

# Gazes and atmospheres: different visions of Venice

Federico FARNÉ

Seeking to define atmosphere would at first sight seem difficult if not pointless; not only does its rarefied and intangible nature make it, at least apparently, refractory to any form of linguistic crystallisation, but its ubiquity makes atmospheres similar to emotions, indeed like these atmospheres are also “curious situations which lose all meaning when trying to describe them”<sup>1)</sup>. As the most recent cognitive science studies have underlined, if it is not possible to find a state which has no emotional connotations, it is equally true that it is also not possible to find a situation that is completely lacking in atmosphere.

As Maurice Merleau-Ponty explained, “in the normal subject the object ‘speaks and is significant, the arrangement of colours straight away ‘means’ something”<sup>2)</sup>, it radiates a *logos* to the emotionally developing state perceived by corporeality, which is not only a pre-condition for every experience, but in contrast to the physical-body, forms a pre-reflexive unit between the Id and the world, in which the experience lived, characterised by holistic-emotional perception, is segmented into spatialised feelings.

Borrowing from Tonino Griffero, we may therefore define atmospheres as “affective and corporeal conditions aroused in the subject by external situations”<sup>3)</sup>. They represent the specific emotional shade of a pre-dimensional lived space from which they radiate, in a movement from outside to inside, affecting the corporeality which is now captured, now overwhelmed, now altered, but never indifferent. Here we refer to the lived space as a space experienced, directly or indirectly, by a body that inhabits, lives and penetrates it, as an integral part. This space is the privileged place of our actions. It is the opposite of the aseptic space of geometry constituted by mathematically measurable distances and an abstract uniformity.

“Besides the physical and geometrical distance which stands between myself and all things, a ‘lived’ distance binds me to things which count and exist for me, and links them to each other. This distance measures the ‘scope’ of my life at every moment”<sup>4)</sup>. Far from being dichotomous, the relationship between the body and the world consists of a sensory continuity - which cannot be reduced to mere cognitive facts which specialist psychology deals with - in which “atmospheres are feelings poured into the surrounding space. Means of pre-dualistic corporeal communication which is now over-subjective and over-objective [...], now more dependent on the person, or condensed in (or anchored to) preferential objects”<sup>5)</sup>. In this sense, just like sensory perception, atmospheres are not and cannot be indifferent to cultures and sensitivities, but are rather filtered and interpreted by them, indeed we could speak of atmospheric perception as a sixth sense. In fact we could

probably state that perceptive activity deciphers the world that surrounds us through a symbolic-social and atmospheric path along which the two elements, far from being two extremes of a dialectical synthesis, tend to become mixed (muddled?) into each other. If it is true that atmospheres are feelings spread by space (or objects) while perception belongs to corporeality and it is partially defined by the referred cultural substratum, it is equally true that the two elements can never be completely separated from each other and that indeed they are interwoven.

To use Merleau-Ponty's words: "The thing is inseparable from a person perceiving it, and can never be actually in itself because its articulations are those of our very existence, and because it stands at the other end of our gaze or at the terminus of a sensory exploration which invests it with humanity. To this extent, every perception is a communication or a communion, the taking up or completion by us of some extraneous intention or, on the other hand, the complete expression outside ourselves of our perceptual powers and a coition, so to speak, of our body with things" <sup>6)</sup>. And thus, as Griffero underlines, atmospheres appear as the bridge-qualities in which communication with our corporeality acquires a prototypical characteristic of the merging with the instrument, as found in musicians or athletes <sup>7)</sup>.

In this continuous interchange between the individual and the space that surrounds them, we must repeat that the body is not an entity which passively receives external stimuli, but on equal footing with language, it is a continuous supplier of meanings. "If the body and the senses are mediators of our relationship with the world, they are such only through the symbolism that surrounds them" <sup>8)</sup>. Between sensation and perception comes the faculty of recognition, senses become a way of giving meaning, penetrating the world and making it communicable. The gaze across a landscape is never aseptic, it captures a reality, it harnesses it, making that line on the horizon a fate from which we cannot escape <sup>9)</sup>.

It is an aesthetic *poiesis*, counterposed by the eye, which slides ephemerally over things. Although intangible, the gaze has something haptic about it, it acts symbolically. Focusing on data subtracts emotionally recognised situations from the incessant flow of the world. Induced by "a surprise, a beauty, any detail that catches the attention"<sup>10)</sup>, thus by an atmosphere, the gaze thus becomes an alteration of the sensitive experience, "it touches from far away, with eyes as an instrument"<sup>11)</sup>. It is a synaesthetic experience, in which sight, working with the other senses, overcomes the subjective-objective dichotomy and ascribes an aesthetic identity to places.

In such a context, the city, *habitat naturaliter* of man and space *par excellence*, can be a privileged place in which the atmospheric charge unfolds in all its many prismatic facets. Not only when the urban landscape is lazily covered by the slothful step of the *flâneur*, but also when, leaving us almost pictorial impressions, it is fleetingly caught from the window of a car or a train. Moreover, when we deal with the post-metropolis or non-place, we can in any case capture an atmosphere, even if it is that of a concrete-jungle nightmare. "In short, a landscape is such even when it is disfigured by artifice, and we can call atmospheric even the negative emotional and corporeal involvement that we can feel in the most chaotic and anonymous city"<sup>12)</sup>. The atmosphere

of urban spaces thus becomes the epithelium covering the city, invading our body while at the same time being invaded by a multi-sensory gaze that penetrates it. As the geographer Jürgen Hasse states: “atmospheres manifest the corporeality of man moving in a material space in the city and who feels involved [...] in emotional situations. On the other hand, they manifest the metaphorical “corporeality” of the city which [...] tells of life in the (and of the) city”<sup>13</sup>).

The gaze on the city is always axiological, it has an in-built “vision of the world” which triggers an continuous interchange of meanings between the perceived and the perceiver. On one hand, we can see that the city will be different not only if those experiencing its spaces live there or have visited it closely as a tourist, but also depending on our own disposition and personal and cultural history, which change the shades of the gaze. “The man who did not love a certain city or a given region praises its beauty only after having met with a decisive love or having ended long-standing worries over those places”<sup>14</sup>). On the other hand, it must be said that from every built-up space, through its architectures and urban planning, a sentimental choir is raised up which often becomes an integral part of the very identity of the city, so far as to turn its atmosphere into a veritable myth, we may think only of certain *skylines* with a highly symbolic value. A very different experience will in fact be gained by walking through the alleys of a city rich in historical attractions, such as Siena, or the concrete pavements of a crowded modern metropolis surrounded by imposing skyscrapers, such as Dubai.

Starting from these premises, this work aims to analyse the atmospheric representation of Venice - or should we rather say the many different Venices - as it has been portrayed in some comic book works and board games. The - far from arbitrary - choice of this city is justified by the archetypal power of the different emotional shades that pervade the city and which, as Moebius stated in his 1984 personal exhibition in the lagoon city, make it a place “which is ‘processed’ very consciously by the whole population through the elected ones who live there and by the country as a whole”<sup>15</sup>).

The preference for the two above-mentioned *media* is due to the fact that on one hand, through the panels or cartoons making up the sequences, comic books offer us a perfect representation of the gaze as a creative act, emotionally connoted and founded on the intentional hiding of other parts; on the other hand, board games, above all those with a narrative basis, are able to recreate atmospheres which, personally involving the players, directly influence the corporeality of the participants. Lastly, considering that the analysis focuses on the paratexts, it is worth underlining that these simply select and intensify the atmospheric impressions inherently present in the lived space of the city<sup>16</sup>).

In *Call of Cthulhu*, a role-playing game inspired by the stories of the father of Cosmic Terror Howard Philips Lovecraft, Venice appears at least twice, firstly in a chapter of the *Horror on the Orient Express* campaign and secondly in the card game expansion *Terror in Venice*. In both contexts, an atmosphere of inexplicable and terrifying horror is propagated from the city, due to the contact with unknown external spheres. If it is true that the matrix of Lovecraftian legends lies

in the discovery of a sidereal cosmos populated by terrifying alien beings and in a world in which man is merely a random accident destined to disappear when the forgotten ancient gods awake from their age-long sleep and rise up from the abysses, it cannot be denied that this situation of precariousness and horror, the blood-curdling discovery of which, in the best case scenario, leads to madness, is all played out on atmospheres. “The most important thing is the atmosphere, because the authenticity is given not by a plot but by the creation of a given feeling”<sup>17)</sup> states the “Loner from Providence” in his 1927 essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature*.

We may in fact say that the true stars, in both the stories and their game version, are not characters/players but rather atmospheres which, acting on the subject, lead their reason to breaking point. One of the most important mechanisms of the game is in fact the mental health score, which during the adventure is destined to crumble and lead the characters to madness. In such a context it is inevitable that the city plays a key role, if, as we have said, the atmospheres are spatialised feelings.

Venice undergoes an authentic twisting, in which its characteristic elements and identity become the places in which the ancient myths come to life and in which unspeakable terrors lie just around the corner. It is here therefore that the city’s alleyways become frightening mazes infested with horrors and whispers that even the most pragmatic mind cannot rationalise; bizarre screams break the silence in St. Mark’s Square cloaked in winter fog, while a terrorised woman vanishes in the fog; the pitch-black stinking water overflowing from the canals brings strange wounds, reawakening the now-drowsy fear of the plague.

As in Lovecraft’s stories, real geography also overlaps a fantasy geography in which the material substrate mingles with that of the dream. For example, on the completely transformed island of San Giorgio in Alga we find the hidden ruins of bizarre primordial religions, while an unexpected eclipse of the sun catapults Venice into a nightmare dimension. All this in a context in which the archetypal symbols of the city help to create an atmosphere of pure terror from which it seems impossible to escape. Two examples over all the others, the sculpted Lion of St Marks which comes to life or cries blood and the carnival masks that hide unworldly creatures from the depths or crazy worshippers of unworldly gods.

The Venice of *The Call of Cthulhu* is a city in which the restless and frightening atmospheres already found in its spaces and which can easily be seen at night, perhaps wandering through the alleys when the tourists have all gone, or during a winter day when the city, wrapped in the fog, radiates an enchanted melancholy, are exasperated to paroxysm.

Completely different, on the other hand, is the Venice told by Paolo Bacilieri in *Durasagra, Venezia Uber Alles*. Through a mannerist style blending Michelangelesque and Berninian-like images with a perturbing and caricatured drawing reminiscent of Andrea Pazienza, Bacilieri represents a Venice in disrepair, split into two irreconcilable realities. On one hand, Venice as a space lived in by its inhabitants, a decaying city eroded by the water, a place of meanness and unspeakable desperation in which the flaking walls looking over the suffocating alleys are nothing

more than the reflection of the permeating dilapidation. Its counterpart is the Venice “city of dreams”, a picture-postcard beauty and mandatory destination of tourists seeking a glossy backdrop to project their romantic dreams onto.

Differentiating the two different representations of the city are not so much the actual places but rather the atmospheres that are created. Of course mass tourism will never see or experience the Venice behind Venice, that of the smoking factory chimneys and industrial areas of Marghera, the trade union struggles and broken economic dreams; but the canals, the architectures and the maze of alleys in the lagoon city lived in by Piero, Cristiano and Zeno, the three main characters in the story, and by the lazily strolling visitors from cruise ships, are equally different, precisely due to their different and irreconcilable perception of spaces. We might even go as far as to say that it is indeed because of the stark relationship between these two atmospheres that Venice appears to us in Bacilieri’s drawings as a doomed city, “evicted from reality [...] childless but filled with lovers, sad artists, never seen, who hate the tourists”<sup>18)</sup> as Leone, the drunk proletariat poet recites, steering his boat just before crashing into the cruise liner *Beautiful*, the emblem of that tourism that lives the urban space like a theme park.

A completely different atmosphere can on the other hand be found in the Venice which one of the great masters of the Italian cartoon school, Hugo Pratt, shows us in the stories of the adventurer Corto Maltese. Here I would like to focus particularly on *Favola di Venezia*.

Here what was once the city of the Doges is represented in abundant detail. It is a Venice *caput mundi*, a cosmopolitan melting pot of cultures and different visions of the world which build up layer upon layer between the folds of time to forge the magic. A liminal city, continuously half way between the real and the fairy tale.

Corto Maltese, an untiring dreamer and new-romantic Don Quixote, walks the streets with at times lazy steps, tracing a periegetic path following the *mirabilia*, stopping to examine apparently hidden yet surprising details that open doors into a magical, secret Venice. “In Venice there are three magical, hidden places. One is in “Calle dell’Amor degli amici”, one is near the “Ponte delle Maravegie”, and the other is in “Calle dei Marrani”, near San Geremia in the Old Ghetto. When Venetians feel that they can no longer endure the establishment, they go to these secret places where, on opening the back doors to these courtyards, they wander off into beautiful spaces, and other stories”<sup>19)</sup>.

It is also very interesting to note how the at-times surreal meetings dotted around the story seem to have the function of reflecting the different atmospheres of Venice. Marked by that cosmopolitanism and historical stratification referred to above, the characters are nothing more than the representation of the different spirits of the city, thus making up a gestaltic vision of the space and feelings that permeate from it. The work also offers us a perfect representation of the relationship between those tertiary, flowing and intangible qualities we have called atmosphere and corporeality. We cannot help but note how during the whole adventure there is a continuous, incessant interchange between the atmosphere exuded by the city and the state of mind of the

main character and how these two extremes, mutually blending into each other, not only tend each time to redefine their unstable boundaries, but define each other in a relationship of continuous reciprocity.

I would like to conclude this short *excursus*, wandering around and captured by the different atmospheres that flow out of Venice, by returning to where we started from. Moebius and his *Venezia Celeste*. In the French surrealist artist's book, the lagoon city becomes a wonderful mystery in which it seems inevitable that one will get lost, and the dream-like atmospheres propagating from the houses, streets and squares completely transfigure the space. Without dwelling on an analysis of Moebius's work, which deserves a study of its own - and which at the same time would be accompanied by the reverential fear of diminishing all that Milo Manara talks of, preferring the pleasure of contemplation and atmosphere to the systematic study of this great artist - I would like to close this work with an evocative description used by the French cartoonist to pay homage to this city.

“There is universal agreement on why Venice is a place of beauty. [...] Every stone is an event, every brick wall a painting, every view of the alleys was created by thousands of lives, unaware people, brilliant artists who had no idea. No conscious enterprise could equal this accumulation of creativity which is a feature of ancient cities. What is fascinating is not the sinking of all this beauty, but the very threat of it sinking”<sup>20)</sup>.

## Notes

- 1) D. Galati, *Prospettive sulle emozioni e teorie del soggetto*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 2002, p. 84.
- 2) M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Librairie Gallimard, Paris 1945, *tr. It.* A. Bonomi, Bompiani, Milan 2003, p. 186.
- 3) T. Griffero, *Atmosferologia, estetica degli spazi emozionali*, Mimesis, Milan-Udine 2017, p.18.
- 4) M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie...*, p. 375.
- 5) T. Griffero, *Atmosferologia...*, p. 110.
- 6) M. Merleau-Ponty, *Op. cit.*, p. 418.
- 7) T. Griffero, *Atmosferologia...*, p. 55.
- 8) D. Le Breton, *La Saveur du Monde. Une anthropologie des sense*. Éditions Métailié, Paris 2006, *tr. It.* M. Gregorio, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milan 2007, p.5.
- 9) F. Nietzsche, *Morgenröte. Gedanken über die moralischen Vorurteile*, 1886. *tr. It.* in *Opere*, I, Adelphi, Milan 1964, p. 88-89.
- 10) D. Le Breton, *La Saveur...*, p. 47
- 11) D. Le Breton, *La Saveur...*, p. 47
- 12) T. Griffero, *Atmosferologia...*, p. 96.
- 13) J. Hasse, *Die Wunden der Stadt. Für eine neue Ästhetik unserer Städte*, Passagen, Wien 2000, p. 133
- 14) D. Le Breton, *La Saveur...*, p. 75.
- 15) Moebius, *Moebius a Venezia*, F. Serra (edited by) in “Corto Maltese”, Year 2 no. 6, June 1984, Milano Libri, Milan, p. 39.
- 16) T. Griffero, *Atmosferologia...*, p. 91.
- 17) H.P. Lovecraft, *The Supernatural Horror in Literature*, 1927, S. Fusco, G. Pilo (edited by), Newton

Compton Edizioni, Rome 2009, p. 1723.

18) P. Bacilieri, *Durasagra. Venezia Uber Alles*, Black Velvet, Florence 2006, p. 56.

19) U. Pratt, *Favola di Venezia*, 1921, Rizzoli, Milan 2009, p. 79.

20) Moebius, *Moebius a...*, p. 49.



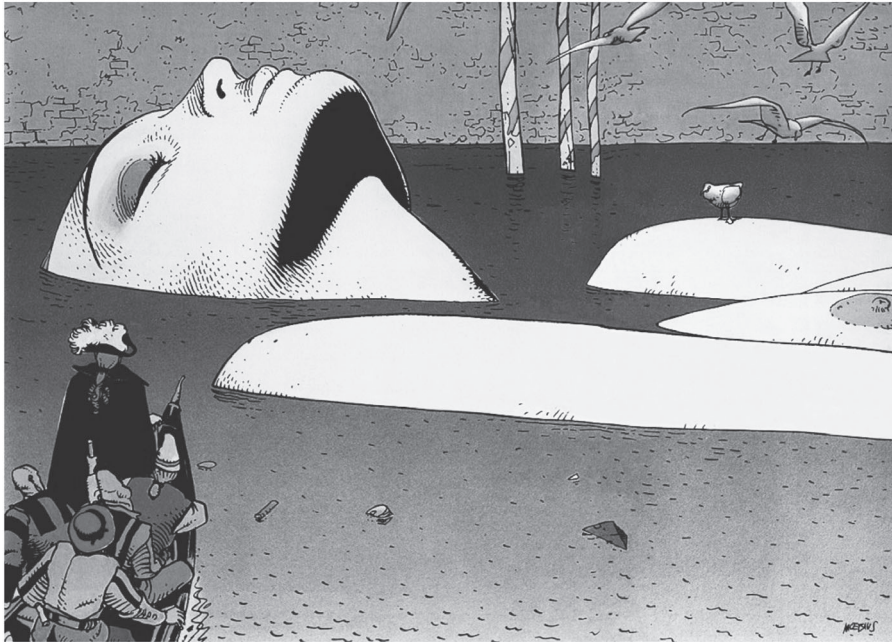


Image 1: Moebius, *Celestial Venice*, 1984

<https://surrealismtoday.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/moebius-aka-jean-giraud-23-of-41-1024x735.jpg>



Image 2: Mark Molnar, *Call of Cthulhu, Terror in Venice*, 2013

[http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-aqEcFpwwEJE/UXVZncwIJ4I/AAAAAAAAAGMo/ApITaA7wi0Y/s1600/CoC\\_Solar\\_Eclipse\\_MarkMolnar.jpg](http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-aqEcFpwwEJE/UXVZncwIJ4I/AAAAAAAAAGMo/ApITaA7wi0Y/s1600/CoC_Solar_Eclipse_MarkMolnar.jpg)



Gazes and atmospheres: different visions of Venice (FARNÉ)



Image 3: P. Bacilieri, *Durasagra, Venezia Uber Alles*, Black Velvet, Florence 2006

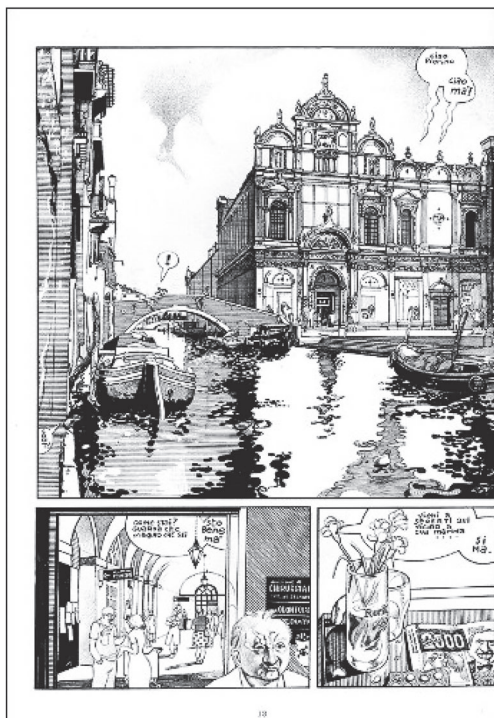


Image 4: P. Bacilieri, *Durasagra, Venezia Uber Alles*, Black Velvet, Florence 2006

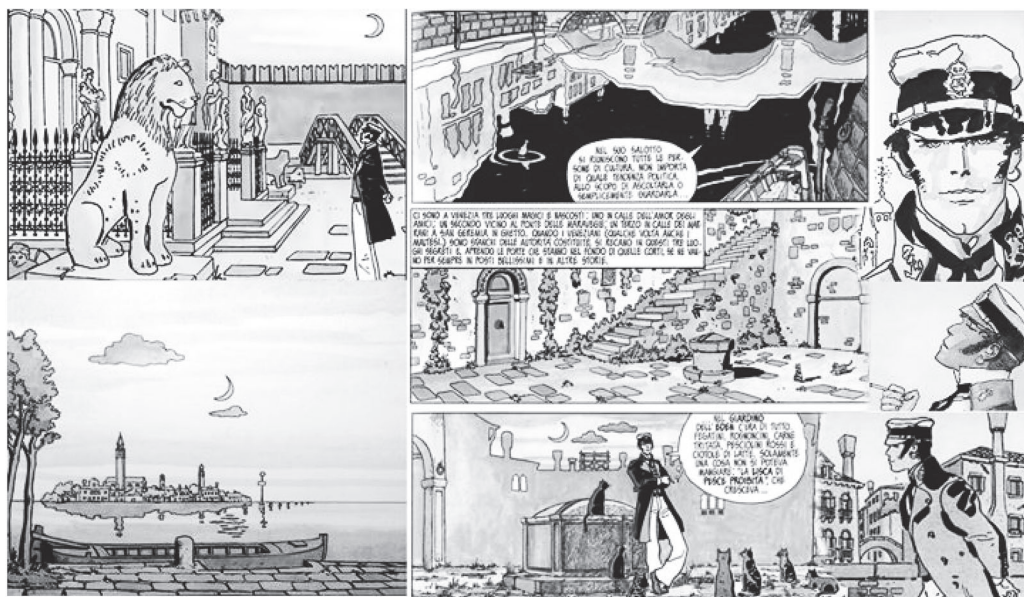


Image 5: Hugo Pratt, *Corto Maltese: Favola di Venezia*, 1977  
<https://venice.carpe-diem.events/data/afisha/o/d5/73/d573bca6df.jpg>

