

Experience in a New Key

Tonino Griffero*

Pathicity: Experiencing the World in an Atmospheric Way

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Abstract: Is there really an atmospheric turn? The concept of “atmosphere” as a qualitative-emotional prius of sensory experience seems today to have encouraged the convergence of many interdisciplinary studies focused on the qualitative aspects of our “surroundings”. Based on the neo-phenomenological theory of atmospheric perception as a first pathivc impression and a felt-bodily communication, this paper explores and synthesises the relationship between atmospheres and expressive qualities. It thus clarifies the key features of a general “pathic” aesthetics. It considers perceivers as beings who are touched by atmospheric feelings in emotional and tactile ways. These are widespread and vary in their modulation of lived space. They are also ontologically rooted in things and quasi-things of the lifeworld. By realising how they (especially in an unintentional way) expose themselves to what happens, perceivers turn out not to be “subjects of something” but rather “subjects to something”: that is, human beings who are only “sovereign” when they are free, at least in their daily experience, from the dogma of rational and methodological autonomy imposed by Western Modernity.

Keywords: atmospheres, quasi-things, pathicity, felt body, affordances, presentness, resonance

1 A pathic aesthetics

“Fortunately, there first exists (apart from the light waves and nerve currents) the colouring and shine of things themselves, the green of the leaf and the yellow of the grain field, the black of the crow and the gray of the sky”.¹ Does Heidegger’s anti-scientistic call to *qualia* mean that our everyday experience can never exceed the lifeworldly dimension and its phenomenal certainty? And can a philosophical reflection really investigate a lifeworld experience that in principle comes before (and transcendently regulates) any theoretical thematization of experience? Also, is it enough to say that “a subjective account of experience should be distinguished from an account of subjective experience”?² And in any case, what is the lifeworld, really? Does it amount to the experiential evidence and habitualities from which scientific statements get their meaning and justification? Or is the lifeworld the reflection of epistemology, of the part of it that is compatible with common sense? Or else, is it the subjective and idiosyncratic way in which the person appropriates the world?

After almost a century of discussions, it is still unclear what the lifeworld is. However, two points are clear for me: a) the lifeworld defends the validity of sensible-emotional experience and resists the attacks of scientific abstractions, thus highlighting the qualitative involvement in the world that is epistemically repudiated as too subjective and ephemeral; b) the “things” one encounters in the *Lebenswelt*, which I

¹ Heidegger, *What is a Thing*, 210.

² Gallagher & Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind*, 21.

*Corresponding author: Tonino Griffero, University of Rome “Tor Vergata”, Rome, Italy; E-mail: t.griffero@lettere.uniroma2.it

mean as the set of aesthesiological truths of everyday praxis (first of all *Stimmungen* and atmospheric feelings, chaotic situations and affordances), are not the same one finds in a rigorous epistemic-objective and therefore dis-encharmed world (selfish genes, atoms, etc.). In my view, our first encounter with the world and the resulting “objective” experience (in an intersubjectivistic sense) testifies to our pathic being-in-the-world: hence my proposal to embed a phenomenology of atmospheres and quasi-things³ in the more comprehensive theory of a pathic aesthetics.

By “pathic” I do not mean pathetic or pathological, of course, but the affective and lifeworldly involvement that the perceiver feels often unable to critically react to or mitigate the intrusiveness of.⁴ This involvement and complicity with the atmospheric world is for me the core of the aesthetic sphere (in the etymological sense of *aisthesis*), much more so than art and beauty. But it is also a real phenomenon, to the extent that it withstands every projectivistic criticism. Thus, philosophically rehabilitating pathicity means valorizing the ability to let oneself go – a skill so rare today that it appears surprisingly (and critically) very relevant nowadays: one could sum it up as the ability to be a means of what happens to us rather than subjects of what we do. This skill is obviously stigmatized by the rationalistic post-Enlightenment dogma of subjective sovereignty and finalistic action, which becomes even more radical in the biotechnological attempt to remove every kind of contingency. Yet, it is the main heuristic instrument of a pathic aesthetics.

The practicability of a pathic aesthetics, though, entirely depends on our ability to welcome what happens to us, whether we like it or not, resisting both the temptation to always transform the given into something done (i.e. a spontaneous evolution into an artificial production) and the temptation to seek shelter from this historical contingency in (now definitively compromised) late-Romantic obscurantist nostalgias. This pathic aesthetics, now emancipated from the nineteenth- and twentieth-century view of art as a continuation of religion and/or politics with different means, is for me a real “thought of the senses”⁵ – where the genitive is both subjective and objective – conceived as a non-gnostic but, indeed, pathic form of experience (also in Erwin Straus’ sense).⁶

This explains why I am especially interested in ordinary (naïve) sensible experiences, particularly when they are involuntary and show the key-role of affectivity or, better, self-affection, namely of how one feels when experiencing the co-presence of oneself and a thing (or, better, a quasi-thing). Obviously, what profoundly changes here is the very meaning of experience. A pathic aesthetics and phenomenology, in fact, do not presuppose an interpretive and constructivist approach – that is, the idea that the world is given only through some reflective *access* – but suppose that there is a sense (in both meanings of the word) that is always already sedimented outside of us and can be verified through our felt-bodily and prereflexive resonance.

This makes it possible, more specifically, to avoid the frustrations caused both by transcendentalism, which is always exclusively exhausted in the analysis of the conditions of possibility, and interpretationism (hermeneutics and semiotics),⁷ which is always bound to a necessarily deferred sense at the expense of the presence. My pathic phenomenology and aesthetics, instead, intends to counteract such twofold bad (unending) infinity, and the mistrust that it entails in the fullness of meaning of what is simply present and yet happens to us without us being able to neutralize it through a merely observational orientation. I remain, instead, as faithful as possible to the “presence”, to the way in which appearances resound in our felt body. Following closely Hermann Schmitz’s and Gernot Böhme’s footsteps,⁸ I therefore focus on atmospheric feelings in the context of today’s aestheticization of the lifeworld and the so-called diffuse design, typical of

³ See Griffero, *Atmospheres*, and *Quasi-Things*.

⁴ According to Klages, *Sämtliche Werke. 3 Philosophische Schriften*, 643, pathicity is the ability to receive effects rather than produce them, to be possessed by what happens and to act only in light of this rapture.

⁵ Griffero, *Place, Affordances, Atmospheres*.

⁶ Straus, *The Primary*, 367-379.

⁷ We are referring here, of course, to the “vulgate” sense of these two disciplines. In fact, it is clear that, to give just one example here, for Heidegger understanding (*Verstehen*) and affective situation (*Befindlichkeit*) are always closely intertwined.

⁸ I am listing here only their main works on this subject. Cf. Schmitz, *System der Philosophie*. III.2. *Der Gefühlsraum; Atmosphären*, and Böhme, *Atmosphären; Anmutungen; Aisthetik; Architektur und Atmosphäre; The Aesthetics of Atmospheres; Atmospheric Architectures*.

late capitalist societies, which are based on surplus consumption, on desires (rather on needs) that cannot be satisfied in principle and are “intensified in being met”.⁹ The analysis of situations and atmospheric perceptions, which constitute the first step of this wished-for pathic aesthetics, introduces us to entities that, without being full and measurable objects, are present and active to us, primarily populating our lifeworld and creating an experiential and unthematic horizon without being purified of subjectivity.

Much of this comes from the impressions radiated by the spaces which are inhabited by things but also and above all by quasi-things, that is, by entities that, as we shall see below (paragraph 6), fully coincide with their appearance “in act” (active and effective, indeed, *wirklich*)¹⁰ and their arousing the affective situation. The expressive qualities that by radiating atmospheres, turn things into quasi-things or present themselves as quasi-things in the proper sense are both particular natural phenomena (twilight, luminosity, darkness, the seasons, the wind, the weather, the hours of the day, the fog, etc.) and relatively artificial phenomena (townscape, music, soundscape, the numinous, dwelling, charisma, the gaze, shame, etc.). All these qualities are salient not despite being apparent and ephemeral, but precisely because of that, provided that becoming is no longer understood as an anomaly of being. Nevertheless, for that very reason, Western thought and common sense – when the latter is just the container of vulgarized scientific ideas – consider them devoid of reality as opposed to full things, which are endowed with borders, separated from other things, perduring in time and normally inactive if not touched.

Moreover, a pathic and atmospherological aesthetics, which is (broadly) realist in rejecting the lazy associationist and projectivist explanatory hypothesis, emphasizes the cooperative relationship between experience and the more nuanced dimension of quasi-things, which, just like the ecstasy of things (in Böhme’s sense), emotionally tune their surroundings. This pathic area is intermediate (an in-between indeed) but in a predualistic way, meaning that atmospheres are not the outcome of two autonomous and fixed poles (subject and object) but express a relation prior to its (fixed and cohesive) *relata*. The core of this “we-space” or in-between, however, is always the felt- or lived-body (*Leib*), that is, the non-physiological and non-anatomical dimension. It always also presents itself as a task, as something we are daily responsible for – even more so when, like today, it is subject to (and threatened by) countless modifications and technological prostheses. Both the theory of atmospheres and that of quasi-things thus presuppose an adequate investigation of human felt-bodily experience. Consequently, both seek to rehabilitate the specifically aesthetological paradigm of certainty, thought of as *experientia vaga* without rules, irreducible in its rich lifeworldly meaning to an etiologic and genetic approach. However vague in underscoring affective hetero-determination and not identifying a single and epistemic assignable thing, this experiential and sensible certainty attests the being-in-the-world better than other, traditionally privileged, states (including the *cogito*).

In short: one should learn to experience the world pathically (in the right way), no longer regarding teleological efficiency as a phenomenologically privileged path. Particular attention should be given not to the subject – which has been pathologically overestimated by Modernity with well-known negative consequences – but to the pathic “to me” (or to the perceptological “me”) that precedes the egological solidification – which as such is fatally destined to the dualism typical of cognitivism. Without taking refuge in the only critical-polemic use of a lifeworldly approach, my proposal aims to avoid the scientific illusion that sooner or later every epistemic acquisition will have a positive impact on our everyday experience, thus trying to conceive of human beings, as already mentioned, not as “subjects of” but rather as “subject to” – not independent and autonomous as Modernity posits, but sovereign and adult precisely because they were educated to expose themselves (in the right way).¹¹ After all, as soon as you pay attention to it, you can easily see that what happens to us hetero-determines us much more violently when we fight or try to manipulate it than when we abandon ourselves to it (*cum grano salis*, of course). This is a chance to see affective involvement as potentially leading to emancipation rather than to occult and alienating mediation, as our paranoid culture seems instead to be obliged to claim.

⁹ Böhme, *Critique*, 16.

¹⁰ According to a frequent Böhme’s distinction (see for example *Critique*): their *actual fact* (what they irradiate) and not their *factual fact* (what they are made of).

¹¹ Cf. Böhme, *Ethik*.

2 In praise of presentness

An atmospherological phenomenology of experience aims at rehabilitating presence (present, presentification and presentness) in a spatial-temporal sense, opposing all philosophies obsessed with the tendency to defer the presence/present's sense of experience. The latter fatally reduces present/presence to a mere elusive moment of transition, totally negligible if compared to past stability and to a long-desired active future transformation of the world. This rehabilitation of presence, developed independently by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (in a *kulturkritisch* way)¹² and (phenomenologically) by Hermann Schmitz,¹³ should be based on the pathic-aesthetic notion of felt-bodily presence.

Gumbrecht distances himself from a culture of meaning for which the truth is necessarily something invisible hidden behind the surface (or the signifier) and the subject, disembodied and spiritual, seems to realize itself only if it transforms what is “only” present. He defends the importance of re-presentation above representation, of appearances or signifiers also when not coupled with a meaning (in other terms, physiognomies without interiority), and replaces meanings with (even painful) present “moments of intensity” meant as atmospheres and moods no longer waiting to be “deciphered”. As one can see, Gumbrecht's rehabilitation of presence/present means avoiding both the indefinite and therefore frustrating search for a transcendental foundation and the necessarily relativistic constructionist approach. Consequently, it reintegrates three underestimated dimensions: space against time, appearance as such as self-reference against any alleged substrate, but especially the felt body, that is, the body that we do not have but rather *are*. Exactly for this reason, according to this certainly questionable interpretation of mine, it's only a small step, so to speak, from Gumbrecht's historic-cultural will-to-presence – the “yearning for moments of presence in our broad present”, the need “to grasp them and to be open to their fullness”¹⁴ – to Schmitz's ontological-neophenomenological will-to-present.

For Schmitz, in fact, to *be* means to *be-present*. The person is a conscious subject with the capability of self-ascription if and only if they are always able to go back to their proto-identitary life. This original life, based on “subjective facts”, is exactly that of the primitive present, to be understood in both a temporal and a spatial sense. According to a felt-bodily economy based on the subject's vital drive and affective involvement, fright (exemplarily), pain, and other catastrophic reactions (in Plessner's sense) show through a felt contraction that, when living beings spatio-temporally attempt to escape from the spatio-temporal present/presence (the here and now), they prove they are always conditioned by it: what happens touches and concerns them.

Without elaborating further on Schmitz's philosophical system and his relentless campaign against the Western psychological-reductionist-introjectionist paradigm, suffice it to recall here his idea of the primitive present as the fusion point of five elements (here, now, being, this and I). The certainty provided by this, guaranteed by a felt-bodily resonance, implies no certainty either about one's self-attributed and slightly abstract properties or the real nature of what appears to them, but only about their being emotionally concerned as subjects. Through the fivefold unfolded present, human beings (unlike animals) doubtlessly go beyond the present situation, but it's only thanks to the collapse of their personal emancipation and the resulting regression to their primitive present (personal regression) that they feel and know with certainty that they exist. In other terms: only when meanings suddenly fall back into their internally diffuse meaningfulness, do the subjects have full confidence in reality and fully experience it.

This approach, which I have only sketched here, is rooted in a phenomenological theory of felt-bodily communication. According to it, an experiencer felt-bodily communicates with everything that is other (be it animated or not) in the sense that they experience the other's presence-present through their own felt-bodily presentness, that is, through a resonance understood as one of many possibilities contained in the intracorporeal economy of contraction (encorporation) and expansion (excorporation). By virtue of this simultaneous presence of communication partners, and regardless of whether the subject thus embodies or is disembodied into something, everyday experience (walking down a street, contemplating a landscape,

¹² See Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence; Atmosphere, and Our Broad Present*.

¹³ Since the first book of his *System of Philosophy* (1964).

¹⁴ Gumbrecht, *Our Broad Present*, 79.

waiting for the train, even feeling our heartbeat) seems to mainly consist in feeling the presence-present. This requires, of course, that one is able, in the short term at least, to carelessly open oneself to the moment, get out of the usual goal-oriented life and feel the ephemeral *qualia* of the world. It could be said that this ordinary felt-bodily experience of presentness is really mine, and therefore can only occur if I can rely on the experience of a primitive present that is able to break the life *continuum* thanks to something sudden and new. This involuntary experience can provide a self-consciousness without identification, i.e. a self-acquaintance with myself through the primitive present.

To sum up, Gumbrecht's "presence" and Schmitz's "present" are just two examples of today's increasing phenomenological rehabilitation (respectively in literary and everyday experience) of all that appears as such and that we directly felt-bodily perceive. It is anything but casual that both focus on experiencing atmospheres and highly value their key-role in experience. We could even talk here of affective enactivism.¹⁵ This means that, whether one surrenders to situations full of atmospheric energy, or fulfills (more or less voluntarily) the "affective action" through which they consolidate our incipient and vague emotions, without the external conditions and constraints provided by atmospheres one wouldn't experience certain feelings, or, at least, one would not feel them as something precise and authoritative.

3 The neglected first impression

A phenomenological and atmospherological explanation of experience should rehabilitate the so-called first impression. That is to say, the involuntary life experiences that, "almost" beyond both doubt and selective or conceptual discretion, function as a global response (emotive, motivational and value-related). The first impression is irreducible to single elements, therefore one should avoid the compositional, atomistic-singularistic logic that both Western language and physics take for granted. In my view, the first impression is an affective felt-bodily involvement that, interrupting the habitual observational and pragmatic flow (exemplarily in the case of the already mentioned primitive present), can, precisely thanks to its very immediacy, represent for the subject an identity certificate much better than the *cogito* and than objective facts, which as such might be ours as much as others'. The first impression, which is certainly amendable, though only because it's initially assumed in its unanalysable certainty, is always atmospheric. This is why "the sensible working-class woman [...] sees at a glance a slight anger in her returning husband and a mute irritation in her son",¹⁶ without being able to analytically explain the link between physiognomic traits and the impressions she draws from them. When, for example, we feel something when visiting a certain apartment for the first time, we are living an affective and felt-bodily experience that has immediate evaluative and expressive consequences, and whose analytic explanation sounds like a flat post facto rationalisation.

Without quantifying this first impression, I usually embrace the (willingly naive) thesis according to which the first impression ceases "when in the person who receives the impression there is nothing left that could co-resound during the act in which something is recorded and understood".¹⁷ As for the possible uncertainty of the first impression, one must be careful not to confuse formal certainty with content certainty, given that an atmosphere of uncertainty (I feel there is something wrong in this place) is not necessary a less certain atmosphere than an atmosphere whose content is affectively certain (I feel tension in this place). The first and (so to speak) indemonstrable impression influences and directs with its atmospheric charge every subsequent reflection and experience. It is therefore not surprising that, in life as in literature, an enormous yet fragile atmospheric potentiality is given with our first experience of a place.¹⁸

¹⁵ Cf. Slaby, *Emotions*.

¹⁶ Klages, *Sämtliche Werke*. 6, *Ausdruckskunde*, 379.

¹⁷ Eckstein, *Psychologie*, 102.

¹⁸ "What makes the very first glimpse of a village, a town, in the landscape so incomparable and irretrievable is the rigorous connection between foreground and distance. Habit has not yet done its work. As soon as we begin to find our bearings, the landscape vanishes at a stroke like the façade of a house as we enter it. It has not yet gained preponderance through a constant exploration that has become habit. Once we begin to find our way about, that earliest picture can never be restored" (Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, 78).

4 Atmospheric feelings

But what is an atmosphere? In my view, it is the most prominent example of the passive synthesis,¹⁹ largely intersubjective and holistic, that precedes analysis and influences the perceiver's emotional situation from the outset, resisting (at least in its prototypical form) any conscious attempt at projective adaptation or epistemic correction. An atmosphere is an influential presence inextricably linked to felt-bodily processes²⁰ and characterized by a qualitative microgranularity that is, by definition, inaccessible to a naturalistic-epistemic perspective and that in a sense eludes any objective-reflective (and precisely for this reason inevitably following) observation. In short, an atmosphere is more a spatial state of the world than a very private psychic state.

This, however, presupposes the overturning of an introjectionist metaphysics that is largely dominant in our culture. In other words, it presupposes the enhancement and further development of the aggressive campaign, started several decades ago by Hermann Schmitz, of depsychologization of the emotional sphere and of externalization of feelings. The latter must therefore be understood as constraints that, like climate conditions, modulate the lived and predimensional space whose presence we feel, and, as a consequence, also modulate our mood. As pervasive impressions that, I would argue, precede and disable the subject/object dualism, atmospheres resonate through their authority in our felt-body²¹ and disprove any purely projective explanation of external feelings. Without relying on a regression (which is impossible) to a preintrojectionist way of life, my neophenomenological approach to experience simply aims at rebalancing the predominant psychic ontology through an “anthropological proportion” between spontaneity and control.²²

Of course, atmospheres like *ki*,²³ *ma*,²⁴ etc. (which unsurprisingly are specifically Eastern atmospheric and even windy notions),²⁵ cannot but irritate traditional ontology because of their unavoidable lifeworldly vagueness and irreducibility to the Western dualistic paradigm. But let's focus on the atmospheric and quasi-thingly experience: what kind of perceptive experience is it? First of all, perception here means an emotional experience and not the distancing-constative process that specialized psychology limits itself to – let alone the mere passive-reflective registration of a portion of the visual field by an immobile eye. This kind of experience then does not concern cohesive, solid, continuous objects that are mobile only through contact, nor discrete forms and movements, but rather what Schmitz refers to as chaotic-multiple situations endowed with their own internal and (only partially cognitively penetrable) significance, with a vagueness and twilightness whose petulant focalization would even represent a pathology, just as painting something as a mere thing implies limiting its atmosphere. In other words: in this kind of experience, the phenomenological “that” (presentness) and (pathic) “how” – always merged with each other if you accept my idea that the quasi-thingly presence is always affective and felt-bodily – reveal themselves to be irreducible to the (cognitive-thingly) “what”. Perceiving atmospherically is not grasping (presumed) elementary sense-data and, only afterwards or *per accidens*, qualitative states: instead, it means being involved by affectively charged quasi-things and situations.

As already said, experiencing atmospheres means being touched by them in the felt-body. It does not only mean that this kind of perception is direct and deambulatory, kinaesthetic and affectively involving, synaesthetic or at least polymodal, but also – and most of all – that one makes oneself present to something through the felt-body. Unlike the physical body, which is a legitimate object of natural sciences, the felt-body is indeed devoid of surfaces and occupies an absolute and non-geometrical space; it is capable of

¹⁹ See especially Husserl, *Analyses*.

²⁰ See Griffero, *Felt-Bodily Resonances*.

²¹ See Griffero, *Who's Afraid*.

²² See Fuchs, *Leib und Lebenswelt*, 299.

²³ Namely an airy intensity (an “in-between”) that grabs the person and the environment but being prior to their distinction.

²⁴ Namely the necessary symbolic and spiritual interval between things (but also the place together with the subjective way one experiences it). As Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, 75, explains: “In the West, man perceives the objects but not the spaces between. In Japan, the spaces are perceived, named, and revered as the *ma*, or intervening interval”.

²⁵ Cf. Kimura, *Zur Wesensfrage*, 29, 31, Yamaguchi, *Ki*, and Hisayama, *Erfahrungen des ki*.

self-auscultation without organic mediations;²⁶ it is manifest in the affective sphere and articulated, again according to Schmitz,²⁷ not into discrete parts but into felt-bodily isles that communicate with each other and with the world. It is indeed this felt-bodily communication with everything perceived that explains the experience of quasi-things through the extrareflective-situational intelligence of external motor suggestions and synaesthetic characters.

I must also point out that, although they are opaque to the so-called expert knowledge, atmospheres produce a real and effective segmentation of lifeworldly reality. In fact, while uniting and allowing for a productive tuning, they also divide at the same time.²⁸ As invariants thus obtained from a flow, still classifiable into a familiar and sufficiently systematic repertoire of affective-emotional kind, they must certainly be registered in the ontological repertoire originated by our ordinary, intuitive, and pragmatically efficacious experience of the lifeworld. Most of all, atmospheres take us out of our (alleged) closed-off inner sphere. As Sartre rightly says against a philosophy of immanence claiming to assimilate everything to consciousness, it would be a matter of taking everything out (even ourselves!) and thus free ourselves from inner life bringing terror and magic back into things.²⁹ By fostering a convergence between the heterodox science of the phenomenon (*Erscheinungswissenschaft*) sketched by Ludwig Klages – namely, a science of “elementary souls” appearing phenomenically as originary real images – and the less romantic neophenomenological redefinition of philosophy in the terms of people’s self-reflection regarding the way in which they orientate themselves within their environment, my atmospherology therefore focuses on pathic experience, on examining everyday experience so as to discern its atmospheric charge.

In fact, experiencing atmospheric feelings, effused into a spatial dimension, means experiencing multiple and chaotic situations that can be distinguished from others precisely thanks to their peculiar atmospheric tone. Furthermore, atmospheres act as situational constraints of our experience: especially as background existential feelings, atmospheric constraints are a frame condition that is bound to productively remain latent and to function like a blind spot eluding any more detailed inspection.³⁰

5 Affected by affordances

Perceivers also encounter affordances. These do not only imply a preconscious reflective-motor response, but convey messages, also emotionally tonalized, about their possible uses and functions. This ecological account of atmospheric agency highlights that people are not initially surrounded by things that are devoid of meaning and whose qualities are nothing but the outcome, projected onto them, of brain computing of physical data. Rather, people are surrounded by things and first of all quasi-things and situations that are always already affectively (atmospherically) connoted.

As James Gibson noted, perceiving an affordance is a process of perceiving a value-rich ecological object.³¹ In the human lifeworld there is indeed nothing rarer than the perception of an inexpressive object or situation, and it is perhaps the atmospheric quality itself that makes it possible for mere sensation to become an experience in the true sense of the term. However, going beyond Gibson, I must say that forms, whether they are static or in motion, do not express merely apparent causal relations and pragmatic affordances, but also tertiary qualities or emotional (and therefore atmospheric) ones. They permeate the space in which they are experienced and are within certain limits no less interobservable and repeatable than other perspective properties. The idea – very briefly – is that atmospheres function as (intermodal,

²⁶ See Schmitz, *New Phenomenology*, 65: it is “whatever someone feels in the vicinity (not always within the boundaries) of their material body as belonging to themselves and without drawing on the senses, in particular, seeing and touching as well as the perceptual body schema (the habitual conception of one’s own body), derived from the experiences made by means of the senses”.

²⁷ See, at least, Schmitz, *System der Philosophie*. II.1. *Der Leib* and *Der Leib*, and Griffero, *Quasi-Things*, 55-67.

²⁸ As Tellenbach, *Geschmack und Atmosphäre*, teaches us referring mainly to atmospheric evaluation in psychopathology.

²⁹ See Sartre, *Intentionality*.

³⁰ These tacit atmospheres are very close to what Ratcliffe, in *Feeling of Being*, calls “existential feelings”.

³¹ See Gibson, *The Ecological Approach*, 140.

amodal) affordances or sets of affordances, i.e., as ecological invitations and demands that are not only of a pragmatic-behavioral and visual kind.

Precisely due to their supervenience on material situations, but even without them (the void or silence, for example, as expressive-voluminous qualities), atmospheres seem to demand special quasi-thingly objectivity. For instance, it is legitimate to expect that the unease and the feeling of being spied on, aroused in us by a dark forest, would be affectively and bodily experienced by anyone who shared such an experience. The disquietude can certainly be greater for a city person than, say, for a lumberjack; but certainly the forest at night has, for everyone, traits that at least impede the opposite, that is, joy or lightheartedness: the disquietude is the immediate-spatial and atmospheric irradiation of the forest, so that association, if anything, comes after, and it is certainly not arbitrary.

Nevertheless, with the purpose of a wider, practical applicability of this approach, I admit that there are various types of atmospheres, also depending on their quasi-thingly characters: in short, atmospheres can be prototypical (objective, external, and unintentional, and sometimes lacking a precise name), derivative (objective, external, and intentionally produced), and even quite spurious in their relatedness (subjective and projective). Obviously, these different types of atmospheres can generate various types of emotional experience. Said briefly: (a) an atmosphere can overwhelm us (ingressive encounter) and be refractory to a more or less conscious attempt at a projective reinterpretation and change; (b) it can find us in tune with it (syntonic encounter), to the point that we don't even realize we have entered it; (c) it can be recognized (be it felt as antagonistic or not) without being really felt in our body; (d) it can elicit a resistance that pushes us to try to change it; (e) it may not reach the necessary threshold for sensorial-affective observation, thus causing an embarrassing atmospheric and social inadequacy for oneself and for others; (f) it may (for various reasons, also absolutely idiosyncratic) be perceived differently in the course of time; and (g) it may be so dependent on the perceptual (subjective) experience as to concretize itself even in materials that normally express different feelings. Summing up, an atmosphere is primarily the authoritative object of a shared experience, but it is also sometimes filtered through the evaluations and felt-bodily dispositions of the experiencer. Hence in most cases, in our everyday life, atmospheres actually exist "between" the object (or rather, the environmental *qualia*) and the subject (or rather, their felt body). By stating this, I do not mean to embrace a projectivistic relativism. Indeed, if by experiencing an atmosphere we *ipso facto* altered it, then no opposite atmosphere could ever overwhelm us and affect us – which, however, is clearly shown by everyday experience.

As stated above, atmospheres are "the" main example of the wider ontological category of quasi-things, and the atmospheric experience is the fundamental way in which we experience quasi-things. So I will now further explain what quasi-things are.

6 In a quasi-thingly way

As we have seen so far, for a pathic phenomenology experience is based on presentness, the first impression, atmospheres and affordances. Now we must better explain its quasi-thingly nature. Quasi-things act very powerfully on us not *despite*, but precisely *thanks to* their attenuated physical reality. Thoughts of the future, melodies and earworms or impressive images, for example – despite being less physically "present" than the couch on which we are sitting – can condition our life much more than the couch precisely because they are able to quasi-thingly generate a deep and intimate felt-bodily resonance through their expressive qualities. Of course, embracing a new and unprecedented ontological category like that of "quasi-thing"³² means prescinding from the pragmatic purposes and the representational advantages undoubtedly offered by the artificial objectification of what is elusive. In short, it means experiencing something that, without being either substance or an accident, felt-bodily affects us like an extraneous agent.³³

³² For the first emergence of this notion see Schmitz, *System der Philosophie*. III.5. *Die Wahrnehmung*, 116–139.

³³ It is something that affects us in a way that is felt only in our felt body while not being generated by it. It is felt like an extraneous agent, devoid of a substrate and with structurally imprecise borders, and yet real (i.e., active) only when it affects us. Which reminds to some extent the brilliant pages of *Being and Nothingness* devoted to pain as a psychic-affective object (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 335–337).

Well, the “big and colourful family”³⁴ of quasi-things includes the wind and the gaze, sound, colour, the night, certain thermal qualities, smell, weight and void, time (obviously only when we quasi-substantialize it, by saying something such as “saving time”), and above all atmospheric feelings. In other words, this strange family embraces qualities that, for their marked expressiveness, physiognomic “character” and intrusiveness (that makes them sometimes friendly and sometimes threatening partners), exert on us a more direct and immediate power than full-fledged things through felt-bodily communication, and especially by deeply incorporating a felt-bodily contraction.

Nevertheless, it is not enough to stick to the thing as a substratum of properties, possibly dramatizing its aspectuality and valorising its variable appearance, depending, for example, on light, or the perceiver’s direction, distance and felt-bodily state. Why? Because this restriction is really not enough for a philosophy that is neophenomenologically framed as a reflection on how one feels in a certain environment and on subjective facts. Overcoming in this way the existential narrowness of philosophers who seemingly limit their scope to books and dusty tables, one should rather leave the desk (or, if you prefer, the Lucretian topos of shipwreck with spectator) and give due attention to subjective facts, that is, to things about which only one person can talk, using one’s own name but without necessarily involving a private language. This is how one gradually learns to appreciate the importance of entities that are vaguer than the solid, three-dimensional, cohesive, contoured, identified and persistent things prevailing in the usual ontologies. Holes and shadows, clouds and waves, atmospheres and (why not) the wind, just to mention a few examples, therefore play a completely new role within a phenomenologically legitimate ontological inventory, experientially based now not only on material stability (at the expense of fluidity), single things and their possible constellations (at the expense of situations made by a chaotic and holistic-internally diffuse meaningfulness), but rather on influential qualitative nuances and fluxes and evanescent but meaningful impressions.

It’s clear that Western ontology, well aware that only a subsumption of perceptions under genera can mitigate the anxiety provoked by experience of the incessant change of *qualia*, had no other option but to give priority to tangible and well-determined entities, which are endowed with a regular, homogeneous, cohesive and three-dimensional shape and can be singled out through genus and species. To this reistic deflationism that “reduces” situations to mythical substrates like things, represented by (intermomentary and intersubjectively identifiable and manipulable) characters derived from abstraction and induction, I’d like to oppose an inflationary ontological approach. This approach should give due value to quasi-things, which despite their vagueness and transience, fluidity and lack of borders, we (unwillingly) experience much more frequently than, say, abstract beings such as numbers or mythical “data”.

In order to recognize that quasi-things occupy a vast territory between the (so-called) mere *qualia* and things in the proper sense, one must obviously resist the temptation to erase them, which usually happens in two distinct manners. The first consists in forcedly thickening them and turning them into things, in order to reduce their particular intrusiveness: for example by reducing the wind to air moving when it blows or being still when it dies down.³⁵ The second strategy lies in tracing them back to experiences so chaotic and decontoured that they end up being considered as something anomalous, if not pathological. After all, we must never forget that if not all that (epistemically) exists appears, all that appears surely (phenomenologically) exists, and, what is more, being experienced, it is also in principle public and intersubjective.

But what is a quasi-thing? From the outset it should be stated what it is not. It is not a) the outcome of inaccuracy (due to extrafocality or poor attention) in the normal distal perception, nor b) the mere higher-order context of things acting as their “reference scheme”; it is not c) the product of an extravagant mereological conjunctivism aiming at hypostatizing subsequent appearances, nor d) the result of an exasperated linguistic conventionalism, for which every expression of ordinary language must infallibly correspond to a real thing. Indeed, if any of these were the case, a quasi-thing would always be such only relatively, and it would be not much more existentially significant than the imaginative products explored by thought experiments in analytic ontology.

³⁴ Schmitz, *System der Philosophie*. III.5. *Die Wahrnehmung*, 134.

³⁵ Reducing the weight that drags us down to gravity, the pain we feel to its neurobiological causes, etc.

The wind, as mentioned, is a particularly good example of an atmospheric quasi-thing. It especially affects us on the affective-bodily level in the form of an atmospheric feeling poured out into (predimensional) space. In other words, it is a very concrete experience, significantly both climatic and affective – provided, of course, that the weather is duly set aside from today’s obsession with weather-forecasts and synthetically testifies, instead, the quality of our emotional environmental involvement (exactly like the Japanese *fūdo*).³⁶ In fact, whipping and assaulting us like a threatening partner, the wind can be directly experienced. Coinciding with its own flow and thus being an event in the proper sense (a “pure act” in a way), it pervades space with its particular voluminousness, tuning it in this or that way (obviously a breeze is different from a hurricane) and arousing motor suggestions and synaesthetic affordances that prove to be irreducible to Heideggerian handiness.

I will use precisely the example of the wind, irreducible to moving air, to very briefly exemplify the main “characteristics” of quasi-things.

- A. As already mentioned, quasi-things are not contoured, discrete, cohesive, solid, and therefore hardly penetrable like things. Nor do they properly have the spatial sides in which things necessarily manifest themselves and from whose orthoesthetic coexistence one can usually gather their protensional regularities. Thus, we do not perceive a given side in the wind, a side that hides and yet announces the others. This means that if a thing can still deceive us by having concealed sides, temporarily or eternally hidden inner strata and only apparent qualities, a quasi-thing like wind never deceives, because it totally coincides with its phenomenal appearance and the experience we have of it.
- B. Moreover, things have immanent and regular tendencies. An object weighs and tends to fall; the pages of a book turn yellow; if we don’t lift something it stays on the ground. Because of these immanent dispositions, also proving their compatibility or incompatibility with other bodies, things testify to us their physical-bodily presence. Things have these tendencies even without interaction (the glass remains frangible even if nobody breaks it), which confer to them a future as well as a past revealed by signs, marks, fractures, etc. Instead, because of their relative immateriality, quasi-things do not seem to have actual tendencies (nor do they have a history). In their atmospheric and quasi-thingly effect, the night, anxiety and also the wind, for example, don’t ever get old and don’t show any temporal patina. By virtue of their absolute “presentness”, quasi-things are not the continuation of something prior, but something always new and so radically evenemential as to make any genetic phenomenology and etiologic explanation useless.
- C. Things transcend their momentary character, in the sense that they are not born nor die all of a sudden, but bear instead the signs of their own specific history, and also in the sense that one can own them, portion them, save them, or annihilate them. Quasi-things, on the contrary, appear in a partial form without this necessarily meaning that they do so through fragments and sides. So, if I can point at a single object made of silver to show someone what silver is, in the same way I can refer to *this* wind (regardless of its specific present variant) to explain what the wind is in general. In other words: a single wind is not the portion of a larger wind-thing, but fully expresses the “character” of its appearance. In the same way as a different tone does not make the voice of a person (another quasi-thing) a different one (warm, metallic, polished, hoarse, etc.), a quasi-thing has its own distinct identity, which within certain limits can be traced back to types, but never to universal-conceptual genera.
- D. Above all, quasi-things are (felt as) more immediate and intrusive than things, because they are able to generate inhibiting and sometimes even unbearable motor suggestions. The felt-bodily communication triggered by quasi-things is based on an alternation of encorporation and excorporation much more intense than that triggered by things. As “centers of encorporation”³⁷ able to occupy some surfaceless and lived spaces, or violent “attractors of our everyday attention,”³⁸ they are often more pathically incisive and demanding than things in the strict sense.

³⁶ *Fūdo* (wind and earth) is the climate, understood as that in which the human being primarily finds and discovers themselves. See Watsuji, *Climate and Culture*.

³⁷ Schmitz, *System der Philosophie*. III.5. *Die Wahrnehmung*, 169.

³⁸ Soentgen, *Das Unscheinbare*, 13.

- E. The wind dies down with the same inexplicable immediacy with which it rises. Even if, as we have seen, it has a “character”, it doesn’t have the same continuity of existence as things, which as a rule cannot disappear from a point in space and reappear soon after in another. For this reason, the embarrassing question asked by the child (“what does the wind do when it isn’t blowing?”), implying in a thingly way a being separate from feeling,³⁹ turns out to be an excellent though irritating philosophical question. The normalizing and reifying answer given by the adult (“it has died down,” or even “it went to sleep”) disregards its importance. While things that are not perceived, that are lost, etc., still occupy a certain portion of space (unless they have been totally destroyed),⁴⁰ quasi-things have a rather intermittent life, and it would make no sense to ask where they are when they are not present yet or when they are no longer there. Although endowed with their specific “character” (we indeed say “here’s my usual pain in the shoulder,” “here’s the melancholy of an autumn evening,” etc.), their intermittence, producing a kind of broken biography that cannot be filled in principle, is very different from the latency periods that normally belong to things that are temporarily not perceived.
- F. Lastly, following here Hermann Schmitz more closely, quasi-things do not have a threefold causality (cause-action-effect) but a twofold one (cause/action-effect). In short, while a book is always a book, which can potentially be knocked over and break a glass if it hits it, the wind, which in a certain sense “is precisely this blowing and nothing else”,⁴¹ does not exist before and beyond its blowing. One experiences here, so to speak, an aggression without there being a real aggressor (a cause) that may be separated from it and be prior to it. The wind that hinders our way and perhaps makes us fall over is an action that coincides with its cause. Only the need for prognosis and prevention, whose condition of possibility is precisely that the potential effect of a cause can be discovered before its actual action, justifies the transformation (both scientific and commonsensical) of the twofold into a threefold, that is, the tendency to assume a *substratum* whose experienced power would only be the (more or less accidental) expression. This indistinction of cause and action confirms *a fortiori* that the somewhat unexpected appearance of a quasi-thingly configuration is almost always necessarily followed by an involuntary experience, a pathic and felt-bodily involvement that is at least initially uncontrollable.

7 Felt-bodily resonances

Presentness, first impression, atmospheres, affordances and quasi-things: as already mentioned, these are the main components of a pathic lifeworldly experience. Since, however, they resonate in our felt body in a specific way, something should now be said on the way in which the latter experiences reality.

- 1) First of all, the (quasi-thingly) and pre-reflective sphere of the felt body is certainly extended in the pre-dimensional and surfaceless space (unlike the psyche) but is also indivisible and absolutely located (unlike the physical body).
- 2) Secondly, it can be said that the felt-bodily sphere concerns both what you feel within your body and what you feel in the pericorporeal space (pain, hunger, thirst, pleasure, vigour, relaxation, etc.), yet without any mediation of either the sensory organs or the body schemata. Instead, sensory organs and body-schemata act by virtue of the felt body’s temporary “silence”, which works as a blind spot in relation to all following perceptions. In fact, like the physical body, the lived body is not even noticed whenever a fluid and effective motor spontaneity prevails and makes a spontaneously “ecstatic” orientation possible.
- 3) Thirdly, the quasi-thingly felt body is the resonance board of atmospheres and other quasi-things. This is made possible thanks to a felt-bodily (*leiblich*) communication with any really salient object

³⁹ A question that, not coincidentally, can be asked of all quasi-things: “what does a voice do when it is not heard?”; “where is pain when I do not feel it?”, etc.

⁴⁰ Even when the waves cease to crease it, we still see the water; but when the wind stops, there is no perceptible air left.

⁴¹ Cf. Grote, *Beiträge*, 251.

or form, starting from what one dwells in (chair, clothes, house), up to the weather, atmospheric feelings and, in general, all the *qualia* or affordances of the outside, whose intermodal nature has existential and felt-bodily resonances (isomorphism). Highlighting once again the co-belonging of the human being and the environment (including other people), these resonances are an immediate grasping of outside affordances: in short, they are the answer to the valences of atmospheric spaces, and at the same time an ecstatic extension of the felt body's own lived directions. According to this clearly anti-solipsistic stance, the felt body embodies not just its tools, but also everything that we experience in the pericorporeal space and whose peculiar voluminousness we also sense: the car we drive, the bystander we miraculously avoid on the sidewalk, and so on.

- 4) Lastly, the most challenging point. Unlike the thing-body, which is composed of organs and delimited within cutaneous boundaries, the felt body is a body before or without organs (in a sense, however, that is largely different from Deleuze's). It consists of multiple felt-bodily isles,⁴² whose "absolute" spatiality gives life to indivisibly extended felt-bodily motions. The felt-bodily isles are voluminous but surfaceless quasi-things, which we cannot identify with articulate and discrete anatomical parts, let alone with the increasingly fine-grained parts examined by physics. As they incarnate an existential and symbolic salience which in part is also culturally and historically variable, such isles are sometimes relatively stable (oral cavity, anal zone, chest, back, belly, genitals, soles, etc.), while at other times they can come forward or dissolve – a bit like high and low tides – on the basis of excitement (itch, palpitation, burst of heat, ache, etc.), and yet at other times can be subsumed under general, indivisible and more permanent felt-bodily states (vigour, prostration, pleasure, uneasiness). It is precisely in this sense that our chest, as the felt-bodily isle of emotional involvement, becomes other than the organs thereby located (and *a fortiori* other than cells, genes, chromosomes, atoms, etc.). Again, it is for this reason that the head to which we often refer by saying that somebody's head "is in the clouds" or "is full of ideas" becomes other than the brain anatomically understood. Likewise, it's obvious that when "we feel butterflies in the stomach" because we are in love, the heart-zone becomes other than the heart as an organ. And so on.

Normally one experiences the felt body as a "vast, profusely articulate landscape, or even [as] a vast continent":⁴³ i.e. as a landscape which obviously cannot be topographically defined and requires almost a meditation practice or, more simply, a fine-grained phenomenological perception. Indeed, it needs an autoscopia, in which we could say that – since sentient beings cannot ever feel without also feeling themselves – the perceivers merge with the perceived.⁴⁴ When the wind is blowing in my face, for example, I don't feel my skin cells but I do feel at one with the wind.⁴⁵

8 Conclusions

From this neophenomenological point of view, I can be satisfied neither with the psychological expedient of the body schema, that is, the "three-dimensional image everybody has about themselves",⁴⁶ nor with the so-called body-image or -pattern, that is, the body as socially constructed and reified by the other's objectivizing gaze. In fact, these perspectives only provide some "cultural" guarantee of the unitary liveability of the physical body, whereas, so to speak, they are the by-products of the original felt-bodily feeling. Because it is composed of successive representations gained through sight and touch, the body schema will represent, for example, "the" foot as a unitary configuration that is durably localizable. By contrast, the felt-bodily feeling is able to perceive in "the" foot a peculiar voluminousness, as well as intermittent and vaguely delimited isles, such as the ankle, the malleolus, the sole, etc. In short, the body

⁴² A central notion in Schmitz (since *System der Philosophie*. II.1. *Der Leib*). See also Griffero, *Quasi-Things*, 55-67.

⁴³ Schmitz, *System der Philosophie*. II.1. *Der Leib*, 157.

⁴⁴ Böhme, *Leibsein als Aufgabe*, 120.

⁴⁵ See Rappe, *Leib und Subjekt*, 7.

⁴⁶ Cf. Schilder, *The Image*, 11.

schema and the body image, too tied to local and directional space,⁴⁷ always presuppose a quasi-thingly and felt-bodily feeling, which is prior and more fundamental and works a bit like “the darkness needed in the theatre to show up the performance”.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, talking about resonance of felt-bodily isles means restoring a way of thinking the body that was prior to the so-called axial Age. In ancient Greece, before the “discovery” of the spirit or mind, for which the body (in the sense of *Körper*) was something “dead” and thus alien to the cosmos, the body was indeed referred to only in the plural form, indicating precisely different felt-bodily isles. All that is thus accessible in the vast sphere of naïve experience without any reflexive self-attributing mediation is set against the traditional inner psychical dimension as well as the physical-anatomical one. Even more, it is opposed to the neuroscientific myth of the brain, of a neuronal hardware subject to hyper-technological manipulations legitimated by likewise hyper-technological perceptions. After all, both the brain and any other neurophysiological element are never a felt phenomenon, and instead, within a phenomenological account of experience, “neurobiological differences make no difference when there is no phenomenological difference”.⁴⁹ In other words, it’s totally impossible to go from, for example, objective data like hormones, semiochemicals and c-fibres to felt-bodily impulses.⁵⁰

In conclusion, it is now possible to briefly examine to what extent and in what specific way the felt-bodily isles could really be a perfect and coenesthetic sounding board of outside atmospheres. In the simplest case, they obviously correspond to oppressive atmospheres through tightness and to brightening ones through wideness. Usually, however, things are slightly more complicated than that. In short, and following the already mentioned phenomenology of atmospheric experience (see *supra* par. 5): a) the prototypical discrepant atmosphere generates an almost unavoidable felt-bodily involvement in us, so that the body is no longer a silent medium that disappears into the background and through which we experience the world.⁵¹ It becomes a “conspicuous body”⁵² and witnesses a gap between us and the world. b) When we experience a syntonetic atmosphere, instead, no single felt-bodily isle is really engaged and, in the case of well-being, this correspondence makes our body so “healthy” as to be completely absorbed in the world and to ensure the achievement of harmonious and efficient performances. c) The fact that we observe an antagonistic atmosphere, without being truly touched by it, can depend on the inability to let ourselves go or on a kind of felt-bodily anaesthesia. Nevertheless, this also can arouse a qualitatively different and even felt-bodily antithetical atmosphere, for example accentuating our previous and contrary mood, such as when a shallow party, instead of cheering us up, simply aggravates our previous felt-bodily sickness. d) An atmospheric effect developing over time could undoubtedly resonate in variable felt-bodily states. The discovery of the fictional or even manipulative character of an atmosphere, for example, reflexively cancels (at least in part) our initial enthusiastic openness to the world, as well as the atmosphere of magnificence of a building resolves at a close distance into an atmosphere of decay that can even make us feel felt-bodily anguish.

A more detailed explanation of the type of resonance aroused by atmospheres is certainly necessary. What I have tried to show here is that a pathic experience means to feel the presence of situations in their chaotic-diffuse meaningfulness, to value their first impression and respond to their affordances, to resonate through the felt body in accordance with atmospheres as spatialized feelings and quasi-things as ephemeral entities. Indeed, there’s enough to legitimately talk about experience “in a new key”.

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⁴⁷ About the lived space see Griffero, *Atmospheres and Lived Space*.

⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 115.

⁴⁹ Ratcliffe, *Feeling of Being*, 122.

⁵⁰ Rappe, *Leib und Subjekt*, 93.

⁵¹ About the structural “absence” of the body cf. Leder, *The absent body*.

⁵² Ratcliffe, *Feeling of Being*, 112.

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