

Philipp Zehmisch, Ursula Münster, Jens Zickgraf, and Claudia Lang, eds.,
Soziale Ästhetik, Atmosphäre, Medialität: Beiträge aus der Ethnologie

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The edited volume *Soziale Ästhetik, Atmosphäre, Medialität: Beiträge aus der Ethnologie* may be translated as “Social Aesthetics, Atmosphere, Mediality: Ethnological/Anthropological Contributions.” It was published in honor of Frank Heidemann, professor of *Ethnologie* (ethnology/socio-cultural anthropology) at Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich. The volume comprises an introduction and twenty-two essays contributed by former students, friends and (some well-known) colleagues from around the globe that all pay tribute to his legacy as a teacher and scholar. The chapters are written in either German or English.

The introduction (in German) traces Heidemann’s scholarly trajectory and presents recurring themes in his work. Heidemann is mostly known for his work on South Asia with a particular emphasis on the South Indian Nilgiris but also Sri Lanka and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Thematically, he has worked on topics as diverse as migration, history, politics, local culture, myths and rituals, while problematizing the question of “ethnographic representation.” The latter is also reflected in his take on visual anthropology, which he firmly established as an area of specialization at the Munich university department. Heidemann’s growing awareness of the holistic nature of emotional and sensual experience, probably fostered by his own experience in participant observation, as argued by the editors in the introduction, may have contributed to his recent endeavor of grasping and theorizing the elusive and fleeting character of particular kinds of human sociality in their sensual and cultural dimension. He approaches the latter drawing on the concepts of “social aesthetics” and “atmosphere.”

Heidemann’s theoretical and methodological interests as well as his legacy as a teacher are reflected in the three thematic parts of the book, consisting of four to nine chapters each. Thus, the first part, entitled “Social Aesthetics and Atmosphere,” comprises nine essays that engage with these concepts in one way or other. Hence, we find

here anthropologist and documentary filmmaker David McDougall, who significantly promoted the use of “social aesthetics.” In his contribution, he specifies it as “the broad spectrum of social and natural features that make up the particular character of a community. These include its physical settings, formal and informal rituals, styles of speech and gesture, types of clothing, dominant colors, material objects, and so on” (21). He sees it as an intermediate phenomenon akin to the concept of “atmospheres,” as discussed by German philosopher Gernot Böhme. A closer look at the unique quality of these phenomena and at the impression they make on those co-present, McDougall argues, may help us gain a better understanding of how human beings create shared perceptions.

Eminent anthropologist Michael Herzfeld, in his contribution, reflects on proximity as an affective and a spatial category and warns us—in line with Heidemann—of rash parallel attributions. Rather than reiterating that the x supposedly always do y (such as “Thais do not touch each other”), we should be sensitive to where “rules are enunciated and broken in speech and in practice” (32). He prefers “social poetics” over “social aesthetics” for its closeness to performativity. To mention just two further chapters in this section, Ursula Münster’s contribution on “forest atmospheres” takes us to a teak plantation in Kerala. Hers is a perceptive rendering of walking through the forest and experiencing the nostalgia and contradictions in this co-created ecology. Elizabeth Burns Coleman, in turn, portrays the Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy drawing on the concept of “social aesthetics.”

The second part, “Mediality, Knowledge, and Perception in South Asia,” assembles nine rather diverse chapters. They range from an engagement with the mediality of the voice, as in Helene Basu’s contribution on religious aesthetics in Islamic practice, to an engagement with sight and being seen, as in Katja Müller’s reflection on the role of the “evil eye” in South India. Moreover, four chapters touch upon the topic of health, health seeking, or healing (contributions by Gabriele Alex, Claudia Lang, Markus Schleiter, and William Sax). Philipp Zehmisch, in his contribution, traces changing marriage patterns in the Andaman Islands. Peter Berger and Abhijit Dasgupta engage with knowledge and remembering in different contexts; in the first case, dealing with the disciplinary history of the anthropology of South Asia (Berger), in the second dealing with the relationship between local and scientific knowledge in Indian agricultural practices (Dasgupta).

Finally, the third part, entitled “Practice, Teaching, and Methods,” comprises four chapters that engage with Heidemann’s legacy as a teacher and colleague. Julia Bayer, as a longstanding colleague at the Munich anthropology department, brings together short tributes by present and former students of Heidemann’s, where he emerges as an inspirational teacher and mentor. Eveline Dürr and Martin Sökefeld, in their joint contribution, reflect on the changing character of field research in the everyday work practice of anthropologists turned professors. Birgit Bräuchler takes a look back at the beginnings of internet research and takes stock of the significance of her own PhD research—in the early 2000s under Heidemann’s supervision—in light of recent developments. To round up the book, the last chapter represents a journalistic take on the ethnographic study of culture(s) by Bettina Weiz, a former PhD student of Heidemann’s who works as a journalist.

This book contains some appraisal of Heidemann’s work, but criticism is largely kept at bay; a fact that may largely be attributed to the character of such a publication.

This is important to keep in mind. Overall, though, the book makes a highly enjoyable, informative and inspiring read, especially so if one is fluent in both German and English. Scholars of South Asia, and to a certain extent also Europe and Germany, will welcome this volume. Particularly, scholars interested in human sociality, embodiment, sensual experience, and in uses of the concepts of “social aesthetics” and “atmospheres” will benefit from the read. To conclude, this book conveys well much of the “atmosphere” that the Munich department has fostered during the past twenty years, and it is therefore undoubtedly a valuable resource for scholars interested in the disciplinary history of social anthropology (*Ethnologie*) in Germany and one of its key defining exponents.

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