



Feeling at home in contemporary Japan: Space, atmosphere and intimacy



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ABSTRACT

Based on a long-term ethnography inside thirty urban dwellings, this article aims to explore what it means to feel 'at home' in contemporary Japan. Ample attention has been paid to the staging of atmospheres in public spaces, but qualitative studies about domestic atmospheres are scarce and the emphasis tends to be on 'front-stage' concerns such as hospitality, status, and normativity. By contrast, by focussing on 'back-stage' activities such as sleeping, eating, and bathing, this article will show how these bodily practices may generate, assisted by various domestic technologies, an all-encompassing heat that encourages intimate sociality without infringing on individual needs for autonomy and detachment from social demands. More generally, the article argues that by exploring the complex entanglements of ideal and actual atmospheres we might gain a more comprehensive understanding of this expansive, spatial phenomenon and its relationship with intimacy within different cultural contexts.

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1. Introduction

'[Japanese people] find it hard to be really at home with things that shine and glitter.' (Tanizaki, 1977 [1933]: 10)

While writing this paper about domestic atmospheres in Japan, I frequently recalled my first stay in the country in the early 1990s, when I shared an apartment with another Belgian student on the tenth floor of a block of flats in Yamada, a sleepy suburb in the north of Osaka. We were surprised to find that bright fluorescent ceiling lamps were the only source of light in our new home, and decided to buy some freestanding lamps, to permeate every space with what we considered to be more soothing and incandescent light. Little did we know that this small modification would unleash upon us a bizarre weekly ritual. The protagonist was our Japanese landlord, who during his weekly inspection visit would now march from room to room, switching on every ceiling light, until the whole flat was bathed in a bright neon glow. This domestic 'turning on the lights' ceremony was always accompanied by some drawn-out ponderings about 'why Belgians are so dark' (*kurai*). At the time, the comical associations made between our dimly-lit environment and the moody personality of a whole nation seemed trivial; but

over a decade later, in 2003 and 2006, when I was conducting fieldwork inside Japanese homes in the same area, similar negative comments were repeatedly made about 'dark' domestic spaces and the un-homely atmospheres that they generated.

None of these Japanese people seemed to appreciate the 'beauty of feeble light', famously described by Tanizaki and ever since associated in the 'West' with a unique Japanese sensibility that informs local understandings of homeliness (Tanizaki, 1977: 18). By contrast, all were at home in neon 'lightscares' (Bille and Sorensen, 2007: 267) filled with 'things that shine and glitter'. During the 1930s, at the time of Tanizaki's writing, electrical illumination was rapidly replacing candles. Indeed, in Japan, as elsewhere, the development of light bulb technology (and electricity) is inseparable from the grand narrative about progressive modernity (Sneath, 2009: 74–6), which, as Partner has shown in his study of post-war Japanese advertisements for electronic goods, resulted in the active promotion of 'the bright life' (*akarui seikatsu*) (Partner, 1999: 149) during the 1950s. In this context, 'brightness' referred not only to modern homes lit with fluorescent light bulbs (*ibid.*, 149), but also to the shiny commodities and the sunny character possessed by the members of the 'modern', nuclear family, especially the newly emancipated housewife, who lived in these homes (*ibid.*, 153–56).

The idea of the 'bright life' and the pleasant domestic atmosphere associated with it still resonates today. However, in this article, I will scrutinize this ideal by confronting it with the lived

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experience of atmosphere, and its relationship to intimacy inside real homes. I will draw on one year of fieldwork in 2003, which was conducted inside thirty urban homes in the Kansai region,¹ and a visual project that was carried out in the same area in 2006. The larger aim of this research is to challenge widespread stereotypes about Japanese minimal aesthetics, by revealing the messiness and contradictions of everyday domestic life (Daniels, 2010).² However, the focus in this article will be on back-stage bodily activities, such as co-sleeping and co-bathing, which generate 'social heat' and cultivate strong feelings of family solidarity and security. I will show that the successful reproduction of this intimate sociality inside the home is constantly threatened by, and contingent upon, the realization of individual desires for relaxation and freedom; I will further argue that unless a balance is achieved between dependence and autonomy, domestic atmospheres will be experienced as 'dark', 'cold', and conflict-laden. Overall, I hope to show that by paying more attention to social, material, and spatial constraints within a particular environment, we can begin to unravel some of the complex entanglements of ideal, real, and possible atmospheres, and develop a more comprehensive understanding of how people experience atmospheres within different cultural contexts.

As illustrated in the introduction to this special issue, the notion of 'atmosphere' has already been explored at great length by philosophers, urban planners, and designers, but only in recent years has the concept received proper attention from social scientists (Anderson, 2009; Edensor, 2012; Thibaud, 2011). Still, the majority of these studies tend to focus on the staging of atmosphere in the public sphere, and my research sets out to offer a novel perspective, by investigating the everyday, lived experience of the atmosphere inside the home. In the last twenty-five years, a growing number of anthropologists – influenced by the feminist critique about the natural body, the phenomenological re-thinking of rituals, and a more general dissatisfaction with both logo-centric and ocular-centric approaches – have engaged in the empirical and theoretical study of lived experience. Whilst theories of embodiment (Csordas, 1994), which argue that people experience the world with both their minds and bodies, have become well-established, it is only in the last decade that attention has turned towards the relationship between embodied knowing, perception, and space. Anthropological research about the movement of sensate perceiving bodies in particular environments (Ingold, 2000, 2007), as well as the realisation that things, people, and places are not finite entities but are "constellations of processes" (Massey, 2005), are two important developments that this article builds upon. However, I also aim to enhance these debates, by arguing that a focus on the concept of atmosphere offers a unique opportunity to examine the complex and often fluid affective relationships between people, things, and environments, without prioritising human intentionality (Anderson, 2009: 80). This is particularly pertinent with regard to domestic atmospheres because, as I will demonstrate next, most previous studies have given undue importance to the role of housewives, portrayed as 'aesthetic workers' (Böhme, 1993: 122), who draw on a complex set of

aesthetic skills and knowledge to arrange a selection of objects (including lamps), in order to produce a 'homely' feeling.³

2. Methodology: staging versus experiencing home-like atmospheres

Qualitative research about domestic atmospheres remains scarce, and the focus tends to be on the staging of ideal domestic atmospheres in the US and Northern Europe, described with adjectives such as informal, cosy, and relaxed, as opposed to the un-homely (generally linked with the public and commercial sphere), defined as formal, cold, and modern. Thus, in her classic study inside working-class homes in 1970s Bergen, Gullestadt, for example, shows that 'a good Norwegian home has to be cosy and homely and warm. [...] Cosiness is achieved by an abundance of furniture, small lamps, green plants and ornamental pieces' (Gullestadt, 1984: 87). In a more recent ethnography, also set inside urban Norwegian homes, the Irish anthropologist Pauline Garvey zooms in on the specific role of incandescent illumination in producing outward expressions of normative homeliness (Garvey, 2005: 168). Similarly, a Dutch study shows how elderly residents in Amsterdam create aesthetic arrangements of plants, porcelain figures, and vases on windowsills, to express domestic cosiness or *gezelligheid* to passers-by (Van der Horst and Messing, 2006), but this study also establishes hominess as an exclusive category, because cosy Dutch homes are contrasted with immigrant homes that have closed curtains.

More recently, Olesen (2010) has explored how white, middle-class women in the US use ethnic objects to create sensuous domestic interiors. However, she argues that the compelling effect of interiors cannot be 'pinpointed as emanating from the furniture, decorative objects or built structures' alone, and that the 'feel' of the home is foremost grounded in sociality and solidarity (Olesen, 2010: 32). Although Olesen ultimately fails to elucidate how domestic spaces are, in practice, 'continuously animated by social life', the suggested shift in focus from ideal aesthetics to lived experience is significant, and it also underpins this article. To my knowledge, only two studies take domestic sociality as their starting point, and both analyse the Danish concept of *hygge*, characterised by activities such as 'being with good friends or with one's family or partner, having fun in an easy-going yet not overly exciting way (not a party, as such), talking and telling jokes in a relaxed manner, or perhaps watching a movie together or playing a board game' (Linnet, 2011: 22–23). However, whereas Linnet reveals very little about how Danes negotiate *hygge* inside their homes, Bille's article in this special issue, which focuses on the role of lighting technology in the production of *hygge*, addresses this problem, by showing that Danish people also desire a degree of detachment while being a part of a larger social whole – a point I will return to later.

This said, most studies link domestic atmospheres with normative forms of sociability, which brings to mind Simmel's famous discussion about *Geselligkeit* (1949), which he defines as a 'playful mode of the social' that values 'correct form', thereby creating 'an ideal world of equal participants', in which 'the pleasure of the individual is always contingent upon the joy of others'. In a much-cited essay about style, he further singles out the dining-room as the domestic space where this 'cozy togetherness' (*Gesellige Zusammensein*) is enacted; it is 'supposed to favour relaxation,

¹ This specific urban area, around Osaka, accommodates twenty-five million people, or twenty percent of the Japanese population.

² While living in Japan for six years, I developed an extensive network of friends who acted as gatekeepers, and introduced me to five families with whom I lived for at least one month each, as well as fifteen homes that I visited on a regular basis throughout the year. A further ten volunteers were recruited, through public lectures about the project and notes posted on notice boards in public institutions. All participants considered themselves to belong to the 'mainstream', a concept that assumes inclusion, instead of the exclusiveness associated with class.

³ These practices form a part of what Böhme has called 'production aesthetics,' as opposed to 'perception aesthetics' (Aarhus March 2012). Elsewhere, I have shown how Japanese housewives also draw on complex knowledge of the seasons in order to create intricate domestic displays (Daniels, 2009).

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