

Genius Loci: from an atmospherological point of view

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ABSTRACT

The theoretical vagueness of a concept such as genius loci (spirit of the place) makes often feel unsatisfied. To avoid the widespread more rhetorical trend to attributing a spirit to every place - a trend already discernible in the progressive secularisation from the Greek world (an uncanny daimon) to the Roman world (a familiar genius) – and/or to explaining it as the outcome of creative human planning (especially architectural-urban), my paper states that a place has its specific genius only if it radiates a specific and particularly intense-authoritative atmosphere. That is, when the place is pervaded by a quasi-objective feeling that affects the perceiver and finds in their felt (or lived) body its precise sounding board. Just as there are different types of atmospheres (prototypic, derivative, spurious) and atmospheric encounters, there are therefore different types of genius loci, also depending on one's conception of space, here always understood as lived space, i.e. qualitative-anisotropic, and not in a physical-geometric (isotropic) sense. Contrary to the today's prevailing projectivist-constructionist explanation (culturalist as well as neuroscientific) and the tendency to explain every affective quality inherent in the external world as a subjective projection, i.e. according to an hydraulic model following the Platonic "invention" of the soul, a "pathic aesthetics" based on a neo-phenomenological approach means with genius loci, in the authentic and original sense of the term, a lifeworldly qualitative-emotional experience: in brief a spatialised atmospheric feeling that can sometimes be protected, maybe also improved but never arbitrarily created.

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Intruduction

Atmospheres are spatialised feelings: that is to say, they are the specific emotional quality of a given “lived space”. By this concept, which is now on the fore in social sciences, where they even speak of a spatial turn, I here mean the space we experience in the lifeworld and to which plane geometry turns out to be completely blind: for instance, the (not only metaphorical) voluminousness of a Sunday silence or the narrowness of a living room (perhaps metrically identical to another which is yet perceived as more spacious), the space filled with directional saliences of the dancer, the different length of a journey for someone who strolls casually and someone with a precise destination in mind, etc. While physical space made of places and measurable distances enjoys an abstract uniformity (isotropy and Euclidean three-dimensionality), “lived” space claims to have an absoluteness and an irreversibility constrained to the felt-body (above/below, right/left, up/down) and to our actions as revealed - with all due differences - in a phenomenological-psychopathological sphere and also in an anthropological-existentialistic one (Heidegger, Binswanger, Minkowski, Straus, Dürckheim, Merleau-Ponty, Bachelard, Bollnow, Schmitz).

It is only because we have a lived space that it makes sense to say that there is not enough space, that we want our own space, that we need it, that there is too much of it so that we find shelter in narrowness, that we can or cannot have it, that we can make it (thus creating a void that was not there before), given that both its genesis and its effects are psychosocial and relatively independent from physical ontology. We, in fact, are not first of all “in” space like in a big container (i.e. in an invariable and pragmatically useful system of reference of things and places, mutually defined by position and distance) but are related to pre-dimensional lived spaces, including the atmospheric ones. We experience this lived space through our corporeal and felt-bodily presence (through the oscillation within the anisotropic narrowness/vastness polarity) and through atmospheres that, although largely unconscious, permeate our entire life and not only its exceptional moments. After all, it is only because we have a lived space that it makes sense to ascribe to a certain portion of space a *genius locus* (a spirit of the place).

But here the difficulties begin. In fact, “if no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to an interrogator, I do not know.” This Augustinian paradox of time also applies to the *genius loci*, which is as theoretically inexplicable as it is practically (existentially) certain. The paper aims to demonstrate that the *genius loci* in the full sense of the term is something pathically found and not intentionally created.

1. Inexplicability of the genius loci?



Figure 1.

According to Norberg-Schulz (1980, 188), this suburban area of Oslo (fig.1) is a “visual chaos” devoid of any *genius*. But things change (Führ, 1998) as soon as the same place is framed from a different perspective (topological, climatic, time and affective) and maybe experienced in a polymodal way (especially if not just visual). Indeed, as soon as certain details of the same photo are enlarged (fig. 2), the atmosphere of the place already changes in part. Not to mention the fact that visual chaos could be just the specific “spirit” of a messy urban periphery.



Figure 2.

This example already shows how theoretically unsatisfying in their metaphorical vagueness are both scientific and popular discourses on the *genius loci*. Yet even the coldest rationalist “feels” that there are certain places whose identity “character” or physiognomic quality should be preserved from the threat of placelessness (Relph, 1976, 6). Unfortunately, however, the argument adopted in favour of place-identity is usually the commonplace according to which the *genius loci* is the very vague *quid* (what) that transforms an

anonymous space into a lived and intensely expressive place. As plausible but indemonstrable as any other *cliché*, this argument nevertheless expresses the inescapable need for some kind of correspondence (or positive “resonance”, as many prefer to say today) between internal and external landscape, state of mind and environment: a need all the more felt after the end of the “asceticism by exclusion” sponsored by the International Style and the proposal, suggested by the “spatial turn” of many humanities (Casey, 1993, 110; Tuan, 1977, 3; Malpas, 2004, 31 f.; Günzel, 2014), of seeing the inclusion in a lived-qualitative space as a meaningful-expressive location (Cresswell 2013, 7) the condition of possibility of the isotropic-naturalistic space (Griffero, 2014a; 2014b, 36-47).

The texts on the *genius loci* spare no metaphorical and rhetorical tools, hoping in vain for the self-evidence of terms such as character, quality, liveability, taste, feeling, environment, essence, resonance, presence, aura, harmony, grace, charm, *decorum*, etc (Hiss 1990, 15). But in this way, the need to defend the identity of places from topological globalisation, modern cartographic reductionism and banal tourist sightseeing does not seem able to really contrast the post-Enlightenment eliminativism, which can be summed up (Kozljanić 2004) as the trend of degrading the *genius loci* to a residual product of a mythical-archaic mindset (childish, prelogical, anthropomorphic, evemeristic) and space to an asemantic screen subject to human beings’ arbitrary projections-constructions. Nor does it satisfy the evolutionary argument according to which a *genius locus* would be recognisable in any landscape in some way traceable back to the savannah as the original human habitat. At the very least, the argument fails to clarify why this *genius loci* have often been also attributed to places unrelated to the savannah (great peaks, islands, deserts, etc.).

This metaphorical vagueness of the notion has always also been accompanied by a destiny of abstraction and secularisation, easily recognisable as early as the transition from a *daimon* responsible in Greek lands for triggering ecstatic raptures to a *genius* so devoid of numinosity for the Romans that he became the protector of (almost) every person and every place. The real estate ploy of claiming the special spirit of a certain area is then only the distant commodification effect of this Roman inflationism. It risks undermining even the architectural choice of making such a spirit a pre-planning intuition felt as indispensable to the organic-ecological and hierarchical-functional overcoming of an otherwise merely geometric project (Neddens, 1986, 24 ff., 91-92). We are not told, in fact, how to identify such a spirit, nor what its added value is compared to the urbanist who pays no attention to it.¹

Equally traditional is the other ploy used, consisting in the illusion that semantic precision passes through the proliferation of (physicalistic and spiritual) meanings. Will it really be useful for generating/preserving the spirit of the place to identify (Alexander et al. 1977) 253 different topological patterns (“high places”, “sacred sites”, “access to water”, “accessible green”, etc.)? Or to state that its architectural style, climate, natural setting,

¹ Wouldn’t also the uninterested urbanist have connected, for example, the city of Wiesbaden to the element of water (Neddens 1986, 109-110)?

memorial and metaphorical value for residents, material used on the basis of specific craftsmanship skills, constructive sensitivity and cultural-historical specificity, popular values that hover there, high quality level of the visible and accessible environments, daily and seasonal urban activities that take place there, meanings and symbols conveyed by it, and so on, are indispensable requirements of the spirit of the place (Garnham, 1981, 99; Steele, 1981)? Would it suffice (Müller 2009) to define the *genius loci* as a quasi-personal and identity-based animic (psychic) entity, whose potentialities come to light thanks to anthropic intervention? Or as a sphere endowed with its own peculiar (even geomantic)¹ dynamic, a spatial unit that is accessed by crossing (even symbolically) a threshold? Or else as the mythical or historical mnemonic trace of a collective identity and maybe as a space filled with accessible information and effective factors? In identifying both its alleged material components and its alleged symbolic-cultural values scholars have often fallen into inflationism: an approach that rightly intuits the “coalescence” (Thibaud 2015, 229-230) of the elements constituting a “situation”, but naively deludes itself into believing that proliferation could compensate for a probably unavoidable theoretical vagueness.

2. The best (failed) attempt to explain the *genius loci*

Unfortunately, these theoretical difficulties also affect the most serious studies on the subject. In his famous phenomenology of places, Norberg-Schulz, in fact, conceives architecture as a concretisation of existential space and a pregnant visualisation of the *genius loci*, but obscurely defines this, among other things, as something with which those who want to live authentically and “feel at home” should dialogue (Norberg-Schulz 1980, 5, 7-8, 15-16, 10-11, 170, 179). Almost nothing is said to us about how the “variable invariability” of the spirit of the place - an obvious revival of the rhetorical-aesthetical *topos* of the “variations on the theme” (Norberg-Schulz 1980, 18) – could resist transformations over time, if and when these are misrepresentations would be adaptations, how to identify the theme, nor why some places are so devoid of atmosphere (Norberg-Schulz 1980, 21-22, 72) as to be devoid of a *genius*. Norberg-Schulz's phenomenology is also undermined by being entirely “external”, i.e. based only on aerial views, wide shots and above all on the façade of buildings, in short on a scenographic and ocularcentric frontality (notoriously criticised by Pallasmaa 2005) that ends up underestimating both the *genius* of non-urban places and the perceptual role of the body in motion (Shirazi 2008, 6-10), especially of the felt or lived body (*Leib*) in the phenomenological sense.²

His examples also are unconvincing. The physiognomic qualities attributed to Prague, Khartoum and Rome, for example, seem neither sufficiently specific, nor do they survive physical and historical transformations, revealing themselves to be salient only once, circularly, one has preliminarily chosen them as the parameters of the investigation. Would it not be the spirit of any Mediterranean city, and not only of Rome, the way of life according

¹ And here it is easy to get carried away: it goes from the magnetic-radioactive irradiations of certain zones up to the Chinese *feng shui* as formal adaptation of the dwellings to the landscape, and so on (cf. Brönnle 2009).

² For a comprehensive theoretical and historical analysis see Schmitz (2011) and Griffero (2024).

to which while standing “outdoors” one feels comfortably “inside” (“idyllic urban interior”)? Does the attribution to Rome, even to Piazza Navona, of a spirit consisting of an olympic humanisation (Colli Albani) of nature, of the “archaic chthonic forces” of Etruria, and capable of bringing together “all the basic categories of existential meanings” (Norberg-Schulz 1980, 164), not depend too much on cognitive (geography, history) and even sensory concealed elements (archaeological finds) to still be considered as object of a real perceptual-phenomenological experience?

Aspecificity and partiality also characterise Norberg-Schulz's classification of the *genius loci* into ideal-typical forms. The Nordic-Romantic landscape, founded on the search for a protective refuge, the human-classic landscape, dominated by the combination of man (inside) and nature (outside), and the cosmic-desert landscape, destined in its abstractness to monotheism, prove in fact irreducible to the mere physiognomic character hypothesised here. Moreover, they also fail to recognise the *genius* of “mixed” places and places that, like jungles, tropical islands, etc., appear salient for non-European scholars, interested (like Watsuji 1961) in significantly different types (monsoon, desertic and pasture climate).

3. Theoretical dissatisfaction and practical certainty: the atmospherologic approach

But if it is difficult to understand what the *genius loci* is, it is even more difficult to understand how to implement it or even design it out of the blue. Obviously (Valena 2009), in trying to identify it, one cannot disregard the topography of a place, its physical-climatic - and therefore also qualitative-emotional - discontinuities, the characteristics of its inhabitants (humans and animals), its soundscape and smellscape, the means of transport passing through it, etc.¹ And yet, the concrete “imageability” (Lynch 1960) that must characterise it presupposes that one exposes oneself to it pathically and felt-bodily, perhaps counting, as Klages (1929-1932, 1132) says, on a soul that is able to be really receptive because it is not too “robust”, that is, capable of perceiving and being imbued by that impalpable affective tonality we call “atmosphere” (Griffero 2014, 2017, 2021) or *ambiance*²: two “nomadic” and eminently transdisciplinary terms that emphasise a pervasive and enveloping, amodal and peripheral (not ocularcentric) (Pallasmaa, 2014) affectivity, which makes the environment non-neutral semantically and whose identification of the *genius* of a place finds a precise sounding board in our felt body. However, a few words are now necessary to introduce the pathic aesthetics (Griffero, 2020) that I called atmospherology, especially the distinction between different types of atmosphere and different types of atmospheric experience.

We are all always “situated,” i.e. engaged in a series of atmospheric “encounters” or “games,” where by “atmosphere” – a concept become relevant in all the Humanities that subscribe to the affective- and embodiment-turn (Griffero 2019) – I mean the “something

¹ But I do not share the idea (Valena 2009, 200) that the *genius loci* is all the more effective as it depends on a human factor.

² Perhaps also depending on whether it is a tone only vaguely felt or already perceived in the environment (see Augoyard 2016, II, 579-580).

more” we sense “in the air” (so to speak), a holistic qualitative feeling that pervades a certain (pre-dimensional) space and resonates in the experiencer’s felt body, albeit it is inaccessible to an epistemic-analytical perspective. Not every atmosphere is like that, but certainly the one that most emblematically shows its ontological specificity and that I define “prototypic”.¹ It precedes any analysis and influences the perceiver’s emotional (and later also cognitive, practical) situation from the outset, even resisting any perceivers’ conscious attempt at projective adaptation and epistemic correction. Truth is, however, that any atmosphere may within certain limits be traced back to a more or less homogeneous set of affordances, which, using a notion of Gernot Böhme (2017a, 2017b, especially 2001), act as atmospheric *generators* that can be (at least in part) specified and linguistically expressed.

This atmospherological project must be contextualized within the neo-phenomenological overturning of an introjectionist metaphysics (due to Plato’s invention of the psyche) largely dominant in our culture. It takes seriously the provocative hypothesis suggested by Hermann Schmitz nearly 60 years ago now of a radical de-psychologisation of the emotional sphere (see at least Schmitz 1969, 1992, 2023).

Let’s use an architectural space as an example. Let’s imagine that we are now entering the hall of a major banking institution, with its pretentious decorations, furnishings, paintings, and sculptures (an example developed, even critically, in Arbib, Griffero 2023, 44-49). This certainly impressive lived space may be filtered (token-atmospheres) in various ways by our felt-bodily dispositions—exemplarily, suggesting an atmosphere of inhibiting power on the customer and an atmosphere of power that makes proud the owner of the bank and even the employee who has developed a strong *esprit de corps*. And this despite the type-atmosphere (imposing and authoritative vastness) is the “same”.

However, going beyond this extreme polarity, quite different can be the atmospheric “encounters”. Summing up: an atmosphere can 1) overwhelm us, 2) find us in tune with it, to the point of not being recognised and felt (hence some embarrassing inadequacy like moving in a disorderly manner in church or in a too conventional way during a party), c) be recognised without being really felt, 4) elicit a resistance that pushes us to change it, 5) or a feeling that is opposite to the one initially felt (and commonly predicted) (what I call atmospheric inversion), as when a building aims at intimidating us and instead enhances our tendency to rebel, 6) finally be perceived differently in the course of time (for various reasons).²

It should be stressed that all these atmospheric “encounters” or “games” prove, against any projectivistic relativism, that different atmospheric moods are just relatively different

¹ According to my (ontologically inflationary) typology (from Griffero 2014b, 144 on), atmospheres can be a) prototypic, that is objective, external, unintentional, sometimes lacking a precise name and relating to space of vastness, but also b) derivative-relational, i.e. objective, external, intentionally produced, related to directional space and implying an “in-between” between subject and object, and c) even quite spurious, i.e. subjective, projective and even related to single objects and local spaces

² For a detailed presentation (also supported by literary examples) of this phenomenology of atmospheric “encounters” or “games” see Griffero (2021, 37-66).

felt-bodily filterings and “resonances”¹ of the “same” quasi-objective and first-impression atmosphere. They are a form of response to affordances that are immanent to forms, things and living beings perceived in the pericorporeal space: a response that could and should be investigated (which is clearly impossible here) following the neo-phenomenological theory of the ubiquitous “felt-bodily communication” (for the last version [Schmitz 2011, 29-53](#)).

Now back to *genius loci*. Speaking of this, I want talk especially about the atmospherologic use of the notion of affordance ([Griffero 2022](#)). Atmospheres, in fact, are for me affordances or sets of affordances that tonalize the affective (natural or built-up) space in which we (sometimes physically) “enter”. They also segment this space into places through boundaries that, despite not being geometrical but emotional, affect (even socially and politically) our life-world experience. It’s true that atmospheres mostly occur as an “in-between” (between the perceiver and their environment), but in the already mentioned prototypic cases, they may even be prior to the constitution of these two poles. Anyway, all atmospheres express more or less intensely what they “afford” a person not only to do (as [Gibson 1986 famously clarifies](#)) but also to feel (and this is what interests us most). In fact, on the one hand, every relation to the world is primarily emotional and not the detached-impooverished perception reductionistically depicted by objective sciences, and, on the other, the perceived-sensed world is not the meaningless sphere of “dead” properties pursued by modern consciousness (both physicalist and culturalist), on which the experiencer simply projects their private-idiosyncratic feelings, needs, biases and motives. On the contrary, our affective and felt-bodily interaction with the surrounding (lived) space is always ruled by a physiognomic expressiveness to which, insofar as we are normal percipients and not experimental subjects, we mostly respond as recommended by phenomena themselves. *Genius loci* is precisely a place whose physiognomic expressiveness and affective affordances are so intense that it profoundly influences the experiencer. We can therefore look at the *genius loci* as the most emblematic example of an encounter with an aggressively prototypic atmosphere.

Nevertheless, the first step for an atmospherologic approach to the spirit of places implies that we get rid of the idea, polemically ascribed by Christian authors (Prudentius) to polytheistic ones, that “nullus enim locus sine genio” (“there is no place without a *genius*”) (Servius). The genius actually does not reside everywhere, nor is it everywhere transportable or interchangeable at will.² Since it is *genius* of nature and not of human being ([Kozljanič, 2004, I, 76](#)), it signals for us above all the uncanny-numinous nature – thick woods, solitary places and dense shadows that for both Seneca and Rudolf Otto would be at the origin of the sacred (numinous) - that preferentially is perceived by those who do not habitually live there but are grasped and felt-bodily raptured by it. In the form of a continuous affective-expressive bass ([Kozljanič, 2010-2011, 160](#)) whose condensation points are always only

¹ For a critical analysis of this notion (also referring to Hermann Schmitz, Bernhard Waldenfels, Hartmut Rosa and Thomas Fuchs) see [Griffero \(2024a, 145-159\)](#).

² The specific Greek topography (distinct sites) must have lent itself well to the identification of places and their *genii* (see Norberg-Schulz 1980, 28).

relatively autonomous, the spirit of a place, just like the prototypic atmosphere, is embodied in a certain space before being historically implemented or even idiosyncratically projected in it by culture.

The resulting ranking of the different spirits of places is obviously unwelcome to metaphysical apologists of “all or nothing”, whereas it is heuristically productive in more pragmatic disciplinary contexts (architecture, sociology, etc.), thus coming to even explain the sometimes a bit arbitrary nature of the spirit of place. It actually comprises the “geniologal” arbitrariness of those who, like Ludwig Klages for example, declared the *genius loci* of Munich to be incomprehensible and not very visible. He traces it back to quasi-objective, albeit variously interpretable, conditions (Bavarian geography and climate), but above all to two evocative and imaginary symbols like the rusty exhalations of the cellars and the Marian blue of the sky (also taken up by various urban elements) (Klages 1940, 18 f.). Klages’ archaic poly-iconism and poly-daemonism - there are “as many spaces and times as the images it is possible to have a lived experience of, in a spatio-temporal sense” (Klages 1929-1932, 1263-1264) - suggests that there are as many *genii loci* as the perennially changing ecstatic-contemplative, atmospheric experiences of the human being (Klages, 1942, 46 f.; 1955, 259).¹ Unfortunately, it is precisely the “etcetera” that usually ends the suggestive “expressive qualities” lists provided by Klages and every other Romantic apologist of the *genius loci* to be evocative but a theoretically useless poetic leitmotif.

4. Is it created or found?

Against this inflationary perspective-imaginal *escamotage*, it would be necessary to feel whether a certain place has a spirit independently of subjective projection and whether it remains unmistakable even if it is unmentionable (like the place where Rome was founded according to Virgil; cf. *Aeneid*, VIII, 345-352). The mandatory question, for the scholar no less than for those who design places and environments, is therefore whether the *genius loci* is found (according to archaic numinosity) or whether it is created, as a certain architectural tradition obviously requires, perhaps even by provocatively inserting contrasting artificial elements in the place (Kuhlmann 1998, 8, 14). Widely spread among architects is the Heideggerian idea that dwelling should respond to Being’s appeal and thus preserve its Fourfold (Heidegger 2001, 141-159), but not, significantly, his insistence on the preliminary necessity of releasement toward things: hence the (for me) at least controversial argument that, exactly like the landscape, the *genius loci* must also be the outcome of constructive initiative, at best suggested and favoured by the potential that would be sedimented in it.

Instead, my proposal presupposes the recognition of the manifold nature of our dialogue with a place. One can in fact a) abandon oneself to a place in an ecstatic-cultic manner, or b) intervene on it by means of material or ideal superstructures, as with the Christian reinterpretation and architectural re-functionalization of previously pagan sacred places

¹ On the partial coincidence in Klages between *Urbild* (archetype, originary image) and atmosphere see now Griffero (2024b).

(Kozljanič 2004, I, 387 ff.); finally c) one can flatten it, thus making it perfectly suitable to host new architectural projects (almost) completely foreign to the character of the place (Kozljanič 2004, II, 117). Only in the first case, however, does one have a full experience of the *genius loci*, whereas in the second one only re-functionalises the most original potential of a place (in any case still fascinating), and in the third one embraces the constructionist illusion of being able to generate it out of the blue in a space that is evidently considered available and semantically indifferent. To the thesis that the experiences of places are under our control, since we can simulate them and pre-visualise them (Hiss 1990, 99-100) we must therefore reply precisely questioning the “reduction” of the *genius loci* to human design.

It is undoubtedly legitimate to state that both the *in situ* perception of the urban ambiance and dwelling, understood as configuring, modelling and articulating our space, always involve the overcoming of traditional dichotomies (subjectivism vs. objectivism; active vs. passive) (Thibaud 2015, 57-58), and that therefore also the atmosphere should not be thought of as a static contemplative “object” but also as a constructive circulation between the given (felt) phenomenon and the configured (enacted) one (Thibaud 2015, 28, 50, 57-58, 227). Indeed, claiming that perceiving an atmosphere always implies an action (at least a virtual one) is not tantamount to claiming that an atmosphere is always the outcome of an intentional project. Even those who emphasise the sensorimotor dimension of the encounter with the world cannot disavow the primacy of the environment’s action. Its rhythmic-energetic *Gestalt* (suggestions, lines of force, etc., everything Schmitz calls motor suggestions and synesthetic characters), understood as an affective tonality embracing a subject and an object that are not even properly distinct yet, is what guides the designer’s decision to act in a specific place (and not elsewhere), especially when they are in search of the *genius loci*. This decision pragmatically answers the question “what does an environment, a space afford me to be, to do and to perceive?”

Even if mediated by small, diffuse, unanalysable, pre-conscious and unfocused perceptions, the *genius loci* is for me an atmosphere of “pervasive quality” (Dewey), which, due to its particular intensity, involuntariness and authority, is relatively unavailable: it impregnates a place, demands to be felt and answered, suggests design and dwelling performances that delude us to think we are autonomous atmospheres-designers. Given this conception of prototypic atmosphere, which is refractory to any attempt at subjective transformation, “setting up the *genius loci*”, with all that it implies in teleological and semiotic terms, sounds even like an inherent contradiction (*contradictio in adjecto*).

But the projectivist-constructivist conception also has a long history. It basically radicalises both the Homeric universalisation of divine characters, liable to even be incarnated in landscapes very different from the original ones, and the monotheistic disavowal of the spirits of places. In fact, by transforming the protective *daimon* into a

tempting daemon, enthusiasm into diabolical possession¹ and pilgrimage into a heresy compared to the illocatable transcendence of the divine, Christianity exorcised, exiled or at least degraded the local spirits (which, after all, were still considered existing!), giving thus rise to a topophobia for which even places that were later deemed worthy of pilgrimage – provided that they were duly purified - are at most allegories of the heavenly Jerusalem, whose potential sacredness in any case only depends on some transcendent miracle. This easily leads to post-Enlightenment subjectivism, according to which the spirit of the place, first understood as numinous (pagan antiquity) and then as inspirer of human (also aesthetic) *genius* (Renaissance and Romanticism) (Grassi 1979, 187 ff.), ended up being replaced by the idea of the place as “white canvas” on which the emancipated person could arbitrarily project their own meanings: an idea whose climax was probably the voluntaristic-avant-garde atmospherism sought by situationist psychogeography. To this subjectivism a neo-phenomenological atmospherology must be clearly opposed.

Conclusion

The hypothesis is therefore that a place has its own *genius* only if, when and where it radiates an intense and authoritative specific (prototypic) atmosphere. And that this *genius*, as we have seen, is essentially found and, only within certain limits, also produced. Borrowing the tripartition of spatiality proposed by Hermann Schmitz (space of vastness, directional space, local space) (Schmitz 1967; Griffero 2014a), I might further suggest that *genius* sometimes presents itself as the semi-climatic atmosphere of entire regions, sometimes instead as the atmosphere of a specific landscape (a mountain, a valley, a bay, a city, etc.) and sometimes even as an atmosphere condensed in particular places (a tree, a cave, a road intersection, a building, etc.) or objects acting as the “condensation zone” of more diffuse “anchoring” atmospheres.² This also means that the *genius* of a certain place seems to be ascertainable only in a circular fashion, in the sense that, on the one hand, unspecified atmospheres seem to occasionally materialise in specific places, and on the other hand, specific places propagate their atmosphere in larger territories. That is why the *genius loci* of Paris, for example, can legitimately reside both in its overall *Gestalt* (perhaps even reduced to clichés) but also in some features that are only salient for the perceiver’s biography (that bistro, that little square, certain perfumes, etc.) as well as maybe the result of a momentary and unrepeatable sensation.

A hundred times I may have seen the forest in front of my window, experienced nothing but the thing, that same thing that even the botanist has in mind: but once, while it was burning in the splendour of the evening sun, its sight managed to tear me away from myself: and then my soul suddenly saw what I had never seen before, perhaps for minutes, perhaps

¹ For the early reformed anti-demonological rationalism, when one place appears more sacred than another, it is legitimate to assume devilish action (Kozljanič 2004, I, 285-295, and, for a summary, 402-407).

² A terminology of the gestaltist Wolfgang Metzger (1941) taken up several times by Hermann Schmitz and in the present context by Kozljanič 2004, II, 332-333).

for seconds; however, for a short or a long time, what I glimpsed was the *Urbild* of the forest, and *that* image will not come back for me or for anyone else (Klages 1991, 422-423). Despite this fascinating but heuristically unmanageable “profane illumination” (Benjamin), one should recognize that every expressive variation remains mostly anchored to atmospheric and “genial” types that are so relatively objective as to be repeatable and widely shareable. Alexander Pope's invitation (1731) to consult the “*Genius* of the Place in all” is therefore, for me, equivalent to the invitation, consistent with a pathetic and atmospherologic aesthetics, to indulge as far as possible in the quasi-thingly nature (Griffero 2017) of the genial-atmospheric qualities immanent in our “surroundings”. Through this aesthetic-phenomenological re-evaluation of the *genius* (of some and not all places) I therefore intend to distance myself from both late Romanticism, often degenerated into obscurantist and chauvinist localism, and post-Enlightenment isotropy, which appears so contradictory that even the ontological “nudism” opposed by Lévinas (with Gagarin's praise of homogeneous space) to Heideggerian topophilia had to coexist with the messianic appeal to a place like the Holy Land, evidently felt as imbued with a specific *genius* of its own.¹

I can in conclusion confirm my dissatisfaction with the various attempts at theoretical precision and the irreducibility of *genius loci* to strictly epistemic criteria. However, provided that one does not confuse any intervention aimed at preserving and/or amplifying the spirit of a place (altars, temples, nymphaea, gardens, monuments, iconification, edification, etc.) with its arbitrary projective production, I believe it is legitimate to state that the *genius loci* – at least in its prototypic sense - is not intentionally constructed, but rather found involuntarily in lived space. It is something “given”, something that is “brutally there”, as Dewey (1931, 93-116) says of the total pervasive quality. In short: we do not have a “clear and distinct” (Descartes) idea of the spirit of a place. Yet we cannot help having a “clear and confused idea” (Baumgarten) of it when deciding where to live. This proves, *pace* Kant, that (at least) with the *genius loci* something may be true in theory without applying in practice.

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¹ To the enigmatic fascination of natural places and landscapes, responsible for an idolatrous and paganising infantilism not free from cruel consequences (Lévinas 1976, 299-303), contrasts the delocalisation of man made possible by the spatial adventure but already anticipated by the process of abstraction typical of Judaism.

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