships” and – with reference to The Lads in Their Hundreds by George Butterworth – she indicated that weather can be manifest in the “weave of music”, rather than simply being music’s object.

Her repeated questions “What is weather?” or “We need to understand what weather is” however revealed the central obstacle of her approach to atmospheres. In the definitional and substantialist take, weather became once again the object of study rather than, as Tim Ingold had argued (2011), a medium of perception. Without drawing on the fast growing conceptually rich body of literature on atmospheres that addresses and thoroughly discusses the very concerns Mason raised, her ideas remained “in the air”, vague, and conceptually sketchy. Instead of challenging truisms about atmospheres and analytically disclosing them, she simply repeated that atmospheres are multisensory, tangible and intangible, ineffable, charged with meaning, multistranded thick, memorable, haunting and storied, and a way of perceiving time or genuine potent forces. Yet, it remained uncertain how these observations could become productive in research on the atmospheric dimensions of social relationships with regard to weather. A crucial question raised in response to Mason by Jamie Matthews concerning the normative dimensions and the often ideologically charged romanticism regarding atmospheres, could open up one such trajectory for a critical scholarship on the “socio-atmospherics” of weather.

Despite an insistence on non-representational theory, the rationale that ran through many of the presentations was one of describing and representing a particular atmosphere. Indeed the “challenge of ‘capturing’ atmospheres” as was phrased in the CFP turned out to be an objective in these presentations. Aiming at deciphering the atmosphere as just another layer of social life, these papers offered outstanding ethnographic insight into particular case studies, yet the notion of the atmosphere often did not seem to add to the ethnographic findings as it remained conceptually vague and at times only generated another terminological layer on top of the nevertheless insightful descriptive accounts of mosh-pits,
care homes, migrant communities, stores or festivals. As such the rather interesting
questions that a concern with the atmospherics yields were, if at all touched upon, treated as
marginal: what are the forms of ramification and social effects that are particular (only) to the
atmospheric? How and why can the atmospheric become generative and generic in social
processes? What are pertinent epistemologies and ontologies a concern with such
“atmospheres” would necessitate?

Another dominant thread that ran through the presentations was an emphasis on affect and
the notion of affective atmospheres as prominently proposed by geographer Ben Anderson.
In her paper “Becoming Goth”, Zoe Enstone discussed atmosphere as a spatial affective
phenomenon by using the case study of Goth events in England. Drawing on her own
experience from her longstanding involvement in this subculture, she described the affective
potential of dress and asked how atmospheres can be transformative regarding both subject
and space. The abundant references to affect theory, however, raised the question of the
conceptual difference between affect and atmosphere and why we need yet another term to
describe the non-representational dimensions of social life. Challenging such approaches,
Tim Edensor argued that the affective is merely one aspect of atmospheric potencies where
always affective, sensual and emotional momentums are entwined, where the
representational and the non-representational are inextricably combined and moreover
where moreover the atmospheric is a force of such melting and linking across sensory
regimes. In his outstanding paper that discussed “Light, Dark and Atmosphere: Recent
Events and Installations”, he analysed the ways in which the atmosphere may elicit habits
and how anticipation and not just presence is involved in atmospheric encounters.

A third thread through the conference was an emphasis on space and place as an implicit
research category for atmospheres. The many engagements with homes, hospitals, care
facilities and the micro-spatial evaluations of festival sites or memorials where atmospheres
were analytically deduced from the “material and aesthetic aspects of space” (Shanti
Sumartojo), indicated the preeminence of the atmosphere as a concept of space. Beyond
confining atmospheres to space and place, Gemma Edwards explicitly broadened the scope
of atmospheric research from an one-off event and its presentist description towards taking
into account the “wave of contention” that spans several events and times. Similarly
emphasising the contagious momentum of atmospherics, Simon Runkel argued that the
political atmosphere of crowds is suspended between imitation, affective state and
atmospheric space. Drawing on Tarde, Schmitz and Canetti he developed a conceptually
innovative approach to the atmospheric momentum of crowds. In response to this, Adi
Moreno raised the crucial question “Do crowds exist?” which led her to ask “Do atmospheres
exist?”, thereby furthering a discussion of the atmospheric beyond substantialist ascriptions.

Other papers conceptualised atmospheres in a way that was reminiscent of Bourdieu’s
notion of the habitus as in David Morgan’s study of snobbery or in the panel on atmosphere
and dress. Again, what seemed of paramount importance here is the need to thoroughly
circumscribe the notion of the atmosphere and to ask for its conceptual gain over already
existing and well established theories.

Another implicit connection and in part indistinguishable concurrence was made with sensual
ethnography. The emphasis on the human body led to an understanding of atmospheres as
being-manifest to the human sensorium as in Wendy Couchman and Anabel Foots’ account
of a historic store. Giving a comprehensive account of how to “capture the atmosphere”,

James Burch proposed a methodological framework that aimed at the particular
betweenness of the atmosphere thereby decentering the paradigm of the sensuous.

The conference was absolutely worthwhile in raising awareness regarding both the ubiquity
and pervasion of atmospheres in social and individual life and the inherent difficulties of their
study. Yet, what was irritating was the abundant lack of references to the existing
atmosphere theory and hence a shortage of critical theoretical grounding. Atmospheres have
become a fashionable term and as is often the case with such academic fashions the notion
of atmosphere seemed to rather disguise than disclose insight into the dynamics of
“everyday life” with the tendency to remain superficial in the absence of conceptual contour.
Yet, the many epistemological and methodological challenges that atmospherics present,
which became more apparent in the conference, may incite more in depth critical research in
and through everyday atmospherics.