

Mark Deggan / University of British Columbia

### What is Literary “Atmosphere”?

The Role of Fictive Motion & Hypothetical Focalization in Understanding Ambience in Fiction.

This paper demonstrates how Leonard Talmy’s influential frames of *ception* and *fictive motion* can be applied to larger scale literary constructions than are evident at the sentence level, while indicating the difficulties of how such motion is to be focalized. My presentation concentrates upon fictional instances in which mental spaces comprise the sorts of cognitive-sensory environments literary critics are beginning to call ‘atmospheres’ – novelistic environments incorporating both sensory and ideational phenomena. My evidence is drawn from Marguerite Duras’s challenging novella, *The Lover*. At a key juncture of this text, ‘a river seems to reach the horizon’, and crossing it by ferry, a girl knowing herself about to be seduced, describes how the river has ‘a storm blowing inside the water. A wind raging.’ Tellingly, the girl’s affective response to her situation is caught up in ‘the surrounding flatness stretching as far as the eye can see’, thus the ambient conditions of the environment, as these come to be focalized, blend with the cognitive, sensory, and affective aspects of her experience. So, too, the girl’s view of the unfolding scene, and her projected ‘image’ of herself are described as codeterminant even if ‘while it was happening no one even knew of its existence’, factors adding to the temporal ambivalence of the episode. In concert with recent attempts to theorize the mood and ambience of complex environments as aesthetic “atmospheres” – the ‘intertwinement of representational spaces with the spaces of bodily presence’ – fictive motion and hypothetical focalization are shown to provide terms by which atmospheres can be read as performative instances of Talmy’s notion of *ception*.

In sum, I apply Talmy’s dynamic amalgamation of ‘sensory stimulation, mental imagery, and currently experienced thought and affect’ to the totalized hypothetical environment I call “fictive atmosphere”.

