Hazy worlds. Atmospheric ontologies in Denmark

Mikkel Bille

Roskilde University

Department of Environmental, Social and Spatial Change

Universitetsvej 1, room 10.01.71  
DK-4000 Roskilde  
Denmark

Telephone: +45 46743031

Email: [mikkelbille@ruc.dk](mailto:mikkelbille@ruc.dk)

## Abstract

This article explores the use of light in Denmark as part of shaping atmospheres. It discusses how the words informants use to express a particular atmosphere may have multiple connotations and, in essence, be defined more by their vagueness than by their clarity. The article argues that taking informants’ lack of clarity at face value rather than focusing on clear ontological statements offers new ways for the ethnographer to gain insights into the material aspects of social life through the concept of atmospheres. Atmospheres denote a sensuous ‘something’ that takes place *in-between* things and people. They may be ontologically difficult to grasp or contain yet they play an important role in ordering spaces and social life. With a focus on the ‘ecstasy’ of things – in this case a light source – as a sensuous encounter of presence, the article argues that both the contemporary focus on the ontology of things within anthropology as well as a Post-ANT perspective on performativity, though analytically useful, also methodologically overlook how the vagueness of atmospheres foregrounds the contemporaneity and entanglement of matters, minds and cultural preferences of sensing places.

## Keywords

Atmosphere, light, undecidedness, vagueness, cosiness, materiality, Denmark,

## Introduction

Susie, the bartender, stepped towards the table in a pub in Copenhagen, Denmark, with a lit tea light and proclaimed: ‘Here comes the *hygge*’. *Hygge* is a common term in Denmark which generally translates as cosiness. It denotes a kind of atmosphere characterized by a particularly informal and relaxed spirit of being together, or even alone. Lighting plays a key role in orchestrating such atmosphere and, hence, social life in Denmark. Since it was broad daylight, it was clear that the tea light was not about visibility, but about orchestrating a particular quality of atmosphere. Susie’s comment announced that *hygge* had arrived in the shape of a light, but also that being in the pub *should* be cosy.

If one were to write from the perspective of the so-called ‘ontological turn’ within anthropology and its insistence (at least in some cases) on taking the words of the informants at their face value, this would be a clear-cut example of where the candlelight does not *represent* cosiness but *is* cosiness; The divide between experience and analysis has collapsed (Henare et al., 2007a: 4). Susie is not alone in Denmark in her conflation of concept and matter in terms of cosiness and light – or lack of separation to begin with. On commercials for lamps, one sometimes sees expressions such as ‘turn on the *hygge*’ (‘*tænd for hyggen*’) and, in these days of economic crisis, one can buy ‘12 months of interest-free *hygge*’ (‘*12 måneders rentefri hygge*’) in the shape of a wood burning stove. In home decorating magazines’ coverage of Danish homes, light and cosiness often seem more fused than separated. In candlelight, we apparently have a Danish counterpart to the emic lack of separation of concept and object that has been highlighted in recent discussions of multiple ontologies ([Alberti et al., 2011](#_ENREF_1), [Carrithers et al., 2010](#_ENREF_24), [Henare et al., 2007b](#_ENREF_37)). Martin Holbraad’s ([2007](#_ENREF_38)) exemplary fusion of matter and concept, whereby powder not only *represents* power but *is* power, *power-powder*, is here presented as *cosy-light.* Judging from her proclamation and similar one’s from all my other informants, Susie literally came to the table with *hygge*. In the recent rise of case studies discussing the nature of objects, people – the anthropologist included – appear clear and settled about the ontological nature of things. Susie’s statement seems unequivocal, and the ‘12 months of interest-free *hygge*’ suggests that this will be the case at least for the next year. From an etic perspective, one can critique such notions of *hygge* and *hyggelys* for simply being common phrases that reduce both light and *hygge*. Yet, in Henare, Holbraad and Wastell’s version of an ontological turn, we need with ‘purposeful naïveté […] to take “things” encountered in the field as they present themselves’ ([2007a: 2](#_ENREF_36)), so I am only taking my informants, Susie, PR bureaux, journalists and other peoples’ words at face value: ‘Here comes the *hygge*’.

Inspiring and thought provoking as the ontological turn may be, I want however to offer a methodological critique of the soundness of relying on apparently clear verbal expressions as expressions of the informants’ ontologically conflated understanding of things and concepts. In recent anthropology on ontology, we rarely read, “I think, that *maybe*…” or “I don’t know, *perhaps* it is…”. One might wonder whether the informant actually did not express any vagueness, or whether it was simply not noted down or reported by the anthropologists later on. It appears that clarification and radical expressions are of interest, while vagueness is less relevant.

With his notion of *definiteness,* sociologist John Law ([2004: 24-25](#_ENREF_42)) points to the way in which the sciences – social sciences included – often view a lack of clarity as a methodological problem on the scholars’ side rather than because the world is enacted in that way. Following Annemarie Mol, Law argues that when the world is practised in different ways, it is not only different perspectives but different realities. Reality, in this sense, should not be considered *a priori* definite for the researcher.

But what if it is actually not even definite for the informant? What if informants are not quite sure what a thing or the ‘world’ in all its totality really is? What if a thing is perhaps more than just one thing for the single individual at one time, instead of multiple ones depending on the different individuals’ perspective? Or what if informants feel that the words they use – and which anthropologists record or jot down – are not sufficiently encompassing to describe their worlds? Taking the question of ‘undecidedness’ as my point of departure, I argue that in understanding the informants’ world, we also need to take informants’ undecidedness at face value in order to explore how concepts and objects unfold in messy ways through vague, and at times contradictory, premises.

The point here is not so much an ethnographic exploration of the social use of light or cosiness in Denmark (see Bille and Sørensen, 2007, Bille, 2013, 2014) but rather a methodological venture. First, I outline how light plays a key role in Danish social life. Then I question the way in which clear verbal expressions from informants are taken as access points into clarifying the ontology of objects. This critique is then used to demonstrate how undecidedness becomes an analytical point of departure in studying the use of light for shaping cosiness in Denmark. From this, the article seeks to go beyond questions about *what* the world is, to *how* it is by investigating the recent academic interest in the concept of atmospheres. The article is based on 60 interviews in Copenhagen from 2011-2012 on the introduction of energy saving lighting technologies.

## The ecstasy of light

I have previously argued for the importance, from an anthropological perspective, of understanding how light and luminosity are more than simply means of making things visible (Bille and Sørensen, 2007, Bille, 2013, 2014). Light reveals that something is present, but it does so in a particular way, through shadows, tones, contrasts, etc. In Denmark, electrical lighting, along with natural lighting and fire, is continuously applied in people’s practices of orchestrating spaces. Candles are lit as guests arrive, they burn out, new ones are set up, the electrical light is dimmed as the evening progresses, or fully lit when it is time to go home, and curtains are pulled as the night falls and turns the windows into dark surfaces. In other words, apart from being a material phenomenon, light comes to matter through practices and the way it is entangled in the social and affective lives of people – most often at the margins of attention.

A case in point of such social embeddedness is the rise in energy saving technologies. In 2012, the incandescent light bulb that had illuminated most parts of the 20th century was phased out to accommodate more energy efficient light sources. Yet with these new lighting technologies also came increasing attention to light quality. According to most media coverage and Danish lighting experts, this change in technology has been for the worse in terms of light quality. Energy saving lighting technologies are more expensive to purchase and hazardous to health if they break, on top of which the very quality of the light does not live up to cultural ideals about visual orchestration of space and comfort. With the incandescent light bulb, consumers paradoxically understood quantity of light in terms of energy consumption, *Watt*. Now a new conceptual apparatus has arrived in the wake of the political pressure for increased energy awareness. As a part of the energy saving technology, people no longer have to understand light in terms of energy consumption, *watt*, but in terms of *lumen* – the measurement unit for light quantity.

Judging from the vast amount of attention the shift to energy saving light bulbs has attracted in the media, it is however not the quantity but the quality of light that is causing concern. While consumers knew what they were getting when they bought a 40 watt incandescent light bulb with an E27 base, they now have to know the measurements of *lumen*, *ra* and *kelvin*, what kind of light is wanted in a specific spot, whether the bulb is dimmable or not, and what kind of dimming contacts are working with that particular technology. Energy saving light bulbs, here defined as compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFL), also have several disadvantages from a technical point of view as compared to the incandescent light bulb. CFL bulbs are rarely dimmable; they are slow to light up, often up to a minute or more, and the design of the bulb is markedly different such that its long spiral or elongated shape may not fit a lamp. Furthermore, they do not emit the same spectrum of light as the incandescent light bulb, with the effect that surfaces appear different in terms of colour and texture. Most often, a surface will appear to have less depth and a greyish tone, which informants describe is not cosy (*ikke hyggeligt*). The incandescent light bulbs have a colour temperature of 2700 kelvin, which means that they are more reddish glow than energy saving light bulbs that often surpass 2900 kelvin.[[1]](#footnote-1) The colour reproduction, measured in *ra,* is likewise significantly different. The incandescent light bulb has a *ra* value of 99 compared to the 100 of the sun, while the energy saving light bulb is normally around 80-85. The light from an incandescent light bulb was in a sense “black boxed” as *watt*. The very notion of light is now being “white-boxed” to the consumer, opening up a range of measures to take into account when defining the nature of the bulb.

The point with the example of the changing lighting technologies of the 21st century is that, as mediators of vision, light from light bulbs (as well as candlelight and natural light) visually tint, shape and affect the material properties of things and their surroundings. It is not an ontic question of *whether* it exists, or a strictly ontological question of *what* it is, but rather *how* it is. Light, in this sense, becomes embedded in the norms and visual habits, whereby minor nuances matter, as they change the appearance of the material world. From this perspective, the ‘being’ of a thing is not limited to its physical shape. The thing may step out from itself – be ‘ecstatic’, to follow the terminology of philosopher Gernot Böhme ([1995: 32-34](#_ENREF_19), [2001: 131-145](#_ENREF_22)), and impose itself on other things, just as the light quality from a light bulb imposes itself on other things. Take for example, a blue glass. If the glass is placed alone in a white room, it will appear more vibrant to the bystander than if it were one among several coloured glasses. Add then that the glass will throw shadows by mingling with the light sources, and thus shape a blue rather than a simply darker patch, thus radically altering the surface and perception of the other object ([Böhme, 1995: 32](#_ENREF_19), [Bille and Sørensen, 2012: 104-109](#_ENREF_12)). The essence of an object’s ‘being’ thus also becomes the way it tones and is toned by other things. The important point here is that, when focusing on the ecstasy of things, what is needed is not an understanding of what a thing is but how the totality of (temporary) ecstasies makes it what is and, by extension, how these ecstasies affectively shape the way the objects are perceived by the viewer.

## The vagueness of cosiness

When I interview people about their use and perceptions of various lighting technologies, they most often talk about *hygge*, homeliness, energy consumption and the ‘cold light’ from the energy saving light bulbs, compared to the ‘warm light’ from the incandescent. All distinguish between ‘practical light’ and ‘cosy-light’, depending on the activities conducted, rather than necessarily the specific room. Light is used to shape activities and the spatial feeling that is desired. In this way, informants would change the feeling of their home during the day as the natural light or activities change, and turn on and off the electrical lights or candlelight. In this luminous orchestration of places, *hygge* is a particularly appreciated atmosphere shaped through light, although importantly to note that light alone does not determine *hygge*, but is equally influenced by many other objects, practices and expectations (Linnet, 2011). In the same way informants would also stress how light may create other senses of atmosphere, such as ‘unsafe’ public areas with little lighting, or happy, festive spaces, with more performative lighting, such as nightclubs or music festivals. Light is not exclusively creating such sensations, but an important part.

Despite the variations in dwelling type, income, class and preference for interior decoration, all informants describe *hygge* as shaped by a particular kind of lightscape defined by dimming and shielding the electrical lights or using candlelight (called ‘living light’).. Some informants, of course, challenge cosy-light for being too stereotypically Danish or enforcing a mood that is not welcome. Yet no one would light up a room with bare light bulbs, but would always orchestrate it to some degree by shielding off or subduing the direct glare. Thus variations exist as to what constitutes the particular character of cosy-light, but the general setting is a dispersed, subdued light, most often including candlelight, whereby domestic light in essence becomes closely related to understandings and practices of how to be and feel at home. Candlelight has a diffuse and elusive materiality that shapes the room in a different way to electrical light; one that ties in with ideas of intimacy and confidentiality. Even if it may be an exaggeration, Edwin Ardener even claims that, ‘In order to activate Danish domesticity, there needs to be candlelight’ ([1992: 28, my translation](#_ENREF_3)). Similarly, although not in a Danish context, Gaston Bachelard poetically notes that, ‘Reveries of this faint light will lead us back to the wee space of familiarity. It seems that there are dark corners in us that tolerate only a flickering light’ (1988:4).

The subdued lighting is thus part of orchestrating (the wish for) a cosy atmosphere and this effect of light is simultaneously what cosiness is – or also could be. One informant, Catharine, pointed to this dual nature when commenting that, ‘Candles are *hygge*. They create *hygge*’, whereby cosiness is articulated as both cause and effect. Ardener ([1992](#_ENREF_3)) calls this a *contemporaneity*, where the parts do not lead to or succeed each other but are present at once: light is both a marker, activator of action, a sign and a scene setter that shapes social spaces out of physical spaces, but without a clear meaning, and more as a particular presence ([Ardener, 1992: 27](#_ENREF_3), [cf. Armstrong, 1971: 31-32](#_ENREF_4)).

Catharine’s description above would fit nicely in with Henare et al’s methodological project of a lack of separation between matter and concept, between light and cosiness, in the Danish context. Yet, with further questioning the informants’ expressions about cosy-light comes also an insecurity and further reflection on whether that is the way it really is. The informants navigate in a cross-field of clarification and doubt, interchangeably between a ‘pathic moment’ of pre-conceptual presence and being seized and a ‘gnostic moment’ of conceptualization and classification of the perceived ([Strauss, 1966: 10](#_ENREF_54)). Sensing in this way is not a mode of knowledge but an affective relation to an exteriority ([Strauss, 1966](#_ENREF_54), [see also Barbaras, 2004](#_ENREF_7)).

Rather than advancing a study of *hygge* in Denmark ([see Linnet, 2011](#_ENREF_46)), the point here is to explore the role of undecidedness to question the use of informants’ phrases such as ‘here comes the *hygge*’ as an expression of the ontological nature of the light. Most often my interviews about light and *hygge* shift between clarity and vagueness, for instance, when Nanna states, ‘*Hygge* is many things, but of course, we say that candlelight is also *hygge*. I guess it is. Maybe it is also that. They set that kind of atmosphere. It is something, yeah, something you gather around’. Yet, later on in the interview she goes on to say that:

It is like I mentally tell myself that now I want to make it cosy, so I turn on this light. I guess it is like that. When I do this it becomes cosy. But it doesn’t. It may not lead to cosiness – I also know that. But the frame is sort of set for it. The stage is set by lighting the candle.

On the one hand, Nanna points to the way that candlelight instantiates *hygge*. However, after further reflection, doubt comes to mind - ‘I also know that it is not like that’ - after which light becomes a requisite for setting the cosy atmosphere. In other words, rather than an inseparable *part* of a thing, *hygge* becomes an affective condition – an atmosphere – achieved *through* the thing. Thus, while many informants immediately conflate *hygge* and a particular light setting, they remain undecided as to what both cosiness and light really are, since the word *hygge* covers too much. Or, rather, *hygge* denotes multiple things and phenomena (even in the same grammatical form): tangible things, modes of appearance, ways of being together, which in essence capture an atmosphere. *Hygge*,then, is a concept with vague definitions and an object with unclear borders. It is used in various ways, and in different grammatical forms, to describe a feeling of everything from a visit to the restaurant, a part of the city, a home, an object (*hyggen*), an activity (*at hygge*) and a quiet evening at home. Most often it is defined by its absence but generally involves informality, the ideal of equality, downplaying rules. At the same time, *hygge* is also highly structured and planned, despite claims to the opposite ([Ardener, 1992: 26-27](#_ENREF_3)). It is what is supposed to be achieved, and people interact with such knowledge and expectations, rather than on a blank slate.

While expectations, social practices, interaction and communicative forms are central to hygge, there is as alluded to above also a particular material character to *hygge*. It is about coming together through things: food, candy, television, or being alone with a book and a cup of tea, whereby the material infrastructure becomes the media through which cosiness unfolds. Simultaneously, as illustrated above, light *is* also *hygge*. *Hygge* is there, even if its character is vague and unclear. It is as if the informants acknowledge that the term *hygge* covers too much but they are not able to reduce it further or be more precise. How, then, can we understand this use of light and description of the orchestration of cosy spaces in Denmark, if we were to move beyond the conflation of matter and concept?

**Aspects of decidedness**

If we turn to the last decade of writing on ontology and multiplicity, we could get the impression that it is primarily about people on the margins of the Western world. Most often it is about shamans and healers in various versions, instigated by Henare, Wastell and Holbraad’s book *Thinking through Things* ([2007b](#_ENREF_37)), with its point of departure in Viveiros de Castro’s ([1998](#_ENREF_60)) work on perspectivalism in the Amazon. However, beyond the confines of anthropology, a wide range of discussions on ontologies and multiplicity have been based in *Science and Technology Studies*, with studies ranging from fertility clinics in USA ([Cussins, 1996](#_ENREF_26)), contraception in Australia ([Dugdale, 1999](#_ENREF_28)), Cumbrian sheep in the UK ([Law and Mol, 2008](#_ENREF_44)), alcoholic liver disease in England ([Law and Singleton, 2005](#_ENREF_45)), water pumps in Zimbabwe ([Laet and Mol, 2000](#_ENREF_40)) and atherosclerosis in Holland ([Mol, 2002](#_ENREF_48)).

In the latter study, Annemarie Mol eloquently shows how an object, atherosclerosis, as a composition of elements, actually represents different objects for different people, and not simply different perspectives on the same object. Mol unfolds this innovative argument through the way in which hospital staff handles the disease, descriptions in journals, staff meetings etc. When Mol observes and talks to the pathologist, atherosclerosis appears, under the microscope, as a thickening of the inner membrane. That is what atherosclerosis *is* ([Mol, 2002: 30-32](#_ENREF_48)). When she speaks to the doctor in the outpatients clinic, however, atherosclerosis is a pain or immobility. Atherosclerosis in the legs *is* apain, weak pulse, cold skin and low blood pressure. In this way, Mol examines how different professionals each perform different yet co-existing objects, precisely because the disease comes into being through different practices ([e.g. Mol, 2002: 24-25,30,102,108-110](#_ENREF_48)). Reality is ‘enacted’. If there are four different practices of atherosclerosis, then there are four different atherosclerosis, and not just different perspectives on the same phenomenon. These realities are, however, not necessarily fragmentarily separated but folded in and out of each other. The body (singular), Mol claims, is in other words multiple (many) ([Mol, 2002: 5,84](#_ENREF_48), [Law, 2011](#_ENREF_43)).

From Mol’s performative perspective, an object is multiple and is what it does and is enacted to be. This would be a tempting analytical framework for Susie’s point about cosy-light. And it is not far from what Holbraad likewise has suggested about the merging of concepts and things through people’s practices with them when stating that, ‘Instead of treating all the things that your informants say of and do to or with things as modes of representing the things in question, treat them as modes of defining them’ ([Holbraad, 2011: 12](#_ENREF_39), [cf. Bijker, 1995: 77](#_ENREF_9)). Despite the difference between Mol’s performative perspective, whereby objects are enacted, and Holbraad’s representation-presentations-perspective, whereby things and concepts merge, they have the analytically potent idea in common that things are multiple and variable.

Yet this particular perspective also carries with it its own ontological premise that goes beyond the systematic study of existence to instead being that ‘ontologies are brought into being, sustained, or allowed to wither away in common, day-to-day, socio-material practices’ ([Mol, 2002: 6](#_ENREF_48)). As Levy Bryant recapitulates and critiques, ‘The question of the object, of what substances *are*, is subtly transformed into the question of how and whether we *know* objects. The question of objects becomes the question of a particular relation between humans and objects’ ([2011: 16](#_ENREF_17)). Bryant implicitly critiques what he calls ‘epistemological realism’, such as Mol and Law, where ‘materials do not exist in and of themselves but are endlessly generated and at least potentially reshaped’ ([Law, 2004: 161](#_ENREF_42)). The ‘being of objects’ is reduced to our access or relation to it, as it is enacted, even if this would not necessarily imply that the chemical and physical structure of the object is transformed (cf. [Bryant, 2011: 18](#_ENREF_17), [Sartre, 1977: 65](#_ENREF_51)). As with quantum mechanics where all particles are both a particle and a wave, it is the observer that collapses the wave function into a particle by the very act of observation, rather than the facticity of the wave. This again illustrates how a lack of clarity, e.g. that it is both particle *and* wave, is seen as a methodological problem rather than the premise of the matter.

As illustrated, these approaches may offer a lens to understand Susie’s comment. Yet, inspiring as they are, they also raise other points of critique. Although most of the studies of multiplicity are about the informants’ practices with the object, the arguments are often tied to clear verbal expressions, where words are ‘modes of defining them’ ([Holbraad, 2011: 12](#_ENREF_39)), such as, ‘We live in the worlds our forefathers let us see’ (Nielsen 2013, my translation), or Mol’s pathologist: ‘Look. Now there’s your atherosclerosis. That’s it. A thickening of the intima. That’s really what it is […] Under a microscope’ ([Mol, 2002: 30](#_ENREF_48), [cf. Mol, 1999: 77-78](#_ENREF_47)). One could ask what an anthropological study of multiple ontologies would look like if, instead of having the verbal expression as its starting point or central to its argument, it had *only* practices? All things being equal, it is easier to convince the reader and oneself, and even raise the question of ontology as the systematic study of being, with Susie’s ‘here comes the hygge’ than to rely solely on a detailed description of practices with things ([cf. Alberti et al., 2011](#_ENREF_1)). It is also possible that the doctor in the outpatients clinic in the Dutch hospital is unable to use the understanding of atherosclerosis as a sclerosis (hardening) of the artery in the diagnosis and so, in his/her own practice does not address this. There must, however, still be some sort of awareness that atherosclerosis *could* be something other than merely a weak pulse and cold skin, if nothing else then at least through knowledge gained at medical school. And, if this is the case, is it then ontolog*ies*, or merely aspects of a shared ontology being enacted?

Ludwig Wittgenstein famously talks about aspect-seeing when he shows how a drawing may depict both a duck and a rabbit depending on how one looks at it ([2009: 205](#_ENREF_61)). If informants are well aware that the same object may appear in multiple forms, how then can the anthropologist state that the informants ‘enact’ it as a rabbit simply because they momentarily (e.g. in relation to their professional conduct) only see this, or are forced to act *as if* it were only this singular object? According to Mol, the same person is also able to slide between one and the other practice ([1999: 79](#_ENREF_47), [cf. Law and Mol, 2008](#_ENREF_44)). If, however, the informant is able to slide between versions of atherosclerosis – or anaemia (Mol 1999:77-78) – this then also means that every version must, to some extent, be a momentarily bound unity. Importantly for the argument here, Mol ([1999: 83](#_ENREF_47)) explicitly claims that it is *versions* and not *aspects* that the informant enacts. Yet the ability to slide between one and the other version, in practice as well as in the consciousness of the existence of each individual version, sounds more like aspect-seeing than multiple versions. The difference is thus between a point of departure in *defined and clear versions*, compared to *vague and undecided aspects* ([cf. Laet and Mol, 2000](#_ENREF_40)).

From this follows the problematic nature of taking Susie’s word at face value without simultaneously listening to other ways in which she defines both light and *hygge*, depending on the context. Light is both warmth, *hygge*, element in staging *hygge*, dangerous, and just light, both separate and merged in what Ardener ([1992](#_ENREF_3)) calls synchronisms of meaning, action and object. Susie’s quick and kind opening remark was an aspect of what light was, not the total ontological nature of light and/or *hygge*. Hence, the critique here is not the idea that things are enacted, that concept and thing may be conflated, or whether one can even talk about multiple ontologies. I believe these approaches could be used to analyse *hygge* and light with fruitful results. It is rather a critique of a position in which an object is *only* one thing at a time for an individual informant, rather than as yet unclarified number of things or aspects of things. An object may, as illustrated with the case of *hygge*, contain several – even contradictory - aspects for the same person, and some of these aspects may be clear or only come to matter in a professional part of life, while others not. Yet there is still a unity to those aspects – they are aspects of a *single* ontology.

Furthermore, there may also be an undecidedness as to whether light *is* cosiness: ‘It [light] is *hygge*, or maybe *hygge* is not the proper word’, as several of my informants stated. *Hygge* is, after all, a comfortable word to use, sometimes a metaphor, but often used for lack of a better term for the plethora of situations it occurs in. Added to this is the social evaluation implied in describing a situation as marked by *hygge*. To these informants, light and *hygge* are both the same *and* different things, and neither the uniformity nor the difference is something the informants are completely decided upon. The zones of undecidedness are shaped by the situation. There may be what we can call “temporary interests of perception” giving orientation to how an object becomes momentarily confined and categorized in a situation in order to let a practice proceed. Susie may merge light and *hygge* when she approaches our table, and her statement is seductively clear for the anthropologist to notice and introduce an academic argument with. But Susie’s statement, where the light *is* the hygge, is not just an expression about how the world *is* in this exact moment but also a normative expression about how the moment *should* be – an interest of perception with a social evaluation of the nature of both a pub visit and a social gathering in Denmark.

So how much should we actually take our informants’ words at face value as *ontological* statements? When informants mean or do something, there is a potential danger with the current focus on ontology that it is interpreted more radically without a close look at how the words they are using may just be a common phrase, or may not necessarily be fully covering their experience, worldview or ontology, if there is a difference between the latter two. A point here is thus that I can take the statement ‘here comes the *hygge*’ as a clear ontological statement that many informants used during interviews, whereby light and *hygge* merge in *cosy-light*, and thus follow in the footsteps of Henare et al. But I can also take it *too much* at face value as they may also state that this is not *only* the case, or at least that both *hygge* and light are also something else and all these variation are part of one ontology. *Hygge* in Denmark is an overly diffuse and all-embracing concept and matter, and questions about undecidedness and vagueness are as important as the firm identification of the nature of reality.

While the above concerns question the extent to which informants see aspects, have interest of perception, are decided or not, and whether language is able to capture this, I will in the following point beyond the clarification of what a thing *is*, or is *enacted* to be, to the way things present themselves, as an element in informants’ and anthropologists’ understanding of inhabiting one or the other world. To understand *cosy-light*, one needs to understand atmospheres.

## The ‘being’ of atmosphere

Light plays a central, although by no means exclusive, part in the orchestration of affect, as has continuously been shown in art, architecture, film and theatre ([Baxendall, 1995](#_ENREF_8), [Laganier and Pol, 2011](#_ENREF_41)). This feeling of a place or situation commonly goes by the term “atmosphere” and tones the way people experience and interpret events (cf. [Anderson, 2009](#_ENREF_2), [Edensor, 2012](#_ENREF_29), [Hasse, 2002](#_ENREF_34), [Navaro-Yashin, 2009](#_ENREF_49), [2012](#_ENREF_50), [Stewart, 2011](#_ENREF_53)). Other terms such as ‘affect’, ‘mood’ and ‘ethos’ has also been used to highlight the existence, yet atmospheres as illustrated below focuses on the spatial aspects of such existence (for a fuller review see Bille et all, in press). Through such toning, one can experience exhilaration, a hateful or sad atmosphere, cosiness, intimacy or other such descriptions of sensed places. But atmospheres may also escape one’s attention, or not be verbalized, and yet still play a key role in the appearance of the material world and in people’s practices through it. More than simply the informants’ atmosphere, the anthropological data generation is shaped in the light of such atmospheric attunements, whether the anthropologist recognizes them or not. The anthropologist may methodologically try to create an atmosphere that the informants feel comfortable in, or which has a particular intensity that creates rapport, trust and data (the Balinese cockfight being exemplary).

The atmosphere is then translated into writing in order to catch the reader and undergird the argument and factuality of the fieldwork. Atmospheres are, so to speak, integral to the way things and emotions appear and the anthropological analysis is authored (cf. Geertz 1988, 1957). In other words, to understand the worlds of our informants, we need to understand the premises of how atmosphere seizes the informants and the anthropologist; how the atmosphere can be the very feeling around which the emplaced informants structure their social and material life, such as *hygge*. In this case, words may not suffice. At other times, the atmosphere simply extends beyond the limits of language and is something that ‘just is’ ([Gilsenan, 1982: 265-266](#_ENREF_31)).

Atmospheres are not just a product of the human psyche. Architecture, for instance, is a material form that deliberately seeks to direct the atmosphere ([Zumthor, 2006](#_ENREF_62)). However much philosophical literature has also continuously argued that atmosphere cannot be reduced to the material qualities of the infrastructure ([Böhme, 1995](#_ENREF_19), [Bollnow, 1941](#_ENREF_14), [Tellenbach, 1968](#_ENREF_56)). People bring a particular state of mind to a place, and this affect may be transmitted ([Brennan, 2003](#_ENREF_16)). A joyful or exhilarated mood may be dampened by stepping into a funeral ritual, and discouragement may disappear when you meet people who are partying. As one of the prime proponents of the recent philosophical emphasis on atmospheres, Gernot Böhme describes this relationality in the following way:

Atmospheres fill spaces; they emanate from things, constellations of things, and persons […] Yet they cannot be defined independently from the persons emotionally affected by them; they are subjective facts. Atmospheres can be produced consciously through objective arrangements, light and music […] But what they are, their character, must always be felt: by exposing oneself to them, one experiences the impression that they make. Atmospheres are in fact characteristic manifestations of the co-presence of subject and object ([1998: 112-114](#_ENREF_20)).

Atmospheres are thus an integral part of being human situated in place, and not necessarily something that can be verbalized or defined, even if felt as a relation to an exteriority. They ‘exist’ even if they may have weak or strong intensity, negative, positive or insignificant influence. The appearance of the world is in essence shaped by atmospheres, the way spaces seize us, and we seize the ‘attuned spaces’ ([Bollnow, 1963: 230](#_ENREF_15), [Böhme, 2006: 16](#_ENREF_23)).

The concept of atmospheres is drawn into a discussion of the methodological soundness of the turn towards ontology here because of the ontological status of their *in-betweenness*. Atmospheres cannot be pointed out, as in ‘there it is’, and yet it is there as ‘the most familiar and everyday kind of thing’ ([Heidegger, 2010: 130-131](#_ENREF_35)). It is both an ontological reality that exists and an analytical implication of studying people’s practices and understandings of spaces, as well as material and social life. It cannot be confined to a the physical boundaries of room or place but is the volatile and changing sensation through which reality comes into being as a unity with innumerable nuances without borders or direction (Gumbrecht, 2006, 2011, Thibaud, 2002, 2011). Atmospheres are in this sense quasi-objective, to use Böhme’s terminology ([2006: 16](#_ENREF_23)), something which is precisely defined by vagueness:

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 of feeling *like a haze*. ([1993: 114, my emphasis](#_ENREF_18))

A focus on atmospheres thus means a shift from what a thing *is*, or is enacted to be, to a focus on *how* and why the world is present as it is. To follow Renaud Barbaras, this shift forces a move from the ontology of objects, i.e. each individual thing, to the ontology of the elements where, ‘the element is not subjective, nor is it what is perceived. It is the dimension through which perception takes place’ (Barbaras, 1998:222, cited in Thibaud, in press). The material world in essence becomes what it is to the observer through the atmospheres that are created in the very interaction between matter, place and state of mind.

For the argument here, Böhme’s distinction between *Wirklichkeit* and *Realität* is also important, although both are translated as ‘reality’ in English. *Realität* denotes the ‘factual fact’ of what we may know about the object ([2001: 57](#_ENREF_21)) whereas *Wirklichkeit* is the ‘actual fact’ of how things are experienced ([2001: 57](#_ENREF_21)). Contrary to notions of ‘relational materialism’ ([Law, 2004: 83](#_ENREF_42)), where reality is enacted, the point is that it is precisely in the *contact* between the ecstasies of entities, bodies and affects that the constitution of the world is presenced to the observer as an actual fact. It is through atmospheres that cosiness, irony, gatherings, politics, power, morality etc., take form. The uncertainty and hazy nature of atmospheres accentuated by Böhme marks the undecidedness my informants have as to what – and not least how – the atmosphere characterized as *hygge* becomes present. Decidedness and certainty is not an ethnographic reality in this case.

In this take on atmospheres, the properties of an object are not something it “has” or is enacted to “have”. The object’s properties do not separate from its surrounding. Rather this happens through the ‘articulation of its presence, the way and manner of its presence’ ([Böhme, 1995: 32](#_ENREF_19)). The *being* of an object, in other words, is not defined by its physical, tangible separation from other things but by their presences and absences, their ‘ecstasies’ ([Böhme, 1995: 155-176](#_ENREF_19)).

## Conclusion: Vagueness as premise

So, to return to the ethnographic examples, we may on the one hand understand Susie’s proclamation that light is *hygge* as an example of how representation and presentation merge, or defy separation to begin with. A fair analysis would then be that it is the way Susie performs and talks about the light that defines what it is. Yet, on the other hand, I want to push the analysis and talk about the way in which the material environment is enveloped in a ‘haze’ by the atmosphere (cf. Navaro-Yashin, 2012:168, for a critique of using affect to denote atmospheres, see Bille et al., in press), a world where affects and presences (or absences, or presence of absences) constantly shape the impression of the world through a haze without necessarily a clear separation between things. With the diffuse borders and intensities of atmospheres, the world is shaped as a sensed place at times shared by people, but with the possibility of radically different perceptions among the people in the attuned spaces; some will find it cosy, others not (and thus hinting to how a phenomenological approach cannot stand alone in understanding social worlds). It may be unclear what the atmosphere precisely *is* in a given situation and yet, as an element of social practice, atmospheres also structure what the world *should* be – in all its unclarity. Susie’s proclamation that ‘here comes the *hygge*’was not so much a statement about the ontology of the tea light or the emic concept of cosiness as it was an ontology of the elements – the atmosphere that *is* and *should* be. As subjective facts, atmospheres are the contact zone of *in-betweenness* that cannot be reduced to the object or subject but are always there: not only *in* the relation but *as* the relation.

The undecidedness as to the nature of the relationship between light and *hygge* is anchored in this double position of not quite object and not quite concept but rather the in-betweenness beyond the collapse of representation-presentation dichotomies. The nature of atmosphere cannot be limited or even pinpointed materially or geographically, and yet it has an ontological reality that tones and attunes the world, in the sense of not being the property of a thing but rather the ecstasy of a thing in concert with other things. *How* the world is to our informants depends on the atmosphere that is subjectively experienced, yet culturally informed, in the moment of praxis or description. The atmosphere is shaped through the intersection of ecstatic matter and people’s state of mind, social practices, communication and expectations, which thereby shapes what the thing momentarily is or needs to be. Atmospheres offer direction which, even if unclear, may bring a sense of comfort, despair, seize us or escape our attention as something that ‘just is’. They may create intensities that provoke temporary interest of perception whereby an object is momentarily confined but then unfolds again as the atmospheric intensity drops.

My aim here has thus been to point to how interest of perception and aspect-seeing is a premise for proclamations such as ‘here comes the *hygge*’, in order to momentarily confine what something is and should be. This momentary confinement, I argue, is not a matter of ontolog*ies* but of aspects of worldviews shaped through the (wish for) intensities of atmospheres. In this respect, I wish to methodologically promote vagueness and undecidedness in line with Law when exploring ontologies rather than bypass them, for the sake of clarity. Vagueness should, in this respect, be taken seriously both theoretically and methodologically while, at times, the clear expression should be taken with caution.

At the same time, it has been the aim to point out that the way in which the world presents itself is (in part) toned by light settings that people most often barely recognize, even if - according to some recent research - it guides moral judgment, creative processes and the physical responses of the body ([Chiou and Cheng, 2013](#_ENREF_25), [Czeisler, 2013](#_ENREF_27), [Steidle and Werth, 2013](#_ENREF_52)). Yet informants and anthropologists are not just *in* but a *part of* the atmosphere, since our moods and practices co-shape the atmosphere. In some instances we cannot verbalize the feeling of space, or the concepts we have are too imprecise to fully satisfy the feeling. It is the ‘something’ that is taken for granted or overwhelms us that nonetheless shapes our conceptualizations and orchestrations of the world. The interplay between language, affect, materiality, normativity and practice as subject of ethnographic analyses can, in this respect, be explored through the impact of the atmosphere on informants and anthropologist. In other words, a focus on *how* the world came to appear as it did, rather than what the world *is*.

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1. That said, producers are increasingly making energy saving light bulbs with lower kelvin. Yet these are rarely the ones readily available in supermarkets, where most people buy bulbs. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)