

Tonino Griffero

## Corporeal Suspicion Defining an Atmosphere of Protracted Emergency (such as Covid-19)

### Abstract

*The paper investigates the kind of collective feeling – or, better, atmosphere – that is generated by the situation of protracted emergency. After asking whether ours is in general an age marked by (media) emergency, what are the structural characteristics distinguishing short-term emergency from protracted emergency and to what extent we can speak of an effectively shared collective feeling of “emergency”, the analysis focuses on the atmospheric properties of this collective affective situation and shows what are the possible resources to escape from it (at least in part). Irreducible to the classic phenomenological intentionality, the atmosphere of protracted emergency (whose case study here is that of the COVID 19 pandemic, which is also related to the “terror from the air” theorised by Sloterdijk) proves to be a chaotic situation that establishes with those who experience it a very particular felt-bodily communication, based essentially on narrowness and hypochondria. It is an invisible atmosphere of which it is fairly easy to identify the markers on the phenomenal level, whereas it is largely impossible to anticipate the long-term (affective, social, cognitive) effects.*

### Keywords

*Protracted Emergency; Atmosphere; Situational and Felt-bodily Resonances*

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t.griffero@lettere.uniroma2.it (Università degli Studi di Roma “Tor Vergata”)

### 1. *An age of emergency?*

If I consider my life, there is a feeling that has prevailed over everything, literally everything: anxiety [*Angst*]. Anxiety for the future, anxiety for my family members, anxiety for men, sleep, the authorities, a storm, war, anxiety, anxiety [...]. And this is why I started lying, because I was afraid and because I didn't want to betray myself, not daring to talk about what I had inside. (Spengler 2007: 51)

It is not surprising that such objectless existential anxiety (hence my translation of *Angst* with “anxiety” instead of “fear”) afflicted the author of a disconsolate masterpiece such as *The Decline of the West* (1918-1922): a book that could be considered the very starting point of an age governed by *Angst*, ranging between the First World War and the pessimism raised by the nuclear threat and the Cold War. And yet today the age of anxiety is undoubtedly back, spread especially by media-fuelled hysteria and panic attacks, transforming users into passive conductors of collective emotions. The resulting “self-stressing ensembles” or “excitement communities”<sup>1</sup> clearly show that today's affective logic or media global governance takes individual and collective attention as an essential economical and consumption-driving activity. For performative producers like the media, in fact, the content of distributed information is of much lesser importance than the emotional outcomes (the only real news is the bad news!)<sup>2</sup>. Bad news, gossip and “must see”-cues stir up both alarmism and permanent agitation. In their ubiquity, for example, so-called “breaking news” turn out to be both dependent on and co-responsible for the current sensationalism<sup>3</sup>. They generate a protracted uncanniness or even shock as well as a catastrophic atmosphere to which the only sensible answer seems to be a (political but also individual) state of exception (in a general non-technical meaning).

<sup>1</sup> As Peter Sloterdijk would say. However, by especially focusing on dramatic events, scholars often forget the positive mobilizing power of the media.

<sup>2</sup> It is now undisputed that negative news is more contagious (in broad sense) and elicit stronger and quicker emotional, behavioral, and cognitive responses than neutral or positive ones.

<sup>3</sup> It is always difficult to determine whether the media reflect an existing feeling or generate it (almost) *ex novo*. Today's sensation-seeking can certainly be understood as a struggle to be perceived and at the same time to perceive, in short as a “fight for being there” (Türcke 2002: 66). Will it be enough to slow down (pulling an emergency brake) to contrast the overall emotional situation, defined as a multi-media addiction (Türcke 2002: 308 ff.)?

Fundamentalist terrorism and the indecisive retaliation wars, ecological disasters and humanitarian crises, xenophobic nationalist policies and the omnipresence of terrifying images: all this, together with the recent viral pandemics, has spiked anxiety to levels that had not been felt for several decades. But talking about a (second) age of anxiety and emergency (here limited to the Western world and the last century) competes with similar and equally problematic definitions: society of excessive demands, achievement society, competitive society, consumerist society, society of fatigue and overwork, depressive society, narcissistic society, burnout society, risk society, disaster society, affluent-throwaway society, surveillance society, precarization society, etc. The most worrying thing is that in our sensation-society, emergencies are often cultural catastrophes whose degree of seriousness may vary, but are certainly amplified by the media logic of “too much, too fast, too crashy” (Milev 2012: 293). The resulting “saturated software environment” makes us prisoners of “techniques of capture derived from routinization and habituation and inflows of contagious-suggestibility” (Sampson 2012: 166) that continuously generate zones of emergency and shock strategies leading to pathogenic effects such as anomie, disorientation and, somewhat paradoxically, even anaesthetization<sup>4</sup>. Nor is it merely incidental that “mediacracy-mediocracy” has deeply colonized the political system up to jeopardizing any separation of powers.

Whatever the danger of the month, the constant media hysteria – made of copy-and-paste, assembly by assonance, combination of news in the sign of exaggeration – obviously propagates an atmosphere of continuous or at least protracted emergency that is difficult to evade even if one is safe in one’s own home. This type of media emergency immediately leads to a reduction of perceptual (and therefore also aesthesiological) competence, due to saturation as a natural consequence of continuous sensationalism, and to a mediocrity fueled by bad mood and an anomic mere-spectator-syndrome, whose outcome is a toxic and epidemic burn-out atmosphere spreading like a “neural fog” (Milev 2012: 298).

In this context, I would like to analyze emergency as a collective atmospheric feeling. In the case of the pandemic, the discovery of the limits of our control over nature goes hand in hand with the recent “affective turn” in the humanities. This “affective turn” occurred for many reasons

<sup>4</sup> A series of disorders that Milev (2016: 28) summarizes in terms of “dissociative amnesia”.

a) In academia, scholars sought to overcome the linguistic turn, the hyper-interpretationist or decoding (hermeneutic and semiotic) paradigm as well the cognitivist primacy. b) From a sociological standpoint, the shift was due to the ascertainable interaction between thought and feeling on the micro-, meso- and macro-social plane. Finally, c) in terms of communication, the “affective turn” was accompanied by the realization that understanding, far beyond the domesticated category of “connotation”, means rather a favorable emotional resonance<sup>5</sup>.

There are certainly many ways to call this “affective logic” (Ciampi 1986). Next to older concepts (“vital horizon”, “lifestyle”, *Zeitgeist*<sup>6</sup> or “sphere of meaning”), today one must add “climate” and especially “atmosphere”. The explanatory-theoretical difficulties are, however, the same, since it is impossible to reduce a background collective-affective tonality like “emergency atmosphere”, underlying our lives as a basso continuo, to a simple cause/effect constellation. Nor is it clear if this “emergency atmosphere” results from a statistical average or if it is an ontologically transcendent entity, if it is something cognitively ineffable and historically changeable (whose beginning/end or geographical extension are hard to pinpoint) or stable enough to resist ephemeral changes.

In this regard, let’s look at an unsuspected passage from Marx<sup>7</sup>, describing a real but not perfectly conscious atmosphere.

The so-called revolutions of 1848 were but poor incidents – small fractures and fissures in the dry crust of European society. However, they denounced the abyss. Beneath the apparently solid surface, they betrayed oceans of liquid matter, only needing expansion to rend into fragments continents of hard rock. Noisily and confusedly they proclaimed the emancipation of the Proletarian, i.e. the secret of the 19th century, and of the revolution of that century [...]. But, although *the atmosphere in which we live, weighs upon every one with a 20,000 lb. force, do you feel it? No more than European society before 1848 felt the revolutionary atmosphere enveloping and pressing it from all sides.* (Marx 1978: 577; emphasis mine)

<sup>5</sup> For a linguistic analysis of the atmospheric discourse see Metten (2012). Whether the affective response always implies some semantic (maybe unconscious) processing and whether emergency communication goes beyond a soft persuasive line like the “peripheral route” (Sjoberg 2007) is an open issue that I cannot look into here.

<sup>6</sup> This concept is outmoded today, since *Geist* was – shamefully – “reduced” to mind.

<sup>7</sup> See Anderson (2014: 138).

Marx's distrust in the perceptibility of the revolutionary atmosphere perhaps resulted from an excessively cognitivist conception of "atmosphere". The absence of a clear explanation for an atmosphere, in fact, does not exclude at all its aggressive-overwhelming authority (felt on the gestural and felt-bodily level). After all, collective feelings are sometimes quite different from situations of true shared feeling: the latter, in fact, take root<sup>8</sup> and are thus able to avoid the "loss of natural self-evidence" (Blankenburg 1971) that results from the disorientation inflicted on us by media propaganda. At the mercy of foreign intentions, the contemporary subject seems instead exposed to multiple collective feelings or atmospheres acting as mere commodities. This means that we are more dependent on social atmospheres today than in the past. The air we breathe (in both a literal and metaphorical sense, as we'll see) and the spaces we inhabit are never innocent nor have they purely aesthetic-ornamental value. If atmospheres as feelings permeating a predimensional space and irreducible to persons' projected moods are something aesthetic, they are such in the (aesthesiological) sense that they influence our sensory and bodily life starting from partially latent moods.

But what distinguishes "emergency" from "disaster", "catastrophe", and "crisis"? Is emergency a real "fact" or just a collective mental state? Can there be a general definition of "emergency", and what does it mean to our lifeworldly situation? Do emergencies have a definite object, or could they be considered thoroughly only with reference to their management? And so on. Although "emergency" and "crisis" both denote an experience of necessity which requires a fundamental change or decision to be made despite an unknown future, "crisis" seems to have gained a more positive value. Indeed, "crisis" implies a dialectic intertwining of danger and opportunity as a necessary stimulus for social cooperation as well as for the development of a person or a society, thus even becoming a guiding rule of life<sup>9</sup>. Instead, the word "emergency" has a less melioristic sense, perhaps also because it is less easy to identify a lasting common enemy and consequently a lasting common goal, and an emergency usually does not allow enough time to create a "common destiny".

<sup>8</sup> This is what Hermann Schmitz calls *implantierende Situationen* (cf. e.g. Schmitz 2005: 25-7 and *passim*).

<sup>9</sup> Wang (2014). However, claiming that the term emergency means that something valued (life, health, security) is at risk seems to necessarily confirm and reinforce the *status quo*, that is, it seems to suggest that the system is capable of recovery on its own terms.

But it is anything but clear how we perceive (or better, feel as) an emergency. It is trivial to reduce emergencies to cases where the response is almost a conditioned reflex<sup>10</sup> and there is no time for thinking or deliberating, let alone for lecturing<sup>11</sup>: moreover, sometimes an emergency actually arises from a situation whose genesis is partially unknown and whose effects are pervasive but uncontrollable. This way the emergency can also extend over time and cease to be an immediate danger signal. During the plague of Athens for example – Thucydides writes – since no medical therapy or prayer helped, people felt paralyzed and lost their powers of resistance, became indifferent to every rule of religion and law, falling into a state of lawlessness and even linguistic dissolution. In other cases, instead, hopelessness and the failing of language, usually replaced by alarm sounds and sirens, go along with incoherent actions and high susceptibility to following orders imposed by someone else (especially if expert at politically manipulating affects)<sup>12</sup>. However, it would be wrong to believe that the rapid action required by an emergency completely rules out any thought. This would misconceive the – at least partial – role of habit in the mental acts and (negative or positive) procedural pathways that are embedded in emergency situations.

In what follows, I will address “emergency” not as a clear-cut individual event made up exclusively of objective facts but as a “common situation” (Schmitz)<sup>13</sup>, a collective feeling<sup>14</sup> that, as a really ubiquitous and

<sup>10</sup> Even in cases of low-level emergencies like the emergency exit sign, multiple and connotative meanings cannot be completely ruled out and require education to achieve conventional perception (Tang, Wu, Lin, Hsu 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Aesop tells a tale about a young boy who is drowning and calls a nearby huntsman for help. The huntsman, disapproving of the boy’s rashness, begins to lecture him. The boy calls out: “No. Save me now. Lecture me later”(Aesop 1954: 197).

<sup>12</sup> As is well known, according to Carl Schmitt, the sovereign is he who decides on the exception.

<sup>13</sup> Although worthy of further investigation, the thesis that Schmitz’ Leibphenomenology is ultimately autistic-solipsistic (Slaby 2020 and above all Bonnemann 2016) seems to me to be defeated by his central ideal of a felt-bodily communication with every form (things, lines, qualities, people, etc.) of the pericorporeal space.

<sup>14</sup> Analytic philosophy prefers to define this (in my opinion, reductively) as “shared” or “collected” (or even “we”) intentionality”. “Collective feeling” is still a controversial term because it is not always clearly different from other ones (like “common feeling”, “shared feeling”, “fellow feeling”, “joint emotion”, “emotional climate”, “feeling-with-one-another”, “emotional contagion”, “sympathy”, etc.), nor can it specify the number of people needed to be able to really speak of something “collective”. For a further exploration of atmospheres as collective feelings see Griffero (2021a; 2022a).

even “spatial” phenomenon in social life, I prefer to call an “atmosphere”<sup>15</sup>. In my view<sup>16</sup>, an “atmospherological” approach underlines the omnipresence of the affective dimension in everyday life by giving space to a class of feelings (ranging between basic moods, atmospheres and single “objective” emotions)<sup>17</sup> that are neither encapsulated in a person’s interiority nor belong completely to them, but are instead widespread and poured out into a certain space (to be understood as lived and non-geometrical, of course, although not entirely devoid of physical margins). An atmosphere has its own specific (felt, non-measurable, but not only metaphorical) “voluminousness” for the people who are gripped by it: as a sort of powerful spirit floating around<sup>18</sup> and felt-bodily resonating in the experiencer’s emotions without being equivalent to them – a necessary neo-phenomenological distinction between the feeling in a substantial sense, as an objective quasi-thing, and the fact of being involved by it –, an atmosphere should be considered as a real, “objective”, phenomenon that, especially in the case of what I called a “prototypical” atmosphere, pre-exists its perceivers and is not subject to being transformed or amended by them. In short: it is an “external” affectively authoritative state.

Collective emotions or shared feelings seem to be perhaps the latest collective “spectres” (after the people, the masses, the *Zeitgeist*, etc.) haunting the Western World (at least) and challenging scholars to seek an explanation for the resulting affective pressures. That their scientific investigation is still in its infancy should not discourage or make people believe that studying such feelings means creating docile “excitement communities”<sup>19</sup>, for example making the population digest a crisis by virtue of the alleged feeling that we are “all” in this together. Nor should we be discouraged by the fact that philosophical dictionaries seem to ignore the concept of collective feelings, inhibited both by a kind of transcendental

<sup>15</sup> In my view, every situation (and not only some, as Schmitz instead claims) has a more or less intense and perceptible atmospheric charge, which also defines its “boundaries” (so to speak).

<sup>16</sup> I refer here to my previous major works (Griffero 2014; 2017; 2019).

<sup>17</sup> See Griffero (2021a: 105-49).

<sup>18</sup> The word “atmosphere” is normally used interchangeably with mood, feeling, aura, emotion, ambiance, tone, affect, climate and others.

<sup>19</sup> We know too well that the media excitement proposals often result in a non-substantial but only highly imaginary sociality, in a vague “we” that is easy to manipulate. See Laermans (2011: 118).

need to not deal with lifeworldly phenomena but only with their conditions of possibility, and by a rationalizing urgency aimed at a theoretical (political, pedagogical etc.) instrumentalization or repression. Another obstacle is the fact, already mentioned, that a collective feeling could be just a latent emotional tone<sup>20</sup>. Now, it is true that a feeling always has a phenomenal quality that a mere knowing-that does not possess<sup>21</sup>, and that therefore it would be absurd to say, for example, that “one is afraid but one doesn’t feel it”. However, it must be recognized that some atmospheric feelings are not fully conscious and in fact occur preferably in our vaguer felt-bodily-expressive life.

Despite the trendy “emotionology” of our times, the marginalization of emotions in philosophical analysis is still ongoing. It is owed both to a neutral-procedural conception of intellectual agency – in politics, for example, to the supremacy of the rational choice paradigm and of “interest” as opposed to “passion” – and to the alibi of the ineffability of the affective realm, considered irreducible to analytical-scientific conceptuality. I think it’s instead time to acknowledge not only that one is always somehow affectively tuned, but also that for the investigation of collective feelings to be intriguing also philosophically – and not only in the perspective of social ontology and psychology, moral philosophy and political theory (as has actually happened so far) – one must obviously reject the widespread belief that social groups are not entities capable of experience and feelings. Likewise, one must also go far beyond the trivial consideration that feelings are social because they refer to persons (someone else or even oneself, when one feels like the object of the judgment of others) and try to conceive of feelings (especially the atmospheric ones) as quasi-things<sup>22</sup>, whose qualitative power can be considered partially independent from those who perceive and filter them in a relatively different way.

The hypothesis my atmospherological approach to collective feelings is based on is that, almost like meanings, atmospheric feelings are not in the head or in the psyche but in our lived environment (also acting as this environment’s affordances). Now, I simply ask myself whether “emergency” can be defined an atmosphere like other affective situation<sup>23</sup>, and

<sup>20</sup> For some suggestions in tune with my pathic approach see Großheim (2008).

<sup>21</sup> Demmerling (2014: 23-4).

<sup>22</sup> For this “new” ontological category, borrowed by Hermann Schmitz, see Griffero (2017).

<sup>23</sup> Which can be defined (atmospherically) serene or heavy, tense or relaxing, light or dark, homely or strange and uncanny, stimulating or melancholic and depressing, holy

especially what this radical affective externalism entails in terms of the felt-bodily resonance of an emergency.

## *2. Emergency as a collective-atmospheric feeling*

Emergency is usually conceived as an unexpected bad surprise that necessarily breaks with everyday life and the pre-existing order thereby requiring an exceptional response. In other words, it would be a temporary exception that, as such, necessarily promises a return to everyday normality<sup>24</sup> that cynical regimes often know how to politically manage. If that were the case, though, it would be difficult to consider it a widespread atmosphere. In order to conceive of emergency as a diffuse atmospheric feeling (not unlike resentment, guilt, common shame, envy, etc.) whose unpredictability doesn't require immediate action (as opposed to deliberative thinking)<sup>25</sup>, one has to think of it instead as extended in time. Emergency as an atmosphere certainly involves the present as a suspension of time's unfolding, but without compressing the time for decision and action: rather, it generates an omnipresent, "frozen" present that is deprived of any transition to the future and thus arouses the impression that no action can make a difference.

This kind of emergency can become a real emotional regime that takes on a "sticky" character due to its mere repetition and makes it impossible for something new to "emerge". In other terms, it can become the atmosphere of a "protracted state of emergency", turning the everyday into a perpetual "preparation for a potential catastrophe". As a result, the everyday stops being synonymous with security and routine – a mid-20th-century condition that only reflects a Western middle-class reality and is only a promise for many areas of the world<sup>26</sup> – and becomes a here-and-now that is steadily threatened by "precarity" and instability, so much so

and numinous or demeaning, pleasant and moving or inhibiting, inviting or excluding, erotic or repulsive, collegial or authoritarian, warm or cold and even anonymous or faded, etc.

<sup>24</sup> For this dialectical role, according to which the everyday is confirmed-made by the emergency, and vice versa, see Anderson (2016).

<sup>25</sup> A thinking aimed at decision-making (Scarry 2012).

<sup>26</sup> "The distinction between everyday and emergency [...] has only ever been available to some and is produced at the cost of making life into a perpetual emergency for others" (Anderson 2016: 185-6). The emergency, in fact, seems only accessible to individuals or groups whose existence was previously marked by the promise of stability.

that only a “major incident” seems to be a real exception to the emergency, an emergency in the emergency (so to speak). In this atmospheric state of emergency there is no panic, because the latter usually gives way to low-level anxiety that is partially alleviated by “exercises” in anticipating future emergencies.

However, many difficulties stand in the way. Even if there are few doubts that “behind every psychosocial event there are in the last analysis always energy-affective ‘motors’” (Ciompi, Endert 2011: 9), it is absolutely controversial what a “collective” or “shared” feeling properly is<sup>27</sup>. Even without uncritically assuming the popular-mediatic trend to define epochs in terms of a dominant public feeling, one has to admit that it is a “phenomenal” given that collective-atmospheric feelings act as constraints on how we tend to feel, think and act. But the questions raised by the very concept of feeling – one that is common across otherwise disparate practices (events or processes and distinct collective entities) – are manifold and still unresolved.

There are many risks here. One 1) is that of hypostatizing and reifying an ephemeral mood and thereby homogenizing an age into one single nameable structure of feeling at the expense of other co-existing affective states (or cultures). Another 2) is that of privileging the affective state testified by official and cognitive representations (statistics, art, etc.), for example the rules about feelings that act as moral injunctions (you “should” feel this, and have the right to feel this and not that), to the detriment of lifeworldly feeling. Yet another risk 3) is that of only choosing as dominant the collective sentiment a society attributes to itself and not the one maybe better captured by those who are outside that society (or vice versa), without ever being able to establish when a certain emotional age begins and ends (becoming another one)<sup>28</sup>, how an age is formed and what the probable “boundaries” are of its spreading, but also 4) of not making any difference between the collective feeling as such and its probable “out of sync” individual resonance, without, moreover, understanding its relationship with ideologies or mentalities, for example whether it is their anticipation, their exact reflection or only their residual long-term

<sup>27</sup> See Griffero (2021a: 129-49) and especially Trigg (2022c).

<sup>28</sup> A possible (though not entirely satisfactory) answer comes from a non-linearist energy theory: when the energy tension reaches a critical point, the so-called “butterfly effect”, the situation requires a transformation (Ciompi, Endert 2011: 30-1), as in the case of the burst of the financial bubble and stock exchange. Schmitz’s answer is instead that these changes also occur underground and inadvertently, that is, not only in dramatic crises and epochal decisions (Schmitz 1992: 328).

condition. More generally, one could run the risk 5) of not knowing whether collective feelings, present even in an apparently anaffective period (indeed governed rather by a faded and anonymous atmosphere), are merely dispositional attunements or fully acting affective qualities. Alternatively, one could risk 6) losing sight – because of a too-rapid passage from a circumscribed atmosphere to a global culture and even age of the spatial-visual voluminosity that, acting as a fence, represents the fundamental character of the atmosphere (but also of the “spheres” theorised by Peter Sloterdijk) conceived as a specific type of being-together. These difficulties are far from insignificant, sure. And yet they are nothing compared to the two following philosophical-ontological problems.

a) Can a collective entity have a feeling, or are feelings the exclusive properties of the self-conscious subjects in whose bodies they are located? The answer might consist in underlining that having collective feelings does not mean attributing them to a group personhood, and that a corporate emotional and moral sensibility does not imply considering (re-ifying) group persons as embodied agents.

b) It is instead harder to establish if a collective feeling really unites different people despite their conscious diversity and thus makes a collective emotional response possible, or if such feeling is only shared in the sense that it is found in different people at the same time. More precisely: can one legitimately say that a feeling is collectively shared only based on the overlapping of private feelings of individuals that are experiencing a similar situation and are aware of this sharing but also of their differences in roles, abilities, power, and even strictly personal feelings? Or is a collectively-shared feeling only one that is numerically such, i.e. a single feeling understood as a primitive phenomenon irreducible to the simple summation of individual behaviors or states of mind? In my terms: since “I feel an emergency atmosphere” (individual feeling) differs from “I feel that we feel an emergency atmosphere” (weak collective feeling) and above all from “we feel an emergency atmosphere” (strong collective feeling) – the only condition in which the shared feeling community is both the subject and object of feeling<sup>29</sup> – it is necessary to understand how the feelings of others might play a fundamental role for other people. Let’s see Max Scheler’s famous example.

Two parents stand beside the dead body of a beloved child. They feel in common the “same” sorrow, the “same” anguish. It is not that A feels this sorrow and B

<sup>29</sup> See Landweer (2016: 150).

feels it also, and moreover that they both know that they are feeling it. No, it is a feeling-in-common. A's sorrow is in no way an "external" matter for B here, as it is e.g. for their friend, C, who joins them and commiserates "with them" or "upon their sorrow". On the contrary, they feel it together, in the sense that they feel and experience in common, not only the same value-situation, but also the same keenness of emotion in regard to it. The sorrow, as value content, and the grief, as characterizing the functional relation thereto, are here one and identical. (Scheler 2008: 12-3)

Note the (synchronic) bodily and (diachronic) narrative intimacy strategically utilized to show their mutual attunement, made of marital love and life, biological relation and parental love, and even physical closeness – which proves, incidentally, that far from arising *ex nihilo* a shared feeling presupposes an already existing mood that is poured out into a certain space atmospherically and is grasped pre-reflectively and felt-bodily<sup>30</sup>. Despite all that, the feelings of the two parents may also differ: part of their feeling may consist of trying to empathize with the other, or to reduce the other partner's pain. Furthermore, you can well imagine that factors such as a weaker commitment to care-giving, their loving each other less than before, their having experienced and known of death in different times and ways, etc., might further show the distinction between the undoubtedly shared (type-feeling) atmosphere of grief and their partly different atmospheric mood (token-feeling). If it is certainly inappropriate to define as a collective feeling the fact that different individuals react affectively in a completely different way to the "same" atmospheric situation, in the case of musicians playing their instruments as part of a collective performance (as in the case of both parents) one could instead legitimately speak of an intercorporeal, more than just intentional-mental<sup>31</sup>, collective feeling.

From my point of view a collective feeling is the "same" type-atmosphere extending across multiple individuals, who experience in their felt body relatively different token-atmospheric experiences, a qualitative part of which also certainly results from their being unthematically affected by the relation they have with each other (as I think Scheler himself

<sup>30</sup> Trigg (2020) rightly summarizes this in two requirements: a mutual self-other awareness, and a sense of integrative togetherness.

<sup>31</sup> As Meijers (2003) instead claims counting too much on the cognitive form "we intend to do X".

acknowledges in a little-remembered passage)<sup>32</sup>. The atmospheric we-experience, therefore, is not a numerically single feeling but a well balanced condition of similarity – since individual feelings belong to the same type of affective “style” also due to the felt-bodily communication between individuals and their affective environment<sup>33</sup> – and differences rooted in individual felt-bodily co-presence and resonance effects-expressions (which, *inter alia*, can act circularly by reinforcing the starting atmosphere)<sup>34</sup>. More people on the same late train certainly experience a similar concern, but, since they are not feeling *together* but *alongside* each other, they certainly do not share a joint feeling as the players of the same team do, unless there is a co-presence based on intense participation and felt-bodily interaction. Anyhow, even in this case, it would be better to say they do not feel the same single feeling but feel, and consequently also think and act, according to a common affective atmosphere (as well as to their affective habits, of course)<sup>35</sup>.

Thus, shared feelings imply neither reified collective entities existing autonomously nor numerically single feelings devoid of different individual resonances. What does this tell us about the atmosphere of protracted emergency understood from a neo-phenomenological-atmospherological point of view?

### 3. *The atmosphere of protracted emergency*

Claiming that atmospheres are ineffable states oscillating between presence and absence is a cliché. So, I’d rather specify what an atmosphere of protracted emergency is, as far as possible, from both a phenomenological and an ontological point of view. Firstly, I must show that the we-feeling has often been explained in ungrounded ways, for example through

<sup>32</sup> “Even in mutual endurance of the ‘same’ evil and the ‘same’ quality of feeling-state – in other words, in the extreme case of fellow-feeling, where there is no distinction as yet between vicarious and companionate feeling – the functions of ‘feeling something’ remain distinct, and the phenomenon itself includes an awareness of difference among its separate sources in two, three or x individual selves” (Scheler 2008: 64).

<sup>33</sup> Or interaction, as proposed by Landweer (2016: 154, fn. 26). See also Demmerling (2014).

<sup>34</sup> Trigg (2020: 6).

<sup>35</sup> If an atmospheric feeling can be separated from the way experiencers are affected, one can even think that two people can felt-bodily experience the same affective-atmospheric quality even if the object (the anchoring point, in Schmitz’s terms) may not be the same (Landweer 2016: 164).

the metaphor of emotional contagion and the so-called “membrane model”. This model, whose latest trendy variant is based on mirror neurons and which continues to influence how we see any form of propagating replication (today especially the viral logic of networks)<sup>36</sup>, has three issues: it a) is too reductionist in its biologicistic nuance<sup>37</sup>, it b) doesn’t work in cases of solitary (therefore non-mimetic) atmospheric perception, and it c) does not correspond to what individuals truly feel (in the proper sense)<sup>38</sup>.

Another inadequate explanation consists in taking the affective-atmospheric intersubjectivity as an inferential (Theory Theory) or projective-simulative process encapsulated in the brain, not realizing that collective atmospheres go beyond any internalist-representational and third-person approach and need an enactive-embodied concept of dynamical interaction among persons (physical and felt-bodily resonance, affect attunement, coordination of gestures, facial and vocal expression perceived as such, etc.)<sup>39</sup>. For me, then, a collective-shared feeling is a peculiar form of intercorporeality-interaffectivity, of a non-mentalizing interaction between perceiver and percepts based, in the best cases, on a mutual incorporation.

But what exactly is a protracted emergency atmosphere? It’s certainly an “emergent” feeling<sup>40</sup>, where it’s hard to separate out causes from effects—Anderson (2014: 156) calls this “emergent causality”, meaning that one cannot be sure of the character of an atmosphere before registering

<sup>36</sup> Nixon-Servitje (2016).

<sup>37</sup> As happens in Brennan (2004).

<sup>38</sup> Zahavi (2015).

<sup>39</sup> For a critique of internalism, based on the hypothesis of an inner world excluding any immediate perception and real (circular) interaction, on disembodied subjects and too static brain mechanisms (given that also the mirror neuron system can only function when embedded in a context of embodied and meaningful interactions) see Fuchs, De Jaegher (2009).

<sup>40</sup> I freely follow here De Sousa’s (2014) emergentism, according to which it is not possible to predict the nature of a collective feeling on the basis of the properties of its constituents. This applies even more to atmospheres, since their “material” components can condition, without ever fully determining, specific atmospheric effects. This means that atmospheres are so singular and ephemeral as to supervene to (and therefore to exceed) their (always somewhat conventional) generators (which remain worthy of investigation). For this non-deterministic meaning of “condition” see Anderson (2014: 161).

its bodily effects, whereas I'd like to call it a "quasi-thingly bipolar causality", meaning that here cause and action coincide<sup>41</sup>. This emergent atmosphere, moreover, is based neither on a merely coincidental (but necessary) joint attention nor on a one-way influence like empathy<sup>42</sup> or imitative sympathy<sup>43</sup>, neither just on a mutual influence<sup>44</sup> nor on a purely epistemic influence<sup>45</sup>, and not even on a revised form of contagion<sup>46</sup>, whether one means it in the sense of Le Bon's unidirectional-iconic hypnotism (individual→crowd)<sup>47</sup> or in that of Tarde's imitative hypnotism, maybe understood today as a "hypnotic draw of the events of the market itself" (Sampson 2012: 168). Let's now turn to the Covid-19 atmosphere of protracted emergency, while being well aware that its reverberations can be more complex and their outcome even unpredictable.

### 3.1. Terror from the air

Some of today's ordinary emergencies and pervasive catastrophism (from climate change to terrorism and transspecies epidemics) are not properly perceivable or measurable, much like the air<sup>48</sup>. For this reason, any talk about atmospheres that occurs without perceived phenomena is phenomenologically problematic at first. Furthermore, the pandemic atmosphere is really a strange combination of a completely involuntary natural

<sup>41</sup> See Griffero (2017: 13) following Schmitz (1978: 116-39).

<sup>42</sup> The empathized person might actually not even be aware of the existence of the empathizing individual, so that empathy does not necessarily result in similar affective states.

<sup>43</sup> An imitation-based influence does not exclude but, on the contrary, implies partially different emotions.

<sup>44</sup> The outcome of persons communicating in a harmonious way, in fact, can even be one of mutual estrangement.

<sup>45</sup> First of all because a collective mental belief does not need to involve emotions and felt-bodily resonances.

<sup>46</sup> "A process in which a person or group influences the emotions or behavior of another person or group through the conscious or unconscious induction of emotion states and behavioral attitudes" (Schoenewolf 1990: 50).

<sup>47</sup> "Le Bon understood democratic crowd contagion to be guided by a dangerous unified mental inclination toward images that could subordinate freewill, pervert truth, and provoke revolutionary acts of violence. It was in fact the mass hallucination of such images through the unconscious crowd that became the mechanism of Le Bon's hypnotic contagion" (Sampson 2012: 162).

<sup>48</sup> Even when the air threat has a physical cause, the resulting emergency atmosphere might not be visible, as in the case of the ash clouds caused by the eruption of the volcano Eyjafjallajökull in Iceland, posing a great danger to flights. Cf. Metten (2012).

atmosphere (virus transmission), a partly involuntary social atmosphere (relationship between people but also between people and environmental things) and a fully intentional, even “toxic” media atmosphere (emotional manipulation in a positive or negative sense)<sup>49</sup>. This deficient phenomenalization of the situation is often the foundation of the implausible no-mask and no-vax arguments – how can something be so dangerous if it escapes any sensory perception? – thereby spreading a conspiracy-obscurantism that is nothing but the other side of a prior and equally naive idolatry of scientism.

The pandemic atmosphere brings out a crucial aspect of the affective condition of the twentieth century, which was already brilliantly diagnosed by Peter Sloterdijk. For him, the discovery of air as a philosophical, political, and ecological matter as well as its use as a medium for the manipulation and control of the atmosphere (also in the literal sense) is the most remarkable sign of the artificial modern environments. According to Sloterdijk, it all began on 22 April 1915 (the Battle of Ypres in World War I), when toxic (chlorine) gas<sup>50</sup> was used to threaten not the enemies’ bodies but their spatial or atmospheric living condition. The awareness that terror might now come from the air would symbolize the typically modern tendency to make the implicit explicit – here the air as a threatened vital immunizing sphere. This event would thus mark the beginning of “atmoterrorism”, which is based on the threat of unbreathable space and cannot be attributed to any specific agent (unless one generally blames the Industrial Revolution, Capitalism and even carbon...).

The discovery of our total dependence on “air conditioning”, rapidly exploited by any regime propaganda committed to designing huge mass events and impressions engineering<sup>51</sup>, becomes particularly relevant in

<sup>49</sup> However, it is legitimate to question the excessively dualistic meaning of the notion of “manipulation” (which occurs by distinguishing too rigidly between manipulator and manipulated). Indeed: is there really a docile subjectivity that falls under the hypnotic influence of a media-saturated landscape?

<sup>50</sup> Sloterdijk’s thesis (2016) is powerful and suggestive even though it may be historically inaccurate, as he forgets pre-modern anticipations of bioterrorism such as the Greek theory of the miasma and episodes of water poisoning, or even the Christian interpretation of earthquakes as a bad omen (divine atmoterrorism!) (Usher 2019).

<sup>51</sup> Instructions for the 1917 front suggested the constant use of masks. But what mask do we really need to protect ourselves from the spectacular media catastrophe, from “the mental effects of storage [that] are organized on the basis of atmospheric threatening environments, media fictions of friend/enemy and the business of fear of an expanding industry of fear” (Milev 2012: 302)?

the current pandemic (even more so than in the similar case of Chernobyl)<sup>52</sup>. Unfortunately, we now all realize that we are extremely porous to the environment, i.e. that our sphere<sup>53</sup> or inner atmosphere<sup>54</sup> has no immunizing power against the aggression of a global outside enemy. And only “conspiracy” theories consider this enemy as a simulacrum artificially constructed by distressing media atmospheres acting as software ruled by some hardware (the usual supranational and anonymous financial and economic processes...).

### 3.2. Hope in sub-atmospheres

In an atmosphere of protracted emergency as a transcendental cognitive-affective bubble providing an emotional imprinting or an affective logic<sup>55</sup>, the future is unpredictable<sup>56</sup> or even completely lost. One lives the endless time of a present “saturated with a sort of restlessness” (Anderson 2014: 129), whose most obvious symptom is phobic flight and social withdrawal. Given that it is hard to voluntarily create contrary atmospheres, the only hope comes from the periphery of this logic, i.e. from the blind spots that, relatively uncontrolled by the predominant affective core, might arouse new and counteracting atmospheric resonances. In fact, if it is true that prototypical atmospheres<sup>57</sup> are irreducible to a series of interacting component parts, derivative or spurious atmospheres instead exhibit sometimes an internal articulation which must be taken into account and, as a result, can take the form of a kaleidoscopic affective situation. Just as the predominant emotional quality of a feeling can conceal

<sup>52</sup> “We sense the invisible by means of the atmospheres that are co-determined by it – comparable to the situation in the 1980s when insights gained from the discourse on nuclear power (the non-noticeable nuclear radiation as opposed to the clearly noticeable nuclear threat) brought the atmospheric phenomenon to the center of phenomenological debates revolving around ecological aesthetics of nature” (Rauh 2020: 95).

<sup>53</sup> That today, according to Sloterdijk, is no longer a bubble or a globe but a foam.

<sup>54</sup> See Laermans (2011: 115).

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Ciompi, Endert (2011: 12-44).

<sup>56</sup> A narrowing of desires and expectations that seems reflected in the drop in birth-rate. As Vannini (2020: 270) rightly says, “in atmospheric dis-ease, the future becomes a speculation, the present an experimentation”.

<sup>57</sup> My theory (since Griffero 2014) distinguishes among prototypical atmospheres (objective, external, and unintentional, sometimes lacking a precise name), derivative-relational ones (objective, external and intentionally produced), and even some that are quite spurious in their relatedness (subjective and projective).

secondary (even opposite) feelings (traces of hatred even in love!), a protracted emergency atmosphere can show inner sub-feelings of hope that give a different specific tone to the entire emotional state.

As regards the atmosphere of protracted emergency, this can occur in two ways. The first is when a) the predominant atmosphere of non-localizable insecurity coexists with more objective and less pervasive emotions (fear of the concrete effects of the virus, for example) and thus becomes protracted or occasionally something else (a more manageable emotion of fear). The second is when b) the predominant atmosphere of emergency find remedies in sub-atmospheres<sup>58</sup> (or minor atmospheres)<sup>59</sup> that are almost opposite in character. For example, a culture of fear spread by power apparatuses may arouse not only the need for protection and decision-making but also an atmosphere of deep solidarity among the opponents of the regime. In the same way, the predominant atmosphere of pandemic emergency may arouse in large sections of the population a previously unknown solidarity (in the best cases), or the search for a scapegoat (in the worst ones). The less reactionary version of this consists in a latent atmosphere of resentment (possibly manageable in a political way) directed towards those who can enjoy privileged isolation in holiday locations or at least are not forced to constantly work under the risk of contagion.

### 3.3. Non-intentional emergency

The collective atmospheric-affective condition of protracted emergency surrounds and envelops the people of a certain historical period – one could perhaps call it, following Ratcliffe (2008), an existential feeling – but is certainly felt individually. Here what's decisive is the quality of "aboutness". In the most orthodox phenomenology, this aboutness is identified in an intentional object, whereas from a neo-phenomenological point of view the atmosphere is rather captured by a pre-reflective and relatively non-directional "operative intentionality" (Merleau Ponty)<sup>60</sup> for which perhaps it is not even appropriate to speak of proper intentionality.

<sup>58</sup> This means that an atmosphere is always already angled (Ahmed 2007-8: 126) but, for me, not that the atmosphere as such is relative depending on the experiencer's state.

<sup>59</sup> Anderson (2014: 142, 152).

<sup>60</sup> "We find ourselves in the midst of an affective atmosphere, and thereby caught up within a series of meanings which are not of our own making, before the atmosphere is localised as belonging to specific objects and situations" (Trigg 2020: 2).

The fact that the enemy today is identifiable with the virus does not take away the fact that the emergency is temporally and spatially so indeterminate that it turns fear into real anguish. An acute emergency, one that refers to the formal object of a precise feeling, is paralyzing; instead, a protracted emergency calls for further resonances due to its indeterminate significance. In our case, for example, the fear of the virus (the formal object, which is somehow anthropomorphized-personalized) gives way to the fear of its impact on one's life (significance)<sup>61</sup>. Now, it is already doubtful whether a normal atmospheric perception can be explained in an intentional way<sup>62</sup>, because what appears to be the intentional object often proves to be rather just an occasional condensation area with respect to the real anchoring point. In the same way, an atmosphere of a protracted emergency, just like that of anguish, seems completely irreducible to any intentional directionality.

This is not only because, in anxiety and emergency, what is at first a condensation area can later become an anchoring point, or because they have in principle several focal points at the same time<sup>63</sup>. Rather, it is because they do not seem to have any real anchoring points until they can be transformed into fear thanks to the identification of some determined anchoring points (which proves that Bauman's liquid fear is rather anguish)<sup>64</sup>. This is what usually happens when, by breaking the intrinsic visualization limits of certain distressing but imperceptible emergency situations, someone manages to spread an image of them, a sort of phenomenal surrogate that's possibly disturbing enough to arouse apocalyptic fear. This is the case of the effective media image of the ozone "hole" in relation to global warming: nothing but the positive-educational side of

<sup>61</sup> A distinction similar to Schmitz's one (anchoring point/condensation zone). When you, for example, perceptually realize that the overall atmosphere of nervousness is actually nothing but the field of condensation of the irradiation of a single person (anchoring point) who makes the environment nervous. This means that sometimes a thing or portion of space that appears to arouse an atmosphere is in reality merely the "occasion" for the not-yet-localized atmosphere to condense there.

<sup>62</sup> That is, according to the dogma that every psychic act is intentional. See Griffero (2019a: 45-55).

<sup>63</sup> As Micali (2015: 233-4) claims.

<sup>64</sup> To me, something that "is at its most fearsome when it is diffuse, scattered, unclear, unattached, unanchored, free floating, with no clear address or cause" (Bauman 2006: 2) is a basic mood (or atmosphere) rather than a single feeling (fear).

the unfortunately more frequent negative tendency, especially in cases of collective psychosis, to undue visualizations of shadowy figures<sup>65</sup>.

This neo-phenomenological criticism of affective intentionality suggests that a collective atmosphere is something anonymous and impersonal. It is therefore legitimate to ask oneself what density, quantity and kind of interaction is produced in the case of an atmosphere as a collective feeling. As for the emergency atmosphere, it is clearly unlike the one produced, for example, in a strike demonstration. There, as is well known (also from the frequent negative consequences of the herd mentality), the synchronicity provided by slogans and marching steps ends up homogenizing and anonymizing the contribution provided by personal expression and individual behavior – of course except for those who can participate with reserve and perceive the collective feeling “at a distance”, without a real felt-bodily resonance. Well, if there is no reason of principle not to define a homogeneous-anonymous emotional space as atmospheric, it is certainly true that only a plural emotional space is atmospheric in the strong sense<sup>66</sup>. This is based on a real felt-bodily interactive sociability, an affective attunement consisting more of dynamic balance than static homogeneity. In a plural emotional space, individual expression does not degenerate into individualism precisely because it is aroused by the same shared type-atmospheric feeling<sup>67</sup>. But what specific type of felt-bodily communication underlines this shared atmospheric feeling?

<sup>65</sup> As in the case of the so-called “phantom anesthetist” whom the residents of Mattoon (Illinois) in September 1944 considered responsible for dozens of gas attacks (later revealed to be imaginary). See Bartholomew, Victor (2004).

<sup>66</sup> Using here a distinction proposed by Trčka (2016).

<sup>67</sup> “What is needed is a broad overlap of perspectives, which allows for a variation of (i) an atmosphere’s material emanations, and, (ii) a variation of affective expressions, with both material emanations and affective expressions participating in the overall unity (or style) of an atmosphere. Thus, just as an affective atmosphere can be articulated in a broad range of specific objects (without being reducible to specific things), so it can also be felt experientially and expressively in a range of ways (without being reducible to those specific modes of expression)” (Trigg 2020: 4). This approach can be widely shared even if it may excessively detach an atmosphere from the single objects and situations in which it can “condense”, which are not infinite and arbitrary. Besides, if an atmosphere is not a cause in the traditional sense (as Trigg rightly underlines), it is however, as already mentioned, a cause identical to the caused action (causal quasi-ingly bipolarism): see Griffero (2017).

### 3.4. Situational and felt-bodily resonances

a) *Situation*. In order to specify the neo-phenomenological approach to the emergency atmosphere I need to introduce two fundamental concepts. The first is that of “situation” as a totality that is cohesive in itself and specifically profiled with respect to its outside. A situation is also constituted of internally diffused meaningfulness made of (according to Schmitz) states of things (the pandemic), programs (to contain the pandemic) and problems (how to behave in private and in public), which as such can be hardly identified individually<sup>68</sup>. Based on Schmitz’s distinction between situations (common or personal, ongoing or stratified over time, rooted or inclusive), the pandemic emergency atmosphere is certainly a common situation that runs the risk of also becoming stratified and inclusive, i.e. so pervasive that it can be neither forgotten (aren’t we a bit irritated even by the normal physical contacts between actors in a movie?) nor ascribed to something to blame: it would be absurd, a sign of obsession with the “legibility of the world”, to look for a precise cause of what is happening instead of accepting its mere contingency<sup>69</sup>.

In the absence of face-to-face contact, crucial for all intersubjective and intercorporeal encounters, the pandemic situation is influenced by the media even more than before – it’s hard to say whether in a largely supportive way (the abused slogan of the first months “everything will be alright!”), or in an antagonistic fashion (“every man for himself!”). This atmosphere is now turning into a long-lasting and sedimented mood, of which the people’s felt-bodily resonance is both the condition and the outcome. It is not sufficiently clear, however, why positive feelings are enhanced by becoming collective while negative ones, like the emergency we-feeling, instead weaken, relativize and become more manageable, as certainly happens for collective shame, for example, which is notoriously less intense and burning than individual one. Nor is it clear if the increasing positivity to Covid-19 of public figures could come as a “consolation” and induce fatalism or generate further and even greater worries.

<sup>68</sup> See Kammler, Kluck (2015).

<sup>69</sup> “If we search for such a hidden message, we remain premodern: we treat our universe as a partner in communication. Even if our very survival is threatened, there is something reassuring in the fact that we are punished, the universe (or even Somebody-out-there) is engaging with us. We matter in some profound way. The really difficult thing to accept is the fact that the ongoing epidemic is a result of natural contingency at its purest, that it just happened and hides no deeper meaning. In the larger order of things, we are just a species with no special importance” (Žižek 2020: 14).

b) *Felt-bodily communication*. The second necessary neo-phenomenological concept after “situation” is that of “felt body”. Precisely because the pandemic atmosphere is now a mood that relates us to the world in a pervasive way, its sharing must be also investigated in the felt-bodily dimension. This obviously applies differently for those who merely “witness” what is happening and for those who instead are directly involved as patients or health professionals. For the latter, anguish may even turn from anguish “for nothing” (as underlined in the tradition from Kierkegaard to Heidegger), obsessively in search for an object onto which to project itself, into a less pervasive and therefore more manageable fear<sup>70</sup>. Indeed, those who deal professionally with pandemics do not view the virus as something that embraces the entire sphere in which they passively conduct their lives, and to them the hypnotic power of the virus is not as limitless as it is to others<sup>71</sup>. Unable to project their anxiety onto a determined intentional object that could be sensorially perceived, simple witnesses, instead, feel their body (the physical and, even more so, the felt one) being subjected to unavoidable passivity and a severe hypochondriac form of suffocating (social and private) narrowness<sup>72</sup>.

When examining collective affectivity apart from the phenomenology of acts and its dogmatic pan-intentionalism, the concept of “felt-bodily communication” can be particularly helpful. In fact, it means that every perception forms an *ad hoc* comprehensive felt-bodily unit with the (ani-

<sup>70</sup> “Subjects in the fear condition spent considerably more time in group interaction relevant to the situation they were facing than did subjects in the anxiety and ambiguity conditions. In addition, measured cohesiveness in the fear groups was higher [...]. Emotions resulting from specific and identifiable external agents tend to produce affiliative motivation and collective coping, whereas those emotions having no clear environmental referent (and that may, therefore, seem less ‘rational’ or reality-based to subjects) do not” (Morris et al. 1976: 678).

<sup>71</sup> In the case of the protracted emergency atmosphere, reactions are less acute and more indeterminate than those triggered by fear. There are no diseases due to sympatheticotonic vegetative excitation (palpitations, perspiration, hyperventilation) and somatic aggression (trembling, fainting, coughing, nausea, gastrointestinal distress, vomiting, skin rashes, convulsions, or even pain from cramped muscles associated with general muscular tension).

<sup>72</sup> “Avoid touching things which may be (invisibly) dirty, do not touch hooks, do not sit on public toilets or on benches in public places, avoid embracing others or shaking their hands...and be especially careful about how you control your own body and your spontaneous gestures: do not touch your nose or rub your eyes – in short, do not play with yourself” (Žižek 2020: 43).

mate or not) perceived thanks both to motor suggestions and synaesthetic properties acting as bridge-qualities between the two poles<sup>73</sup>. Pedestrians on a sidewalk can miss each other without thinking too much about it or measuring their mutual distance: they simply co-act without any reaction time (i.e. without there being a gap between perception and reaction) and form temporary units that are felt clearly only when they fail (i.e. when two people bump into each other). In the same way, the felt-bodily communication/interaction aroused by the Covid-19 atmosphere forms solidary (or unipolar)<sup>74</sup> units that neither exclude a hierarchical articulation (between virologists and simple commentators, for example) nor presuppose full awareness of said hierarchy. The impulse given to all those involved by this shared atmospheric (albeit indeterminate) focus does not need to be experienced by all at once and in the same way. Two dancing partners, for example, certainly engage in a solidary bodily communication even if one of the two leads and the other follows; the musicians of an orchestra play together despite the diversity of scores and instruments. In the same way, the unipolar interaction among different individuals, as such based on a coordinated but involuntary way of feeling, i.e. on fine tuning entailing an energetic increase, also implies apparently quite different reactions and expressions (in terms of personality and role)<sup>75</sup>. Although we are all stressed by the pandemic, for example, young people are maybe less so than the elderly, healthy people certainly less so than those with comorbidity, those who can afford a period of isolation less so than those who deal with crowds of people every day, fatalists less so than those who believe they can control every aspect of their existence, etc. But it is worth noting that even those who distance themselves from the collective pandemic feeling still share it, at least partially, precisely insofar as they try to react and resist it.

The only necessary condition to describe this emergency atmosphere as a collective feeling is the conscious felt-bodily co-presence – even exceeding the sensory perception – of the individuals who make up the

<sup>73</sup> See Schmitz (2011: 29-53) and Griffero (2016a; 2016b).

<sup>74</sup> According to Landweer's vocabulary (2015; 2016: 155 fn. 28).

<sup>75</sup> Individual differences in the felt-bodily resonance of emergency are a result of people's prior anxiety levels, their disposition toward critical thinking about non-directly perceivable emergencies, and now also their particular location in a communication network where talking of an emergency soon finds consensus.

group. This way they can experience the attitude of things and other people<sup>76</sup> through their own, i.e. through an incorporation that is not restricted to whatever is near their skin but extended to any object and form they might be interacting with. This felt-bodily co-presence urges people to perceive the world's "affordances" with a tone that makes a range of possible actions possible or impossible. It is not true that because of the pandemic the affordances of other bodies are now missing and the world is therefore disembodied<sup>77</sup>. The temporary pandemic suspension of the body, even for those at an age in which bodily-sexual relations are unavoidable rites of passage, does not cancel all affordances<sup>78</sup> but only accentuates the negative ones, because other bodies (and even all the objects in which the virus could survive) are perceived with greater intensity, inducing almost intolerable felt-bodily reconfigurations. Our atmospheric-emotional agenda is not so much missing as severely impoverished and changed in character, except in the rare cases where the lockdown – or what is euphemistically called "shutdown", "sheltering in place" or "staying at home" – helps one rediscover *ex contrario* the fascination of one's prior extroverted life.

c) *Spatial narrowness*. The first thing to say about the relationship between living or affective space (*Stimmungsraum*) and felt-bodily communication is that Covid-19 certainly does not develop a unilateral incorporating co-presence, as occurs when a tennis player incorporates-anticipates the ball's trajectory – even if some hypnotic fascination cannot be entirely excluded (think of the much awaited tragic statistics in the daily bulletin during the early days of the pandemic). Rather, Covid-19 results in a narrowness shown first of all by our felt-bodily withdrawal from the common-intercorporeal lived space. Dramatically emptied, this space leads to an oxymoronic "collective-shared isolation" (a "negative" cohesion, so to speak)<sup>79</sup> whose felt-bodily resonance<sup>80</sup> – whether it is more or

<sup>76</sup> "Suggestion need[s] not refer to human interaction but can instead describe a sociality which is built on the relationship between humans and objects. Rather than a hypnotizing subject, that is, we may identify a hypnotizing object, tendency etc." (Borch 2005: 19; see also Borch 2014).

<sup>77</sup> As Fugali (2020: 84) claims.

<sup>78</sup> For further details about the (controversial) nature of affordance-based atmospheres see Griffero (2022b).

<sup>79</sup> Which totalitarianism could rely on, for example by spreading an atmosphere of anguish made of the isolation of subordinates, or an atmosphere of mutual distrust that inhibits any political engagement (to the benefit of the regime).

<sup>80</sup> For the debate about the concept of "resonance" see Griffero (2020).

less paralyzed, more or less “insularly” localized (chest, cervical and intestinal area, etc.) – primarily expresses itself in dodging other people and falling silent, being still or even moving blindly, but also avoiding touch in a compulsive way<sup>81</sup> and continuously sanitizing one’s hands (hence many cases of dermatitis): in short giving life to a spatialized choreography of risk management which must now take account of the criminalization (or at least control) of previously normal everyday activities like dressing, shopping, travel, walking or sitting outside<sup>82</sup>. This felt-bodily and even physical resonance, resulting from a tacit (background) perception permeating a certain space, is also continuously strengthened by perceiving other people’s fear or anguish (different in quality and intensity) pre-reflectively, which do not need to be objectively-statistically proved or causalistic-indirectly communicated.

The lived space is thus severely defamiliarized. It loses its usual and reassuring affordances and becomes a distressing environment consisting of present-at-hand objects that are no longer the guiding lights of our actions and rather become threatening entities as soon as they are touched by anyone other than us. This applies in particular to public objects, to any densely populated urban environment, and even to the simple act of “being outside”, as it is impossible to tell when and where you are further away from (or closer to) the virus. The “good old” urban outer reality is certainly still here, with its streets, shops, restaurants, cinemas and theaters: it’s just that they are all closed, we can’t enjoy them any longer and, more generally, our usual social and physical flow, our fluid non-verbal and taken-for-granted interaction rituals<sup>83</sup> and pre-reflective urban “directionality” seem more and more uncertain. It is as if we now saw this disappearance or absence with perfect clarity: “quarantine is a geography of what doesn’t happen: of canceled events, of missed chances” (Vannini 2020: 270); it silently speaks, on the other hand, of our need for a life-world. Even wonderful spring weather, with its usual centrifugal-expansive atmospheric resonance in us, by its striking contrast with the health crisis during the first pandemic “wave”, deceived us about the healthiness normally associated with being outside.

Our homes, especially when we are told that family members may infect us, are no longer a zone of immunity demarcated against intruders

<sup>81</sup> And the increase in the number of cleaning crews does not seem to have really reassured people.

<sup>82</sup> See Young (2021).

<sup>83</sup> What Goffman terms “civil inattention”.

and other calamities. Exactly like open spaces, they also become areas exposed to a plague<sup>84</sup> and claustrophobic situations populated by nightmares, anguish and loneliness, places that stand no chance against an enemy that defies any hopes of control, corrodes internal integrity, and ignores the borders that usually define and defend identity. Even the injunction “stay at home!”, which had a protective and de-distressing effect at the beginning of the pandemic, sounds depressive as the emergency appears to continue indefinitely, and seems overtly paradoxical if home must be regularly sterilised<sup>85</sup>. Not to mention those who for various reasons (domestic abuse, economic difficulties, unemployment, social isolation, etc.) run more risks at home than outdoors.

The normal intracorporeal oscillation between narrowness (centering) and vastness (decentering), which forms the basis of the neo-phenomenological theory of the felt body, is here almost entirely lost. This is also due to the real sensorial shock we are experiencing, concerning first of all taste and smell<sup>86</sup> but also the reduction of sound and noise, and, conversely, the accentuation of sounds we usually fail to notice (like bird-songs but also the disturbing sound of silence). Like anguish-anxiety, a protracted emergency arouses a combination of contraction and (stopped) impulse to flight<sup>87</sup> – up to real or metaphorical escape attempts – which may increase tension almost to the point of paralysis. The dominance of the centripetal direction in normal conditions can favor existential self-reflection; now instead it freezes and qualitatively converts our surroundings, making danger and otherness ubiquitous.

This spatial compression, as well as the thickening of the cities’ volume (due to the loss of urban fluidity) that makes them appear almost like ghost towns, produces a feeling that is close to the uncanny but that, unlike it, cannot be overcome through social contact<sup>88</sup>. The narrowness due

<sup>84</sup> Contagion, in fact, requires contact, absorption and the breaking of a boundary, thus connoting both a process (transmission) and a substantial, self-replicating agent (the virus). See also Barsade (2002).

<sup>85</sup> This cannot be relativized with the obvious observation that at home we coexist everyday with thousands of bacteria and fungi without worrying about it.

<sup>86</sup> Whereas their loss is a symptom of infection (which, of course, is unscented in itself), for those who are not sick they become signs that something has changed (scent of disinfectants everywhere, of food delivery, of your own breath because of wearing masks, etc.).

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Fuchs, Micali (2013).

<sup>88</sup> Aho (2020) interprets the pandemic atmosphere, conceived as a world-collapse, i.e. an alteration of the routinized familiarity and the global sense of being-at-home up to

to the ongoing emergency forces us to isolation, to a primitive presence – Schmitz’s here-now-being-this-me – that perfectly individuates us but also isolates us in an absolute subjectivity. This present is marked by a pessimistic affection of waiting<sup>89</sup> (which is also a “bad adviser” insofar it excludes compromise or deferred solutions, and even imaginative escapes) and multiplies “repelling zones”, which normally coexist in a balanced way within our living space. The perdurant emergency gives rise to invisible space “curvatures” and barriers which, with a power reminiscent of that driving phobic and obsessive patients, restrict or prevent spontaneous life movements, incorporating in us, through an implicit felt-bodily memory, vast though repressed taboo zones (or similarly negative pericorporeal regions that are impossible to avoid) with traumatic consequences. All this makes it impossible to find an escape outside, as is instead usually granted to fear as a circumscribed feeling. It is also impossible to find a socially productive reaction in solidarity, given that “contagious diseases [...] affect not only individual bodies but also the social fabric itself. Helping is dangerous, if not deadly for the helper – and often of no effect for the patient” (Horn 2020: 22).

d) *Protopathic hypochondria*. It is also worth noting that the experimenter’s particular somatic reactions, which used to be contextualized in a more widespread manner and now are instead paranoically focused on a single etiology (Covid-19), also symbolically reflect the nature of the perceived threat. As we have been taught, among others, by the already mentioned Mattoon case, coughing and throat irritation can be consistent with the perception of poison gas, and skin rashes are common when people believe they have had contact with dangerous chemicals. While prior to the pandemic emergency my body was largely inconspicuous to me since it was absorbed in everyday tasks (and this absent-silent body is what the sign of a felt-bodily health), now it is normal to pay too much attention to the tiniest change in our bodies and worry at the first manifestations of any symptoms (at the first cough and sneeze!). Also,

an ontological death, in the light of the Heideggerian concept of “uncanny” and “deep boredom” (Griffero 2021b).

<sup>89</sup> It is well known that in conditions of ambiguity expecting sickness can cause sickness symptoms (Hahn 1999).

hearing others cough may increase coughing and therefore cause hypochondriac anxiety<sup>90</sup>.

But even in the absence of these epicritic symptoms, somehow connected with strictly organic aspects, the emergency atmosphere and the resulting social distancing (offensive especially in a community where all know each other), has two effects: on the one hand, it reduces human bodies (ours as well as others', whether infected or not) to homogenised biological entities, and on the other it gives rise to a disturbed protopathic sensitivity. The lack of lifeworldly familiarity caused by this atmosphere implies the end of circadian rhythm synchrony, hypochondria, obsessive-compulsive traumatic stress disorders and addiction of various kinds. A certain (negative) role is also played by face masks, which limit intersubjective understanding and the possibilities of empathizing even with friends and family (not to mention the possibility of ironic facial expressions); masks determine a global renunciation of other people's faces, smile and more generally their meaningful expressiveness (except maybe the exchange of glances, whose interpretation can however be misleading), thus always making meeting other people a bit spooky.

In short: our lived body has degenerated from a social subject into a mere physical, thinglike body that, as a site of continuous suspicion to be scrutinised and measured<sup>91</sup>, hinders any lifeworldly attitude. The ubiquity of telepresence, no matter how sophisticated, eliminates the other's living and expressive body and therefore any real intercorporeality (being just an impoverished simulation of it). The lived outer and inner space becomes a strictly calculated one (a localized space in Schmitz's terms). The felt-bodily communication (or intercorporeality) with otherness has lost all fluidity by being subject to various rules and prohibitions. There is a lack of nuances in the meaning of our living with others, but there is also a loss of ethical responsibilities, since without proximity and the "embodied risk" that proximity always implies, our ethical responsibility towards others seems to disappear<sup>92</sup>. The usual porosity between private and public turns into a confinement relationship through stable borders; the deserted cities give life to a spectral aesthetics, etc.

<sup>90</sup> See Bartholomew, Victor (2004: 242). "From a perceptual perspective, hearing another person cough prompts others to monitor quickly their own throat, thus increasing the probability that someone would become aware of throat irritation and emit a cough" (Pennebaker 1980: 87).

<sup>91</sup> I thank Dylan Trigg for this verbal suggestion. See now Trigg (2022a; 2022b).

<sup>92</sup> See Dolezal (2020).

The protracted emergency and suspicion atmosphere – as stated above, in the case of Covid-19 everyone and everything is suspect – seems lead to an objectification-depersonalization of any dimension that previously enjoyed our latent trust, of our feeling of being unthreatened by places and people on which routine used to rely before, and that allowed a fluid and guaranteed being-in-the-world (which now instead is always precisely calculated). It is as if our world's tacit background foregrounded (became a figure, gestaltically speaking), thus becoming uncertain and threatening (even if only because it is now clear and no longer latent) and also giving a different tone to our affective life, now synthesized by a depressing (once we would have said simply “alienating”) sense of “I can't” and by people's isolation<sup>93</sup>.

#### 4. *Affective regimes*

It's difficult to share the rare but existing optimistic statement that this emergency and the various lockdowns have given us the possibility to reimagine our lives, to embrace a politics of compassion, new forms of collective spatiality and new rituals – in short that they have freed us from the old world and the regressive ideal of returning to how things were before. Moreover, talking of our time as an age of protracted emergency means assuming that it is possible to discriminate historical periods also according to a predominant emotional regime. And yet, bringing back these affective “styles”, as suggested by my neophenomenological approach, to the type of felt-bodily disposition and resonance towards outside atmospheres (instead to just scopic regimes) means asking a whole series of questions that even common sense has not yet been fully resolved. It means offering a solution that is promising as long as one does not wield the corporeal *Urphänomenon* of a certain era – as a true condition of possibility of can and cannot be felt in that time – in an omni-explanatory way. Rather, one should refer to a polyphonic constellation made by the interaction of all the categories of the lived body (which as such has an isomorphic relationship with the environment) and take into account relevant exceptions.

Indeed, the examination of the “evidence of felt-bodily feeling” (Schmitz 1966: 155) has shown that a protracted emergency atmosphere

<sup>93</sup> “Not only were we not allowed to touch each other, we were not allowed to breathe the same air. That is the essence of social distancing” (Horn 2020: 22).

can become a habitus<sup>94</sup>, namely an embodied history and logic underlying all social practices and inducing high degrees of felt-bodily synchrony<sup>95</sup> or entrainment<sup>96</sup>. This intercorporeality, not only based on body schemas and parallel feelings, can ensure that participants in a certain situation understand and feel themselves as confronted with an event that is relevant to them, living a “convergent plural for-the-sake-of-which” (Sánchez Guerrero 2020). The resulting joint atmospheric feeling, which even after its dissolving leaves behind a deep imprint in the felt-bodily state of those involved<sup>97</sup>, can also be, within certain limits, historically studied *ex post* through the felt-bodily disposition or corporeal style (Schmitz 1966: IX-X) of a certain culture. Think, for example, of the correspondence in the baroque era between the high pitched trumpet sound and an agile bodily attitude; or between the prevailing architecture and its inhabitants’ corporeal-proxemic character in late-19th-century Paris. An even clearer example can be found in the Weimar Republic, in the convergence between the atmosphere of social-political relativistic nervousness at its peak<sup>98</sup> and the diffuse neurasthenia due to the feeling of “missing the ground under your feet”: people tried to defend themselves from this state of mind by therapeutically anchoring in primitivism (avant-garde art) and regressing to anti-urban vitalistic elementarism (Spengler against the city but also Heidegger’s cabin in the Black Forest), by embracing the cult of alleged authenticity (think of Heidegger’s struggle against the oblivion of Being and the massifying “they”, which leads to the authenticity of being-towards-death!) but especially by adopting apathetic coldness (Bauhaus!) and a soldier-worker-type behavioral kinetic energy<sup>99</sup> (and even the war’s “storm of steel” and “total mobilisation” promoted by Ernst Jünger)<sup>100</sup>. This epoch exemplifies very well that two different and even apparently opposite styles like cold rationalistic sobriety and ecstatic excitement

<sup>94</sup> But freeing Bourdieu’s concept from the too-strict reference to social classes, action and (only) the physical body, and also giving it an affective value almost entirely lacking in the French sociologist (see Trčka 2011: 20).

<sup>95</sup> *Contra* Sánchez Guerrero (2020: 469).

<sup>96</sup> See Krueger (2016: 267), Salice, Høffding, Gallagher (2019: 206) for examples that are often taken from musical practice.

<sup>97</sup> Especially artists, of course (see Schmitz 1969: 158, and generally 1966).

<sup>98</sup> A nervousness that would characterize the entire 1880-1933 period. See Lethen (2005, and above all 2002).

<sup>99</sup> See Radkau (1998).

<sup>100</sup> Hence the decrease in the cases of neurasthenia confirmed by doctors in the first months of war, obviously just before the conflict generated countless other diseases.

(from the sport records and conquest of the Poles to sexual promiscuity)<sup>101</sup> are – almost like a bistable Gestalt figure – only different resonances (forms of felt-bodily filtering) of the “same” atmosphere: in this case, the nervous anguish of the European “roaring twenties”.

Group atmospheres and causing-resulting felt-bodily styles are fundamental components of what we call a historical climate or a basic mood: something that can certainly be better recognized in a third-person (external) perspective as well as *a posteriori* (by comparison with other styles), but is already sufficiently understood by the interacting members of the group through the expression of others (second-person perspective). This comparatively collective and homogenous felt-bodily style – where “comparatively” acts as a caveat if not as a magic formula aimed at absolutizing neither its diffusion nor the homogeneity of the group involved – is neither only the cause nor only the effect of an atmosphere but rather, circularly and not aimlessly, both the condition of possibility of its perception and the resonance of this perceptual experience (as the result of a selection within what a richer felt-bodily alphabet could make climatically possible)<sup>102</sup>. Besides, every (geographical and historical) determinism is avoided, if only because individuals sometimes, just by moving, manage to find a more suitable climate or can develop properties that perfectly adapt to the hostile environment.

Instead of indulging in unrealistic, typically philosophical fantasies, according to which the pandemic would be a favourable opportunity for a reconsidered communism (a co-immunism) or the starting point of nefarious forms of authoritarian-securitarian control, where even e-learning would be the perfect equivalent within today’s telematic dictatorship of university professors who in 1931 swore to the fascist regime (!), I think it’s definitely preferable to leave it to some open questions. How could a protracted emergency atmosphere be managed, provided, furthermore, that one might not want to feel the way one does? Time will tell, of course. It is difficult to predict how Covid-19-driven anxiety, a revenge of

<sup>101</sup> See Gumbrecht (2012: 126): “Natural impulses aroused and amplified the desire for mounting intensity. In this way, the metropolitan world of the 1920s became the scene of a challenging form of sexual freedom that, by posing both physical and affective risks, could scarcely be satisfied. Because it drew on feelings of bland resignation instead of primal energies, sexual experience really was like dancing on a volcano – not just the opposite pole of sobriety, *Gelassenheit*, and anonymity, but also their other side, which expressed a dramatic form of vexed excitement”.

<sup>102</sup> Schmitz (1992: 329).

the air<sup>103</sup>, as it were, will affect generations in the age of development and lacking the resources of experience that would enable them to live with risk; if it can be downgraded from a basic-existential mood to limited fear and thus compensated for by other feelings; if one will be able to avoid reacting to bodily disorientation through a purely mechanical and “masked” physicality, through a securitarian stiffening based on drawing net boundaries and keeping one’s distance – as such antithetical to our usual fluid and taken-for-granted felt-bodily movement – or even through obedience to some authoritarian slogan; if one will get around the damages caused by the loss of other people’s smile and the handshake as the gestures that by definition exclude any threat, etc. In short: “Things ain’t what they used to be”. It is very difficult to know what future normality will look like<sup>104</sup>, as well as to anticipate the long-term (affective, social, cognitive) effects of an invisible atmosphere like the one we are all “breathing”. Unfortunately, since it is “in the air” – literally – and we all share it, Covid-19 instills an affective-atmospheric flattening that, for now, we must simply learn to live with.

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<sup>103</sup> “Covid-19 will continue to change our lives long after we are all immune, or dead. Perhaps this pandemic is a wicked, bitter ruse, a revenge of the air. It reminds us that it is a medium, a medium of life, but also of being social” (Horn 2020: 23).

<sup>104</sup> “When will the peak of the virus take place? No one knows. But atmospheric disease has already peaked. It peaked the moment hope drowned in memories of what ordinary life once was” (Vannini 2020: 273).

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