This is the peer reviewed post-print (accepted) version of the following article: *Feeling the future: An exploration into studying youth future,* Giuliana Mandich *, Caterina Satta, Valentina Cuzzocrea, in "Futures", Volum 155, 2024, ISSN 0016-3287 Published online 13 December 2023, which has been published in final form at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2023.103299

(https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0016328723002057)

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Feeling the future: An exploration into studying youth futures

Giuliana Mandich *, Caterina Satta, Valentina Cuzzocrea

University of Cagliari, Italy

Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to offer a contribution in the search for appropriate ways to disentangle the intangibility of the future – especially amongst young people, who have been hit particularly hard by the Covid-19 pandemic. It draws on a large research project which investigates how young people in several Italian cities look at their futures ([name of the project]). Theoretically, we refer to one of the possible 'modes of engagement' with the future (author 1, anonymised, following Thèvenot, 2007) that we address via the idea of *feeling the future,* thereby bringing elements of affectivity into the discussion. We do so by analysing narratives generated through visual elicitation interviews conducted with young, mobile Italian people. We pay particular attention to reflexivity enacted by young people in constructing their narratives of their futures. To draw out our findings in some depth, we focus on two interviewees whose insights on the future we characterise as 'a felt experience in the present' and 'a shared imaginary'. We conclude by envisaging a closer dialogue between youth studies and sociology of the future.

1. Introduction

In sociological theory and research, interest in futurity has continuously grown in the last few years. Recently, Beckert and Suckert (2021) analysed 571 sociological research articles published between 1950 and 2019 that considered empirical work about perceptions of the future, using a qualitatively driven, mixed methods approach. Their study demonstrated a significant increase in the number of

articles published each year, particularly since 2000, which is an impressive result and a fact worthy of interpretation. Indeed, recent developments in sociology, such as the rise of cultural and affective turns, have revitalised futurity as a fundamental dimension for understanding social agency and everyday practices. This is related to a strong trend toward 'mainstreaming the future', as John Urry (2016) has termed it, thereby making it a central topic in sociological theory.

Although sociology has played an important role in future studies – this latter has from the beginning been an interdisciplinary perspective (Adam, 2011, Davies and Fuller, 2011), the integration of the future into the sociological field has only recently developed. In this article we mainly refer to this recent sociological development, assuming that the field of future studies can be further enriched by a closer connection with sociological perspectives As one of the authors of this paper recently suggested:

> …the introduction of the future in sociological theory and research is not simply the opening of a new "field of inquiry" but rather is profoundly related to some of the problems that the discipline has encountered in its way and meets some of the answers that have recently been at the core of its development ([author 1, anonymised]).

Among these, the issue of understanding agency (as in Emirbayer and Mische 1998) is pivotal, as is the general need to better understand the complexity of 'time work', following Flaherty (2003), and the strategies put into action by individuals to control temporality processes. Certainly, the sense of having to put the future 'on hold' that we experienced during the pandemic further urges us towards an understanding of all the multiple dimensions of the future.

The increased attention on futurity, while producing a good amount of empirical research and theoretical reflections, has also put at stake how much work still needs to be done to properly introduce futurity to existing sociological debates. In this direction, recent literature on futurity highlights how difficult is to tackle the future both theoretically and empirically (Beckert and Suckert, 2019). Futures are wicked, to use Tutton's definition, and 'new and more nuanced conceptualizations of the future are required' (Tutton, 2017, 478). We suggest that it may be practical to condense these broad challenges into two overarching themes.

The first has to do with the fact that the future is slippery, ill defined, constantly moving and, hence, intangible (Adam 2010, Coleman, 2017a). The naïve notion that 'the future does not exist' – which questions the reality status of the future – that accompanied the first phases of the development of future studies has been overcome in sociology. Now, there is an established awareness that researching futurity requires a thoughtful and methodological approach. As Adam and Groves

underline, 'engagement with the future is an encounter with a non-tangible and invisible world that nevertheless has real and material consequences' (Adam and Groves, 2007, XV). *Making the invisible visible* is thus one important task in a sociology of futurity.

The second difficulty relates to the multifariousness of the future. Here the challenge is to take into account both the intertwining of the temporal dimensions of past and present involved in 'making futurity', and the complexity of social practices through which the future is produced (author 1, anonymised, author 1 et al, anonymised). In this direction, the use of terms such as 'futurity' or 'futures' is more appropriate than the single 'future' in order both to acknowledge the complex intertwining of dimensions and processes of *making futures* and to overcome any kind of objectification of 'the not yet'. The dynamic relationship between theory (i.e., methods of conceptualising the future) and methodology (i.e., research strategies that are better suited to capturing futurity) plays a crucial role in shaping the current debate.

The aim of this paper is thus to offer a contribution by finding appropriate ways to tackle the intangibility of the future, with reference to one of the possible 'modes of engagement' (author 1 anonymised) with the future that we can address via the idea of *feeling the future*. We do so through empirical analysis of narrative interviews that entailed visual elicitation. These were conducted with young Italian people who were interviewed on their experience of mobility, which happened through embarking via the European Commission funded programme called European Solidarity Corps (henceforth, EVS).

In the first part of the paper, we develop the theoretical frame we use in dealing with futurity and explore the conceptual ground of an approach that is sensitive to 'feeling' the future. We then continue with a review of the methodologies which are used today and considered apt for empirically researching futurity. Our empirical discussion is based on the analysis of the narratives and pictures that informants offered for the discussion based on visual elicitation interviews. We pay particular attention to reflexivity in the process of investigating these youth futures. To discuss the findings in some depth, we focus on two cases out of a sample of 40 interviews, that best exemplify the ideas of the future 'as a felt - in the present' and ' as a shared imaginary'. The objective of the paper is also intended to strengthen the dialogue between sociology and future studies.

2. The theoretical frame: feeling the future in the present

Various studies on the future generate distinct narratives about what the future may entail, resulting in a diversity of possible outcomes and interpretations. As an example, Adam and Groves (2007,

pagg. 2-13) show how the 'realm beyond the present' can be analysed according to the way it is 'told' (through different forms of anticipations such as prophecies predictions or forecasting), 'tamed' (through all the practices that make daily life less precarious such as habits and rules), 'traded' (commodified in order to create value in the market), 'transformed and traversed' (i.e. planned and colonized by human agency). Consequently, futurity is *made* through social practices and in a variety of ways.

One possible way to delve into the multifariousness of the future is to consider empirically the different forms of 'engagements with the future' (author 1 anonymised), a category that brings Thévenot's (2007) idea of 'regimes of engagement' as different forms of agency into the field of futurity. Thévenot conceives of action as plural, seeking to handle the variety of cognitive and evaluative formats by relating them to a set of regimes of engagement with the world that he identifies in terms of dependency between the human being and his or her environment (Thévenot, 2006). Following Thévenot, (Author 1) shows how the nature of anticipatory practices can also vary, depending on the context in which we engage with futurity. In the regime of plans, the future is constructed and measured within the logic of probability. In the regime of justification, the future is seen as a realm of possibility. In the regime of familiarity, practical anticipation guides our expectations of the future. Finally, in the regime of exploration, anticipation takes the form of discovery. This perspective helps us avoid oversimplifying the future as a static entity, just waiting to be discovered, and allows us to recognise the diversity of ways in which we anticipate the future without immediately labelling them as realistic or unrealistic. In this paper, we are particularly focused on the mode of engagement with the future as seen in the regime of familiarity. In fact, today various authors converge in depicting the future, not only as planned, foreseen, expected, or reflexively imagined, but also as *felt*. This idea can be developed following and intertwining two different paths in sociological analysis. The first of which is the revitalisation of the idea of protention, as in (author 1 anonymised) and Tavory and Eliasoph (Tavory and Eliasoph, 2013). Following Husserl's (1960, 1991) terminology, protention is defined as the socially located 'feel' for the immediate future. Husserl's conceptualisation of protention emphasised the flow of lived experience as tension towards the following instant.

This mode of engagement with the future has important roots also in Bourdieu's practice theory. The 'feel for the immediate future' has been powerfully analysed by Bourdieu in terms of practical anticipation (Bourdieu 2000). The 'feel for the game', which is essential for the definition of habitus, resides in the practical (e.g. unarticulated) sense of the forthcoming. Practical anticipation of the forthcoming inscribed in the immediate present, protention and pre-occupation are the most common

form of the experience of time – a paradoxical experience, like that of the self-evidence of the familiar world. In fact, time cannot be 'felt', and it passes, in a sense, unnoticed (Bourdieu, 2000, 208).

Therefore, in practical anticipation, the future (and past) is lived as a presence: 'habitus is that presence of the past in the present which makes possible the presence in the present of the forth coming' (Bourdieu, 2000, 210). Atkinson has emphasised how, according to Bourdieu, 'We may, through our doings in the world, be projected into the future, but we do not consciously project the future prior to our doings' (Atkinson, 2018, 4). This sentence highlights the need to tie together the two dimensions. Both in a phenomenological and Bourdeusian perspective, protention is a future 'felt' in the present, being the focus both on the unreflexive and affective nature of this specific mode of anticipating the future. As Bourdieu emphasises, the future is *lived* 'without knowing it'.

This idea that the future is felt and lived has been powerfully recaptured in reflections on futurity, developed more recently within the perspective of an affective sociology. One way to 'adapt our modes of inquiry' to access and know the intangibility of the future is precisely to consider the current and ongoing elaboration of interdisciplinary theories and methodologies from which to engage (with) affect. Affect is variously described as elusive, excessive, non- rational and/or difficult to articulate through language (Blackman and Venn, 2010). It also refers to the relational forces through which entities – human, non-human, environmental – are constituted, moved and transformed (Coleman, 2016, Anderson, 2014). In attempting to study the future, it is therefore helpful to make connections with work on affect that seek to study the intangible. Rebecca Coleman's perspective is particularly important in the direction of theorising the complex affective temporality of futures. As she says:

> ...an affective temporality complicates or confuses linear temporality, so that the future is not (only or so much) a distinct and/or far off temporality, separate to the present (and past), but is (also) experienced and felt "in" and as the present (Coleman, 2017a, 3).

This idea has greatly influenced the way we have planned, conducted and analysed the empirical material. Specifically, we have intentionally sought to investigate the multiple time dimensions of the future and, in particular, to capture how its experience unfolds *in the present*.

3. Investigating and feeling the 'not yet' through images. Methodological considerations

Existing research has demonstrated how producing knowledge about imagined futures remains a challenge, often leading to abstract or generic accounts of futures (Carabelli and Lyon, 2016, (Andersen et al., 2020, Sools, 2020). Therefore, we need a sensory sociology of the future which pays particular attention to 'the relevance of sensory and inventive methodologies' (Coleman 2017a, 526),

that is, a sociology 'interested not only in *documenting* orientations or imaginations of the future, but also in *probing*, *provoking*, *stimulating* them' (Coleman, 530). In this sense it should be underpinned by speculative (Coleman 2017b) or inventive methodologies (Lury and Wakeford, 2012), which are able to capture the openness of the social world, to 'expand the actual, inventively' (2012, 11). As these latter state 'inventiveness does not […] equate to new' (2012, 6) as it's 'not intrinsic to methods' but 'rather emerges in relation to the purposes to which they are put' (2012, 2).

Indeed, we sympathise with Souls' (2020) statement that the 21st century may well be the age of prospective methodologies, and act in this frame. A comprehensive study of future imagination, broadly conceived, would need multiple methods and modalities by which imagined futures are externalised. To produce narratives of futurity, moreover, *triggers* for future imagination may be useful. Different methods have so far been used to elicit narrative accounts of imagined futures for research purposes. They show how effective it is to use diversified ways of encouraging the emergence of imaginaries of the future. Within inventive methodologies (Lury and Wakeford, 2012), we reviewed different types of *creative writing exercises* based on the idea of collecting (through different instructions) short texts about the future. As an example, some research projects on youth have used essays collected from young people, in which they have been asked to write about an imagined future (Autio et al., 2009; Elliott 2010, Lyon and Carabelli, 2016, Heggli et al., 2013, [author 1 and 3]). Similarly, Sools (2020) bases empirical analysis on letters from the future. In this technique, the instruction is to imagine travelling to the future in a time machine, and from there writing a letter to an audience in the present about the depicted future and the path that led to this future. British geographer Sarah Hall, in her studies on austerity and the future, has experimented with biographical life mapping (2022) and postcards written to 'a future self' (2023). Other papers (Ravn, 2022) contribute to the 'future' methods literature by exploring the methodological potentials of using materiality as an elicitation with young women's imagined futures. *Objects* are here conceived as 'building blocks' for an imagined future. It may be argued that, rather than viewing objects (or the materiality that they entail) as 'containers for stories' (cf. Digby, 2006, Holmes, 2020), the objects here work as anchors for future narratives.

Art-based methodologies have also been taken up to investigate temporality (Lyon and Carabelli, 2015). Broadly considered*, v*isual methodologies are, as Coleman suggested, an approach that is sensitive with detecting affective and intangible dimensions of futurity. For instance, in their work with teenage girls in an ex-mining town in south Wales, Ivinson and Renold (2013) employed mixed methodologies, such as photo-elicitation interviews, semi-structured and ethnographic interviews based on photographs taken by the participants, walking tours and film-making activities . The authors emphasise how 'to explore the affect associated with everyday practices through the multiple

activities, rituals and routines that comprised the micro-intensities of everyday life' offered their participants 'ways to experience, think and imagine futures differently from those afforded by the community's mining past' (2013, 374). In our opinion, these kinds of explorations help in overcoming conventional visions of the future and open space for investigating the unexpected. Consistently with 'the affective turn' (Ahmed, 2004, Gregg and Seigworth, 2010, Brennan, 2004, Clough 2007, Thrift, 2008) and the methods challenges associated to it (Kahl, 2019), following Knudsen and Stage (2015, 1), our goal was 'experimenting with how [methodological] categories can be used and reinterpreted in inventive ways in order to engage with the immaterial and affective processes of social life'. We did so with the help of the visual.

Given the increasing pervasiveness of the visual dimension in all facets of our lives, incorporating images into sociological work and *reframing* our heuristic tools '*through* visuals and visualizations of a varied nature' (Pauwels 2015a, 3) has become part of the contemporary process of doing research (Pink 2007). Visual elicitation interviews – based on images produced or selected by the respondents – have already been employed in research for decades and proven not only to elicit more detail, but even to evoke a different kind of information (Harper 2002) and trigger deeper perceptions, meanings, and feelings (Pauwels 2015). Pauwels asserts that with the visual, 'the focus of attention shifts from external manifestations to an "experience", to an "interior" perspective, as it were' (Pauwels 2015b, 119). On the one hand, such an approach has been emphasised for its collaborative and participatory value. For instance, Collier speaks of 'the projective interpretation [made] by the native' (1967, 49). On the other hand, the emotional value and significance in the interview process has clearly been made evident. To date, many scholars have commented on the ways in which this method encourages emotional responses. This started with Roland Barthes (1980) and Susan Sontag (1977, 2003), who first recognised the power of photography to generate intense feeling, and not only a semiotic message. Both in their material production and in viewing them, images are embedded with affective states (Breckner and Mayer 2022). More precisely, a visual elicitation interview can be a fruitful tool in the direction of grasping the intangibility and the affective atmosphere of the future (Anderson, 2009). Clearly, the researcher plays here an important role as facilitator of this 'kind of interaction between the researcher and the researched' (Pauwels, 2015b, 111), which includes his/her ability to trigger and sustain the interviewee's capacity to imagine and recount his/her possible futures.

We thus responded to a widespread call to be creative and inventive framing our methodology withing an interview guide based on both words and images, being overall *sensitive* to the immateriality and the atmospheres in which future can unfold. Recognising that 'narrative texts can be any type of text where a person relates a story in a particular medium, such as in words, imagery, sound, movement,

or any combination of these' (Keats, 2009, 181), the idea was that offering participants multiple means of expressing stories around their observations, ideas, emotions, and activities could enhance our capacity to understand the complex constructions of how they live through their own experiences.

3.1 [name of the project]Research

The reflections put forward in this article are based on the [name and funding body]. The aim of the project was to identify and analyse young people's views of the future in Italy with the purpose of understanding the variety of configurations they take, and the ways they inform young people's current lives, strategies and multiple transitions. Assuming that mobility can be considered an opportunity for the young people involved to widen their horizons and strengthen orientations towards the future – as well as a possible turning points in the imagination of the future (on Italy, authors 1 and 3, Gruning and Camozzi 2023, for broader agenda Robertson et al 2018) – we considered youth mobility to be one of the focuses of the research project alongside non conventional forms of political action, youth entrepreneurship and so-called "second-generation of immigrants"[1]

To this end, we conducted interviews to investigate how mobility influences the ability of young people to cope with the future. Our approach involved using visual elements to prompt the development of narratives about the future. Interviewees were asked to recount, from images brought by them, their relationship with mobility and future separately. However there were frequent overlaps between these two themes in terms of how mobility had shaped their lives in the past and how they imagined the future as a result of the mobility experience. The interview started by covering their mobility experience and memories (i.e. the desire to move, the organisation of the journey, the atmosphere of the new place, settling in, etc.) and looking, in the end, for different ways of engaging with the future (author 1). This helped interviewees to get into more personal memories imbued in emotions and feelings.[2] A sensitive interview guide was pivotal in paving the way for a dynamic, relational, and 'situated affective encounter' (Ayata et al., 2019) with the interviewee through a gradual approach. From the beginning, participants had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with

[1] See project website [anonymised]
[2] Here it is an excerpt of the interview guide:

I.: Let's go back with the memory to that moment, the one you decided to leave.

- Do you remember how you *felt*?
- Was there an *image* that guided you during the decision-making process?
- Do you have *sound memories*? A song that you listened to or sounds that you link to that period…
- And *by instinct*? What effect did it have on you?

a *time flow,* rather than with a rigid distinction between past, present and future into which we mechanically progress, following a chronological order. They started by recovering details of their life abroad during the mobility programme, which sometimes even led to discussions of their childhood, school experiences or other events occurred long before their mobility project. These narratives, which may appear to be long digressions, proved to be methodologically useful as they played as preparatory training towards the projective part of the interview on the future.

The combination of youth and future is often as inflated as it is misunderstood. From a very early age, young people are constantly being asked what they want do or be when they grow up, in a future-oriented horizon that risks leaving little room for other ways of engagement with temporality (with the present, first and foremost, but also with their own image of future) (Thorne, 2004, Uprichard, 2008). Yet, the fantasy answers allowed as a child or a teen are no longer socially accepted or understood as they become young adults. The borders of the imaginary world in which they could live, or the imaginary person that they could be, start to shrink (Philo, 2003). They are expected to be more factually oriented and to plan their life according to an implicit linear and deterministic notion of the future. Aware of this bias, our guide was purposively formulated to be as open as possible, leaving interviewees the possibility choosing their images freely and to make their own links between images and their ideas of the future, but also to ease the burden of facing a future loaded with societal expectations of success, and possibly framed by fear or anxiety. Additionally, we asked them to comment on the pictures fairly late in each interview encounter. This was because our interest is located beyond a semiotic study of the photographs or their context and meaning. We aimed to encourage them to think quite broadly, rather than to narrow down too quickly by commenting on the pictures. Images were thought of as means by which to speculate on an imagined future, rather than being objects of research in themselves – what would be called research *on* images [3].

The interviewer also explored the processes by which interviewees selected the images. Asking them to comment upon this has proven to be very productive because it allowed them to a) make explicit what was implicit; b) make further sense of their set of images; and c) facilitate spontaneous narratives beyond the ones displayed during the image-show (which was necessarily prepared in advance). To avoid suggesting interpretations, any direct mention of their future was left until the end of the

[3] The text explaining the assignment read as follow:

> For the interview, please send visual images (like photos shot by you or others, images searched on the web, paintings or other visual material) that freely come to mind when you think of the future.

interview, where the researcher teased the interviewees by directly asking them about a desire for the future and, at the very end, provocatively, of their own 'impossible dream'. This stimulated interesting responses on their attitudes toward the future, which ranged from answers, such as, 'does it exist?', to others which expressed wishful thinking carrying with them fine-grain and extremely realistic hopes.

4. Findings: Snapshots of futures

Going into some detail about our research, 40 participants between the ages of 25 and 35 were recruited, all of whom resided in four regions of northern and southern Italy (Lombardy, Campania, Calabria and Sardinia). They were all native to Italy, except for one from Russia, with various socio-cultural backgrounds. Their educational qualifications varied from school dropouts to university graduates (and the majority had not yet reached housing and economic autonomy. Only a few of them were in stable jobs (3 out of 40), while some were back in education or planning to resume studies, and others had begun some form of entrepreneurialism in the field of European Youth Training and management of EU Mobility Projects. At the time of the interview, 13 were living abroad (5 of whom permanently lived in Poland, Lithuania, Spain, Chile or Portugal, respectively), 5 were still within an international mobility project and, except for one, were not planning to return in Italy, and the other 3 had settled abroad after an experience of mobility but were still open to the idea of future mobility. The rest had returned to Italy, even if many of them were in a precarious job, but did not completely exclude the possibility of mobility, which sounds like a dream of leaving again in the future.

Interviews lasted from two to three hours and, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all but the first three were conducted online using digital platforms. The discussions were audio recorded with consent and the research was conducted in line with the committee's recommendations for protecting participants' confidentiality and anonymity in the collection and analysis of data. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article and all of the photographs are published with the written, informed consent of the participants. Following data collection, interviews were transcribed verbatim and data analysis was conducted.

To better understand the visual material we collected, it is important to acknowledge how everyday action, communication, and orientation have a visual dimension that is becoming increasingly relevant (Debord, 1999, Mirzoeff 1999, 2015). Taking quick photographs of oneself, of others, or of a place or situation, and sharing them with a more or less wide audience has become a routine part of daily activities and experiences, and a normal way of keeping in touch with friends, family and/or other groups (Lupton, 2015, Chambers, 2013, Rose, 2010). Likewise, our interviewees showed

themselves to be very familiar with this lexicon and accustomed to using and sharing images to communicate, albeit intrigued or disoriented by the different settings in which the image flows were displayed. Here, we give a snapshot of what we have collected.

Few produced their own images in response to our assignment, but the majority mainly *selected* images from their own personal archive or from internet. Some merely googled the word "future" and selected existing images. However, even the most standardised images brought to the interview still operated as an entry point into their narratives of the future. The set of images collected encompasses:

- Photos taken by interviewees and kept private.
- Photos taken by interviewees and previously shared (on Instagram, etc.)
- Existing photos and images (from the internet, cinema, popular media),
- Books, art, painting, social media, etc.
- Photos of art installations (in one case, own installations)
- Drawings
- Videos

Images ranged from mimetic to expressive, from highly descriptive and detailed photos, to images that 'convey certain ideas that transcend the immediately manifest content' and reveal – in the interview setting – the participant's particular perspective (Pauwels, 2015a, 141). They spanned from a metaphorical or poetic tone, to a very factual, informational one, also reflecting the variety of profiles of the youth who participated in the research.

We particularly focused on the interplay between the reasons for their choice of images, how they explain the connection that these images have to the future, and the images themselves. The conversation with our interviewees was based mainly on visual elicitation and allowed us to identify different ways of 'making the future visible' as a 'felt' future in the sense we discussed above. Given these assumptions, we discuss the future here 'as a felt experience in the present' (4.1) and the future as 'a shared imaginary' (4.2). In both cases, the narrative of the future does not have an anticipatory role (it does not directly say how the future will be or how our mobile young people wish it will be). Meanwhile, looking at the future ahead, it takes meaning as a need to feel at ease with the things to come.

4.1 The future as a 'felt' experience

As Coleman (2017a) suggests, the future is deeply intertwined with the present. Specifically, in our interviews, the way people see the future is strongly embedded in the present of the mobility experience, which is also the object of the encounter. Experiences of mobility have been investigated in their potential to be turning points in the transitions to adulthood (authors 1 and 3, anonymised, Robertson et al., 2018). The future is not outside reach as it is deeply felt in the present through the personal memories expressed in the photos provided. These photos act as a 'springboard into the future'. A place, a moment, an event, an encounter associated with positive feelings, is what comes into their mind when thinking of the future. We can say that young people *sense* the future in their present experience. Young people do not always know what their possible or preferred future might be. However, crucially, they know how they would like to experience it and this is an important finding from our research.

In this sense, the way people see the future is very personal. It also means, in our reading, that these images do not speak for themselves, nor do they have the power to immediately evoke the future. Using the vocabulary of social interactionism, they are highly 'indexical' or, in Thévenot's terms, they are comprehensible only within a regime of familiarity. Without the justificatory narrative developed in the interview, it would be quite often impossible to conceive of them as images representing the future. Moreover, this future is personally experienced, but highly social at the same time. Sociality, relations, a sense of 'togetherness' are quite an important part of the way the future is seen, as the selected images show. In order to better exemplify what has been expressed above, we have chosen to focus our discussion for this article on two cases that can be defined as eloquent (Cardano, 2020).

The case we start with is Timoteo's, which offers a clear insight of the future as a felt experience. Timoteo was raised in a medium size city in northern Italy. He is 30 years old – though he 'still finds it strange to say it out loud' and lives now with his girlfriend, at her place. He studied up to high school and then, 'without giving it too much thought, [] followed the crowd and went to university like everyone else was doing'. He didn't enjoy it and decided to quit in his third year. After leaving, he had no idea what to do next, but joined an association called […] and started doing activities with them. He then did a year in the civil service within a youth programme in his municipality of residence, and from there he had the idea of joining first Erasmus Plus, followed by another experience of mobility through the European Voluntary Service (EVS). He then settled back in his hometown, working in a furniture factory, and is in the process of buying a house. During a long interview, Timoteo describes his experiences of mobility and how they relate, in various ways, to his

negative experiences of formal education and what he perceives as 'the value of being together'. He also acknowledges the important role of mobility in helping him to see himself in the future. As in many other cases, mobility has an important exploratory role, in both spatial and temporal terms:

> *Oh gosh, before my mobility experience, I didn't really see myself in the future, I don't know... I tried to understand, but I was just very, very confused. I didn't know what to do, I tried to throw myself into whatever came my way, saying yes to everything to try and figure out what I wanted to do, but other than that, I didn't really think about the future... I was afraid of it.*

In a way, his future already looks very much settled, at least according to the traditional markers of the transitions to adulthood. He has a job, a house, and a stable relationship. However, the photo he brings to the interview, and his comments on it, tell a different story. The photo below is the one Timoteo brought to the interview, and it shows a group of cheerful people posing behind a beer distribution counter during an ARCI event.

*****Picture n.1 about here ****

This is how he introduces it:

> *In a first moment I did not want to bring a group photo… too trivial and then I thought COME ON! It is very expressive... Because… Thinking of the future… I have not… So… I try to keep apart work and passions or at least what I like to do, because I am not sure I would do it as a job. I make a living with my office job and after that I make all the activities, I like… in this picture what we do is that we are a group of friends, with common interests, and desiring to do something……what I would like to do in in future……*

In the first sentence, Timoteo expresses his approach to the future as something that is difficult to discuss. Thus, to be able to visualise it he picks something that apparently has nothing to do with it; he then states he had chosen an image, above all, "because it is very expressive". By this, he seems to refer to the potential of the picture to express the joy and energy coming from being together — more generally, to describe the affective atmosphere of a moment. It is, in this sense, an unexpected and original contribution that he brings to the discussion. We could have expected a more descriptive, normative answer, something imbued with societal expectations. The fact that he has in part already achieved them may mean that he possibly does not disregard them; but in this moment he is adding a

layer of meaning that otherwise we could not have grasped about what he considers important for his future, something that denotes his engagement with it in a particular manner.

The second photo that he selected for the discussion is again from the same club event. This time it depicts a moment of relaxation after the event.

*****Picture n. 2 about here****

The photo expresses a different feeling from the previous one. In contrast to the joy, it shows the relaxed tiredness. However, it nonetheless conveys of the same feeling of being together. As he says:

> *The second photo... This was taken immediately after we organised the first exchange with our club, and this was the main staff, then there were many other people who volunteered. So, in my future, I see myself working hard, even if I'm* ***exhausted****, to s****till feel very satisfied*** *[inaudible], but it's worth it. For me, this is it, my circle is this, a* ***series of endless struggles to be able to do anything****...*

To speak about the future, Timoteo here provides evidence of a sense of accomplishment of something achieved within a small group of like-minded people. The reason we think this is central in his construction of the future is the meaning that he attributes to a feeling, and the possibility that he constructs to encapsulate this into something oriented towards the future. The tiredness becomes a feeling of accomplishment, and this morphs into something that in itself orientates his future action. Proceeding with the interview, and talking about a different event, the annual festival of a left-wing party, he indirectly stresses the same concept:

> *What people at the festival do is to bring in good music, our energy, good mood, build a place where people can come, be accepted, feel safe, have fun, discuss… this is what I like.*

It is peculiar that the elements brought into the discussion are characteristics of youth cultures – the feeling of being together that animates youth congregations of different types and that are animated by a particular effervescence (author 3 et al, anonymised). However, here they are brought to life in a thematic discussion that could have perhaps more naturally explored issues in a more strongly normative vein: we are used to thinking that the future is about achieving results, obtaining something (a family, a job, etc). The fact that emotions are so central in his accounts may, in part, relate to the 'fabric' of the mobility experiences that characterised his path and the specific 'ambience' that emerges in 'international bubbles' (author 3 et al, anonymised). Moreover, there is the push that these

experiences in other mobility studies based on traditional interviews have been proven to entail towards some kind of maturation process (author 3, anonymised). Therefore, in a frame of this kind, the interplay of oral conversation and images further elicits and enriches a view on the future which adheres to the interviewee's peculiar expectations and frame of meaning which, notably, is entrenched in a specific atmosphere. Finally, this adds something to the bigger picture of his future that otherwise could have easily remained implicit.

4.2. *The future as a shared imaginary*

We continue our discussion drawing from reflections from a different, but related, set of pictures that also conveys a sense of affectivity of the future via, in particular, the sharing of a common imaginary.[4] First thing to say is that the imaginary we refer to relates to a common cultural repertoire that is easily drawn from the web. Many images show wide views of nature with a dominance of the sky and/or the sea, together with the constant presence of natural elements (rainbow, clouds, waves). Such imagery expresses in an affective and sensorial manner the uncertain and unstable nature of the future as a temporal dimension. Additionally, these images often have at their centre the individual alone 'facing' the future or 'looking' at the future.

To go in depth into this way of 'feeling' the future, we discuss the narrative that emerged from the interview with Luisa. She is 35 at the time of the interview and comes from what she defines as a very untraditional southern family. She calls herself a European and international citizen and works as a freelancer in the field of informal education. Doing this largely relies on different possibilities and programmes for mobility. Due to intensive mobility experiences, she is even able to construct a 'mobility career' (author 3, anonymised) and establish her own association supporting mobility. However, she stresses that she is not merely a person who travels for work purposes. In her view, and in contrast to the case discussed above, working is not seen as merely a task. Rather, it is conceived of as something that should entail – in both the meanings of creating and maintaining – a sense of connection and community among like-minded people. When she talks about her honeymoon in [Latin America], for instance, she describes it also as a chance to connect with people, see new things, and become inspired to make a difference in various domains – her work included.

She brings a large number of images to the interview that represent her view of mobility. Some that we think are worth mentioning are: a pile of suitcases, a view of Moscow from an airplane, personal

[4] This is an expression we borrow from Appadurai, for whom 'The image, the imagined, the imaginary [...] are all terms that direct us towards something critical and new in global cultural processes: imagination as a social practice. [...] Imagination is become an organized field of social practices, a form of work, and a form of negotiation between the agency of individuals and globally defined fields of possibility' (1996, p. 31).

photos of significant moments during mobility experiences, a drawing representing a woman-shaped tree, images of animals taken from Instagram, a jar full of light, an art installation in Poland, a clock that always points at *now*, a picture of the elderly during the Covid-19 pandemic. We do not have space here to enter into the details of mobility that these images convey. However, it is important to argue that together they clearly represent, and do so in positive terms, the *present moment,* as is made particularly evident through the image of the clock that always points at now. In a late stage of the interview she says:

> *I am a person who plans, but I do not create schemes for the future, so I do not feel like saying what I think the future will be like. As I see it, it is colourful, and I do not want to see it in grey like many people on social media [laughs]. It does not inspire me particularly. I am positive and always try to give maximum peace of mind.*

Despite being so articulate about the future, the interview transcript reminds us that Luisa realises in the course of the interview that none of the picture she has brought to contribute to the discussion are *on* the future. When prompted about that, she stresses that she has brought images on mobility instead. She further adds:

> [Photos about mobility] *cannot count for the future… as a person I do not think that one can count a photo of today for tomorrow. I do have an idea. I can show you what the future is very easily… I will show you now. For me, the future could be* ***only one*** *and I am sending it to you on WhatsApp…*

Immediately after stating this, she takes her phone and shows the interviewer the following picture:

Pic. No 3 about here

We argue that the spontaneous remark she makes above is very rich in meaning. In the first place, she identifies the future with one thing only; in the second, she readily 'extracts' that from her phone; in the third, she is equally ready to share it (easily, via WhatsApp). In this sense, Luisa's future enters in the complex field of social production of imaginaries without being banalised, and retaining instead very rich affective meanings. In fact, the photo itself shows a landscape at sunset, where you can see the wonderful colours of the sun going down together with the grey clouds floating around. It is a very common view, strongly affective, and one that looks as full of possibilities. It immediately communicates a certain 'atmosphere'. And, in fact, this is how she interestingly elaborates on that,

reiterating an equation of work and life (in the sense that what she searches for in life, she also searches for in work):

> *The future, for me, in my work and to represent mobility could be this, a beautiful sunset that then engenders many other things. I do not want to imagine… pick up pictures of the present as the future. When I will have them, tangible, and then will become the past, I will be able to tell them. …none of these pictures belongs to the future, of course, I can see the continuation of some pictures (she lists a few) but I cannot find myself… I do make plans but I do not 'make outlines' of the future.*

This last excerpt "I do make plans, but I do not 'make outlines' of the future" is also very relevant in grasping her notions of the future. Planning does not go very far into the future; it is a future in the making. However, it is not how the future can be conceived by Luisa (and maybe by many of her generation). The uncertain future so frequently analysed in the youth literature (Leccardi 2005) is more about intangibility, a positive affective atmosphere that brings with it an ability to put things into action.

Additionally, this excerpt shows an interconnection of heterogeneous elements within the same narrative. In the first instance, Luisa contextualises the future – *for me, in my work and to represent mobility*. In the second, she draws a clear divide between present and future. As she says:

> *[This landscape] it's an end that allows for a beginning, because, if you notice the sun is setting, but on the upper left is the moon. It has a bit of an aura of mystery, but for me nothing is wrong, and nothing is negative, it's just different. So, I expect a different life in the post-Covid world, a different mobility, a mobility that can help young people in a way that is more like I can say, more sustainable, more consistent, more suitable for the post. And this photo, just yesterday I took it, last night, it could fit, yes.*

So the future also unfolds in a way that is affective, and more precisely positively affective connoted, with plenty of hope, despite the (then) current experiences, such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

5. Concluding: the future as an affective atmosphere

In this article we have sought to disentangle visions of the future among young people who have had experiences of mobility. Although, in line with most research in the field, participants found it difficult to talk about the future in terms of anticipation, the use of visual aids as a prompt for

narratives have helped us in 'seeing' intangible aspects which emerged in relation to the affective atmospheres that they attach to the future that would have otherwise remained unseen and invisible.

Using visual prompts allowed these young people to describe future scenarios as detailed, emotional atmospheres, corresponding with ambience, or maybe even *scenes* (to use an expression which is dear to youth cultures) in which they could feel themselves comfortable and at ease in their own shared futures. This element of commonality is pivotal in understanding why the affective atmospheres are so relevant in these narratives.

The two cases that sustain our arguments are each distinctive. Timoteo talks during the interview about the issue of his work future already being made, without equating this to what he thinks about when looking at the future ahead. Futures are on different levels: this future is a *felt* one, and it is felt through the energy that is expressed in conviviality and social experiences with like-minded peers. Luisa's narrative, on the other hand, is based on a sharp separation between the present and the future. She knows very well what her future will be in terms of plans. However, in her case also, the future ahead is strongly emotional and leans on a very widespread representation of an opens space which carries further possibilities for self-development and for leaving a positive mark on the world.

Despite such differences, however, both cases demonstrate a way of looking at the future whereby the separation from the present (and past) is, notably, felt 'in' the present and from the present, as argued by Coleman (2017a). Moreover, futures emerge from the interaction of individual experience and cultural repertoires that are deeply connoted by the affective atmospheres that characterise these individuals' experience, precisely in the sense that Anderson (2009) gives to this term as a collective mood embedded in social context and situations. And, through these, it is possible to portray the future as open and positive, because it stands on the energy that comes from being together, in the background of sunsets or dawns, rainbows or clouds of difficult times.

On another level, our two case studies help us to show how a unidimensional definition conceals the multiplicity of modes of engagement with the future. In the narratives

analysed, we uncovered that the relevance for young people of futures that are not only planned or dreamt of (as in a significant debate in youth futurities, as an example see Nilsen, 1999) but also felt as an affective atmosphere 'in the present' (Coleman 2020). Moreover, it is indeed this mode of engaging with the future 'in the present' that allows our mobile young people to think ahead and look forward. In both cases, the narratives intertwine with the need to feel at ease in the future and the idea of the future and as a place where changes can take place. In this direction, we can say that, for these

young people, futurelessness is not a significant mode of feeling about the future (Tutton 2023). Maybe mobility is a significant driver (authors 1 and 3, anonymised) that makes this possible.

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