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Atmospheres, Temporality and Hauntology: the study case of the villages of the Italian Apennine

Atmosferas, Temporalidade e Assombração: o caso de estudo das aldeias dos Apeninos Italianos

Atmósferas, temporalidad y hauntología: el caso de estudio de los pueblos de los Apeninos italianos

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Resumo

O artigo investiga as aldeias do interior do Parque Nacional do Gran Sasso (Abruzzo), assumindo o despovoamento como um processo a longo prazo que os terremotos dos últimos vinte anos aceleraram mas não originaram. A contribuição parte da hipótese de que, para compreender a identidade e as possibilidades de regeneração destes lugares, é necessário acompanhar os indicadores quantitativos com uma leitura das atmosferas: campos experienciais multissensoriais, afectivos e relacionais que ligam espaço, tempo, corpo e memória. Nesta perspectiva, as atmosferas revelam o carácter multitemporal das aldeias - permanências, suspensões, interrupções - e dialogam com a noção de assombração, evidenciando presenças-ausências que ultrapassam o "aqui e agora". Metodologicamente, a investigação propõe um quadro híbrido que integra: análises quantitativas com exploração fenomenológica a pé (práticas de caminhada) orientadas para a deteção incorporada de qualidades atmosféricas; fenomenografias como dispositivos para a emergência do conteúdo emocional implícito no espaço vivido. Na esfera quantitativa, é introduzido um indicador original - a Credencial de Recuperabilidade Qualitativa (CRQ) - que mede o "estado de conservação residual" dos elementos histórico-arquitectónicos mais valiosos e permite comparações e agrupamentos entre estudos de caso. O enxerto da verificação fenomenográfica serve para testar os limites dos dados, preenchendo o que escapa à medição por si só. A principal evidência que emerge do artigo é, em primeiro lugar, que as aldeias se configuram como paisagens temporais estratificadas: a rarefação social coexiste com vestígios materiais e imateriais de práticas passadas, gerando atmosferas de "tempo suspenso" onde coexistem fragilidade e resistência. Em segundo lugar, o corpo funciona como um sensor situado: o ritmo, as posturas, as micro-percepções (cheiros, silêncios, reverberações) não constituem meras reacções subjectivas, mas componentes da própria atmosfera, úteis para a leitura de dissonâncias e potencialidades. Além disso, as imagens e as narrativas não se limitam a "ilustrar" os lugares: elas produzem conhecimento atmosférico, activando ressonâncias mnésticas e tornando visíveis relações invisíveis entre pessoas, coisas e ambientes. A nível operacional, a abordagem proposta: evita a 'retórica da aldeia' que reduz as aldeias a imagens estetizadas e desestetizadas; apoia políticas de regeneração orientadas para a qualidade, em que as intervenções materiais são coordenadas com o cuidado das relações e práticas de utilização; fornece um quadro de avaliação integrado (QRC + exploração atmosférica) útil para seleccionar prioridades, calibrar estratégias e monitorizar mudanças e impactos. Em conclusão, o artigo demonstra que a combinação de indicadores e de investigação atmosférica permite apreender a persistência da identidade para além do declínio demográfico, oferecendo ferramentas conceptuais e operacionais para imaginar trajectórias de regeneração baseadas na memória, na pertença e na qualidade de vida sensível.

Palavras-chave: Atmosferas. Temporalidades. Zonas interiores. Hauntologia. Fenomenografia.

Abstract

The article investigates the villages of the inland areas of the Gran Sasso National Park (Abruzzo), assuming depopulation as a long-term process that the earthquakes of the last twenty years have accelerated but not originated. The contribution stems from the hypothesis that to understand the identity and regeneration possibilities of these places, it is necessary to flank quantitative indicators with a reading of atmospheres: multi-sensorial, affective and relational experiential fields that link space, time, body and memory. In this perspective, atmospheres reveal the multi-temporal nature of the villages-permanences, suspensions, interruptions-and dialogue with the notion of hauntology, highlighting presences-absences that exceed the 'here and now'. Methodologically, the research proposes a hybrid framework that integrates: quantitative analyses with phenomenological exploration on foot (walking practices) geared towards the embodied detection of atmospheric qualities; phenomenographies as devices for the emergence of the emotional content implicit in the lived space. In the quantitative sphere, an original indicator is introduced - the Qualitative Recoverability Credential (QRC) - which measures the "residual state of conservation" of the most valuable historical-architectural features and allows comparisons and clustering between case studies. The grafting of phenomenographic verification serves to test the limits of the data, filling in what escapes measurement alone. The main evidence that emerges in the article is firstly that villages are configured as stratified temporal landscapes: social rarefaction coexists with material and immaterial traces of past practices, generating atmospheres of 'suspended time' where fragility and resistance coexist. Secondly, the body functions as a situated sensor: pace, postures, micro-perceptions (smells, silences, reverberations) constitute not mere subjective reactions, but components of the atmosphere itself, useful for reading dissonances and potentialities. Moreover, images and narratives do not simply 'illustrate' places: they produce atmospheric knowledge, activating mnemonic resonances and making invisible relationships between people, things and environments visible. On an operational level, the proposed approach: avoids the 'rhetoric of the village' that reduces villages to aesthetised and de-aesthetised images; supports quality-oriented regeneration policies, where material interventions are coordinated with the care of relations and practices of use; provides an integrated evaluation framework (QRC + atmospheric exploration) useful for selecting priorities, calibrating strategies and monitoring change and impacts. In conclusion, the article demonstrates that the combination of indicators and atmospheric investigation allows us to grasp identity persistence beyond demographic decline, offering conceptual and operational tools to imagine regeneration trajectories based on memory, belonging and the sensitive quality of living.

Keywords: Atmospheres. Temporalities. Inner areas. Hauntology. Phenomenographies.

Resumen

El artículo investiga los pueblos del interior del Parque Nacional del Gran Sasso (Abruzos), asumiendo la despoblación como un proceso a largo plazo que los terremotos de los últimos veinte años han acelerado pero no originado. La contribución parte de la hipótesis de que, para comprender la identidad y las posibilidades de regeneración de estos lugares, es necesario flanquear los indicadores cuantitativos con una lectura de las atmósferas: campos experienciales multisensoriales, afectivos y relacionales que vinculan espacio, tiempo, cuerpo y memoria. En esta perspectiva, las atmósferas revelan el carácter multitemporal de los pueblos -permanencias, suspensiones, interrupciones- y dialogan con la noción de hauntología, poniendo de relieve presencias-ausencias que exceden el "aquí y ahora". Metodológicamente, la investigación propone un marco híbrido que integra: análisis cuantitativos con exploración fenomenológica a pie (prácticas de caminar) orientada a la detección encarnada de cualidades atmosféricas; fenomenografías como dispositivos para la emergencia del contenido emocional implícito en el espacio vivido. En el ámbito cuantitativo, se introduce un indicador original -la Credencial de Recuperabilidad Cualitativa (QRC)- que mide el "estado residual de conservación" de los rasgos histórico-arquitectónicos más valiosos y permite realizar comparaciones y agrupaciones entre estudios de caso. El injerto de la verificación fenomenográfica sirve para poner a prueba los límites de los datos, completando lo que escapa a la mera medición. La principal evidencia que se desprende del artículo es, en primer lugar, que los pueblos se configuran como paisajes temporales estratificados: la rarefacción social coexiste con huellas materiales e inmateriales de prácticas pasadas, generando atmósferas de "tiempo suspendido" en las que coexisten fragilidad y resistencia. En segundo lugar, el cuerpo funciona como un sensor situado: el ritmo, las posturas, las micropercepciones (olores, silencios, reverberaciones) no constituyen meras reacciones subjetivas, sino componentes de la propia atmósfera, útiles para leer disonancias y potencialidades. Además, las imágenes y las narraciones no se limitan a "ilustrar" lugares: producen conocimiento atmosférico, activan resonancias mnésicas y hacen visibles relaciones invisibles entre personas, cosas y entornos. A nivel operativo, el enfoque propuesto: evita la "retórica del pueblo" que reduce los pueblos a imágenes estetizadas y desestetizadas; apoya las políticas de regeneración orientadas a la calidad, en las que las intervenciones materiales se coordinan con el cuidado de las relaciones y las prácticas de uso; proporciona un marco de evaluación integrado (QRC + exploración atmosférica) útil para seleccionar prioridades, calibrar estrategias y supervisar cambios e impactos. En conclusión, el artículo demuestra que la combinación de indicadores e investigación atmosférica permite captar la persistencia identitaria más allá del declive demográfico, ofreciendo herramientas conceptuales y operativas para imaginar trayectorias de regeneración basadas en la memoria, la pertenencia y la calidad de vida sensible.

Palabras clave: Atmósferas. Temporalidades. Áreas interiores. Hauntología. Faenomenografías.

Introduction

Villages in a state of abandonment or depopulation are not just places emptied of population or deprived of services. They represent complex spaces in which memories are condensed, interrupted temporalities and subtle relationships that cannot be grasped through quantitative instruments alone. Studying the atmospheres in these contexts therefore means going beyond demographic data or economic indicators, to restore the lived experience of places, as perceived and internalised by those who inhabit, pass through or observe them.

The atmosphere of an abandoned village cannot be reduced to a technical 'parameter': it encompasses the silence of empty streets, the suspension of time in the architecture standing still from a bygone era, the feelings of melancholy or expectation that emerge in the spaces of interrupted everyday life. This perspective makes it possible to recognise the existential and phenomenological dimension of places, that which links material spaces to the emotions and affections they arouse.

A further relevant aspect is the temporal dimension. In abandoned villages, time does not flow in a linear fashion, but is layered, interrupted, suspended. Atmospheres make it possible to read these complex temporalities: unexpected permanences, memories that resist, broken rhythms that overlap. Understanding how places inhabit time and how time inhabits places is essential to interpreting their deep identity and the possibilities of regeneration.

The study of atmospheres also makes invisible relationships visible. To speak of "invisible relationships" is to recognise that places do not only live through those who inhabit them today, but also through the stratifications of social, affective and symbolic relationships that have settled over time. The study of atmospheres does not invent these relationships, but makes them perceptible and analysable, restoring a dimension otherwise destined to remain mute. Quantitative data give us information on the number of inhabitants, on closed houses, on services present or absent; but they fail to grasp the network of relationships, affections and meanings that persists even in conditions of strong social rarefaction. The atmospheric approach allows us to highlight what escapes the data, but which is decisive for understanding how these places can still be recognised and reactivated.

This perspective also makes it possible to avoid what Teti (2022) calls the 'rhetoric of the village': the reduction of the village to a meta-historical image, to an aestheticised and touristised non-place, devoid of authentic relations. Investigating atmospheres means restoring authenticity to places, recognising both their aesthetic qualities and their fragilities, and turning both into cognitive resources.

In this article, we focus on the villages within the Gran Sasso National Park. Walking through their silent streets, one gets the impression that time has stopped, or perhaps that it is the villages themselves that have stopped, while all around, life continues to flow. The dates of the earthquakes of 2009, 2016 and 2017 remain etched like scars in the collective memory, moments when history seems to have cracked. Yet, in most of these villages, the earthquakes did not upset the trajectory already in progress: rather, they accelerated a process of depopulation and abandonment that has been slowly consuming these communities for decades, making more visible what was already latent (Macchi Janica & Palumbo, 2019; Sette & Romano 2022; De Rossi, 2020; Barbera et al., 2022).

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Defining the atmosphere of a village is a complex task, since it cannot be reduced to a set of isolated variables. The atmosphere is, in fact, a holistic unit that simultaneously involves bodily perceptions, multisensory dynamics and affective dimensions that are difficult to translate into analytical concepts. It is not just a matter of observing forms, spaces or functions, but of understanding how they are experienced, felt and internalised by individuals and communities. One of the main difficulties lies precisely in bringing to light the 'affective content' that permeates the space of the village, an immaterial dimension that manifests itself through sounds, smells, silences, colours, and which contributes decisively to defining the identity of the place.

Over the years, different disciplines have developed different approaches to this theme: from aesthetics to anthropology, from cultural geography to environmental psychology. Each of these approaches has highlighted partial aspects, but none alone has been able to render the complexity of the atmospheric experience. The approach this paper intends to use is in the vein of 'hybrid' methodologies, capable of integrating qualitative and quantitative tools (Creswell, 2003; Bryman, 2006; Johnson et al., 2007; Kiib et al., 2017).

This hybrid perspective makes it possible to bring together on the one hand, numerical indicators and objective data (e.g. demographic, statistical or cartographic) and, on the other hand, subjective narratives, first-person descriptions, photographs and visual material collected in the field. The added value of this method does not lie in the simple sum of different techniques, but in their integration, which allows for a more complete and nuanced reading of the atmospheres.

To construct this methodology, it is necessary to systemise a plurality of descriptive practices, capable of crossing objective measurements and subjective perceptions. The orientation of this paper is therefore predominantly methodological: the objective is not only to analyse places, but to elaborate a framework of tools useful for grasping their atmospheric dimension, understood as a knot where space, time, senses and memory intertwine.

Temporalities, Bodies And Places

The relationship between urban temporality and sense of place is particularly evident in historic villages, where time does not flow in a linear fashion but is layered in spatial, material and symbolic forms. The city - and even more so the village - is the product of historical cycles of growth and decline, of economic and social transformations, of sudden events and slow sedimentation. Each phase leaves traces that remain embedded in the built environment and that, in turn, feed the atmospheric perception of places.

Urban temporalities do not coincide with chronological, measurable and uniform time, but manifest themselves through multiple and discontinuous rhythms, in a lived time (Zumthor & Lending, 2018): architectural permanences that endure for centuries, social uses that are interrupted, memories that resurface like spectres in the present. This plurality of times means that villages are never reducible to a single image, but present themselves as complex temporal landscapes, in which past, present and future intertwine and contaminate each other.

These temporalities do not flow evenly, but intertwine, stop, fold in on themselves in the visible and invisible traces that cross walls, streets, squares. It is in this context that the sense of place, and especially the attachment to place, takes shape: not as an abstracted idea, but as a lived experience, rooted in the relationship between body and space (Bohme, 1995; Pallasmaa, 1996; Griffero 2016; De Matteis, 2019; Schmitz, 2019; Fuchs, 2000), memory and transformation.

"Topophilia" (literally "love of place") is the neologism coined by Tuan (1974) to refer precisely to the emotional and affective bond that unites individuals to places, absorbing concepts and ideas from existentialism and phenomenology. Since then, this theme has been widely investigated and debated in various disciplines and fields of research (Buttimer & Seamon, 1980; Seamon, 1996; Chow & Healey, 2008; Bernardo & Palma-Oliveira, 2013; Belanche et al., 2017; Cook et al., 2007; Mihaylov & Perkins, 2014; Kyle et al., 2004).

Tuan writes:

'Of young lovers we say that they dwell in each other's gaze. They are free from attachment to things and place; they will leave their homes and flee if necessary. Older couples are attached to place, but they are even more so to people, to services and to each other'. (1977, p.137)

This statement effectively grasps, on the one hand, the phenomenon of depopulation that characterises Italy's inland areas and, on the other, the profound reasons for the attachment to places by the communities that still inhabit them or maintain a symbolic and emotional bond with them. Buttimer (1980), too, emphasises that the affective relations that individuals establish with the places where they live are crucial and determine their sense of belonging.

Wylie (2007) observes how places marked by catastrophes or collective traumas are often "paralysed", affected by what, in the wake of Schmitz (2011), we can call a real "emotional paralysis". In these contexts, the link between community and urban-rural environment undergoes an abrupt interruption: the space that once constituted the scene of everyday life suddenly becomes alien, suspended, incapable of sustaining the relationships that animated it.

The rarification of human presences, the suspension of everyday practices and silent degradation transform space into a palimpsest of absences and potentialities. In this context, the body is not a mere observer: it is a sensitive organ that responds to the dramas of place, registers atmospheric dissonances and negotiates its presence in space, even through subtle discomforts (Griffero, 2017b).

The phenomenology of the body offers us a useful lens to investigate these dynamics. According to Merleau-Ponty (1945), perception is embodied: we are not 'in a place' in an abstract way, but through the body-living that is always already immersed in the world. Its perceptual potentials (movement, balance, gesture) and its resistances (fatigue, distance, physical endurance) modulate the way we experience a changing urban landscape (Seamon, 2013).

When we pass through a depopulated village, the body tends to register accelerations and fractures: the pace becomes slower, there is a tendency to look for familiar supports or references, the gaze explores hidden details, the perception of emptiness and silence becomes tangible. What remains is not just a material absence, but a residual energy that acts on the body - a weight of air, an echo, a shadow that still pulses.

The body is not merely an external observer, but a constitutive part of the world and its experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). Indeed, it is through corporeality that the affective knot of spatial experience is situated (Griffero, 2017b; De Matteis, 2018; Feldon et al., 2018; De Matteis, 2019). All perception is embodied: we do not merely register cognitively what kind of space surrounds us, but we experience it with our bodies, and from this springs the emotional and atmospheric tonality of our experience.

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It follows that the perception of architecture cannot be separated from corporeal presence. If it is true that architecture produces spaces, then their evaluation cannot take place at a distance or in the abstract, but only by entering those spaces, passing through them, inhabiting their atmosphere. As Böhme (2017) reminds us, the aesthetic experience of architecture is only fully realised in the direct relationship between body and environment, when space becomes an affective and perceptual field that envelops us and resonates with us.

These bodily responses are not mere subjective reactions: they are components of the atmosphere itself. In a space impoverished of relationships, the body becomes a sensitive instrument for detecting temporal gaps, latent spectra. It is as if the body perceives not only the present, the present atmosphere, but also the resonances of the past and the anxiety of the possible future, compressing these temporal inclinations in its physicality.

Atmospheres, Traces And Hauntology

But what is an atmosphere? This question has been answered in recent years by scholars from different disciplines - from cultural geography to aesthetics (Schmitz (2019) and Griffero (2010) among the most authoritative voices), from anthropology to sociology - offering multiple and sometimes divergent approaches. For Böhme (2017, p.128) "...the atmosphere of a city is precisely the way in which life takes place within it... we mean something characteristic, that is, something peculiar to the city, which makes it individual, and which therefore cannot be communicated with general concepts".

Hasse (2008, 2012) emphasised the role of atmospheres as environmental conditions that exceed individual perception, while Anderson (2009) and Bissell (2010) investigated them in terms of collective affects and pre-cognitive forces capable of orienting social behaviour. From a phenomenological perspective, Thibaud (2011, 2015) and Sørensen (2015) have instead insisted on the embodied experience of atmospheres, understood as sensory fields involving bodies and modulating their relationships with space. In parallel, Edensor (2012, 2015) highlighted the atmospheric character of everyday and post-industrial landscapes, while Ash (2013) and Buser (2014, 2017) emphasised the affective and situational dimension of atmospheres in relation to urban processes.

In this research, the focus is particularly on the relationship between atmospheres and temporality. As Bille et al. (2015) note, atmospheres emerge as multi-temporal tensions: they are never simply anchored in the present but condense within them traces of the past and projections of the future. A depopulated square carries with it not only the materiality of what has remained, but also the memory of the social practices that animated it and the implicit or explicit expectation of what may yet happen. In this sense, atmospheres are configured as stratified fields of experience, in which linear time is shattered and replaced by multiple, dissonant or overlapping temporalities.

Studying atmospheres, then, means recognising that each space is always more than its 'here and now': it is an interweaving of lived, remembered and imagined temporalities that feed its identity and influence the way individuals and communities relate to it.

This perspective on the multi-temporal character of atmospheres opens up a direct dialogue with the concept of hauntology. Coined by Jacques Derrida and first used in Marx's Wraiths (Derrida, 1994), hauntology is a neologism play on words between haunting and ontology, referring to the return of the revenant and the past (understood

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as traces, spectres and ghosts) that continues to persist in the present (Edensor, 2005; Meier et al., 2013; Degen & Hetherington, 2001). A way to suggest that being is always inhabited by an inescapable absence, it denotes a temporal non-linearity and opens up the discussion of presence and absence, visible and invisible (Merleau-Ponty, 1979).

If atmospheres, as Bille et al. (2015) write, are both a product of the past and the future, they share with hauntology the ability to make perceptible presences-absences that exceed the immediate present. In other words, both atmospheres and hauntology spectres operate as devices of broken temporality: they put us in touch with what is no longer and what is not yet, but which continues to exert an influence. Maddern and Adey (2008), emphasise how the relationship between time and space cannot be read according to a rigid linearity. Indeed, past and future are not simply located 'elsewhere' than the present, but enter into an additional relationship with it, becoming an integral part of its experience. In this interweaving, spaces and times are 'bent' in such a way as to make apparently distant presences, events, people and things more intimate and perceptible.

Wylie (2007) writes that "the spectral confuses the established orders of past and present", suggesting how spectral relations tangle the threads of temporal linearity (Maddern & Adey, 2008), questioning the straight "arrow" of time (Merleau-Ponty (1945) already stated that "time is not a line but a web of intentionality") between what has already been and what is yet to be: present past and future, especially within these villages, are not separate, but always have a bit of one within the other, are not linear, and thus allow something to be noticed as 'absent' in the present, through the recognition of traces of the past. In a way, atmospheres are the 'prototypical' way hauntology manifests itself, as they lie between subject and object, characterised by their quasi-cosality (Griffero, 2017a; Böhme, 1995; Böhme, 2017).

As Buse & Stott (1999: 88) write, in the horizon of hauntology, the relations between past and present, between presence and absence, cannot be understood simply as dialectical relations 'in tension', but as inseparable interweavings, in which each term always carries traces of its opposite.

Anderson (2009) develops this insight by emphasising how atmospheric experience is traversed by phantasmatic presences: what is absent continues to influence what is present, and what is present can never completely rid itself of what has been.

Methodology

The research is based on a predominantly quantitative analysis, integrated and 'verified' through a dialectical and image-based articulation. The approach adopted thus combines quantitative measurement with qualitative description to provide a more complete reading of the phenomena observed.

Starting from on-site inspections and surveys, supplemented with data from national databases (cf. ISTAT), a descriptor was drawn up based on the joint analysis of the architectural, urban planning and socio-economic matrices of the villages. This descriptor was then associated with an original indicator, called "Qualitative Recoverability Credential" (QRC), which expresses the "residual state of conservation" of the most valuable historical-architectural features, thus providing a useful measure to guide recovery and valorisation strategies. The method is part of the broader strand of indicator engineering (Romano et al., 2023; Cerreta & Malangone, 2014; Brown & Raymond, 2007; Sun et al., 2020), proposing itself as a tool for assessing the 'quality' of villages, understood in an extended and multidimensional sense. The procedure

developed makes it possible to carry out systematic comparisons and clustering processes, highlighting similarities and differences between the cases analysed and offering a cognitive basis for the definition of targeted policies and interventions.

The innovation of this methodology lies in having, as a complement to this quantitative analysis, a descriptive capacity so as to have a method of verification of this indicator, through images, snapshots, combined with descriptions of the experiences of the subject (narrator) and the object (urban environment), through a walking exploration of these villages, a kind of urban promenade. We ask ourselves: 'What aspect of phenomenal reality can I not assess with an indicator? And what phenomenographic tools (Marton, 1986; Hasse, 2015; De Matteis et al., 2019) do we have to reveal the temporalities of these places?' The experience of exploring "on foot" is a tool for describing places, perceived atmospheres, which combined with the use of the photographic device can highlight urban atmospheres and the different levels of temporalities that have stratified within these villages.

It is not enough to limit attention to the material dimension and architectural objects that make up cities. What makes them vital, in fact, is not only their built form, but also the network of relationships, affections and social resonances that runs through them and which, like the physical heritage, needs to be recognised, protected and kept alive.

The synaesthetic character of atmospheres does not end with their multisensory dimension but also manifests itself in their ability to activate cognitive and sensory associations, both voluntary and involuntary. As Böhme (1995) and Griffero (2016) point out, atmospheres are not simply perceived with the senses, but 'envelop us' and resonate with us, generating bodily responses involving memory, emotion and imagination. For this reason, it becomes imperative to expose oneself directly to the urban experience: it is only through bodily presence in places that it is possible to document and understand the reactions that atmospheric space elicits.

Atmospheric perception is also influenced by the historical and social changes that have transformed urban contexts. Material changes, historical discontinuities and transformations of usage practices sediment in architectural forms and public spaces, altering the quality of atmospheres over time (Pallasmaa, 1996; Schmitz, 2019; De Matteis, 2019). In this sense, urban experience cannot be separated from the historical dimension: our perception of the present is constantly intertwined with traces of the past and projections into the future, making atmospheres a layered and dynamic field of experience.

Phaenomenographies And Traces On Walking

Phenomenography is 'the deliberate application of technical tools that produce a description. In this sense, it can be either an interpretation of reality, as an account of a perceived atmosphere, or produce atmospheric effects itself' (De Matteis et al., 2019: 6). Phenomenographies thus seek to translate the multisensory and subjective experience of lived space into a communicable format, using tools such as images, texts, sounds or a combination of these, often relying on the collaboration between different sensory domains that are synaesthetically intertwined, and are in turn linked to the object of representation (Sumartojo et al., 2019; Morselli, 2019; Mackrodt, 2019; Canepa et al., 2019; De Matteis, 2022).

With the power of photography and images, the aim was to capture what may have remained hidden in the wide-meshed weave of the indicator, and even in the denser weave of words, filling in the gaps of the former and the 'difficulty' of verbalisation.

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Images, prejudicially, are always regarded as denotative and documentary; images, however, 'do not merely speak of an atmosphere, but create it; the images themselves "are" this atmosphere and not its representation'. Atmospheres are 'diffused' in the very image that generates them (Griffero, 2010). Photographs 'represent' the lives of inhabitants, past and present; photographs can in fact be the reiteration of a past memory, still present, becoming a social 'memory bank' (Shanks, 1997). Photography thus works on memory and time, crystallising a past moment that becomes present again. And if "memory is the act of remembering from the point of view of a later time" (Shanks, 1997), photographs help us in the reactivation of the same, soliciting a bodily resonance felt through multi-sensory effects.

And walking through the narrow streets of these municipalities allows one to explore details, to notice unexpected elements, to deviate from the path and to make chance encounters: this openness to the unexpected enriches the village experience, making each walk unique and allowing each route to reveal new facets of the urban environment. The walk has its own temporality and rhythmicity, as each person walks at his or her own pace, influenced by his or her emotions, intentions and the mood of the moment: for Thibaud (2011, 2015), it is also a way of opening to the unexpected and discovery.

In these small mountain villages, everything seems to speak to the past: the ancient stone of the façade bears the marks of time and abandonment: a rough, worn surface that tells stories of lives passed and silences accumulated. The window grills and the locked door speak of closure, of an interruption in daily life, of a presence that is no longer there. But the traces remain 'written in the corners of the streets' (Calvino, 2022).

The white sheet stretched out on the balcony is like a domestic ghost: a simple gesture of life that appears fragile, almost inadequate in the face of the stone's hardness, yet very strong in its symbolic value. It is a sign that something resists, that the past has not dissolved completely but continues to resurface in small everyday actions [FIGURE 1]. The green bench, consumed by the sun, remains as a relic of an interrupted sociality, a memory of encounters and conversations that time has suspended but not erased.

Nature, too, bears witness: the plants growing along the threshold, the flowers emerging among the stones, are living traces of a vitality that stubbornly resurfaces [FIGURE 2].

Crossing my path quickly, apologising for my haste, is a man, dressed in a long dark suit and a light hat: a missionary priest. His presence introduces a sense of mystery and at the same time familiarity: the atmosphere immediately becomes more intimate, inhabited by a sense of discreet spirituality that pervades the space [FIGURE 3].

And then, turning into an alley, here are two old televisions, piled one on top of the other and covered in dust and cobwebs: silent symbols of a technological past now obsolete, which has lost its original function, objects once linked to domestic sociability and image-sharing now lie mute, transformed into relics [FIGURE 4]. And the smell of dust, the smell of abandonment pervades me, a smell typical of these villages. "Smells allow us to identify places and to identify with them... A city without smell is like a person without character" (Böhme, 2017, p.126).

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FIGURE 1 (Left) – The empty bench and the domestic ghost.

Sources: Author, 2024.



FIGURE 2 (Right) – The return of the wild.

Sources: Author, 2024.



FIGURE 3 (Left) – Corporality and spirituality: the figure of the priest in the everyday space of the village.

Sources: Author, 2024.



FIGURE 4 (Right) – The ruin of technology.

Sources: Author, 2024.



Conclusions

The study of atmospheres makes it possible to lay the foundations for more sensitive and respectful recovery strategies. The atmospheres teach us that it is not enough to intervene by physically reconstructing villages: what makes them alive is not only their material form, but the network of relationships, daily practices and affections that runs through them. Regenerating these places therefore means working as much on the spaces as on the conditions that allow the survival and transmission of these relationships.

Zagari's perspective (2008), which proposes a 'homeopathic, non-surgical' method, is placed in this direction: a discreet and selective approach, capable of recognising and accepting even the fragile and 'pathological' conditions of the context, without attempting to wipe them out. The objective is not to erase the traces of history, but to start from them to introduce innovative elements that can reactivate the social and cultural fabric.

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The hybrid methodology adopted here - based on the intersection of quantitative analysis and atmospheric description - shows how it is possible to overcome the limits of a purely data-driven approach. While on the one hand the indicators and statistics provide a comparable and measurable picture, on the other hand the description of the atmospheres brings to light what would otherwise remain invisible: the vitality of the places, the quality of the relationships, the affective density that still remains, even in contexts marked by abandonment and social rarefaction. This element, apparently elusive, is instead decisive for an accurate assessment of the state of the villages and for understanding how to guide their regeneration.¹

At the same time, it is necessary to maintain a critical gaze. As Teti (2022) reminds us, the risk of the 'rhetoric of the village' is that of transforming villages into meta-historical simulacra: aestheticised and touristised spaces, capable of attracting numbers but not of reconstructing relationships. In this case we would no longer have a village, but a non-place, an artificial representation emptied of community (Augé, 2015).

To avoid this drift, it is necessary to ask ourselves, as Rowe & Koetter (1984) write, what can motivate us to cultivate a 'nostalgia for the future' instead of a sterile regret of the past. Regenerating a village therefore does not only mean recovering buildings or infrastructures, but above all keeping alive and nurturing that web of relationships and affections that constitutes its vital essence.

Intervention strategies, therefore, cannot be generic or standardised, but must be singular and targeted. They must enhance the natural and anthropic contexts in which communities can recognise and represent themselves, reconnecting the physical dimension to the affective one. Only in this way will the villages be able to regain a sense of historical continuity and open to new perspectives of life, avoiding being reduced to motionless scenographies.

Ultimately, studying atmospheres is not an aesthetic or contemplative exercise, but a way to deeply understand the condition of abandoned villages, recognise their complexity and direct sustainable regeneration processes. Regenerating a village means preserving its memory, embracing its fragilities and imagining, starting from them, forms of future that are rooted in the lived identity of places. It means regenerating its affections.

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¹ Some of the results of this research were presented in the 5th International Congress on the Ambiances, held in Rio de Janeiro and Lisbon from 8 to 11 October 2024.

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