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Twisted into Form: Eclecticism and Epistemological Dissonance as a Framework for Interdisciplinarity

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Abstract

With interdisciplinarity increasingly being emphasised as an unquestionable asset in archaeology and prioritised amongst research funding institutions and university strategists, it may be worthwhile exploring the nature of collaborative research: What are the political mechanisms of interdisciplinary research and how does epistemic dissonance affect collaborative efforts? In this article, I contend that truly interdisciplinary research should be capable of emphasising the sometimes radical differences between disciplinary research designs, ontologies, epistemologies, and definitions of knowledge. To this end, I pursue atmosphere as an example of a phenomenon that can, or should, be studied in a way that attends to epistemic differences, since atmosphere has different implications in different disciplinary settings. I will favour postmodern eclecticism – however *altmodisch* and unoriginal it may seem in the 2020s – as my methodical approach to atmosphere, since it lends itself to a messy and noisy multiplicity of epistemologies and research designs doing justice to the cross-disciplinary concept of atmosphere. The strength of eclecticism is its lack of consistency and stringency, and its capacity for sustaining epistemic dissonance instead of concealing it.

Keywords

Interdisciplinarity, discipline, conceptual dissonance, eclecticism, postmodernism, atmosphere

Zusammenfassung

Da Interdisziplinarität in der Archäologie zunehmend als ein unbestreitbarer Gewinn hervorgehoben und von Förderinstitutionen und Hochschulstrateg*innen geschätzt wird, lohnt es sich, diese kooperative Forschung näher zu betrachten: Was sind die politischen Mechanismen interdisziplinärer Forschung und wie wirken sich epistemische Dissonanzen auf kooperative Ansätze aus? In diesem Beitrag behaupte ich, dass eine wirklich interdisziplinäre Forschung in der Lage sein sollte, die zuweilen radikalen Unterschiede zwischen den Forschungsdesigns, Ontologien, Epistemologien und Definitionen von Wissen verschiedener Disziplinen herauszustellen. Dafür betrachte ich Atmosphäre als Beispiel für ein Phänomen, das auf eine Art erforscht werden kann, ja sollte, die die epistemischen Differenzen berücksichtigt, da Atmosphäre in verschiedenen Disziplinen unterschiedliche Bedeutungen aufweist. Als methodischen Ansatz nutze ich den postmodernen Eklektizismus – wie *altmodisch* und wenig originell es in den 2020er Jahren auch erscheinen mag –, da er sich für eine chaotische und unklare Vielzahl von Epistemologien und Forschungsdesigns eignet und auch dem fachübergreifenden Konzept von Atmosphäre gerecht wird. Die Stärken des Eklektizismus sind das Fehlen von Konsistenz und Stringenz sowie seine Fähigkeit, die epistemische Dissonanz aufrechtzuerhalten, anstatt sie zu verbergen.

Schlagwörter

Interdisziplinarität, Disziplin, konzeptuelle Dissonanz, Eklektizismus, Postmodernismus, Atmosphäre

Introduction

In this article, I want to argue for a postmodern ethos in the face of the current proliferation of archaeological interdisciplinarity. While often appreciated as an unquestionably benevolent or a necessary progression of archaeology, even raised above criticism, I contend that interdisciplinary relations are subject to a number of understated, perhaps even disregarded, challenges. These predicaments are rarely made explicit in publications of an interdisciplinary nature, but I hold it to be relatively uncontroversial to observe that collaborative efforts are liable to include imbalanced authority and power relations, unevenly distributed research funding, assimilation of academic agendas, standards and methods, and a levelling of epistemological differences. In this article, I focus on the latter: the fact that much interdisciplinary collaboration levels or shrouds the actual epistemological differences and possible conceptual discrepancies that may not be entirely reconcilable, but nevertheless are nested in the encounter between specialists with different epistemic traditions and ways of reasoning. When confronted with such challenges, I suggest that the interdisciplinary setting offers the opportunity to conduct a critical exploration of the concepts that are central to the collaboration. In fact, this charting of conceptual dissonance may even be argued to be *the* constituent qualifier for sound interdisciplinarity and therefore mandatory in order to ensure central epistemological concepts are not taken for granted or assumed to be identical while in fact being different.

Interdisciplinarity can be defined in a variety of ways, and while others have made thorough analyses and outlines of various types of interdisciplinarity (e.g. Huutoniemi et al. 2010; Hodder 2015; Klein 2017; Mazzocchi 2019; Kerr 2020; Díaz-Andreu and Coltofean-Arizancu 2021), a rigid distinction between “interdisciplinary”, “cross-disciplinary”, “multidisciplinary” and “trans-disciplinary” relations and collaboration is not pertinent to my argument in this article. A discussion of these terms is indeed relevant, yet here, I simply refer to “interdisciplinary” in the widest meaning of relations between disciplines. These relations may issue forth as formal collaboration in collective projects, as informal exchanges, or as individual scholars adopting or exploring concepts from other disciplines, including fields that may be described as non-disciplinary or queer-disciplinary.

My aim is not to argue that central epistemological concepts should be aligned or conform to a standardised, shared language, but instead that actual differences may be unavoidable and therefore should be made explicit in interdisciplinary relations. Specialists from different disciplines may not always be able to agree on the understanding of concepts or employ a homonymous vocabulary. I suggest this epistemic and conceptual discrepancy can be the generator of new knowledge rather than its obstacle, moving interdisciplinarity “from simple borrowings and methodological thickening to theoretical enrichment” (Klein 1996: 153), thereby foregrounding “the problem of how meaning is produced, maintained, and deconstructed” (Klein 1996: 153). Following on from this, I believe that interdisciplinary activities – whether between specialists from different disciplines or one researcher bringing together material, theory or methods from different disciplines – should at the very least include a deliberation as to whether research must rest on mutually agreeable concepts or whether the dissonance between these concepts are part of the interdisciplinary engagement, exchange, and enrichment. Thus, I promote the view that attending to – and welcoming – epistemological and conceptual dissonance offers archaeology the opportunity to advance its interdisciplinary strengths: whereas standardisations of concepts and a shared language may make collaboration more expedient or efficient, I argue that academic efforts mature and grow when sustaining, publishing, and taking seriously epistemic fractures and frictions.

In this article, I want to explore the potential theoretical enrichment achieved through the juxtaposition of epistemological differences, which I hold to be compulsory in any interdisciplinary collaboration. My argument is that good old-fashioned postmodernism has something to offer in this context: the eclectic attitude characterising postmodernism has the potential for complementing interdisciplinary regimentation and uniformity by highlighting epistemological discrepancies. I will begin by briefly introducing what I take from postmodernism and its eclecticism, then discuss interdisciplinarity and epistemology, before turning towards atmosphere as an example of a concept in need of an itinerant and eclectic epistemology.

Making the Floor Slippery

Invoking postmodernism, some might respond that this is a tried, tested, and discarded mode of thinking or an unimaginative blast from the past. While I happily relinquish all aspirations to being innovative, I want to be clear that I do not see postmodernism as a unified package of ideas serving as a solution or remedy in its own right.

I doubt postmodernism can even be anything in its own right, least of all a solution. Nor am I looking for a return to postmodernism as an “ideo-praxis” (Bintliff 2011; see also Bintliff 1991; Knapp 1996) or a model through which everything may be processed. Quite the contrary: postmodernism does not qualify as a fixed and applicable “package” or “paradigm” (Engelstad 1991: 504–505; Hodder 1989: 65), because that goes against the very notion of eclecticism and multivocality, which I consider some of the defining traits of the postmodern attitude (see also Hodder 1985; Tilley 1993; Fahlander 2012, 2014). Thus, postmodernism defies the ideal of originality, purity, and consistency, being distinguished instead by “fragmentation, impurity of form, depthlessness, indeterminacy, intertextuality, plurism, eclecticism and a return to the vernacular” (Poynor 2003: 12). As a consequence, the “postmodern object problematizes meaning, offers multiple points of access and makes itself as open as possible to interpretation” (Poynor 2003: 12; also Huyssen 1984).

In this capacity, postmodernism has been portrayed as the end of meta-narratives and grand unifying, homogeneous, objective truths (Lyotard 1984: xxiv; Harvey 1989: 9). Terry Eagleton argues that postmodernists see these modernist truths as a fetishisation of totality, which in effect becomes a way of legitimising these very truths themselves. The consequence of the postmodernist demise of such truths, he states, is that “[s]cience and philosophy must jettison their grandiose metaphysical claims and view themselves more modestly as just another set of narratives” (Eagleton 1987: 194). While this is a call for plurality and multivocality, Eagleton maintains that it is at the same time an invitation to destabilising any common ground, allowing all discourses to become interchangeable but also untranslatable. This criticism, which has also been rehearsed in the archaeological literature, implies that postmodernism is only capable of deconstructing truths, interpretations and conclusions, showing there is no inherent meaning or substance, leading to crippling radical relativity and cultural fragmentation, or plain “intellectual nihilism” (Trigger 1995: 231).

Unless resulting in cultural paralysis, this condition has been claimed to accept all narratives as equal. Richard Dawkins thus contends the whole point of postmodernism is that “anything goes, there is no absolute truth, anything written has the same status as anything else, and no point of view is privileged” (Dawkins 1998: 142). In a similar vein, Eagleton argues that history, in a radical postmodern perspective, becomes a “sheer undecidable text, awaiting the artful orderings of some theorist’s randomly selected tale” (Eagleton 1996: 105; see also Hornborg 2006: 27–28). Indeed, it is possible to find such extremes represented amongst some postmodernist writers, and the “anything goes” allegation is of course particularly incisive. However, I contend that it may be mistaken to assume that the end of meta-narratives and unifying truths necessarily results in the unconditional acceptance of *any* statement and in having to consider all propositions and interpretations equally valid. Rather, the cessation of absolute knowledge¹ and grand narratives are, as I see it, more likely to confront us with an even more radical question: “Does *anything* go?”

This question can either be answered by resignation or exploration: either by throwing up one’s arms and giving in or by exploring the limits of the possible through conceptual experimentation and empirical speculation. Opting for the latter, I proceed by taking my inspiration from postmodernism in design and architecture. First described as “the new post-modern anti-rationalism” (Pevsner 1961: 236), these fields have been marked by experimenting with forms, colours, surfaces, and expressions typically adhering to different established and distinguishable styles but brought together in one object or a constellation of objects in irrational, paradoxical, or counterintuitive ways. The diversity of styles is often explicit and their origins partially recognisable, reshaped in new appearances, such as columns of classical antiquity being made from steel, wood, or cast plastic in bright colour schemes. While the Renaissance may be said to rediscover the columns of classical antiquity, copying and gently rephrasing them, postmodernist eclecticism takes a leap from the very concept of “column”, stimulating the question what we might expect from columns and their use, exploring new potentials. This is achieved through an eclectic approach, meaning postmodern architecture and design become “a juncture where nearly anything is possible” (Jencks 1977: 46). Yet importantly, this hinges on “an eclecticism that goes beyond the pleasant mixing of recent styles – a *radical eclecticism*” (Jencks 1977: 46).

1 It is of course debatable whether the notion of “absolute knowledge” is applicable to archaeology. Given the nature of the archaeological – everywhere and always characterised by absences, fragmentation, vagueness, and occasional tracelessness – we might even consider the idea of archaeological “absolute knowledge” quite absurd.

With its furniture design, the Memphis group, forming around Italian designer Ettore Sottsass, can be said to epitomise such a radical eclecticism within the postmodern attitude. Memphis brought together bright colours, an unusual combination of materials, such as plastic laminate, textile, and steel, and irregular, asymmetrical furniture arrangements, challenging the idea that the primary concerns of furniture design are function and comfort. More than that, by putting different design idioms together through juxtaposition and translation, Memphis made historical references fluid and migratory, and the group sought to rethink conventional understandings of past stylistic idioms, forms of expression, and design concepts (Horn 1986; Radice 1993; Poyner 2003). According to Michele de Lucchi, one of the founders of the Memphis group, “Memphis wants to make the floor slippery. It will be difficult to keep your balance” (de Lucchi quoted in Radice 1985: 10 [my translation]). Tellingly, a critic has described Memphis as “a riot of color and materials that often overwhelmed a piece’s original intent, a shotgun wedding between Bauhaus and Fisher-Price” (Pellegrin 2012). Accordingly, Memphis may be stylistically recognisable, while at the same time producing a counterintuitive, perhaps even iconoclastic combination of expressions and references. Otherwise well-defined concepts – function, comfort, taste, beauty, harmony – become displaced, fragmented, and merge in new – perhaps freakish – ways. The frames of reference and expectations to central concepts are necessarily also reorganised in the process.

Similarly, I hold an eclectic attitude to interdisciplinary relations to be valuable for questioning concepts in archaeological collaboration and for destabilising epistemological authority amongst the disciplines coming together. In this operation, conceptual eclecticism is pivotal, and I want to emphasise the explicit work on concepts and conceptual understanding as being indispensable, because otherwise, interdisciplinary work risks a watering down of conceptual awareness and critique.

Consider, for instance, how studies of origins, migration, and identity increasingly have been subject to interdisciplinary research strategies over the past decade or so, combining archaeological and linguistic evidence with a host of data from various disciplines in the natural sciences. Such research is undeniably valuable and has – with remarkable speed – brought new results to the table. However, these results are usually published as the synthesis of the product of the collaborative efforts, congesting the various contributions in one homogeneous conclusion. Yet, what happens when empirical observations or the construction of data from different disciplines in the collaboration do not add up? What are the consequences of data sets operating in incomparable or incompatible ways? As Marc Vander Linden asks:

“How are we to account for this disjuncture between archaeologists’ doubts and the apparent certainties of geneticists? Either material culture and genes – and languages for that matter – behave in such alien ways that the interdisciplinary dialogue has to be restricted to those rare cases where all signals match each other; or, as argued here, alternative hypotheses have to be sought by all disciplines.” (Vander Linden 2016: 724)

To some extent, this is a challenge in terms of methods and ways of bringing together empirical work, yet disciplinary discrepancies may also present more fundamental, conceptual, and epistemological dilemmas. In this context, it is not enough to merely observe that differences exist, making space for a “relative autonomy between scientific and humanistic research frameworks”, where “both sides employ their own theoretical and methodological standards, some are shared, some not” (Kristiansen 2017: 122–123). If interdisciplinary collaboration implies working on a “common ground”, it must also involve a consideration of how this ground is constructed and defined.

In the recent expansion of interdisciplinary archaeological studies of migration, it is, for instance, curious to see how “origins” and “identity” have been framed largely with reference to very particular parameters: geographical descent or aDNA profiles (e.g. Frei et al. 2015, 2017; Reiter and Frei 2015; Kristiansen et al. 2017; Furholt 2019; see also Hofmann 2015; Wilhelmson 2017; Frieman and Hofmann 2019; Crellin and Harris 2020). Hence, studying origins and identity may from one perspective make sense by pointing to the geographical place of descent of an individual and the person’s genetic profile. Yet, in another perspective, origins and identity are only meaningful with reference to personhood, the sense of belonging, self-identification, performativity, and ongoing processes of negotiating social relations. The notions of origins and identity may thus spell out differently amongst the disciplines involved in these studies, yet the conceptual ground seems to build on an implicit consensus about these terms. While “sharing a common language” (Lidén 2017) and agreeing on the terms used in a collaboration may help getting the job done, it also runs the risk of Procrustean standardisation if genuinely disparate concepts are forcefully pushed into a uniform mould.

To sum up, interdisciplinarity is not simply something to be picked randomly from the shelves in the super-market, added to the plate, making for an orderly and neat dish. Nor should eclectic interdisciplinarity be seen as competing with perceived truths, trying to replace existing meta-narratives with new ones. My argument is instead that by increasing awareness of conceptual dissonance and incompatibilities, interdisciplinary collaboration will have to slow down, question its conceptual foundation, becoming humbler by sustaining and publishing differences amongst the partners in the collaboration.

The Powers of Interdisciplinarity

To some archaeologists, debating – let alone questioning – “interdisciplinarity” may seem odd or even passé (for a discussion, see, e.g., Nilsson Stutz 2018: 49). Some might say archaeology depends so fundamentally on interdisciplinary collaboration that it is part of archaeology’s DNA; that archaeology emerged as a discipline in the 19th century by forming and advancing interdisciplinary relations, drawing on biology, geology, and anthropology in order to become an academic discipline and not just a form of antiquarianism (see Sørensen 2017 for discussion and further references). Pushing this stance further, it may be argued that archaeology *itself* is interdisciplinary and that external relations are not enough in archaeology; in this perspective, archaeology can only form as a discipline, and realise its potential for knowledge, by integrating biology, geology, and anthropology: essentially, archaeology “depends on all the other sciences” (Watson 1990: 688).

There is no denying that archaeology has always drawn on methods, data, and insights from other disciplines. Several scholars have mapped such relations elsewhere, emphasising different qualities in disciplinary transfers, ranging from considering them helpful to archaeology to seeing them as indispensable. A similar kind of praise of interdisciplinary relations is widely expressed by research funding bodies (Ion 2017: 178; Kerr 2020), and by and large, interdisciplinarity seems to be an indisputable quality in its own right. In announcements of calls for applications, we frequently see how the funding agencies encourage or require proposed projects to be interdisciplinary or to apply interdisciplinary approaches (Sørensen 2019b: 97–98). Yet only rarely do these calls bother stating explicitly the qualities of or necessity for interdisciplinarity. Perhaps even more curiously, the nature of interdisciplinarity is left unspecified in such calls, i.e. what counts as an interdisciplinary embrace as opposed to disciplinary silo mentality. Altogether, it seems, what interdisciplinarity is and what it is good for must be understood implicitly. Yet, is interdisciplinarity understood at all, we might ask, or simply taken for granted?

By extension, we might wonder where the widespread enthusiasm for interdisciplinarity comes from, asking: what is the *justification* of interdisciplinarity? In some segments of archaeology, concepts and ideas from anthropology, philosophy, and critical theory have been treated as magic wands that might recast the scope and identity of the discipline. Other segments have galvanised methods and data from the natural sciences, almost as a Messianic resurrection to answer all archaeological prayers once and for all. I do not dispute the practical usefulness of applying methods from disciplines outside of archaeology to explore the archaeological record, nor do I question the relevance of importing data or theoretical perspectives to assist the production of archaeological knowledge. Rather, my query is the wholesale, uncritical celebration of interdisciplinarity in its own right, but even more so the ensuing careless attitude to the epistemological impact of interdisciplinarity. In short, I question not the usefulness of disciplinary interaction and exchange, but I am curious about how the traffic between disciplines affects understandings of crucial disciplinary concepts.

In her tracing of the origins of the concept of interdisciplinarity, philologist Roberta Frank (1988) stipulates, perhaps teasingly, that its connotations are pleasant and comfortable. Interdisciplinarity, she says, suggests openness, inclusiveness, and democracy as opposed to reservation, narrow-mindedness, and stubborn territoriality. She writes:

“Unlike its nearest rivals – borderlands, interdepartmental, cooperative, coordinated – ‘interdisciplinary’ has something to please everyone. Its base, *discipline*, is hoary and antiseptic; its prefix, *inter*, is hairy and friendly. Unlike fields, with their mud, cows, and corn, the Latinate *discipline* comes encased in stainless steel: it suggests something rigorous, aggressive, hazardous to master; *Inter* hints that knowledge is a warm, mutually developing, consultative thing.” (Frank 1988: 100)

The question remains what we want interdisciplinarity to *do* for us, but also – more fundamentally – what it *is*. In their introduction to this special issue, Alexandra Ion and Artur Ribeiro ask whether interdisciplinarity has become the new buzzword and whether it is devoid of an inherent meaning, quoting Julie Thompson Klein (2005). Interestingly, Klein herself asks what we should expect of interdisciplinarity and its different forms, implying there is no unified or stable notion of interdisciplinarity. She contends that the scope of interdisciplinary relations is a decisive factor, distinguishing between “narrow interdisciplinarity” and “broad interdisciplinarity”. Klein argues,

“‘Narrow interdisciplinarity’ occurs between disciplines with compatible methods, paradigms, and epistemologies, such as history and literature. It has a different dynamic than ‘broad interdisciplinarity’ between disciplines with little or no compatibility, such as sciences and humanities.” (Klein 2005: 63)

Accordingly, we should expect disciplinary proximity and distance in research collaboration to have some bearing on the ways in which research questions are conceived and phrased. The more intimately the disciplines border on one another, the easier the transfer of knowledge, methods, and theoretical concerns. The wider the distance, the greater the potential discord and friction.

Is Interdisciplinarity the New Discipline?

In this light, I believe it is paramount to ask what happens to the potential differences between the epistemological frameworks of the disciplines in this collaborative process, especially in the context of Klein’s “broad interdisciplinarity”. Do differences become negotiated, negated or neglected? Does one epistemology eclipse another? I hold it to be quite uncontroversial to claim that interdisciplinary relations affect disciplinary orientations, and the implication is, of course, that interdisciplinarity is not merely a pleasant, innocent expansion of or addition to existing disciplinary territory. Interdisciplinarity is part of the formation of what “knowledge”, “facts”, “data”, “results”, “progress” or “relevance” might mean within various disciplines, what such concepts represent and how they are constructed politically. Consider, for instance, the impact of the scientific research design upon archaeology in the wake of New Archaeology; or consider the ways in which hermeneutics, phenomenology, and feminist epistemologies affected archaeology with the rise of post-processualism. Today, some segments of archaeology never dispute the notion that research must be based on hypotheses and a rigid research design, foregrounding testable analyses upon quantitative data described as objectively as possible. Meanwhile, others would never dream of questioning the idea that knowledge is fluid and culturally contingent, and that “data” will always be the product of subjective interpretation.

Such disparate agendas are subject to waxing and waning cycles of prominence in the struggle for dominating the mainstream of archaeological thinking. It seems to me that this revolves not simply around what is considered worthwhile or legitimate within archaeology itself but perhaps more so about what role extra-disciplinary agendas play in the formation of archaeological disciplinarity. As Ion has argued, these years there seems to be an increasing leaning in archaeology “towards the natural and hard sciences, as a way of grounding the discipline, and of delivering measurable and seemingly objective facts” (Ion 2017: 179; also Sørensen 2017). Furthermore, she observes that archaeology is experiencing a shift from one attitude to another in terms of disciplinary relations, transforming the role and power of components deriving from the natural sciences. Hence, “DNA, isotopes etc. are not merely an annex of the text, but bring/model the kind of questions asked” (Ion 2017: 190). In turn, she contends, “establishing genetic lineages, dispersal models, or diets are not mere means to an end, but they become the main topic of the analysis” (Ion 2017: 190). In other words, illusions of an egalitarian, balanced, and mutually respectful attitude to disciplinary differences must fade, as interdisciplinarity reveals itself to be steeped in the politics of research priorities, negotiations of authority, and confrontations between disparate epistemologies. In itself, there is perhaps nothing surprising, perhaps not even anything wrong, in having to negotiate authority and power in the interdisciplinary relations. However, what Ion implies is that archaeology is facing a silent, understated shift not only in terms of what topics and themes are prioritised, but even more so with regards to the conceptual and methodological frames of reference that come to dominate interdisciplinary relations and define archaeological epistemology.

This deeply affects how research questions are phrased, what research questions are considered relevant, even possible, and what research designs should be applied in the interdisciplinary collaboration. As historian, Joe Moran, phrases it:

“The term ‘discipline’ has two principal modern usages: it refers to a particular branch of learning or body of knowledge, and to the maintenance of order and control [...]. ‘Discipline’ in this context suggested a particular kind of moral training aimed at teaching proper conduct, order and self-control. In fact, the very notion of the term as a recognized mode of learning implies the establishment of hierarchy and the operation of power.” (Moran 2010: 2)

In light of Frank’s, Klein’s, and Moran’s definitions of “discipline” and “disciplinarity”, it may be suggested that the encounter between different disciplines will inevitably have to refer to a preferred order and prevailing discourse in the disciplinary collaboration. Furthermore, the encounter will be subject to the negotiation of the dominant notion of knowledge and epistemic regimes of power. We might idealise, or wish for, harmonious and balanced relations in the production of knowledge in the disciplinary encounter, yet research collaboration is not necessarily as egalitarian as we might hope. Rather, interdisciplinary collaboration is affected by – sometimes even defined by – political and economic discourse, authority, institutional priorities, identity politics, publication platforms, bibliometrics and citation strategy, academic networks, and the loyalties emerging and breaking down in the competition for research funding, jobs, and scholarly recognition.

I am well aware that some might get the impression that I want to purify archaeology, cleanse it of any disciplinary impurities or crossbreeding. This is not my intention. What I propose is that interdisciplinary work can indeed be worthwhile, yet it is paramount that the hegemonies and hierarchies of interdisciplinary relations are made explicit. Above all, I contend that methodological dissonance and tensions should be foregrounded and made transparent in order to avoid epistemological regimentation and a depoliticisation of interdisciplinary knowledge production. One way to sustain such tensions is by paying attention to the differences marking notions of knowledge, data, research results, relevance, and research designs, and by publishing these differences.

Yet, perhaps most centrally, concepts and conceptual frameworks might be a space for increasing the attention to disciplinary dissonance, because the terms we use may sound similar, while sometimes they are in fact used in abysmally different ways. Importantly, this should not compel us to streamline concepts, sanitise them, and make sure one particular definition is made canonical. Quite the opposite. My point in arguing for an eclectic approach to interdisciplinarity is that conceptual differences should be emphasised, made explicit, and scrutinised in confrontations that do not necessarily add up or may not always be resolved. I contend that the interdisciplinary encounter should not merely result in the sum of its parts, but instead lead to interdisciplinary tensions and frictions that make us ask salient epistemological questions of the concepts in use, even when this results in the realisation of irreconcilable differences.

Thin as Air? Atmosphere as an Eclectic, Archaeological Concept

Instead of offering a case study exemplifying my points, I would like to briefly reflect on some of my experience with interdisciplinary collaborative efforts over the past 15 years or so, focusing on the mechanisms of interaction and the conceptual frictions associated with this work. In the mid-2000s, when collaborating with an anthropologist on an article on light and luminosity, I gradually began focusing on the role of atmosphere in the shaping of social relations and the perception of the built environment. While our discussions were cutting across disciplinary boundaries, our article primarily related to contemporary contexts through an ethnographic perspective on atmosphere, studying it through subjective experiences, such as “cosiness”, “intimacy”, “homeliness”, or “hospitality” (eventually published as Bille and Sørensen 2007). However, meanwhile, I was also studying South Scandinavian monumental passage graves built during the Middle Neolithic (their construction conventionally dated to 3300–3100 BCE). Their internal darkness is one of the defining features of these tombs, and I grew interested in carrying out a phenomenological study of how we might try to appreciate the role and effects of this darkness on Neolithic perceptions and use of the tombs.

At the time, I was struggling to translate the notion of atmosphere from the anthropological setting to an archaeological framework, although I had already co-authored an archaeological study drawing on the notion of

atmosphere (Harris and Sørensen 2010). So when co-organising, first, an interdisciplinary local workshop (at Aarhus University, 2010) and, subsequently, an interdisciplinary international conference (at Aarhus University, 2012) on atmosphere, my own contributions to these events did not revolve around Neolithic monuments but concerned contemporary Danish churches (later developed into Bille and Sørensen 2022; Sørensen 2019a). The two events were organised by myself and three anthropologists (Mikkel Bille, Peter Bjerregaard, and Anne-Line Dalsgaard), attended by a host of other anthropologists, in addition to art historians, aesthetic theorists, linguists, cultural geographers, artists, sociologists, philosophers, heritage researchers, political scientists, and architects – but very few archaeologists. In light of this disciplinary gathering of scholars, I began doubting that I would be capable of demonstrating convincingly that archaeology in its more traditional, prehistoric sense would be able to adopt, let alone apply, the concept of atmosphere.

Since the notion of atmosphere has a pedigree outside of archaeology, the challenge would not simply be to convince non-archaeologists of its applicability for the discipline or for archaeology's capacity to add to the understanding of atmosphere more broadly. The challenge was just as much about finding methods for importing atmosphere into archaeology. On a different occasion, I had been confronted not only with doubt but the plain rejection of the notion that archaeology and atmosphere might be combined. At a departmental seminar at another institution, an archaeological colleague, who initially assumed my paper on atmosphere would concern meteorological data from the past, told me there is no evidence for past atmospheres in the archaeological record. So much for interdisciplinarity, you might say. The concept of atmosphere may indeed seem alien to certain notions of what the archaeological might mean, and it may also contradict a key concept within the discipline: evidence. Hence, we may intuitively assume there is no way to turn atmosphere into an archaeological "object". However, if atmosphere is as crucial to social relations, experiences of human and non-human spaces, and the perception of things as many philosophers, sociologists, cultural geographers, and anthropologists maintain, then archaeology cannot turn a blind eye on this phenomenon, since this would simply result in a dehumanisation of the past.

In this perspective, it is interesting to observe how the concept of atmosphere has had an itinerant career, travelling from one disciplinary framework to others: setting out in meteorology and moving across architecture, philosophy, cultural geography to anthropology, until I – successfully or not – attempted its diffusion into archaeology. Etymologically, "atmosphere" describes the layer of gases surrounding a planet (Henckmann 2007: 48), and it has been adopted colloquially as a figure describing the air in a particular place and as a metaphor for the mood or ambience of a social setting. In many respects, there seems to be something slippery and poorly defined about atmosphere and how to understand it, conceptually as well as empirically (Bille et al. 2015; Bille 2019; Bille and Simonsen 2021). Philosophically, it has been described as "mood" or "attunement" by Martin Heidegger (1962 [1927]: 134), as "tempered space" in Otto Bollnow's vocabulary (1963: 230), as "tinctured" or "tuned" spaces following Gernot Böhme (1993: 121), or as that which "moves the felt body" according to Hermann Schmitz (2011: 257).

Following Böhme, the properties of atmosphere are captured at the intersection of the objective and the subjective and just as importantly issuing forth as a cross-over of the material and the immaterial. Böhme thus argues, in an oft-stated quote:

"Atmospheres are indeterminate above all as regards their ontological status. We are not sure whether we should attribute them to the objects or environments from which they proceed or to the subjects who experience them. We are also unsure where they are. They seem to fill the space with a certain tone or feeling like a haze." (Böhme 1993: 114)

In this perspective, atmospheres are indeed subjective experiences, which is what I have described elsewhere as the "clause of subjectivity" (Sørensen 2015). When Böhme for instance states explicitly, "without the sentient subject, [atmospheres] are nothing" (Böhme 2013: 3), the consequence is that it becomes impossible for archaeology or any historical discipline to study atmosphere. Hence, one has to be exposed to atmosphere in and through one's own presence in order for that atmospheric experience to be susceptible and empirical. Contemporary archaeology excluded, the archaeological record does not include live subjects or subjective memory, and without these elements, according to Böhme, atmosphere disappears. In this philosophical perspective, atmosphere does not lend itself to becoming an archaeological research topic. So while a host of other topics that were previously considered "immaterial" or outside the reach of the archaeology eventually were included amongst mainstream archaeological themes – e.g. identity, social and political organisation, religion and ritual, power, emotion, and cognition – atmosphere might be pushing it too far.

Atmosphere Beyond Subjective Experience

After a while, I became discontent with Böhme’s position, since the “clause of subjectivity” means archaeologists must throw up their arms and ignore a basic human mode of interaction with the surroundings. Needless to say, archaeology’s conditions for studying atmosphere will forever be different from those of philosophy, just like cultural geographers, anthropologists, and literary scholars study atmosphere in different ways. Following on from this, the concept of atmosphere will change accordingly: all concepts need to be translated and transformed in order to make sense in new disciplinary contexts. The translation is not direct and straightforward, but takes detours, distorts the “original” concept, and includes perspectives that might be unexpected and queer. For there to be an archaeological study of atmosphere, it needs to include or produce a material dimension – something that generates a friction in space. Here, I am not thinking so much about the production of material evidence, as if atmosphere needs to result in a footprint or a fossil; by “friction” I simply mean a resonance in bodies and material spaces that may become subject to interpretation.

Consider for instance how human geographer Derek McCormack describes atmosphere as “something distributed yet palpable, a quality of environmental immersion that registers in and through sensing bodies whilst also remaining diffuse, in the air, ethereal” (McCormack 2008: 413). Speaking of the palpable, of environment, and of sensing bodies – instead of subjectivity – highlights the material dimension, yet without constituting an archaeological roadmap to atmosphere. Anthropologist Bille is even more adamant in focusing on the material dimension, when he states that the “notion of atmosphere captures the contemporaneity of personal attunement, material culture and sensuous mediations” (Bille 2015: 58). He is critical of approaches that ignore “how atmospheres are dynamic, manipulated, culturally experienced and continually evaluated in people’s lives, for instance through negotiating power, gender roles and a sense of community” (Bille 2015: 57). He argues that the dynamics of such negotiations are inherently material and are unworkable without a material dimension. Bille emphasises how “technologies are increasingly shaping our experience of spaces and thus offer new potentials for orchestrating the atmospheric engagement with the world” (Bille 2015: 57). This echoes philosopher Peter Sloterdijk’s prediction that atmosphere – in the widest sense of the word – will depend increasingly on technology:

“The future era will be climate-technical, and as such technologically oriented. It will be increasingly seen that societies are artificial from the ground up. The air that, together and separately, we breathe can no longer be presupposed. Everything must be produced technically, and the metaphorical atmosphere as much as the physical atmosphere.” (Sloterdijk 2011: 245)

Moving closer from these approaches towards an archaeological concept of atmosphere, what is important is the consistent presence of a material element, whether as a “co-presence” of subject and object (Böhme 1993), or what philosopher Tonino Griffero terms “quasi-things” within a “pathic aesthetics” (Griffero 2018: 75), or in the form of the palpability and bodiness outlined by McCormack, or the technological negotiations and productions argued in Bille and Sloterdijk.

Still, for there to be a workable archaeological concept of atmosphere, it needs to be more specific about these materialities and about its methodological approach. To begin with, we need to accept that an *archaeological* concept of atmosphere cannot depend on a living human subject, capable of verbalising the experience of atmosphere in writing or oral statements. Accordingly, an archaeological concept of atmosphere is entirely irreconcilable with Böhme’s philosophy of atmosphere, yet it still draws on central tenets from his work. Yet in an archaeological perspective, the absence of an explicit subject should, I contend, not be perceived as a loss or deficiency, but as an opening for an emphasis on other aspects of atmosphere. This means I have to gather an array of fragments of arguments and concepts in order to explore the possibility for an archaeological concept of atmosphere. I stress this cannot proceed as picking and choosing at random what is appealing or in vogue, nor is it an opportune embrace of disciplinary concepts as per “anything goes”. Rather, through a morphological approach (following Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2018), I have been interested in exploring whether an archaeological concept of atmosphere is possible at all. My approach to archaeological atmosphere therefore combines elements from other disciplines’ conceptualisation of the phenomenon, reconfiguring them in a different form.

Primarily, this twisting of atmosphere revolves around de-centring the subjective element, focusing more on the material environment than cognitive processes. This implies that I focus on architecture and infrastructure in order to reconstruct possible bodily movements, physically as well as affectively. Such a reconstruction inevitably

depends on a relatively intact three-dimensional architectural setting, which is why I have explored Middle Neolithic monumental, stone-built passage graves for this purpose. These tombs are in many cases well-preserved and entail an architectural form staging a strong and non-negotiable choreography. However, this does not allow me to make statements about the particular perceptions of atmosphere in these settings; I cannot speak of “cosiness” or “uncanniness”, but I can reconstruct movement patterns, infer bodily interactions and sensations, and I can reflect on emergent forms and ecstasies of things, and on materially-affective frictions between body and environment. These are the terms I use to frame an archaeological concept of atmosphere beyond subjective experience (for the applied study, see Sørensen 2015, 2016; see also Harris and Sørensen 2010).

Conclusion, For Now

Obviously, for atmosphere to make sense as an archaeological topic, it has to undergo a transition in conceptual terms. Atmosphere refers to a conceptual pedigree in meteorology, anthropology, and philosophy, but in archaeology it cannot be confined to this background; rather archaeology has to reconfigure it, perhaps distorting or mangling the original content of the concept. It is precisely the idea of an “original content” of concepts that I see as problematic in the academic generation of workable conceptual frameworks, when the borrowing of ideas and approaches are criticised for not being loyal to the original source or context (see also Lucas 2015; Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2018; Sørensen 2019b). Instead, I suggest that our concepts need to remain open to change and reconfiguration in the exchange between disciplinary operations instead of fossilising as robust and lasting definitions. While postmodern eclecticism has been criticised for merely playing with clichés in an ironic fabrication of shallow pastiche figures, I maintain that conceptual transformation must be well-argued and well-defined, yet without being purified or having to subscribe to authoritarian or dogmatic “original content”. Citations are important in the definition of concepts, but with reference to eclecticism, citations must constitute a melange of borrowings, impurities, and selections that are meaningful in the particular context of a new disciplinary setting.

The banal conclusion is that “atmosphere” is not the same thing in archaeology as in philosophy, cultural geography, or anthropology, nor is it categorically or clinically dissociated from this pedigree. As a concept, atmosphere cannot be adopted as a ready-made package in one discipline and transferred to another; the transit to archaeology entails a different rendering of its properties and emphases, perhaps staging what some might describe as a conceptual freak show. In this postmodern eclecticism, there can be no loyalty to “original” concepts, meanings, or definitions. Thereby, the conceptual transfer allows for the combination of different elements from various disciplines and traditions, making the concept less monolithic and more ambiguous; the archaeological concept of atmosphere proposed in this article is thus by no means canonical or timeless.

Historically, atmosphere is itself a concept transferred between disciplines. At its core, it is a translated concept, travelling from one epistemological framework to another, yet also travelling from being a physical phenomenon to a metaphor and further to describing a phenomenological experience at the intersection of subject and object, perhaps even transcending this dichotomy. Atmosphere is thus an example that interdisciplinarity implies an instability of concepts and an inherent dissonance. Studying atmosphere in meteorology is different from studying it in philosophy, which in turn is different from its use in archaeology. This does not mean that other disciplinary uses of concepts disappear or become redundant. Rather, conceptual diversity is budding in the process, which increases the epistemological instability across disciplines. The transfer across disciplinary frameworks indicate to me that the concept must be destabilised and adapted to particular uses and needs, whereby it becomes difficult to refer back to a zealous understanding of a “core meaning” or “original content” as the canonical and true signification of the term. Interdisciplinarity, thus, should make things more difficult, less harmonious, engender the questioning of methods, knowledge, results, research designs, concepts, and stage a doubting of any idealised common language, undermining consensus, efficiency, and regimentation.

Similar arguments could be made for other concepts adopted in archaeology, and here I only want to point to some of those I have been working with myself, such as the above-mentioned concept “identity”, but also “movement”, “phenomenology”, “assemblage”, “affect”, “emotion”, “memory”, “objects”, “agency”, or even the very term “archaeology”. These concepts have all been subject to redirections and reformulations in order to make sense in the encounter between their uses in archaeology and other disciplines. The conceptual transition across disciplinary settings is not a neutral transfer but altogether carries with it mixtures of transfer, loss, change, and redirection

of meaning. As should be clear, I hold postmodern eclecticism to be an inspirational framework for destabilising the authority of past meanings and significance in order to rethink concepts and make them useful in new contexts.

Emphasising the non-neutrality of eclecticism, however, pertains not simply to the meaning of concepts but also to their potential political consequences. Postmodernism in its most extreme form has been criticised on various grounds, for instance by Jean-François Lyotard (1984: 76), who describes consumerist eclecticism as “the zero degree of contemporary culture”. However, while Lyotard – justifiably – sees this as a retirement into ironic distancing, aesthetic ignorance, and political irresponsibility, Ihab Hassan (1983) emphasises instead the postmodern as an “age of indeterminacy”, and, as a consequence, as a powerful call for political awareness and accountability. He argues the postmodern is

“[c]ompounded of subtendencies that the following words evoke: heterodoxy, pluralism, eclecticism, randomness, revolt, deformation. The latter alone subsumes a dozen current terms of unmaking: decreation, disintegration, deconstruction, decentring, displacement, difference, discontinuity, disjunction, disappearance, decomposition, de-definition, demystification, detotalization, delegitimation – let alone more technical and rhetorical terms, such as chiasmus, lapsus, schism, hiatus, diremption, suture, transumption, idiolect, heteromorph, and so on. Through all these signs moves a vast will to unmaking, affecting the body politic, the body cognitive, the erotic body, the psyche of each individual-affecting, in short, the entire realm of human discourse in the West. We may indeed call that tendency *indeterminacies*, thus recognizing its plural character, which reopens or revokes familiar modes of thought and being.” (Hassan 1983: 9)

In short, indeterminacies form a frame of reference for questioning perceived truths and concepts taken for granted. This adds to the understanding of postmodernism as an “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard 1984: xxiv), and in particular towards the political authority nested in grand narratives reproduced uncritically.

While some might see indeterminacy as compromising epistemic and scholarly integrity, coherence, and clarity, I hold postmodern dissonance to be unavoidable and even desirable in the context of interdisciplinary exchange. The way to cope with the cacophony of conceptual understandings is to mine them unashamedly, pick and choose that which is useful to one’s own end, and make the most of it. This is what I hold to be the force of postmodern eclecticism. To be clear, the part of postmodern thinking I seek to avoid is the one confined to citing historic icons and tropes; the tendency to be historicising, nostalgic, and restorative, pointing back in time to older, canonised or immediately recognisable cultural forms (see also Hodder 1990). Following Klein’s view on interdisciplinarity, it may be stipulated that eclecticism has no inherent meaning. Hence, the part of postmodernism I find worthwhile is precisely the non-discriminating, wildly speculative, and experimental eclecticism that tries out uses and combinations of the old for the sake of curiosity and creativity; not in order to honour past icons or to be loyal to their “original content”, but to see what might happen when they become twisted into new forms. The purpose of interdisciplinarity is thus to disrupt and destabilise: interdisciplinarity *has* to make the floor slippery. It must be difficult to keep your balance.

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