

BOOK REVIEWS

Book Review: *Aesthetic Experience of Metabolic Processes*. Désirée Förster. meson press, 2021. ISBN 978-3-95796-180-8Maximilian Gregor Hepach¹¹ Institute of Arts and Media, University of Potsdam

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This past decade has been marked by an escalating concern for our atmosphere. Global warming, chemical and microplastic air pollution, and the COVID-19 pandemic have each contributed to an increased awareness of the porousness of human bodies, of their existential exposure to the environment, to the atmosphere and its elements as a medium of experience.

A fundamental problem in facing these crises is the question of experience: atmospheric crises appear to escape—in their full extent—immediate perception and take place on micro- and macro-scales below or beyond the thresholds of human experience, even as their impacts are felt acutely. As Schneider (2018) has argued with respect to climate science: these crises are rendered an-aesthetic. Morton (2013) has influentially introduced the concept of “hyperobjects” to give those phenomena a name which fundamentally call into question the adequacy of human sensorial faculties. Atmospheric crisis then turns into a crisis of the human subject, a crisis of trust in one’s senses as reliable access to our unfolding reality.

In *Aesthetic Experience of Metabolic Processes*, Désirée Förster (2021)—refreshingly—takes the opposite approach. Instead of taking the supposed limits of human experience for granted—positing, for instance, a hyperobject “climate” to be modeled and measured, but never experienced—Förster argues we must revisit human experience with greater care, excavating aspects that are too quickly buried under convenient dichotomies, such as that between subject and object.

Förster’s book may then be read as an exercise in aesthetics, in directing “sensuous attentiveness” (Förster 2021, 111) toward the more ephemeral and immaterial aspects of experience, toward metabolic processes in such a way as to question and dismantle prejudicial dichotomies. This aesthetic concern has an ethical dimension, too—namely, “to understand how we can attune to climatic and metabolic processes and become more aware of the ways they impact the relation to our surroundings” (Förster 2021, 40).

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Drawing principally on the philosophical work of John Dewey, Vinciane Despret, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Seel, Gilbert Simondon, and Alfred North Whitehead—interweaving diverse intellectual traditions with skill—Förster contributes to the ongoing turn in media studies toward elemental media that facilitate the emergence of experience and objects in the first place (Peters 2015; Starosielski 2019; Jue 2020; Jue and Ruiz 2021; Furuhata 2022), to feminist new-materialist accounts of climate change (Neimanis and Walker 2014; Verlie 2019), and to work in cultural geography and the geohumanities on atmospheres (McCormack 2018; Engelmann 2020; Nieuwenhuis 2019). The particular strength of *Aesthetic Experience of Metabolic Processes*, however, lies in the explication of complex speculative theoretical arguments with the help of atmospheric artworks and installations.

Turning to the structure of the book itself: the introduction and an introductory, conceptual chapter on the “Terms of an Aesthetics of Metabolism” are followed by three core chapters, in which Förster’s arguments are developed in counterpoint with the description of atmospheric artworks, and a concise conclusion.

In the introduction, Förster motivates her study of metabolic processes by recollecting a personal experience trekking through the “tropical climate of Thailand” (Förster 2021, 14). A series of contrasting atmospheric experiences made her aware “of *how* [she] was experiencing being there in that moment rather than *what* [she] was experiencing” (Förster 2021, 14). This difference between how and what one experiences marks the difference, for Förster, between “focused, intentional perception” and “aesthetic perception, which opens our senses to what is happening around us without objectifying it immediately. Aesthetic perception can be understood [...] as a mode of perception in which we turn to the presence of something in its appearing” (Förster 2021, 16).

Throughout the book, Förster continuously draws the attention of the reader away from the perception of objects toward the very conditions of perception. In doing so, she cultivates a sensitivity, a practice of aesthetic experience that, she argues, might facilitate a deeper understanding of atmospheric crises such as climate change.

Förster’s particular attention to the “aesthetic experience of metabolic processes” (Förster 2021, 19) and the atmospheric artworks that facilitate them gives concrete experiential shape to the idea that atmospheres are elemental media (Peters 2015; Horn 2018), that atmospheres “mediate between bio-chemical processes internal to bodies and in the environments surrounding these bodies” (Förster 2021, 19–20). The artworks, then, fulfill a similar function to Förster’s experience of traveling to another climate: they

bring “to the foreground of awareness metabolic bonds that usually remain unnoticed” (Förster 2021, 20) by facilitating a change or modulation in the elemental media of experience.

Förster’s metabolic approach to aesthetic experience gains in sharpness when contrasted with Olafur Eliasson’s well-known weather-related work, such as [The Weather Project](#) (2003). Eliasson, too, tries to make us “conscious of the construction so that we perceive the staging behind the representation,” to make us “conscious of the act of perception, of being caught in the moment of awareness” (May 2003, 17–18). However, this emphasis on *how* we perceive over *what* we perceive remains ocularcentric. Eliasson plays with “our ability to *see* ourselves seeing” (Eliasson, quoted in May 2003, 18; emphasis mine), whereas Förster extends this “looking sideways” at experience—“experiencing experience”—beyond any individual human sense. Instead of seeing artworks as constructed objects of intentional perception, Förster (2021, 22) highlights how we *metabolize* them and can experience this process of metabolization itself by attuning ourselves to the atmospheres the artworks create, by becoming metabolic subjectivity.

To give shape to this rather abstract account of the aesthetic experience of metabolic processes, I turn, as Förster does, too, across the three core chapters, to the artworks that function as “aesthetic milieus that intensify atmospheric and metabolic processes” (Förster 2021, 24)—that is, that intensify *how* we experience over *what* we experience.

The first such chapter focuses on two installations by Philippe Rahm. [Interior Weather](#) (2006), the first example, raises to awareness how experience is metabolically regulated through indoor climate. Whereas built spaces are usually air-conditioned and insulated in such a way that the spaces and rooms of a house serve our needs (Horn 2016), Förster argues that *Interior Weather* inverts this relation: the climate itself becomes an agent, shaping what can be done where in this weathered space.

Whereas *Interior Weather* modulates temperature, humidity, and light to facilitate different experiences across space, the second example, [Hormonorium](#) (2002), brings to attention an even more ephemeral aspect of experience: the “way our mood and our actions are impacted by invisible meteorological forces” (Förster 2021, 62). *Hormonorium* simulates an alpine environment with the help of a floor consisting of “528 fluorescent tubes,” the modulation of temperature to “about 15-16°C,” and “oxygen levels similar to areas at 3000 meters (9852 feet) altitude” (Förster 2021, 63). This space becomes an aesthetic milieu par excellence as it “shifts the attention away from the built environment to one’s own body,” “towards the metabolic dimension of our being” (Förster 2021, 63). The low oxygen levels might, for instance, manifest “in the feeling of disorientation, headache, or even unreasonable behaviour” (Förster 2021, 63).

Building upon the experiences *Hormonorium* facilitates, Förster introduces the concept of *interoception*, or “gut feeling,” as opposed to representation as a mode of aesthetic experience appropriate for metabolic subjectivity: “interoception senses changes in the hormonal, chemical, and thermoregulatory states that impact the way we feel and how much physical energy we have in a situation, and therefore influences our intentions and actions” (Förster 2021, 75).

Unable to present the other examples in any detail within the scope of this review, I only briefly want to mention that the second core chapter turns to [*Urban Algae Canopy*](#) (2015) and [*Oxygenator*](#) (2007) to highlight how *others* are implicated in metabolic processes, and the practices of care that might emerge from a greater attention to metabolic subjectivity. The third core chapter turns to *Affective Atmospheres* (2018), a series of prototypes Förster herself was involved in making to study people’s interaction with a water tank and the weather and clouds it produced.

Reflecting on the various examples discussed and highlighting the relevance of her work for future research on the relationship between media and environment in the process, Förster concludes that she has “concentrated on artistic works that use elemental media, such as air and water, as well as temperature, in order to make the transformative effects of these media on our living bodies and our environments tangible” (2021, 172). This aesthetics of metabolism might then serve as a propaedeutic to a more careful and ethical engagement with our surroundings, in which the living and the nonliving are both metabolically implicated.

At the outset of the book, Förster recounted a personal metabolic experience that had a revelatory effect on her understanding of her own (aesthetic) experience. I want to conclude by considering other possible subjectivities not discussed in any detail in the book. In particular, the studies of Murphy (2006) and Belling (2012) on sick building syndrome and hypochondria come to mind. Both examples highlight the possible negative consequences of heightened metabolic awareness as well as the question of the epistemology of the metabolic; the titles of the two books include reference to uncertainty and doubt, respectively. This leads me to question if aesthetic experience of metabolic processes can ever be *mistaken*. This is not just a philosophical question: arguably, there is a whole lifestyle industry profiting off metabolic subjectivity (Förster 2021, 13). Future work on the aesthetic experience of metabolic processes might equally benefit from a closer engagement with historical material, where metabolic concern around, for instance, miasma was widespread (Nieuwenhuis 2019).

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Author Bio

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