

ATMOSPHERES: SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL INDICATORS.
FOR A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIALLY
RELEVANT STATES IN “MULTI-ATMOSPHERIC” WORD

Premise. – The ecological condition of the earth is precarious. The process of civilisation has not brought a good life to all people. It is an expression of socio-economic inequalities that the exploitation of natural resources and the disregard for the laws of nature have brought prosperity to many people, especially in the First World. However, these practices do not promise a future worth living, neither for those who have profited so far, let alone for those who have been left behind by progress. But at least for those who, as young people, will soon be faced with an ecological fait accompli. They will then have to come to terms with what those who are alive now have left for them. What leads to destruction cannot be “good”.

At the beginning of the increasingly clear signs of serious ecological crises in the 1970s, Georg Picht noted that humans cannot destroy nature, but they can destroy their own ecological niche. «That which he [man, JH] cannot destroy is that destruction which is constitutive of life, and which befalls him when he does not respect the laws of nature» (Picht, 1992, p. 357). According to Picht, this widespread lack of respect results from the arrogance according to which man «sees himself as an autonomous subject vis-à-vis nature» (*ibidem*).

On the one hand, due to scientific progress, people have never known so much (about nature) as in our time. On the other hand, however, the difference between this knowledge and the capacity for practical exchange with nature is becoming ever greater. In other words, the expansion of the faculty of rationality (*Verstand*) corresponds to a reduction of the abilities to reason (*Vernunft*). This is not the same as rationality. Reason is an instance of the synthesis of knowledge and will, feeling and rationality, subjective desire and stepping back for the common good. Among other things, reason is responsible for the ethical regulation of events in the here-

and-now, oriented towards humane norms. Afterwards, a life must be possible in the future that is no worse than that of the present. In this process of regulation, feelings play a central role, which can be felt in atmospheres.

Atmospheres as communication media. – The first mode of communication is literal speech - all the more so in the scientific world. When Russian troops were deployed to Ukraine's border in early April 2021, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said «Moscow wanted to create a `threatening atmosphere» (Gnauck, 2021). It is not only in this situation that an atmosphere is used as a means of communication and understood accordingly as a politically threatening gesture. What are atmospheres?

The term atmosphere exists in most (everyday) languages. Atmospheres give us an emotional perception of what is “going on” in a situation. The feelings they convey, however, are not rooted in any “innerness”; rather, they come from an “outside”. Schmitz therefore defines atmospheres as spatially extended feelings: «An *atmosphere* in the sense meant here is the unbounded occupation of a surfaceless space in the region of what is experienced as present» (Schmitz, 2019, p. 94). What one can perceive in its around is nothing individual or personally subjective. Atmospheric feelings can therefore only transmit a political message if they can be understood by everyone, as it were. They are media of non-verbal communication. The psychiatrist Hubert Tellenbach had already pointed out: «Atmospheric is something present» (Tellenbach, 1968, p. 61), something all-encompassing that can neither be divided into parts nor reduced to a «small denominator» (*ibidem*, pp. 56 and 61).

Atmospheres neither have a subjective nor an objective character (cf. Böhme, 2013, p. 33). In a way, they float between subject and object. As transitional media, they form a kind of crossover. They exist both in the «present around» (Dürckheim, 2005, p. 32) and in a dimension of being-with. Unlike stones or trees, they are flighty, they come and go like the wind, which is completely absorbed in its blowing. Atmospheres thus go beyond the ontology of things. They are completely absorbed in their sensing. Hermann Schmitz has therefore assigned them to the category of “half-things”: «Emotions are half-things/entities» (Schmitz 2019, p. 99), which differ from things by, among other things, that their «duration can be interrupted, that is, they come and go, without there being any point in asking what they did in the meantime» (*ibidem*). Tonino Griffero sees them as

«a new interest in quasi-beings, semi-realities or quasi-realities» (Griffero, 2017, p. XVI).

They are means of communication and at the same time media of resonance. In the milieu of feelings, they react to “something” - e.g. a fermenting political conflict. They are difficult to explain in words, but they are not empty feelings. After all, they “tell” us something because they are loaded with meanings. What they make us understand, however, «does not correspond to the world of language» (Tellenbach, 1968, p. 75). All the more they can be staggering in their power. Likewise, they can infuse us completely in the most pleasant way. The power of atmospheres «attacks the human condition, it affects the mind, it manipulates the mood, it evokes the emotions. This power does not appear as such, it attacks the subconscious» (Böhme, 2013, p. 39). Atmospheres connect people to shared situations. But they can also divide. When they evoke feelings of being affected, they ignite moods. They are of great importance in initiating change, for example in the field of politics, culture, art and ecological communication. In the current ecological crisis, new ways must be found in the human-nature metabolism: in production, mobility, energy generation, food, clothing, logistics, etc. The more an imminent change interferes with people’s lives, the stronger the feelings aroused by expectations and fears. The demonstrations of climate activists show us this in all clarity. Atmospheres play a central role in this.

What do Atmospheres communicate? Between thinking and feeling. – Atmospheres communicate feelings, also in the design of ways out of the ecological crisis and the evocation of changing moods. A message should affect the individual and guide behaviour on the basis of this affectation. Especially ahead of political elections, feelings are addressed through atmospheres. Political parties prefer to dress up their arguments atmospherically so that they can win over people’s feelings. Factual contexts are often distorted, simplified or twisted - the intellect once again proves to be a «master of disguise» (Nietzsche, 1999, Vol. 1, p. 888). However, the ecological crisis also challenges many political actors and leading figures of civil resistance to influence people with extreme scenarios. The factual reasoning then often moves into the background. The effects of atmospheric communication are then scandalisation (to attract attention), fear (to deter) or hope and fascination (for the purpose of social bonding). In the soil of

matter-of-fact realities, the seeds of suggestion seldom sprout; much more likely, however, in the milieu of ecstatic feelings. Reflecting on the power of atmospheres in ecological crisis communication claims itself for the very reason that it can expose ideologies and misguided arguments. The unquestionable threatening nature of the state of the climate, soils and waters leads straight to extreme emotions (between panic in the dystopian realm, denial and trivialisation in the realm of displacement, and confidence in the realm of the utopian). Because ecological crisis communication navigates between thinking and feeling, it is also vulnerable to the improper distortion and over-emphasis of feelings at the expense of weighed arguments of the mind. It addresses the feelings as well as the mind, but often does not seek a balance between the two dimensions of consciousness in the milieu of «transversal reason [Vernunft]» (Welsch, 1987, p. 295).

The following example is intended to illustrate how atmospheres programmatically guide the collective processing of a reactor meltdown more affectively than cognitively, not in the sense of critical reflection on a final loss of control, but in support of ideological smoothing and tourist commercialisation.

The Chernobyl disaster is one of the most massive human-made environmental disasters of all times. Taking into account its massiveness, the ways of dealing with its subject and the atmospheres that surround Chernobyl can be a learning tool for future atmosphere creation and studying.

The accident is studied within different sciences, represented in a variety of places and mediums. Chernobyl affected many social and cultural groups and continues to affect the environment. The disaster happened in 1986 and the Soviet Union collapsed five years later. All this complexity of the phenomenon hinders a creation of a united narrative about the disaster. Right now, there are many atmospheres that radiate from different narratives and social groups with their specific types of experiencing Chernobyl.

Ukrainian philosopher who researches commemorative practices and collective memory Oksana Dovgoplova in her article on Chernobyl designates the problem in terminus “Uninterpreted” memory. She lists main fields where memory on Chernobyl resides:

There are official memory with traditional events in April (concerts and TV-shows), stalkers’ practices in all their variegation (from

searching for abandoned places to meditation about technologies and soviet past together with homages trough art practices as murals on the walls in Zone), touch of Chernobyl in computer games (S.T.A.L.K.E.R is iconic in this case), ukrainian postmodern literature and interest of biologists that ask for saving the status of Zone so that nature could live on its own.” (Dolgopolova, 2019, pp. 221-222).

Certain of these memory practices of Chernobyl still have something in common. It is a specific atmosphere that surrounds them and transmits its effect to Chernobyl itself.

To start with let us analyze the first possible atmosphere - the atmosphere which was there right after the accident. It is one of the most crucial examples of the role of atmospheres in human life and in coping with ecological disasters. It is the atmosphere of the whole Soviet World created by the state officials. It is the atmosphere of stability, trust to the officials and collectivity.

The officials in their race for keeping information inside the state and not letting anyone in the West know about the accident were not telling anything to their citizens too. (KGB Archives, 2019, p. 4) Even those who lived in the city 3 km away from the nuclear power plant were highly misinformed about the situation (see Faizulin, 2019). Later, when Sweden recognized radioactive particles within their territory and sent an official request to the Soviet Union, the officials started to acknowledge the accident¹ (see Schmemmann, 1986). Nevertheless citizens of the Soviet Union were only told that some accident happened and that there is nothing to worry about. In Kyiv, which is only 100 km away from Chernobyl, life was flowing in its usual way (see Mulev, 2006). The officials even didn't cancel the parade on the 1st of May and a lot of people went on the streets celebrating without any knowledge about the spread of radiation in their city (KGB Archives, 2019, pp. 26-27).

People were feeling safe and acknowledged. They were trusting the officials and not doing anything extra. There wasn't any informational campaign to save the lives of the citizens. No one knew anything about radiation and its effects. As a result, in Ukraine and Belarus drastically rose the

¹ “25 Years After Chernobyl, How Sweden Found Out,” Radio Sweden, April 22, 2011, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=2054&artikel=4468603>

number of thyroid cancers together with other effects of the accident that still affect people's lives and health².

It is not just the issue of misinformation, the role the atmospheres played in this case cannot be overrated. People who witnessed the Chernobyl accident, who were working on the liquidation of its effects and who were living near Chernobyl were surrounded by an atmosphere that did not provoke any careful attitude that could prevent dramatic consequences. The atmosphere of stability, of safety while working in the dangerous zone was kept on the high level so that people could work.

Another kind of atmosphere that surrounded the Chernobyl case at the beginning was the atmosphere of fear. Unfortunately, it wasn't the fear of the radiation and its effects, it was the fear of the state. Not all people in the SU were experiencing this feeling of collective trust in the state, a big part of them were only feeling fear, even those who were in high positions. This fear prevented many possible reactions to the accident that could not let the most of the negative effects appear (Plochy, 2018, p. 262). Thus, within the first years after the accident there were two main atmospheres that both influenced the dramatic events after the accident: rising number of losses, areas of the radiation spreading and their ecological effects. These were the atmospheres of stability and collective trust to the state together with the atmosphere of fear.

Now that they stopped radiating from Chernobyl, new atmospheres came. Let us appeal once more to the division between types of memory of Chernobyl made by Oksana Dolgoplova: official, stalkers, game industry, literature, art and science. Atmospheres are not the same as narratives around certain phenomena. There can be different narratives but their atmosphere is the same because atmospheres are non-verbal spatial mediums of feelings and emotions (Schmitz, 1981, p. 259). They help to create an attitude to the phenomenon without rational explanation of it. Atmospheres are what people can feel about certain situations and in certain situations, narratives are what people can think and words in which they can talk about it (Schmitz, 2019, pp. 73-74).

² Environmental Consequences of the Chernobyl Accident and Their Remediation: Twenty Years of Experience Report of the UN Chernobyl Forum Expert Group "Environment" (EGE) August 2005, pp. 182-184 <http://www-ns.iaea.org/downloads/rw/meetings/enviro-consequences-report-wm-08.05.pdf>

That is why in the case of Chernobyl the number of atmospheres isn't the same as that of narrative types. Now there are two main atmospheres that surround Chernobyl: the ones that tourism and art spread. These are fields of atmospheres' creation that constantly spread different feelings and emotions connected to Chernobyl. However, there can exist other atmospheres and they definitely are: the abandoned land itself creates an atmosphere of loss and nostalgia for those who used to live there, the atmosphere of care and scientific interest which Chernobyl and the Zone itself spreads on those who have an attitude to scientific investigation. Nevertheless, these atmospheres are less powerful.

One of the explanations of the affective power of atmospheres lies in their relation to mood. The connection between mood and atmosphere is still not fully explicated in a variety of theories (Hasse, 2019, p. 89). The term "mood" in Heideggerian sense means the possibility for anything to have any significance for us (Heidegger, 1967, p. 134). Thus, as moods constitute our findings of ourselves in the world, the possibility of grasping a certain atmosphere is higher for those whose moods are relative to this atmosphere. If a person does not have any previous knowledge and attitude, their mood makes them open to a variety of possibilities of significance. As a result, an atmosphere with more affective power wins and captures their emotions. In the case of Chernobyl nowadays the atmospheres of art and tourism are more powerful because of their area of distribution. They exist and radiate in a variety of space and time configurations.

The production of tourism to Chernobyl is made by different organisations and powers. All of them add attractors to the whole touristic atmosphere, which could be described as an atmosphere of the Real or the Alien (Lacan, 1981, pp. 204-206; Waldenfels, 1997, pp. 6-7). Within this atmosphere Chernobyl appears to be the most real of all, this thin line between life and death. The Zone itself becomes the portal to other worlds and times. People gain interest in the theme of Chernobyl because of the possible touch of reality, of something they are deprived of from the time they're born. It is a similar atmosphere that usually surrounds other world disasters.

This atmosphere is created through movies and games with their images of the abandoned and lost land that has its secrets and magic. It is co-created by the officials in Ukraine that force tourism to the Zone because of its economical potential. In 2019 the president of Ukraine signed a de-

cree to kickstart the Chernobyl Development Strategy³. In 2021 the officials presented the first steps of this development strategy, they will restore main attractions, create specific routes for groups and organize new sightseeing places. As the president of Ukraine said on the forum “Ukraine 30” this summer: «It should become a powerful magnet for tourists from Ukraine and around the world, and the exclusion zone should become a zone of revival»⁴. Officials claim that it won’t make Chernobyl even more a wild playground for adventure hunters⁵, but the dangerous possibility of it still remains.

Scientists that work in the Zone often argue that tourists take away its initial vibe. They came there to study the reasons, possible solvings and the way radiation “lives” in nature. After in 2011 the Zone was opened for tourists it became problematic for scientists to preserve its initial atmosphere (see Mettler, 2019). They are not only afraid of tourists destroying the perseverance site for scientific investigations but also of the damage that can be done to peoples’ health and to the main atmosphere inside Zone which is an area of tremendous human suffering.

The question is why the atmosphere that surrounds and takes tourists into is that which doesn’t make them careful, thoughtful and moderate but does the opposite: pulls their adrenaline and moves them to take photos in dangerous places where the level of radiation could be high. That is the question to the atmosphere’s production. At the same time as the Ukrainian government started their development program they could’ve started working on the atmospheres. Nevertheless, they let this be the work of TV, travel agencies and games productions.

The Chernobyl case shows that the atmosphere of insecurity, mystery and prohibition works as an attractor. After HBO released its TV-series about Chernobyl in 2019 the number of tourists in the Zone massively rose up (fig. 1).

³ Head of State signed a decree on the development of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone: <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/glava-derzhavi-pidpisav-ukaz-shodorozvitku-chornobilskoyi-z-56321>

⁴ President launched the Green Country project aimed at protecting nature and the environment in Ukraine <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/glava-derzhavi-davstart-proektu-zelena-krayina-spryamovanom-68865>.

⁵ 35 years since its nuclear disaster, Chernobyl prepares for tourists <https://www.euronews.com/travel/2021/04/25/35-years-since-its-nuclear-disaster-chernobyl-prepares-for-a-tourism-boom>

Fig. 1 – Copy of the sculpture *Prometheus*. Original: Julij Synkevitsch, today: in front of the Chernobyl NPP; before then: Pripyat



Source: Kateryna Demerza

According to official sources the number of tourists to Chernobyl in the first month of 2020 doubled compared to previous year and quadrupled compared to 2017.⁶ Travel companies develop these themes: create exciting ads, write intriguing descriptions of their excursions to the Zone and create illusory attractions. They would collect old toys and put them into abandoned houses to create an atmosphere of strong emotional involvement. They would take dosimeters and place them near radiated

⁶ TSN. Do Chernobylia rizko povalyly turysty: <https://tsn.ua/ukrayina/u-chornobil-rizko-povalyli-turisti-1502919.html>

points just to increase the level of risk. Chernobyl became a place for risk for adrenaline seekers.

Right parallel to this atmosphere exists an atmosphere that is created through art practices. There were numerous art-exhibitions dedicated to Chernobyl⁷, many famous world and Ukrainian artists responded to the accident (fig. 2).

Fig. 2 – *View of the fourth reactor of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant from a tourist bus*



Source: Kateryna Demerza

Maria Primachenko, one of the most famous Ukrainian artists, created a series of paintings that actualized the Chernobyl question⁸. ONUKA - a

⁷ Chernobyl 34 - The first virtual exhibition about Chernobyl!: <https://artefact.live/>

⁸ Chornobylskiy bestiarii Marii Pryimachenko - Mystetskyi Almanakh ARTES. 2016: <https://artes-almanac.com/maria-prymachenko/>

famous Ukrainian band released an album about Chernobyl⁹. David Bowie mentioned Chernobyl in one of his songs¹⁰. What unites these practices and ways of responding to the problem is the atmosphere that they spread on those who matter to listen and see.

They usually combine two images: one of the unknown and scary and one of the untruthful and non-scary. Chernobyl here takes images of the unconscious, of initial or even apocalyptic. It is this sphere of the unknown, unseen and therefore scary. The image of Chernobyl supplies artists with tools for working with spheres of uncertainty, mystery and the unconscious. The image of the Soviet Union is perceived as the visualization of the untruthful and dangerous, however not scary. Allegories that connect Soviet lies together with radiative rays are used rather often.

In all these practices, when attending exhibitions, opera shows or listening to music you attend an atmosphere of anxiety in the Heideggerian sense (Heidegger, 1967, pp. 184-186). It is the atmosphere in which participants start to question their borderline questions of existence. Chernobyl as it was was the accident that forced and created the place and time to think of the whole meaning of humanity as it is. And this atmosphere is at its foremost captured in artistic practices. The newest practices: exhibitions dedicated to the 35th anniversary of the Chernobyl accident¹¹ or new opera ChernobylDorf also show great ecological tendency¹². They constantly create a reflexive atmosphere that forces questions and feelings of care for the surroundings.

Thus, Chernobyl - as a case of studying atmospheres shows that still atmospheres are merely used in areas of marketing and production which are more interested in capitalization than problem-solving. The catastrophe and all its potential to create an atmosphere of care and attention to surroundings is still roughly undeveloped except for some interpretations within the art sphere.

⁹ ONUKA on the 30th anniversary of Chornobyl nuclear disaster: <https://empr.media/opinion/interviews/onuka-30th-anniversary-chornobyl-nuclear-disaster/>

¹⁰ This nuclear-themed mixtape, featuring David Bowie and Kate Bush, will heighten your post-'Chernobyl' fears: <https://www.nme.com/blogs/nme-blogs/chernobyl-hbo-show-nuclear-themed-mixtape-david-bowie-kate-bush-2507627>

¹¹Chernobyl. Journey, Expo Center of Ukraine (VDNG) <https://maximdonduk.com/exhibitions/exhibition-views/chernobyl-journey-expo-center-of-ukraine-vdng-kyiv-ukraine-2021>

¹² CHORNOBILDORF. ARCHAEOLOGICAL OPERA - Austria in Ukraine: <https://austriaukraine.com/en/events/chornobyldorf-archaeological-opera/>

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Atmosfera come indicatori socio-ecologici. – Lo stato ecologico della natura sta sempre più diventando un problema esistenziale per l'uomo. Sebbene la conoscenza disponibile sulla natura si stia ampliando, la capacità di giudizio non sta aumentando della stessa misura. Tra l'altro, spetta alla ragione mediare tra il sentimento e la razionalità. Perché questo accada, tuttavia, i sentimenti devono essere presi seriamente in considerazione a livello sociale, poiché attraverso i sentimenti le atmosfere permettono agli uomini di sentire proprio-corporalmente (leiblich) in quale situazione essi si trovano. L'esempio della catastrofe nucleare di Chernobyl illustra la diversità

delle possibili atmosfere che fuoriescono e si “irradiano” da un disastro. Vengono analizzate cinque diverse atmosfere in relazione alla loro funzione. L’esempio mostra anche come gli stati d’animo (Stimmungen) influenzano le atmosfere, ponendole al servizio dell’ideologia. La comunicazione atmosferica della fusione del reattore non porta alla riflessione critica, ma al livellamento ideologico e al marketing turistico di un “evento”.

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