



Luís António Umbelino¹

University of Coimbra, Portugal

ORCID 0000-0002-5242-4863

The violence of space

Abstract: The main goal of this paper is to analyze how “space happens to us” in the “unstable equilibrium” between the need to assert for oneself and the necessity to belong to a surrounding world. We will argue that when such an equilibrium is disturbed, “space can become violent.” We will take a phenomenological approach in our work, trying to intertwine E. Minkowski and M. Merleau-Ponty’s insights on “lived space” with Bruce Bégout’s concept of “ambiance.”

Keywords: Lived space; atmospheres; distance; syntony.

1. Lived space

We are not indifferent to space.

As we begin to interpret the places where our lives take place, we are convinced *from the start* that space can be welcoming or unsettling, protective or menacing, homely and harmonious, or disturbing and confusing. Our endless task of interpreting the spaces we dwell in is largely determined by such a dramatic rhythm of belonging and displacement, comfort and discomfort, security and threat.

This would not be the case were space but an inert, homogeneous, objective, and empty extension, defined and projected as an external container of distinct objects. If we want to understand the fundamental experience of

¹ University of Coimbra – Faculty of Humanities. I&D Research Unit - CECH (Coimbra-Portugal); Research Project “Fenomenología del cuerpo y análisis del gozo I” (CSIC- Madrid-Spain). International Institute for Hermeneutics.

space, we must begin by freeing ourselves from those conceptions of space that prevail in physics and mathematics. As noted by Erwin Straus, although such scientific conceptions are historically prior to the first detailed analysis of what phenomenology will call the “lived experience of primordial spatiality,” (Strauss, 1966, p. 4) they remain “logically and systematically posterior” (Strauss, 1966, p. 4) to them. Therefore, those scientific conceptions cannot account for the primitive way of *appearing* of space itself.

In this sense, it is not by a set of objective prerequisites that we first learn about what space is, as if the first condition for space to be known was to impose upon it a hovering inspection of qualities and measures; on the contrary, and because we are embodied beings, we first know space by experiencing it, by belonging to it, by living it. In other words, the first condition for space to be understood is *the possibility itself of space not to be unknown to us*. And space is not unknown to us because it somehow *happens to us*, or better still: *because it somehow happens in our lived body*. What I mean by this is that space does not originally appear to us as an exterior object or an abstract construction, but as a fundamental situatedness that somehow seems to be unfolded by our lived body’s way of belonging to its surroundings. In this sense to understand space is to understand the close connection between situatedness and embodiment, between human “being-in-the world and spatiality, thus acknowledging that such a connection is essential to who we are and to our ability to understand ourselves.

2. An Atmospheric density

But how does space *happen to us*? To try to answer this question, we could begin, for instance, by describing how the experience of space unfolds or announces itself in multiple ways at the level of our sensory experiences. We find at such a level of experience that space can *happen to us* in many ways, in different layers and in countless “tonalities,” as it seems to “motivate” all our senses and not just vision and touch. Let us consider the example of “hearing music,” taking into account Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945).

Merleau-Ponty’s main argument is this: as we listen to music in a concert hall, and when we open our eyes after a moment of intense delight,

visible space seems to me cramped compared to that other space through which, a moment ago, the music was being unfolded, and even if I keep my eyes open while the piece is being played, I have the impression that the music is not really contained within this circumscribed and unimpressive space (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 257-258).

Music does not just “fill” the visible space as an object; in fact, music “undermines it, invests it, displaces it,” and shakes it like a “storm.” Better still, music seems to unfold “another space”: a space of deep and dense involvement that seems to “insinuate” itself in the darkness of our closed eyes and on the deepest layers of our way of listening.

This “other space” is not unimpressive but a powerfully *inspiring* and *penetrating* space that overwhelms us by its sheer *expanding proximity*. In this circumstance, lived space does not really correspond to an atomized fragmentation of exterior stimuli, taken from different senses as exterior data to be further organized; on the contrary, what seems to be true is that a *unique multi-layered spatiality* crosses, or invades, our embodied way of being in the world as if *motivating* (and, in a way, supporting) the synaesthesia of all our senses. This means that, at the deepest level of our lived experience, space is not the experience of opaque *qualia* that would be “received” “from the outside” by different senses. Space *qua phaenomenon*, on the contrary, *happens to us* as a fabric of imbrication and overlapping that “speaks” directly to the entire body (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 372) that is our “vehicle of being in the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 94).

It is not a detail that, in this context of his analysis, Merleau-Ponty comes to use, the concept of *sympathy*. This is, in fact, a telling reference that the French philosopher finds in Eugène Minkowski’s important work on *lived time*. For Minkowski, “sympathy” is a kind of immediate and global feeling of an *indivisible all* (“*tout indivisible*”), that must be understood as primordial and irreducible to any relationist assemblages of “feelings” (Minkowski, 1970, p. 73; 63). Merleau-Ponty will add that sympathy is thus an “emblem” of both the *expressive* dimension of lived space and the pathic or affective communion that sketches the primordial ground of a *spatialized* way of being-in-the-world. The implications of such a thesis are important. I want to underline one of those implications: without being able to elude the theoretical tensions operating within the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty nevertheless seems to be acknowledging that *space itself*, as it is experienced in *flesh and blood*, “is not constituted in full clarity,” but always “recovered by a knowledge that remains latent,” something like an “atmosphere offered (...) to my entire body.” (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 244).

Merleau-Ponty is worthwhile quoting here:

(...) every perception is a communication or a communion (...). The fact that this may not have been realized earlier is explained by the fact that any coming to awareness of the perceptual world was hampered by the prejudices arising from objective thinking. The function of the latter is to reduce all phenomena which bear witness to the union of subject and world, putting in their place the clear idea of the object as in itself and of the subject as pure consciousness. Objective thinking therefore severs the links which unite the thing and the thing and the natural world embodied subject, leaving only sensible qualities (...), preferably visual qualities, because these give the impression of being autonomous (...). But, in reality, all things are concretions of a setting, and any explicit perception of a thing survives in virtue of a previous communication with a certain atmosphere (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 373).

Perception “survives” because it is supported by a “certain atmosphere”: this is a crucial claim. Merleau-Ponty suggests that our “medium of experience” has an environmental tone, that the “primordial layer at which both things and ideas come into being” (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 255) is a certain atmospheric fabric of involvement. But was Merleau-Ponty able to characterize all the fundamental characteristics of atmospheres?

3. The vehemence of space

Bruce Bégout has recently argued, in a compelling and original way, that Merleau-Ponty remains limited in his descriptions by a “relational perspective” and by a logic of “junction”, which is the case even in his late works regarding the “mediating” background of the carnal being (Bégout, 2020, p. 174) These are not enough to comprehensively tackle the concept of atmosphere. Bégout’s proposal, in turn, will be to go beyond the history of couplings and consider that the background of lived experience is originally environmental; in other words, atmospheres (Bégout favours the term “ambience”) must be understood as the very “memory of the original belonging of the elements to the background,” (Bégout, 2020, p. 52) as a debt, therefore, of the very “merging dimension (*dimension mérsive*) of the environment,” (Bégout, 2020, p. 258) without which the significant “link” between the one which feels by belonging and what is felt by imbrication would not be unfolded.

Even so, we could argue that Merleau-Ponty's approach remains an important and useful one, particularly, if we consider the way he acknowledges that the *previous communication with a certain atmosphere* does not correspond to a simple harmonious involvement but is also and foremost a question of *conflict*:

Sometimes between myself and the events there is a certain amount of play (*Spielraum*), which ensures that my freedom is preserved while the events do not cease to concern me. Sometimes, on the other hand, the lived distance is both too small and too great: the majority of the events cease to count for me, while the nearest ones obsess me (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 333).

Contemporary psychiatry has paid particular attention to this paradoxical way of appearing of a tonal or atmospheric lived space that points to a conflict between “distance” and “immersion,” between “independence” and “synchronization.” Eugène Minkowski's (Bégout, 2020, p. 92²) analysis of “lived space” - the “non-mathematical and non-geometrical space” (Minkowski, 1970, 400³) we “live in” - is particularly relevant in this respect. According to Minkowski, “lived space” cannot be characterized in terms of objective and measurable relations or intervals that separate two points or objects. (Minkowski, 1970, p. 402) Such relations of distance have an unmistakably quantitative and purely static character. They define the objective or geometrical space. In lived space, however, “distance” is something completely different. Lived space is an “oriented space.” It is organized around a lived subjectivity that remains an “absolute” here – a “me-here-now,” as Minkowski puts it; such a *me-here-now* is not an enclosed “object” but an *open and dynamic centre* that unfolds a “lived distance” to his surroundings.

² We could also study here Binswanger, Straus, Tellenbach, Blankenbourg, among others. They all try to transport onto the clinical analysis of mental pathologies philosophical references from phenomenology (mainly Husserl and Heidegger), with the goal of grounding a philosophical anthropology out of the “non pathological conditions of being-in-the-world”.

³ Minkowski, *Lived Time*, 400: “The intelligible aspect of space seems to act as a foil for time. Here, on the contrary, where we are dealing with lived space, this aspect not only will be of no help but will constitute something of an obstacle. The hold that it has on our thought will quite often mask the true nature of the phenomena having to do with lived space. In our study of these phenomena we will constantly find ourselves involuntarily diverted toward the notion of geometric space, and thus we will tend to replace these phenomena with their mathematical aspect. In spite of this, I will attempt to deal with the problem of lived space, always keeping in mind that I can offer only an initial study”.

This means that we do not just see objects or people more or less distant from us, but we perceive “life bursting all around” and “participate” in it (Minkowski, 1970, p. 402-403).

Let us be more precise here: if it is true that the experience of lived space is not understandable in terms of an objective, measurable extension, it also cannot be grasped as a simple indistinction between the lived subject and his surroundings. In fact, lived space seems to correspond to the experience of a certain felt “independence.” (Minkowski, 1970, p. 403) “There is a distance, Minkowski argues, that “separates me from life,” and it is such a lived distance that, at the same time, “unites me with life” (Minkowski, 1970, p. 403). In other words, what allows us to have a human life and to be a part of the world is a kind of “free space” (Minkowski, 1970, p. 403) around us that we can use without being constrained by the concreteness of our surroundings. To be able to “live our lives,” we need a real feeling of being surrounded by a “distance” in which we feel at ease and free to act. And it is such a lived distance, corresponding to an “open space” for our actions, that enables us to “participate” in our surroundings. The way we belong to the world is thus “achieved across, or rather with the help of, a distance which unites us to it” (Minkowski, 1970, p. 403). We are united because we “can feel separate by the ‘sphere of ease’ in which our lives can unfold” (Minkowski, 1970, p. 403). This is a lived distance, but a distance, nevertheless. What this means is that we do not “participate” in our surroundings by simple amalgamation or fusion but by a subtle “negotiation” between the assertion of ourselves (possible in the lived or felt the distance of a “free space” around us) and the need to belong (Bégout, 2020, p. 102), between the capacity to distinguish ourselves from the environment and the syntony “that allows us to vibrate in unison with the environment” (Minkowski, 1970, p. 73⁴).

Here we must consider, according to Minkowski, an important difference regarding the experience of lived time: in lived time, the fusion of personal élan (Minkowski shares at this point a Bergsonian perspective)

⁴ We could apply into the analysis of space the distinction between schizoidism and syntony that Minkowski considers two fundamental modes of existence: “In taking up Kretschmer’s research, Bleuler is led to the notions of schizoidism and syntony. In going beyond the domains of characterology, he sees in them the expression of two fundamental principles of life. Syntony alludes to the principle that allows us to vibrate in unison with the environment, while schizoidism, on the contrary, designates the faculty of detaching ourselves from that environment. Moreover, these two principles, in spite of their apparently contradictory character, do not exclude each other. The one is as indispensable as the other.” (Minkowski, 1970, p. 68)

with the encompassing atmospheric rhythm of life itself is complete – as the accomplishment of human life in connection to reality is fundamentally grounded in the *environmental* feeling of the all-embracing temporal flux of life. In lived space, on the contrary, the atmospheric fabric of belonging is always sketched between “affirming the ‘me-here-now’” and the need to connect and belong “to an *ambiance becoming distant*” (Minkowski, 1970, p. 403).

Two major implications derive from such a thesis: on the one hand, it becomes clear that these two principles of our lived experience, despite their apparently contradictory character, do not exclude each other: to “keep a distance” and to “be in tune” are both indispensable to our way of being-in-the-world. Both principles have their role in fulfilling, and, in a certain way, establishing the balance between them, or their harmonious and “tuned-in” coexistence, which seems to be the ground for a balanced, proficient, and happy existence *in place*. But, on the other hand, such harmony is never always possible to maintain: the “lived distance” that allows us to “participate” in space without being “touched” in an *immediate way* (Minkowski, 1970, p. 402) can always be destroyed by the eruption of a certain way of appearing of space that *touches us dramatically*, that can invade us *totally*, to the point of dissolving the *protective free boundaries* of the *me-here-now*.

4. The violence of space

Minkowski’s distinction between the visual *clarity of daytime* space and the darkness of nocturnal space is of major importance here. When the French psychiatrist defined “lived distance” for the first time in his book, he was referring to what we usually call visual space; more precisely, it is the clarity of this visual space “which forms the backdrop against which my own life and the lives of other living beings come to unfold and against which the contact with ambient becoming is established with the aid of lived distance.” (Minkowski, 1970, p. 405). But this is not all: according to Minkowski - and this is a crucial aspect - we must also understand that the clarity of visual space “is not the only fundamental substance of life; we also live in the night” (Minkowski, 1970, p. 405).

To a certain extent, the “clear” space of day represents the presence of something that “I can see” and in relation to which I can preserve my individuality. I belong to visible space, but I manage to resist dissolving in it; to a certain extent, “I see it in front of me” and “around me,” meaning that I can maintain the autonomy of myself as a perceptive subject in relation to

what I see. On the other hand, the nocturnal space corresponds to a complete environmental merging.

At night, space is transformed and becomes a real contiguity, as all distances are suspended: “I no longer have the black night, complete obscurity, before me; instead, it covers me completely, it penetrates my whole being, it touches me in a much more intimate way than the clarity of visual space” (Minkowski, 1970, p. 405; Minkowski, 1999, p. 155-156). The “black night” destroys any kind of detachment. Never “in front of me,” the “black night” infiltrates me in a disconcerting and dense way; it mingles with my ideas, feelings, and perceptions. As the night falls, silhouettes and edges dissolve; objects gain new and bizarre forms; spectres and mysterious images come to life. The dark space of night is more personal than clear space, more intimate in its intrusiveness. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, in the darkness of night

I am no longer withdrawn into my perceptual look-out from which I watch the outlines of objects moving by at a distance. Night has no outlines; it is itself in contact with me and its unity is the mystical unity of the *mana* (...); it is pure depth without foreground or background, without surfaces and without any distance separating it from me (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 330).

At night, even “oriented space” itself is no longer the reference for our way of belonging to our surroundings; on the contrary, the density of “black night” seems to dissolve all kinds of distance and boundaries. In a certain way, this was already the case in the concert hall: visible space is subverted, and a merging space appears; this “other space” is a space that “touches” us, that penetrates us as if it were the “black space” (Minkowski, 1970, p. 405) of night – a space of pure depth without surfaces or profiles, a space that enwraps me, that infiltrates all my senses, that suffocates my recollections and dissolve personal identity. If we “feel the music,” it is because we merge with the *blackness* of a penetrating space that allows for the pathic imbrication of the here and there, interior and exterior, subject and world.

According to Bégout, what is valid for “black night” is true for any atmosphere (Bégout, 2020, p. 53): as a manifestation of the affective unit of a “medium of experience,” atmospheres are what merge. But is it not the case that the atmospheric merging seems to be, in all respects, “an excessive and pathological syntony that erases the limits between the I and life.” (Bégout, 2020, p. 103) For most of our lives, we try to merge with what is happening around us (we want to “live it” to the fullest): be it a party, a show, a movie, a house, a book, a sports event, a relationship, etc. But we cannot deny that

atmospheres can penetrate us in a hostile, disturbing, sad, or negative way. In these cases, it is curious to note that our response will be to try to salvage the “lived distance” and resist the merging. At the heart of atmospheres, there is always an *unstable equilibrium* (Wiercinski, 2003) that can signal a dangerous frontier between a peaceful accomplished, balanced life and a disturbed, insecure, and oppressed life. An excess of distance will make me “lose” the world, but syntony can also be aggressive, tyrannical, and, as Bégout puts it, “became dystonia” (Bégout, 2020, p. 105).

Space can harm us.

In fact, “the irrational in life – as Minkowski has convincingly argued – is not restricted to lived duration but is found in space as well, without, in this instance, being based on the time factor.” (Minkowski, 1970, p. 412) This does not mean, however, that, for Minkowski, all experiences of the darkness of night will lead to clinical pathological states. It is true that we can analyze the cases of schizophrenia in terms of the duality of “clear space and black space” and argue that the person with schizophrenia does not live in the clear visual space of lived distances and that he is incapable of asserting his “independence” as he feels utterly invaded by an oppressive *non-distant* “black space” full of persecutory spectres. But what is decisive here (besides the importance for psychiatry of such remarkable analysis) is to understand that an excess of syntony, “like black space” (Minkowski, 1970, p. 405), typical of the person with schizophrenia (we could also consider other examples, such as the case of the agoraphobe) *happens to us all* as a possibility of lived space.

I have been arguing that there is an intimate connection between self and envioning world, between person and spatial situatedness. To use one last time the Heideggerian phrase, human “being-in-the-world” is, as Merleau-Ponty suggested, grounded in the intertwining or imbrication of lived body and lived space. It is the description of such an entanglement that demonstrates to what extend the “intimate connection” we mentioned is not a merely contingent feature of human psychology, but – as we learn from E. Minkowski and B. Bégout – a fundamental *atmospheric* structure that makes possible the sort of life we call “human” and the kind of identity we constantly try to recover as our own. In this sense, it is not surprising that the related notions of spatiality and embodiment, place and self, nourish the endless task of interpreting our way of *dwelling*. And perhaps it all begins, in this path of interpretation, precisely when the unstable equilibrium between the assertion of myself and the need to belong is menaced or disturbed, and we try, in response, to resist disturbing atmospheres of excessive syntony by putting our suffering into words.

References:

- Bégout, B. (2020), *Le concept d'ambiance*, Paris, Seuil.
- Merleau-Ponty, M (2005) *Phenomenology of Perception*, English translation, London and New York, Routledge.
- Minkowski, E. (1970) *Lived Time*, English translation, Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Minkowski, E. (1999), *Vers une cosmologie*, Paris : Payot & Rivages.
- Straus, E. (1966) « The Forms of Spatiality », in ID, *Phenomenological Psychology* London, Tavistock Publications.
- Wierciński, A. (2003) (ed.), *Between Suspicion and Sympathy: Paul Ricoeur's Unstable Equilibrium*, Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press.