

thinking

togetherness

ANDREJ BOŽIČ (*Ed.*)

THINKING TOGETHERNESS

PHENOMENOLOGY AND SOCIALITY

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Paolo Furia

UNCANNINESS AND SPATIAL EXPERIENCE

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL READING OF THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

Abstract: The contribution deals, from a phenomenological stance, with three major characteristics of our experience of space and places during the COVID-19 pandemic: 1) the contrast between the unprecedented availability and diffusion of digital representations of elsewhere at the global level and the lockdown, connected with social distancing and confinement; 2) the unique correspondence between the subjective impossibility to visit places and the objective unavailability of places to be visited; and 3) the restructuring of the boundaries between home-world and alien-world. After COVID-19, our familiar world cannot be taken for granted anymore. “Uncanniness” shows the true nature of the world itself, inherently exposed to crisis and open to change.

Keywords: the uncanny, social distancing, confinement, space, place.

1. Introduction

The notion of uncanniness gained scientific dignity thanks to Freud’s famous essay “The Uncanny” (1919). In ordinary language, Freud says, the word is “undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror” (Freud 1955, 219). At the same time, it is “not used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general (ibid.). Hence, he seeks to specify its meaning in the framework of psychoanalysis. Shortly thereafter, the notion of uncanniness was integrated in the phenomenological reflection by Heidegger who broaches the subject in *Being and Time* (1927). Here, Heidegger rephrases the concept of uncanniness in the light of his analytic of being-there, as I will discuss in the following. From Freud, we

additionally learn that the idea of the uncanny is in the first instance a subject of aesthetics, as long as aesthetics is “not merely the theory of beauty but the theory of the qualities of feelings (Freud 1955, 219).¹ Although aesthetic inquiry has not paid much attention to uncanniness, the development of the recent lively debate about everydayness in aesthetics may be an opportunity to rediscover the importance of the notion of uncanniness, especially because of the conceptual interconnections between everydayness and uncanniness from Heidegger onwards.

In the last decades, the concept of everyday aesthetics has developed into a sub-discipline of its own.² It is especially in that framework that scholars have felt the need to elaborate an accurate definition of the everyday. Naukkarinen, thus, states:

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The everyday attitude is colored with routines, familiarity, continuity, normalcy, habits, the slow process of acclimatization, even superficiality and a sort of half-consciousness, and not with creative experiments, exceptions, constant questioning and change, analyses, and deep reflections. In our daily lives we aim at control and balance. The everyday is the area of our life that we want and typically can trust, the sphere of life that we know very well; or at least believe that we do, which is normally enough to keep us contented. Everyday life is not always only made up of the nice and good, but is still something we are familiar with. (Naukkarinen 2013.)

When in our everyday life a change occurs of such magnitude that we no longer know what to do, our everydayness is revealed in all its precarity and fragility. Uncanniness is experientially related to a feeling of “not-knowing-

1 Freud also asserts that the psychoanalyst “only rarely” feels “impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics” (Freud 1955, 219).

2 Everyday aesthetics aims to broaden the scope of aesthetic research by highlighting the aesthetic side of “non-art objects and activities” (Saito 2001, 87). However, since it is highly disputable to determine, what art is and what it is not, many authors have felt the urgency of providing a sounder definition of the everyday, in order to overcome ambiguity and arbitrariness in the development of everyday aesthetics (cf. Melchionne 2013 and Naukkarinen 2013).

what-to-do” in unexpected and bewildering situations. If in ordinary conditions one feels at home in her everyday world, when an extraordinary event concerning biographical or historical conditions occurs, she can no longer orient herself, and the world takes on an uncanny character. Therefore, it can be provisionally concluded that uncanniness consists in the condition, in which the everyday world has lost its familiarity and readability.

Uncanniness refers both to a subjective feeling (to feel bewildered or disoriented in an unexpected situation) and to an objective condition. It can be described as an atmosphere, in the sense specified by Gernot Böhme (1995) and Tonino Griffero (2010). As atmosphere, uncanniness concerns the perceiver as much as the space, in which she is located. Artworks can reveal the uncanny in the everyday space very effectively. In 2001, the American photographer James Casebere made architectural models and then published a monograph of photographs of them entitled *The Spatial Uncanny*. In the series of images, interior landscapes are depicted without reference to the human presence. The vast, empty rooms immortalized by Casebere are sometimes flooded. In the everyday, building and dwelling go hand-in-hand, however their relationship may be conceived differently.³ Buildings without people and their everyday practices may elicit a sense of uncanniness. This example hints at the circumstance that uncanniness is not reducible to just one of the many possible atmospheric nuances of the everyday; rather, uncanniness should be regarded as the condition, in which the precarity, even the ambiguity of the everyday are fully laid bare. When the precarity of the everyday is revealed at the aesthetic, affective level, the everyday as such becomes suspended. The disruption of the everyday indicated by the uncanny is hardly the result of an intellectual act. The everyday presents its inherent precarity in a number of biographical and historical situations. Above all, we are struck by sudden changes of our routines, which retrospectively cast a shadow over the safeness and familiarity we felt before the changes. We ask ourselves, if we at all had the right to feel safe in our everyday practices also, before the sudden changes occurred. We ask ourselves, if we have been deluding ourselves in having

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³ Two different accounts of how dwelling and building interact can be found in Heidegger’s “Building Dwelling Thinking” (1971) and Ricoeur’s “Architecture and Narrativity” (2016).

placed trust in the stability and genuineness of our way of life. And, nowadays, when in only a couple of years the everydayness of our lifeworld has been turned upside down at least twice (by the global pandemic of COVID-19 and, more recently, by the Russian's invasion of Ukraine), it is hardly deniable that to reflect over everydayness in aesthetics, as in any other discipline, necessarily brings with it a reflection about uncanniness.

In the following, by drawing on the phenomenological understanding of uncanniness, whose main features are pinpointed in the first paragraph, I explore the ways, in which our usual conceptions of dwelling, traveling, and perceiving space and places have been challenged during the lockdowns due to COVID-19. In the bewildering experience of being recluses in our houses for a long time, a full-fledged suspension of our everyday practices has occurred. Social confinement has provided the opportunity to reflect over the non-obviousness of places and of our ways to represent and live in them. An opportunity, which should not be missed.

514 2. Not-being-at-home

The Heideggerian analysis of *Angst* (par. 40 of *Being and Time*) represents a full-fledged practical reinterpretation of the phenomenological “*epoché*.”⁴ If we take into account that “[w]hat *Angst* is about is not an innerworldly being” (Heidegger 1996a, 174), it renders the world we live by and as we know it “completely without importance” (ibid.). The things at hand in our surroundings sink away. Our certainties falter. The “public way of interpreting the self and the world” (ibid., 175) no longer applies. In our everyday life, the repetition of practices and the familiarity with our surroundings give us “tranquillized self-assurance” (ibid., 176) and make us feel at home in the world “in all its obviousness” (ibid.). The condition of uncanniness that goes along with the feeling of *angst* discloses “the existential mode of *not-being-at-home*” (ibid.). This is the “more primordial phenomenon” (ibid., 177), even if it remains for the most part “existentially uncomprehended” (ibid., 178). Our ways of living, inhabiting, and taking care of the world represent our responses to that

4 On the connection between the Husserlian *epoché* and the Heideggerian *Angst*, see: Ballard 1999 and Whalen 2015.

condition of not-being-at-home, which, nonetheless, “constantly pursues *Dasein* and threatens its everyday lostness in the they, although not explicitly” (ibid., 177). At the basis of the relative stability of our everydayness, therefore, there is a longing for orientation, security, and familiarity as answers to the precariousness of our being-in-the-world. By suspending the meaningfulness of everyday life, angst provokes *Dasein* “to reflect upon that which matters most in its existence” (Magrini 2006). Thanks to that, *Dasein* rediscovers the world itself as possibility: it is caught in its inherent historicity, and is, therefore, open to change.

The notion of uncanniness, tied with the emotional motif of angst, is less present in the later production of Heidegger characterized by a stronger emphasis on the topological character of being.⁵ At the same time, the development of an ontological perspective based on the centrality of being situated allows for a spatial reinterpretation of uncanniness as well. This was not often the case in much literature devoted to Heidegger and topology. The claim that dwelling has priority over building and that to be is always to be emplaced (cf. Heidegger 1971) has overshadowed the uncanny character of our being in space. In a famous and very learned book Jeff Malpas has devoted to the topology of being in Heidegger (cf. Malpas 2006), the word “uncanniness” occurs only once. The associated term “displacement” is entirely absent. In an equally learned book devoted to the exploration of the concept of place upon the Heideggerian and Merleau-Pontian bases (2009), Edward Casey has chosen the term “displacement” as the title of the second chapter of the first part, which is coupled with the word “implacement” that gives the name to the first chapter. Implacement is endowed with all the positive

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⁵ The *unheimlich* nature of the relationships between the human being and the world returns also after *Being and Time*, for instance, in *Introduction to Metaphysics* (2014) and *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister"* (1996b). In both cases, uncanniness is not just the general character of mortals, but also a specific trait of their relationship to space. By taking our surroundings and our living places for granted, we do not dwell authentically. On the contrary, the authentic dwelling is the one, in which inhabiting and journeying dovetail and coexist. Heidegger sees in the river of Hölderlin's hymn “the locality of the dwelling of human beings as historical upon this earth” (Heidegger 1996b, 33), for its essence as a locale is journeying. The tense coexistence of inhabiting and journeying assumes an uncanny character and at the same time defines the perimeter of something like an authentic dwelling.

meanings of dwelling: to be able to orient oneself, to feel secure and familiar in a cared environment. On the contrary, displacement is labeled as disturbing, discomforting, bad; it makes for the object of a criticism, which is at the same time epistemological and political. The disturbing character of displacement, read through the lens of uncanniness, cannot be denied. But when reading the lines from Casey, one can hardly find reference to the fact that, according to Heidegger, at least in *Being and Time*, to be displaced points to the uncanny character of our existence. The “not-being-at-home” of our condition is not just the occasional, unfortunate fall from the more fundamental position of happy and accomplished dwelling. On the contrary, dwelling is the challenge of our being-in-the-world, rather than a transcendental condition to be fulfilled. Indeed, when *Dasein* is absorbed in *the they* of everydayness and familiarity, when it takes its surroundings for granted, it is fleeing from itself and its primordial condition: not-being-at-home. This does not mean that a full and accomplished dwelling cannot be achieved in this life; it only means that no way of living and inhabiting should be taken for granted. Sooner or later, the alien, which haunts the familiar both from without and from within, will compel us to reconsider our standards and to approach new possibilities.

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Although uncanniness as such can arise in any situation, it is more likely to be elicited in certain historical circumstances. For what concerns our time, the global pandemic is an opportunity to put into question the taken-for-grantedness of the world and our ways to see and dwell. The pandemic is a key event of the kind of the alien in the sense given to this term by Waldenfels (2011): something, which bewilders us, eludes our biases, interrupts both the material and symbolic orders, in which we have lived thus far. It is evident that this is not just a theoretical issue. The pandemic, and the actions taken by individuals, local communities, states, and the international institutions to limit its spreading, have had and continue to have huge impact on how people experience the world. Both the notions of the alien in Waldenfels and the uncanny in Heidegger can be used to understand the suspension of the taken-for-grantedness of the world that occurs during the pandemic. These notions are especially suited to investigate the deep changes of our experience of space and places during the pandemic. Changes in our perception of space affect our ways to dwell, and, therefore, following Heidegger, have impact at the

ontological level. The very idea of feeling/not feeling at home is changing after the experiences of lockdown, the travel restrictions, and the strengthening of national borders. In the following, I will try to pin down some insights about the ways we make experience of space and places during the pandemic time, in order to address their uncanny character.

3. The pervasiveness of the elsewhere and the confinement

The first characteristic of a phenomenology of space and places in the pandemic time lies in the contrast between the unprecedented availability and diffusion of digital representations of places at the global level and the experiences of social distancing and confinement connected to the quarantine. Some literature has already discussed confinement and social distancing from a phenomenological point of view. Rossolatos shows how social distancing, implying “the prohibition of physical proximity between at least two Daseins in public space” (2021, 403), produces also a non-branded “empty space that lies in-between” (ibid.). Such an empty space is a true and proper *deadzone*: crossing it would be a suicidal action. The social spaces, where the being-with unfolds, become “no-go-zones and taboo spaces” (ibid., 404). Solitary confinement is a traumatic and uncanny experience that occasionally everybody can have, it is not new in human history. What makes the difference in the present context is the contrast between the condition of social confinement imposed by national authorities at the global level and the state of total interconnection of things, places, and people made possible by the pervasive spread of digital technologies on a worldwide scale. Of course, there are digital divides between territories and zones of exclusion, in which access to the internet is still not guaranteed; however, digital connection now concerns billions of people and has produced deep transformations in the ways people interact that are fairly uniform at the global level.⁶ Digital technologies deeply affect our ways to make experience of space and places. People are by now literally plunged into a representational place-world. We can explore almost every corner of the earth thanks to

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⁶ According to datareportal.com, 4.88 billion people around the world use internet as of October 2021, and internet users are growing at an annual rate of 4,8 %. Cf. <https://datareportal.com/global-digital-overview>.

satellites and GPS, broadly used both in our everyday life—let us think of our reliance on GPS, when we need to move from one place to another—and in the sciences (cf. Crampton 2010 and Rennell 2012). The images of places shared on social media, such as Instagram, rush from one side of the globe to the other, creating new pervasive geographic imaginaries, which heavily condition people’s behaviors and choices.⁷ Digital representations anticipate and predetermine any possible bodily experience of places, also producing some degree of standardization of the travelers’ gazes and expectations (cf. Hannam and Knox 2010). They have the power to neutralize the alienating character of the alien-worlds by turning them into familiar environments, in which the traveler will eventually be led to find what she has been taught to expect.

518 In social media, the domestication of the elsewhere coexists with options of customization that foster new geographic imaginaries, paths, and travel styles. The juxtaposition of standardization and personalization intersects with the dialectic between the fictional character of cyberspace (cf. Meyrowitz 1985) and the ontological significance of digital technologies (cf. Carbone 2019). Digital tools modify both our experiences of places and places themselves. New kinds of places, new squares, new homes, new aesthetic environments emerge by means of digital technologies.⁸ The relationship between the digital spaces and material spaces can hardly be reduced to a mere opposition, as if the digital were nothing but a simulacrum of reality devoid of any substance. On the contrary, digital tools extend embodiment beyond the boundaries of the *chair*. The smartphone is now considered to be a true and proper prosthesis of the human body. This also affects our sense of belonging and dwelling. To dwell no longer consists solely of belonging to a community rooted in a certain locale, but at the same time means to live with and by digital tools,

⁷ To get an idea about how social media are changing our ways to see places, let us think of their impact on travel habits and spatial practices in general. According to a 2017 survey of over 1000 UK “Millenials” (aged 18–33), “the instagrammability” of a holiday is the number one factor in choosing a travel destination (cf. <https://www.schofields.ltd.uk/blog/5123/two-fifths-of-millennials-choose-their-holiday-destination-based-on-how-instagrammable-the-holiday-pics-will-be>).

⁸ The neologism “homepage,” with which we indicate the departure point for our itineraries within the internet, is very telling. Cf. Albanese and Graziano 2020, 47.

through which every elsewhere is potentially de-severed and every alien is domesticated. We do not necessarily belong together with our physical and symbolic surroundings anymore. Our personal and collective identities are more and more shaped within digital contexts, such as social media, where people meet, exchange experiences and opinions, fight and fall in love, regardless of where they are from. Moreover, the state of global interconnection enabled by the digital reflects a condition, in which people are *de iure* free to travel everywhere on earth. The epistemological transparency of the globe (cf. Sloterdijk 2013 and Grevsmühl 2015) is one with the complete accessibility of earthly space. Of course, this is not an irenic and painless process. In the last years, we have been witnessing various reactions against the current state of total interconnection of things, places, and people: the rise of new forms of localism has been among the most visible phenomena also before COVID-19.

The experience of social confinement necessitated by COVID-19 at the global level represents an alien event that challenges the order, in which we are framed. We have witnessed an extraordinary discrepancy between the ongoing process of intensification of digital interconnections and the confinement of the embodied human being. Social confinement consists in a dramatic restriction of the range of motion recognized as juridically and socially legitimate. Solitary confinement stands in stark contrast to a condition, in which digital interconnections get even stronger, in order to enable activities that under normal circumstances are performed in presence, such as working and studying. This contrast is even more evident with respect to practices that are inherently spatial, such as traveling. From march 2020 onwards, travel blogs and online travel guides have been sharing articles about how to travel while being stuck at home. Thanks to digital technologies, one can take a virtual museum tour. Google Arts & Culture has partnered with more than 2500 museums and art galleries around the world to offer interactive exhibits and virtual tours.⁹ Guided tours are provided on the YouTube pages of many museums. They are cheap—or totally free—ways to get in touch with art objects and places from all around the world, without moving from home. However, by scrolling through the different pictures of the museum sites and

9 Cf. <https://artsandculture.google.com/partner?hl=en>.

their online exhibitions, it is hard to escape the feeling of having an object-centered experience, primarily addressed to the sight, which is different from the total experience of real travel. It has been maintained that “the modern era [...] has been dominated by the sense of sight in a way that set it apart from its premodern predecessors and possibly its postmodern successor” (Jay 1988, 3). The increase of attention towards notions of engagement, interaction, and immersion in a variety of fields in the last decades testifies to the attempts to overcome the ocularcentric bias of the Western culture. While the “debate over ocularcentrism” (Stonehill 1995, 147) overflows the boundaries of the decades-long continental philosophy field to affect the entire postmodern culture, aesthetics and cultural studies have witnessed a boost of attention towards engagement (cf. Berleant 1991) and performance (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2004 and Bachmann-Medick 2016). Parallely, in geography, non-representational approaches in qualitative research about space and place have been elaborated, often in dialogue with the creative arts (cf. Thrift 2008 as well as Boyd and Edwardes 2019). Thus, digital studies usually counter the reduction of the cyberspace to a merely “scopic regime”¹⁰ by emphasizing the interactive and immersive potential of digital technologies. The “list effect” of cheaper or free online exhibitions, displaying works of art according to some kind of order, can be reduced thanks to technologies which are more complex—and more expensive as well. Traveling from the armchair can be more engaging thanks to immersive technologies, such as Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR). Through digital immersivity, an ocularcentric perspective is at least partially overcome, since within it not only sight, but also other senses are involved in the constitution of a complete perceptual world that is connected to the physical one in various ways (cf. Kellerman 2016).

It has been argued that VR has created “immense opportunities for the leisure and tourism industries throughout the pre-visit phase, during the trip and at the post-visit stage” (Hudson *et al.* 2019, 459). However, the alliance between VR and tourism seems to be weakened by the absence of “real” experience of space. In such cases, the simulation of VR may be charged with

¹⁰ The term “scopic regime” derives from the book *Le signifiant imaginaire* (1977) by the French cinematologist Christian Metz.

the task of replacing the spatial movement implied in visiting.¹¹ But, does that simulation attain the desired effect? Is that only a question of how powerful is VR in simulating reality? Or is it only a matter of equally distributing digital tools so as to impress a consistent and homogeneous transition towards post-humanity, as maintained by the most orthodox representatives of trans-humanism (cf. Levin 2021)? The point is that VR and AR are usually not designed to replace embodied experience, but to prepare, anticipate, accompany, enhance it.¹² This holds true from a phenomenological perspective, which recognizes the ontological power of the digital, but does not accept to cast aside the embodied self and the qualitative nature of places. The very notions of enhancement and extension assume that there is something to be enhanced and extended. This does not necessarily mean that the relationship between the real and the virtual should be thought in mere representationalist or realist terms. According to Bruce Janz, for instance, both “real” places and digital places “are made possible by play” (2019, 61). By drawing on Eugen Fink’s phenomenological advances, the author argues that play is a “sense-creating space” (ibid., 64), which ties together people and objects according to certain rules. In both “real” and virtual places, the human subject finds herself embedded and implicated by things. In both cases, there is a constructive side: they are construed through the establishment of rules, embodied in practices and routines. These rules make places possible, but do not exclude exceptions, improvisations, surprise. In short: between the “real” place and the digital one there is continuity, because the “real” place is in itself a virtual field of possibilities that may or may not find actualization. The everyday world of “real” places results from the open and precarious balance between virtualities and actualizations, just as play is virtually constituted by its rules,

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11 See the immersive travel experiences offered by companies, such as First Airlines or Google Earth VR, Oculus, and Immerse.

12 As it is well known, VR and AR differ in that the first is completely based on virtual information and plunges the subject into an entirely virtual world, whereas in AR information, coming from non-digital world, interacts with computer-generated data in a way that enhances the subject’s perception and knowledge of reality (cf. Jung and Dieck 2018). There is a huge literature regarding the differences between VR and AR in many applicative fields such as education (cf. Billingham 2002 and Anderson 2019) and medicine (cf. Ecker *et al.* 2019).

but exists only when there is at least one actual player. Spatial practices, such as inhabiting, walking, driving, flying, climbing, swimming, cycling, are ways to actualize places, enliven, and realize them. The model of the play can be used not only to grasp the processual and engaging nature of both “real” and digital places, but also their interconnections. But the other side of the coin is what Jeff Malpas has called the principle of the non-autonomy of the virtual, which consists in: “the recognition of the fact that the virtual does not constitute an autonomous, independent, or ‘closed’ system, but is instead always dependent, in a variety of ways, on the everyday world within which it is embedded” (2009, 135). As a consequence, digital technologies, as immersive as they may be, are supposed to prepare and accompany spatial practices, but are not supposed to replace them. Immersivity is representational in character as well, when it is disconnected by interaction; however, it is a kind of representation, the fictional traits of which are laid bare, precisely because of the loss of the mimetic reference, regardless of how credible the illusion is. Virtually enhanced experiences of places without “real” places boil down to mere representations without reference or simulacra.

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When social distancing and confinement are in place, the continuity between the virtual and the actual—the digital and the real—is interrupted. The model of the play no longer describes the interconnections between “real” and digital places. It can be replaced by the model of the “utopias of escape.” The expression is drawn from Lewis Mumford and refers to a kind of “aimless utopias” (1922, 16), which help people to survive in a world so full of frustration as the “real” one. As long as real places become inaccessible in themselves, their digital representations or simulations available from home take a somehow unreal character. They no longer anticipate a possible travel experience, but refer to a different time, in which places were staged, set up, disposed, narrated, in order to lure visitors. The *de iure* accessibility of the world is now suspended. People are confined into their homes and other places take again the character of the elsewhere, exotic, and unreachable. A purely aesthetic apprehension of remote places is impaired: travels return to be complex and even dangerous practices, illegal most of the time. It is no coincidence that those spatial practices, which have always been complex, dangerous, and even illegal, such as migrations, have been affected to a lower extent than tourism

and leisure travels.¹³ The confinement renders the aesthetic, domesticated gaze of the tourist untimely and outdated, somehow even scandalous. The domestication of the gaze produced by the enormous exchange of pictures and representations of places on the internet and in social media no longer gives shape to any actualization in real experience. It remains entirely in the sphere of simulation. As a consequence, also domestication fails. We realize that real places can be actually different from what we expect, because we cannot experience them anymore—again, *de iure* rather than *de facto*. The suspension of familiarity and safety is the practical condition for uncanniness to arise. Here, the uncanny lies not in the geographical displacement, which on the contrary may be highly domesticated especially in tourism and leisure travels, but in the lack of substance and in the loss of reference of the representational world we are surrounded by, because of the ubiquity of technological devices.

4. The restructuring of the boundaries between home-world and alien-world

Confinement and lockdown are complementary phenomena. It is not just about preventing people from traveling and forcing them to stay at home. Lockdown is about making places inaccessible in themselves. Full-scale prohibitions to mobility engender a temporary “suspended animation”¹⁴ of places, turning them into something similar to “non-places,” at least insofar as social interactions are suspended within them. As it is well known, Marc Augé defined non-place as “a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity” (2000, 78). He was referring to spaces, such as airports, highways, train stations, entertainment parks, but

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¹³ Movement restrictions exert an impact on migration, but its flows have never really stopped. Cf. <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/migration-data-relevant-covid-19-pandemic>.

¹⁴ The term is taken from the field of medicine and refers to a “temporary state resembling death, with cessation of respiration” (Farlex Partner Medical Dictionary). The use of this term assumes the organic metaphor as an effective one to understand the processes and phenomena concerning spatial entities as constituting a dynamic totality. The organic metaphor is often assumed in geography, architecture, and urbanism (for instance, in Jane Jacob’s pivotal book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*; 1961).

also historical sites consumed in anonymous and stereotypical ways in the framework of mass tourism (cf. Augé 1997). However, to the extent that also within non-places social interactions take place, they might turn into places, at least for some categories of people—for instance, the employees who work permanently at an airport or the couples who have shared their first kiss under the Eiffel Tower. Of course, non-places have been affected by lockdown along with other kinds of relational and historical places, such as squares, churches, arcades, markets. During an extensive period of lockdown, it is precisely the relational and historical character of places that is bracketed. Social interactions take place mostly online, losing thus their inherent spatial dimension. Places are, therefore, deprived of their vital lymph. They continue to exist in a ghostly form, devoid of their social functions and disembedded from the practices that in normal times enliven them. Their historicity is reduced to the certainty of what they have been in the past, for their present time is suspended, and their future time appears precarious and uncertain. What humanistic geography has taught us to call “sense of place” (cf. Relph 1976) is not granted anymore under the condition, in which our dwelling is restricted to the boundaries of our house. The vibrancy of both places and non-places in the classic sense is muted.

This uncanny situation makes it possible to take into deeper consideration the real nature of places from a phenomenological perspective. With distant learning and smart working enhanced as never before, the importance of the places where people study and work is relativized and reaffirmed at once. On the one hand, the very fact that the school- and work-related functions can be performed in cyberspace shows that the built spaces, in which those functions have always been carried out (schools, offices), were dispensable. On the other hand, the experiences of distant learning and smart working have raised issues about what is the contribution of common places to the quality of both learning and working. Of course, much depends on what kind of work we are talking about, for there are jobs that can be carried out online better than others, especially at the current stage of development and distribution of digital technologies. But there is more. The question is whether space is just a mere backdrop we can live without or actively contributes in giving shape to personal and social identities, actions, and meanings. When the function of a

spatial entity, such as a school, a museum, or a square, is transferred online, that silent spatial entity where those functions were performed before the lockdown presents itself in its pure form. The suspension of everyday activities emphasizes their purely material patterns, their mere appearance, their belonging to a greater context, in which we have learned to build our everyday paths. Their very materiality has affective significance for us. Our memories, our imaginative intentions are elicited by them. Places acquire a depth that is usually forgotten in everyday life. They might be accounted for as being objects of nostalgia, because we feel that a part of our identity has been dropped there. We discover that the sense of place is also what governs our sense of ourselves. At the same time, as everyday practices within places are suspended, we address them as alterities endowed with an enigmatic significance. With their taken-for-grantedness being removed, they reveal themselves as the precarious outcomes of morphogenetic processes, which have unfolded in time, and go largely beyond the bounds of our personal existence and everyday practices. Places reveal themselves as spatial crystallizations of a cultural history and a natural history as well, which are often unconsciously removed from everyday understanding. More specifically, in the Heideggerian terms, the suspension of the everyday *world* emphasizes the role of *earth* in shaping our surroundings. This is why, during the lockdown, underwood has thickened, wheatgrass has grown to the detriment of the kinds of plantations requiring specific human care, gardens have set back, while swamp has moved forward. At the same time, the air and the waters have got cleaner thanks to the limitation of human mobility. Spontaneous nature has timidly flourished in the interstices of our crafted surroundings. The situation is ambiguous. The music and the voices from the balconies of the houses show that the city is not dead, that its mute forms are not those of a cold corpse in the hands of necrotic agents, but rather of an ill patient who imposed herself a powerful therapy to heal. Moreover, by being confined at home, we get a clearer idea of how dwelling does not consist just in taking cover behind the reassuring threshold of our houses. When our home is not projected towards the outside, when the transitional character of the threshold is neutralized and is reduced to an insurmountable border, home can hardly achieve the positive values described by Gaston Bachelard in his *The Poetics of Space* (1964). On the contrary, those alienating experiences,

which characterize some empirical living conditions, such as being completely lonely and abandoned, as it happens to many elderly people, or cohabiting with a violent man, as it happens to many women, may be intensified. Confinement clearly shows how the alien haunts the intimacy of the family fireside. By extension, this also applies for places in general, always at risk of transforming themselves into unlivable non-places. However, that awareness should not lead towards despair. Rather, it simply hints at the fact that “the own is interwoven with the alien” (Waldenfels 2011, 76) and that man is “not a master in his own house” (ibid., 77). It is clear at this point how the recognition of the historical and relational character of places is not really eradicated by uncanniness, but, on the contrary, thanks to uncanniness we acquire a better sense of the historicity, even of the contingency of places. Through the suspension of the established meanings and senses of places, the way is paved towards a renewal of our way to dwell.

5. Concluding remarks

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Our contemporary age, dominated by the technologically charged neo-liberal model, can be summarized in the claim that “there is no alternative” (Andersson 2012). Economic processes operating at the structural level have produced an acceleration of paces that results in an endless and unstoppable flow of people, commodities, images. Excessive consumption, waste of natural resources, creation of a global web of non-places, the rise of gigantic megalopolises at the expense of rural communities, new forms of economic colonization, global competition rather than cooperation limit the transformative potential of both humans and places with tight, albeit often unnoticed constraints. A process complementary to the unstoppable flow of the postmodern is the impairment of the power of politics in affecting concretely the living condition of people. I am not referring here in the first instance to the power of the established institutions, but, rather, to the definition Hannah Arendt has given to power as “the human ability not just to act but to act in concert” (1970, 44). In other words, also the apparently perpetual flow, in which it seems we are aimlessly embedded, is a form of a hypostatization of the lifeworld, which results in a substantial paralysis of both intellectual awareness and practical-political

action. Such reification can be shattered by unforeseen, alien events, of which the first effects are perceived at the level of lived experience.

Uncanniness arises from that discrepancy between the expectations shaped by the structural flow and the alien event. By drawing on Arendt's thoughts on power and action, I intend to rephrase the effects of uncanniness in ethical-political terms. What uncanniness allows us to rediscover is the derivative nature of both institutions and culture, and their spaces, which depend on the institutive power of action. In much the same manner as they have been instituted, they can also be withdrawn. In order to avoid misunderstandings about how to interpret this institutive power of action, it is important to highlight the fact that it expresses itself by stopping the allegedly unstoppable flow, in which human activity has developed in our hypermodern times (cf. Augé 2000 as well as Charles and Lipovetsky 2006). The quarantine consists in a deceleration of the human activity on environments, but it is itself a human initiative. It is the result of a political choice, and a brave one, as it consists in the interruption of the flow out of control of the capital, of the market, of commodities and people traffic, of the infection. This concerns the true and proper interruption of an otherwise unmanageable hypermodernity, which has been the veritable philosophy of history of our contemporary age, at least until yesterday. Social confinement is not just an experiential situation: it is a condition determined by political choices pursued at the global level to stop the contagion.

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Thanks to the quarantine, we have been driven to recognize that the way we look at places is often stereotyped and unresponsive, that our usual way to inhabit and move through the earth surface is too invasive, that the population density of our cities is too high, that a merely profit-driven economy is helpless to cope with the contemporary global challenges, and that social and political interactions based only on competition cannot respond to the needs of people. Uncanniness, therefore, not only represents the condition, under which we can refresh our view of the world, but also paves the way to reorient our action to make the world a better and more human place to live.

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