Proxemics and "neo-proxemics": The new meaning of space in the time of COVID-19 pandemic[1]

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ABSTRACT

Il presente lavoro si prefigge di rivisitare, dal punto di vista della semiotica, la categoria dello spazio nel contesto dell'attuale crisi sanitaria globale. La pandemia COVID-19 ha cambiato radicalmente il modo in cui l'umanità si relaziona allo spazio. L'organizzazione dell'ambiente materiale come mezzo di controllo sociale è evidente nelle misure di emergenza imposte da molti governi europei. Di conseguenza, gli spazi pubblici, sociali e privati sono stati rimodellati e hanno subito trasformazioni senza precedenti. Come conseguenza dell'impatto della pandemia sull'uso dello spazio sta emergendo una nuova comprensione del significato sociale dello spazio, che chiameremo "neo-prossemica". Mentre la prossemica sin dai suoi albori all'inizio negli anni 50 e 60 si è occupata del significato dello spazio e delle distanze tra gli esseri umani in diverse culture, la "neo-prossemica" ha bisogno di interpretare le trasformazioni nell'uso dello spazio durante l'attale periodo di crisi sanitaria durante il XXI secolo.

This paper revisits, from the perspective of semiotics, the category of space in the context of the current global health crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has radically altered the way in which humankind relates to space. The organization of the material environment as a means of social control is apparent in the emergency measures imposed by many European governments. As a consequence of this, public, social, and private spaces have been reshaped and have undergone unheard of transformations. This study argues for a new un-

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derstanding of space—which I term as 'neo-proxemics'—that is resurfacing as a result of the impact of the pandemic on the social significance of space. Whilst 'proxemics' from its inception in the 1950s and 1960s dealt with the meaning of space and distances between men cross-culturally, 'neo-proxemics' needs to attend to the transformations in the use of space in the current time of health crisis of the 21st century.

Introduction: rethinking the category of space in the age of pandemic

The aim of the present paper is to revisit the concept of *proxemics*, a branch of semiotics that is concerned with the perception, organization and use of space that stands in between people who enter in a social interaction. The rules governing spacing behavior depend upon variables linked to the different cultures to which social actors belong to. Each culture follows its own rules. Thus, proxemics can be studied cross-culturally. As we shall be seeing in what follows, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a tremendous impact on the use and perception of public, social, and private space not only in Europe, but also worldwide.

The changes in the use and perception of space in human interactions are apparent when one considers the numerous restrictions put in place by the new regulations imposed by the vast majority of European governments – as well as by other governments around the world – after the outbreak of COVID-19 in February 2020 and still in place in 2021. Such measures regulate, control, and guide a large part of social and economic activities in public spaces as well as some key aspects of private life. The impact of the COVID-19 emergency measures is evident for all the hundreds of millions of people who have experienced and still experience such critical circumstances. Indeed, the coronavirus pandemic has altered almost all compartments of life, from economy to education to the very core of social and private life. In a nutshell, COVID-19 has reshaped our lives in many important respects.

The thrust of the present investigation is, thus, to shed light on the resurgence of a phenomenon that was almost completely forgotten up until recent times: the study of space in human relations as a significant social phenomenon. For obvious reasons – the management of public health crisis – some important restrictions on

human freedom and population movement have been implemented since the winter of 2020. Yet the question remains as to what is the social price that people pay for it. How has the COVID-19 pandemic, and the global crisis it turned into, upended the social significance of space in human relations?

In what follows I argue that, as a result of the impact of the pandemic on social life in regard to the regulation and control of space, a new understanding of space is resurfacing. I will refer to the resurgence and the new emphasis of the meaning of space in the age of global health crisis as *neo-proxemics*. I use this word to contrast it with the term originally coined by E.T. Hall, *proxemics*, who was the founder of this field of study in the 1960s[3]. Whilst proxemics dealt with the significance of space and the distances between men in different cultures in relatively stable moments in history, *neo-proxemics* needs to account for the transformations of the use of space in the time of health crisis, and in particular, after the outbreak of COVID-19. As we will see in what follows, the concept of space not only entails a consideration of the distances between people in human encounters, but also the actions that can occur within a given radius or distance zone as well as the human senses involved in the interaction.

The speed of change: historical crisis and the "future shock" effect

Today, the study of the meaning of space in human relations and the new measures around this compartment of life – the do's and don'ts of social interaction during the pandemic – is a much-debated question. Thus, an enquiry into this issue – the organization of the material environment as a means of social control – not only is of utmost importance, but is also very topical. The outbreak of the coronavirus COVID-19 in Wuhan, central China, was a game changer in this respect. Since the official declaration of the World Health Organization in 2020 of COVID-19 as a global pandemic, life has never been the same.

Due to the coronavirus outbreak, millions of people have been confined

[3] I do not envisage an opposition between the two terms. Hall did not think of his theory in light of a global pandemic, although his ideas are insightful for anyone who intends to think of the use of space at this current time.

into their homes. The restrictions were particularly severe in many countries, with extended periods of lockdowns, limitations to people's movements, economic and social activities. Knowledge workers, employees, teachers and students left universities, schools, and office buildings and started to work remotely from home. Places and spaces that were originally designed for meeting people – what Humphry Osmond has called "sociopetal spaces"[4], namely, spaces designed for social encounters – turned into the exact opposite, that is, places where it is required to avoid engaging with others. This has been an issue at the forefront of discussions because, despite the new rules anti-virus, a large part of people could not cope with it. In other words, there is an apparent mismatch between the measures put in place in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and they ways in which people acted them out. Many "sociopetal spaces" were suddenly emptied or closed down, either temporally or permanently. Perhaps, the word that best epitomizes the feelings of many European citizens that were in lockdown for several weeks during 2020 and 2021 is *emptiness*: empty squares, empty streets, empty cafés and restaurants, empty theaters and cinemas, empty schools. No one would have expected to face such a scenario.

If this is not enough to contend with, one need also to take into account the rapidity with which such changes occurred in many European countries and all over the world. Adaptive demands placed on people by the new environment occurred very quickly. Undoubtedly, humankind lives and experiences an epoch of tremendous uncertainty and unpredictability, of "explosive" developments in culture and history[5]. It is a time of fast and dramatic social and economic changes. The speed of such changes is a good indicator of how rapidly people's daily habits, customs, and routines are asked to adapt to novelty and change.

The COVID-19 pandemic, a remarkable and unprecedented event that can be thought of as a moment of historical crisis or, as poignantly expressed by

[4] H. Osmond, *Function as the basis of psychiatric ward design*, in «Mental Hospitals. Architectural Supplement» April 1957, pp. 23–27.
[5] Cfr. J. Lotman, *Culture and Explosion*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin 2009.

Tyhurst, as "transition states"[6], brought in sudden and radical changes that disoriented the vast majority of people. Indeed, there is a large proportion of the world population that is still catching up and adjusting to the rapid change brought in by the pandemic, let alone the stress and social anxiety associated with such moments of catastrophes and havoc. Alvin Toffler reports numerous studies that lay out a correlation between high degree of life changes and illness[7]. Humankind has entered a phase of *interegnum*, a limbo where the present has lost grip on reality and the future is yet to come, a profound historical crisis that is best described by the words of the philosopher Ortega Y Gasset[8].

The current situation of fast and unprecedented changes has led to a "future shock" effect, so to speak. People are not yet accustomed to the new reality, which emerged very quickly. Such new reality is pushing people to change rapidly by overwriting the old way of life and introducing new ways and rules of acting in the world. As the futurologist Alvin Toffler pointed out:

> There are discoverable limits to the amount of change that the human organism can absorb, and that by endlessly accelerating change without first determining these limits, we may submit masses of men to demands they simply cannot tolerate. We run the high risk of throwing them into that peculiar state that I have called future shock. We may define future shock as the distress, both physical and psychological, that arises from an overload of the human organism's physical adaptive systems and its decision-making processes. Put more simply, future shock is the human response to overstimulation[9].

Some people claim that the moment of historical crisis we are all witnessing will become the "new normal". We are far from it at the current stage, however. Nonetheless, this does not provide us with the lucid and rational lenses needed in order to be able to grapple with the deep transformations

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[6] Cfr. J. S. Tyhurst, *The role of transition states – including disasters – in mental illness*, in «Symposium on Preventive and Social Psychiatry», 15-17 April 1957, Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, Washington D.C.1958, pp. 149–167.

[7] Cfr. A. Toffler, *Future Shock*, Random House, New York 1984, p. 169.

[8] Cfr. J. Ortega y Gasset, *Schema della crisi e altri saggi*, Bompiani, Milano, 1946.

[9] A. Toffler, *Future Shock*, cit., p. 168.

that are unfolding before our eyes. The "new normal" is by no means a sufficient explanatory framework for making sense of reality. Some of the radical and fast changes occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic altered the use and perception of space in human relations. This alone provides sufficient grounds as to why the present study dwells on this subject. Undoubtedly, this issue has many ramifications and is relevant for a wide range of social actors: urban designers, city planners, architects, doctors, politicians and public safety officers will all have to deal with this problem in the near future. Thus, not only this subject has theoretical implications but it also shows practical significance in everyday life.

Semiotic approaches to pandemic

The study of the semiotic dimension of disease and contagion in contemporary societies would constitute a compelling object of study in and of itself. Semiotic approaches to pandemic are manifold. This is a very large subject for it encompasses a host of different elements: the language of pandemic and the communication of this issue in science and mass media, the epistemic role of science and scientific evidence, the legislative aspect of the measures set up by the various governments, the way in which such set of rules are acted out by people, respected or violated, the dialectics between human face and the mask and the issue of mandatory wearing of chirurgical masks and other accessories of face protection, the dematerialization of experience and the rise of digital interactions over a computer screen (Zoom meetings and videoconferencing as teaching platforms), as well as the social and cultural representations of diseases, viruses and epidemics, the semiotics of fear and danger, to mention but a few examples. The list is by no means exhaustive.

Uncertainty, unpredictability, fear and contagion are interwoven. As the Russian cultural historian and semiotician, Juri Lotman pointed out, the mechanism of fear is an important phenomenon that can be studied from both the historical and the semiotic perspectives[10]. For Lotman, the semiotics

[10] Cfr. J. Lotman, *Semiotica dei concetti di "vergogna" e "paura"*, J. *Lotman* e B. Uspenskij, *Tipo-*

of fear generally deals with two types of threats: (i) fear elicited by a "real" thereat, such as the occurrence of a pandemic as the "black death"; (ii) or, conversely, when society is gripped with fear due to unknown reason or circumstances, in which case fear itself creates the threat[11]. The latter is an interesting circuit where fear creates threats in a vicious circles that feeds itself.

In the collective imaginary of the West, viruses are often represented as entities endowed with agency, unpredictable, invisible, and insidious threats. Viruses and diseases spread, propagate, and infect, indeed. Viruses and diseases come from afar, belong to the chaotic element of the world and are often identified with the absolute otherness, the foreigner, the stranger, the alien. Viruses and diseases embody the other *par excellence*. We are all accustomed with the irrational fear of China and Chinese people associated with the spread of coronavirus. In February 2020, Italian newspapers reported several cases of stigmatization and fear-based responses against Chinese citizens, that blasted in the country at the inception of the circulation of the virus in Rome and in other Italian cities[12].

From the vantagepoint of semiotics, pandemic can be framed from different perspectives. Undoubtedly, there is an element of communication, narration, and discourse of the virus and contagion. This has to do with the information element which is a key function of the uses of signs[13] and that plays a pivotal role also in times of crisis. Information is coupled with the issues of the handling of communication from mainstream media, the issue of disinformation, fake news, political propaganda and manipulation, a phenomenon that during the last few years, has dramatically increased. In fact, in times of crisis, one important aspect concerns the information overload. As Toffler pointed out,

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logia della cultura, Bompiani, Milano 1975, pp. 271-275.

[11] J. Lotman, *La caccia alle streghe. Semiotica della paura*, a cura di T. Migliore, *Incidenti ed esplosioni. A. J. Greimas, J. M. Lotman per una semiotica della cultura*, Aracne, Roma1998, pp. 241–264.

[12] Cfr. *Coronavirus. Quando la paura del contagio serve solo a mascherare il razzismo* (La Stampa, 02/02/2020): https://www.lastampa.it/cronaca/2020/02/02/news/coronavirus-da-casapound-ai-campi-di-calcio-il-razzismo-e-di-casa-in-italia-1.38415778.

[13] Cfr. C. W. Morris, *Sign, Language and Behavior*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs NJ 1946.

> When the individual is plunged into a fast and irregularly changing situation, or a novelty-loaded context, however, his predictive accuracy plummets. He can no longer make the reasonably correct assessments on which rational behavior is dependent. To compensate for this, to bring his accuracy up to the normal level again, he must scoop up and process far more information than before. And he must do this at extremely high rates of speed. In short, the more rapidly changing and novel the environment, the more information the individual needs to process in order to make effective, rational decisions[14].

Yet another point that is worth pondering is the raise of false discourses that proliferate in period of historical crises. There is a host of various kinds of discourse regarding the COVID-19: scientific, journalistic, satiric, conspiracy, or simply false discourses. These discourses often tend to contradict each other, yielding to a clash of narratives between mainstream media and alternative media as well as within other groups in society around very controversial aspects of the pandemic (the compulsory use of surgical masks in public places, the origin of the COVID-19 virus, the anti-vaccination movement, and so forth).

Last but not least, there is also a behavioral dimension that involves how people act out the altered life styles and the new survival strategies that emerge as a side-effect of the coercive measures adopted by the governments. Such strategies can take on an artistic and theatrical element, as for instance the spontaneous "flash mobs" that occurred everywhere in Italy as a protest to the lockdowns. Impromptu performances popped up in many Italian cities, with people singing together and playing musical instruments from the balconies and windows of their homes. We have also witnessed to irrational forms of behaviors, such as the rush to supermarkets, or various forms of economic speculation as a consequence of the massive demand for masks. Many transgressive behaviors, such as improvised raves, parties and gatherings in public and private places that violate one of the new mottos at the time of COVID-19 – "Stay at home" – also fall within the same basket.

The study of the spacing mechanisms in cultures: proxemics in the work

[14] A. Toffler, *Future Shock*, Random House, New York 1984, p. 180.

The study of the category of space within the confines of semiotics has a quite long pedigree, although one may perhaps argue that research conducted in this field was fragmentary and unsystematic. However, important and meaningful contributions were made in connection with the study of architecture, the study of material culture[15] as well as within the frames of research conducted on the semiotics of objects[16].

Didaskalou[17], Logopulus[18] and Randviir[19] have dealt with the significance of space from a sociosemiotics point of view. Moreover, it will not elude the attention of the experts in the field, that topological categories have played a prominent role in the semiotics of culture rooted in the tradition of the Tartu-Moscow school – see Juri Lotman's well-known essay *The semiosphere*[20]. Moreover, it should be remembered that spatiality and topological signification finds a particular place also in the textual and generative semiotics of Greimasian matrix[21].

When discussing space in interpersonal relations and the meaning that

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[15] Cfr. C. Brandi, *Stuttura e architettura*, Einaudi, Torino1968; U. Eco, *La struttura assente*, Bompiani, Milano 1968; G. K. Koenig, *Analisi del linguaggio architettonico*, Lef, Firenze 1964; G. K. Koenig, *Architettura e comunicazione*, Lef, Firenze 1974; K. Lynch, *The image of the city,* MIT Press, Cambridge MA 1960; J. M Rodriguez, S. Salgarelli e G. Zimbone, *Architettura come semiotica*, Tamburini, Milano1968; M. L. Scalvini, *L'architettura come semiotica connotativa*, Bompiani, Milano1975.

[16] Cfr. C. Maltese, *Semiologia del messaggio oggettuale*, Mursia, Milano 1970.

[17] Cfr. T. Didaskalou, *Space as a System of Social Signification. A Discussion of the Nature of Social Meaning of Space and Problems of its Interpretations*, MSc Thesis, University College London, London1976.

[18] Cfr. A. Lagopulous, *Semiological urbanism: An analysis of the traditional Western Sudanese Settlement*, M. Gottdiener and A. P. Lagopoulos (eds.), *The City and the Sign: An Introduction to Urban Semiotics*, Columbia University Press, New York 1986, pp. 259–287; A. Lagopulous, *From stick to region: Space as a social instrument of semiosis*, in «Semiotica» 96 (1/2), 1993, pp. 87–138.

[19] Cfr, Randviir A., *Mapping the World. Towards a Sociosemiotic Approach to Culture*, Lambert Academic Publishing, Riga 2009.

[20] Cfr. J. Lotman, *On the semiosphere*, trans. W. Clark, in «*Sign Systems Studies*» 33 (1), 2005, pp. 215–239.

[21] For a more recent introduction on the semiotics of space see, A. Giannitrapani, *Introduzione alla semiotica dello spazio*, Carocci, Roma 2013.

space assumes in various cultures, one cannot fail to mention the pioneering work of the American scholar Edward T. Hall[22], who was the first who introduced the concept of "proxemics" in the anthropological debate of the late 1950s and 1960s. Last but not least, it is worth mentioning the volume published by Sebeok, Hayes and Bateson[23] which, although somewhat dated, offers important research material to the Italian reader and extensive bibliographical resources. Likewise, the works of Watson[24], Hinde[25] as well as those of Ruesch and Kees[26] on non-verbal communication, and Birdwhistell[27] on kinetics, are all relevant to the subject discussed. In what follows, I will draw on the study of Hall in the first place, although I have benefit from all the above-mentioned studies[28].

The distance that separates human beings from each other is the subject of "proxemics", a branch of knowledge that deals with the "interrelated observations and theories on man's use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture"[29]. As we have already seen, the term "proxemics" was coined by the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall in a seminal study entitled *The Hidden Dimension* and published in 1966[30]. Drawing on the insights stemming

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[22] Cfr. E. T. Hall, A system for the notation of proxemic behavior, «*American Anthropologist*» Vol. 65 (5), 1963, pp. 1103–1026; E. T. Hall, The Silent Language, Doubleday & Company, Garden City-New York, 1959.

[23] Cfr. T. A. Sebeok, A. S. Hayes e M. C. Bateson, *Paralinguistica e cinesica*, Bompiani, Milano 1971.

[24] Cfr. O. M. Watson, *Comportamento prossemico*, Bompiani, Milano 1972.

[25] Cfr. R. D. Hinde (ed.), *La comunicazione non-verbale*, Laterza, Bari 1974.

[26] Cfr. J. Ruesch And W. Kees, *Nonverbal communication. Notes on the Visual Perception of Human Relations*, Cambridge University Press, Berkley-Los Angeles 1956.

[27] Cfr. R. L. Birdwhistell, *Kinesics and Context. Essays on Body-Motion Communication*, Allen Lane Penguin Press, London 1971.

[28] For what concerns the study of the phenomenon of contagion, see the special issue edited by the *Rivista di Estetica* of the Department of Philosophy of the University of Turin (numero speciale 15, 3/2000, anno XL, edizioni Rosenberg & Sellier). In relation to the concept of *proxemics*, see U. Eco's introduction to the Italian translation of Hall's work as well as P. Fabbri, *Considérations sur la proxémique*, in «Langages», volume 3: *Pratiques et langages gestuels*, n° 10, année 1968, pp. 65-75. Cfr. U. Eco, *Introduzione*, E. T. Hall, *La dimensione nascosta*, Bompiani, Milano 1968.

[29] E. T. Hall, *The hidden dimension*, Anchor Book, New York 1966, p. 1 (italics in original).

[30] Cfr. *Ibid.*

from Franz Boas, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf that language models thoughts and the perception of the world, Hall applies this principle to the whole spectrum of human behavior and culture. Hall's main thesis is as follows:

> People from different cultures not only speak different languages but, what is possibly more important, *inhabit different sensory worlds*. Selective screening of sensory data admits some things while filtering out others, so that *experience as it is perceived* through one set of culturally patterned sensory screens is quite different from experience perceived through another. The architectural and urban environment that people create are expressions of this filtering-screening process. In fact, from these man-altered environments, it is possible to learn how different people use their senses[31].

Hall's account on proxemics is a fruitful example of crosspollination between different disciplines. In fact, it is in ethology and the study of the relation between organisms and environment that Hall finds a fertile ground for his research. Indeed, Heini Hediger's ethological studies on animal behavior is pivotal to the framework of proxemics Hall developed. Hall extends the principles observed by ethologists of the spacing mechanisms in non-human animals to the study of the use of space in human encounters in different cultures.

According to Hediger, "each animal is surrounded by a series of bubbles or irregularly shaped balloons that serve to maintain proper spacing between individuals"[32]. This space, thus, could be imagined as a sphere or a "bubble" that incorporates an organism and separates it from the others. Hediger identifies four types of distances between non-human animals, depending on whether they are encounters between animals of the same species or of different species. Hediger singled out a "fight distance" and a "critical distance" within inter-specific encounters, and a "personal" and "social distance" within intra-specific interactions[33]. With the term "personal distance" Hediger designates the distance that separates the members of two species that are not in contact

[31] Ivi., p. 2.
[32] Ivi., p. 10.
[33] Cfr. *Ibid.*

and "this distance acts as a an invisible bubble that surrounds the organism"[34]. Hall, therefore, encapsulates and re-elaborates the insights provided by Hediger in the ethological study of space behavior in animals and extends it for understanding how the concept of space in relationships between men is rooted in biology and explain how it works.

Hall wonders how many types of distances can be identified in human encounters and how such distances can be identified and distinguished. In this regard, he proposes a real typology of distances maintained in encounters with others. In *The Silent Language*[35], Hall originally identified eight distances, that in a subsequent phase of his research, were reduced to four: "intimate", "personal", "social" and "public" distance. This four-fold distinction ranges from the closest distance – "intimate distance" – to the furthest – "public distance". We could represent the difference between these types of distance in human encounters as a series of concentric circles or spheres ranging from a very close distance, the intimate distance, to the less close distance, the public distance: "a series of expanding and contracting fields which provide information of many kinds".[36] The distance zones Hall identified not only account for the extent to which the human senses are involved, but also for the actions that can occur within each distance.

For Hall, *intimate distance* (less than 1,5 feet) is the distance of "lovemaking and wrestling"[37]. In this zone, "sight (often distorted), olfaction, heat from other's persons body, sound, smell, and feel of the breath all combine to signal unmistakable involvement with another body"[38]. *Personal distance*, a term which Hall borrowed from Hediger, is thought of as a "protective sphere or bubble that an organism maintains between itself and others"[39]. In this zone (from 1 to 4 feet) people can touch each other and the field of vision is very sharp. At the close phase of personal distance, the face of the other is very visible: "the planes and roundness of the face are accentuated; the nose

[34] *Ibid.*
[35] Cfr. E. T. Hall, *The Silent Language*, Doubleday and Co. Inc., New York 1959.
[36] Ivi, p. 115.
[37] Ivi, p. 117.
[38] Ivi, p. 116.
[39] Ivi, p. 119.

projects and the ears recede; the hair of the face, eyelashes, and pores are very visible"[40]. The next zone Hall identified is the *social distance*. The close phase of social distance marks the threshold of physical control over others in the same environment.

The emergence of neo-proxemics: face masks, lockdowns, social distancing, and sensory deprivation

As Hall pointed out in his book *The hidden dimension*, "in time of disaster, the need to avoid physical contact can be crucial"[41], and rightly so. As we have already seen, the emergency measures introduced in response to the coronavirus crisis, is a rupture in interpersonal relationships and an alteration of people's lifestyle.

Restrictions of physical contacts, avoiding crowded places, practicing "social distancing" (the 1.5 meters rule), specific face masks requirements, staying at home as much as possible, working from home when this is feasible, and following the rules of hygiene, are some of the guidelines given in the time of COVID-19 pandemic. This is only a very rough summary of the exceptional measures introduced during the COVID-19 crisis, which are much more detailed and nuanced. Indeed, each aspect regulated by these measures contains various sub-sections and additional rules, as well as exceptions to the rules. Moreover, some of the restrictions vary cross-culturally according to the measures put in place by each European governments. For instance, whilst in Italy the "social distance" or "safety distance" is of at least 1 meter[42], in Estonia is of 2 meters[43].

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[40] Ivi, p. 119.

[41] E. T. Hall, *The hidden dimension*, cit., p. 61.

[42] For the guidelines and rule of behavior adopted in Italy, see the website of the Italian Government: http://www.salute.gov.it/portale/nuovocoronavirus/dettaglioFaqNuovoCoronavirus.jsp?lingua=italiano&id=237#11.

[43] https://www.kriis.ee/en/news/strict-restrictions-are-force-all-over-estonia-march-11. From the 11/03/2021 Estonia has adopted more strict rules, as for instance the 2+2 rule: "No more than two people can move around in a public outdoor space together, keeping a distance of at least 2 me-

All these measures have an effect on isolating people for the environment. The first point I ought to make clear is that face masks have the function of sealing off the individual from its surrounding environment. Restricting the sensory world starts with the compulsory wearing of face masks, which is mandatory in all public places. If one takes into account the main function of masking, prescinding from the type of masks, one can understand the link between masking and the function of self-isolating. This point is well expressed by Boris Ogibenin:

> Among the diverse functions of masks in different cultures, one clearly manifests itself as the principal function, which is valid for any mask: masks serve the purpose of and are used for the isolation (self-isolation) of the wearer from the external social and cultural environment — for purposes which will be discussed below. The mask becomes the instrument of the opposition between the wearer and the local surroundings, simultaneously pointing to his role in relationship to that environment and to the elements of the 'environment' which the mask signals, i.e. which is introduced by the wearing of the mask[44].

This function of the mask goes hand in hand with its protective function, which is another pivotal function of masks. Self-isolation is implemented also through lockdowns and social distancing. As it apparent, "lockdown" is amongst the most severe measures anti-COVID 19 and consists of "an emergency measure or condition in which people are temporally prevented from entering or leaving a restricted area or building (such as a school) during a threat of danger"[45]. During 2020 as well as in March 2021 Italy has undergone a series of prolonged lockdowns in which people have been confined to their

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tres from others. The restriction does not extend to families moving around together or situations where it cannot be reasonably adhered to. The 2+2 rule must be followed everywhere in public spaces, on streets, playgrounds, in parks and parking lots, but also when moving around in nature, for instance when you meet other people on a bog hike. The 2+2 has already been in force in all public indoor spaces."

[44] B. Ogibenin, *Mask in the light of semiotics – A functional approach*, in «Semiotica» 13, 1975, pp. 1–9.

[45] The Webster Online Dictionary: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lockdown.

homes and the social contacts were limited to contacts with family members or very close friends.

The Italian government has adopted a system of classification that maps out the country in different "zones". The color of each zone —white, yellow, orange, dark orange or red—is an indicator of how tight or loose are the measures in place. The color of the zone is calculated following a complex set of 21 parameters. Whilst the so-called "red zone" is the area with the most draconian restrictions – non-essential stores and schools are closed, restaurants and bars cannot serve customers in their premises but only get takeaway orders, movements of people is forbidden with rare exceptions – and the "white zone" is the area without restrictions, there are a host of different gradients of measures in the middle (yellow, orange and dark orange zones).

Despite the emergency measures put in place by the Italian governments, however, the architecture and urban design of many public places has not changed. This has led to the superimposition of new signs to the existing environment, in order to control, bar, or filter the number of people present. The distinction between "sociofugal" and "sociopetal spaces", originally drew by Humphry Osmond and subsequently taken up by Hall, is useful in this discussion. As pointed out before, "sociopetal places" are designed for meeting people and are not built for avoiding meetings. A good example, is the introduction in many public places (restaurants, bars, supermarkets, public transports) of signs that regulate the distance between people.

An important corollary of the current public health crisis, is the quest for the human race to alter an aspect of social life that was taken unquestioned up to now, namely, the management of space, the organization of the material environment, and the regulation of "social distancing". The phrase "social distancing", also called "physical distancing", coupled with a plethora of new terms and idioms related to the coronavirus and the pandemic,[46] has become one of the new buzzwords as well as a new code of conduct. According to the Merriam-Webester online dictionary, "social distancing" is defined as:

[46] On this point see Leone, Massimo "The new words of Covid" (2020): https://frias.hypotheses.org/248. (Last access 01/03/2021).

> the practice of maintaining a greater than usual physical distance (such as six feet or more) from other people or of avoiding direct contact with people or objects in public places during the outbreak of a contagious disease in order to minimize exposure and reduce the transmission of infection[47].

It is worth mentioning that much of such new lexicon of COVID-19 has a topological dimension embedded in the use of language. It suffices to think of expressions such as "self-quarantine", "self-isolating", "lockdown", "red zone" to mention but a few remarkable examples that emphasize spatial implications. This point if worth pondering because it clearly points out how the issues of space and the problem of pandemic are interwoven. It also shows how language and discourse mirror social reality. In a nutshell, the idea of public, social, and private space has been substantially altered after the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. We should see how this has upended the meaning of space shortly.

One of the most debated and controversial issue stemming from the COVID-19 regulation has been the so-called "social distancing", which in the context of Italy is termed as the "safety distance" (*distanza di sicurezza*). This term refers to the space that separates one person from another and its function is to be a preventive measure to limit the spreading of coronavirus. As pointed out before, "social distancing" has become one of the keywords that has now become part of the everyday vocabulary. Experts, scientists and virologist argue about the optimal distance that is needed in order to limit the propagation of the virus. There does not seem to be a unanimous agreement about such matters. Indeed, according to some the social distance should not be less than one meter, while for others it is 1.82 centimeters or perhaps more. However, there is unanimous agreement about the rule that "social distancing" is an obligation to be always observed, especially in public places.

The restrictions introduced as a consequence of the extraordinary measures instituted by the Italian government for containing the spread of

[47] The Merriam-Webster Dictionary online: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20distancing. (Last access 01/03/2021).

the virus COVID-19 constitutes a new set of codes of behavior that overlap, overwrite and modify the already existing cultural codes, that are calcified in Italian culture. The dialectic between the old and the new codes represents relevant and interesting reason for clash of narratives as well as a source of misunderstandings. As said before, the changes were brought in so rapidly that people are still struggling to cope with such a new way of behaving, and to adhere by the word to this new way of life.

The new anti-virus rules and legislations have altered the social and cultural rituals of Italians as well as other people all over the world. Because touch is discouraged unless it occurs within members of the same family, the semiotics of touch has to be reinvented. The restrictions imposed by governments have a profound impact on how individual conduct daily life, from mere greeting gestures – which should avoid kisses, hugs, handshakes, and any other physical contact – to the ban on gathering in squares – an icon for social encounters in Italy as well as other European countries – on bars, restaurants, cinemas, museums, and other places public. Therefore, it seems clear that in a moment of epidemiological emergency in which the need to limit physical contact is essential, the theme of the use and perception of man's social and personal space re-emerges with great relevance. These changes translate into the adoption of a new lifestyle and new social practices that transform the relationship between man and the environment and interpersonal relations.

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