

# 'Sites of Power' and iconic buildings in the 'life-world': shaping, sharing and reinforcing collective and individual identities by relational aesthesis

## Abstract

This article connects several complexes: the concept of the 'life-world' as shaping individual and collective identities the notion of 'sites of power', with the concepts of 'aura' and of 'iconic seeing', and the relation between grounded and shared identities, as important for shared values, and for the experience of communion in a common symbolic horizon - with regard to a present social crisis of fragmentation. It explores the notion of symbolically and experientially significant 'sites of power' as elements of the 'life-world'. Its role for shaping individual and collective identities, perceptions of self, and of their relation to a shared environment, is taken as significant here. The importance of this perspective, and the mode of relating to such sites in it, is reflected with regard to crisis of a growing lack of social cohesion, due to weak 'shared horizons' of values and sense of communion and belonging, in increasingly individualised Western societies. Sociological diagnosis of the social problems arising from the problem of identity is referred to. The concepts of the 'life-world' - developed in the 20th century - as experienced symbolic space -, of 'aura', and of 'iconic' seeing, are taken into view. Recent literature on 'sites of power', and efforts to restore and re appreciate cathedrals as significant to the collective, are regarded as expressing this awareness. Its significance is presented here.

**Keywords:** 'life-world', collective identities, social cohesion, 'sites of power', 'aura', 'iconic seeing', heritage conservation, symbolism of cultural monuments

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## Introduction

In the last decades the relation movements of relating to the natural and cultural environment have gained attention: the perception of 'sites of power' in nature and in culture, with a genre of literature dedicated to them, as in Germany<sup>1</sup> or in South Africa<sup>2</sup>. It also covers historical aspects.<sup>3</sup> The concept designates a category of experience. It is connected to a relational mode of aesthesis or perception, and reflects on its impact and significance for a person and for communities. Some places are felt to have a special 'aura', which has aesthetic and energetic aspects. For buildings with cultural and religious significance, it includes the symbolism and history. The latter aspect received new attention with the arson of cathedrals in France, but also about the deconstruction of eminent churches in Germany, in the wake of secularisation. A realisation has set in that they symbolise core elements of collective identity which is rooted in history, culture, and religion, with significance for the strengthening and shaping of individual identities by their relation to this symbolic 'life-world'. In a context of societal fragmentation its relevance for the coherence of societies is apparent. This essay discusses concepts and their implications in this field.

### **The concept of 'life-world' and its relation to collective and individual identities**

Hans Georg Gadamer unfolded the concept of the 'life-world' as

<sup>1</sup>Graichen G. The cult place book - A guide to the old sacrificial sites, sanctuaries and cult sites in Germany. Augsburg: Bechtermünz Verlag; 1999.

<sup>2</sup>Post P, Nel P, Van Beek W, et al. Sacred spaces and contested identities: space and ritual dynamics in Europe and Africa. Trenton, N.J. African world press. 2014.

<sup>3</sup>Kozljanic Robert J. The spirit of a place: cultural history and phenomenology of the genius loci. Volume 2: modern times - present. Munich: Alibueva Verlag (Diss. Phil., Darmstadt); 2004.

relevant to self-understanding.<sup>4</sup> Hans H. Gander explains, that the vitalist 'philosophy of life' took the experience of the environment into focus, as relevant to the understanding of the 'self'.<sup>5</sup> 'Life' and the 'significant environment' are connected, experientially and symbolically. Edmund Husserl pointed out that the 'life-world' with its significant phenomena - which comprise both experiences and symbols - shape the individual (and the collective which shares it).<sup>6</sup> It fulfils functions of 'grounding', guiding, and unifying individuals.<sup>7</sup> In the process of living this relation is enacted and experienced. The experience of 'self' - and its meaning - is conditioned hereby, according to Martin Heidegger.<sup>8</sup> The individual and the collective are thus not detached from context and life-world, as 'de-territorialised' entities, but shaped by such participation. (Evidently, this has political implications, as to the protection, restoration and accessibility of such sites, on regional and national levels. It extends beyond the religious communions to which churches and other places of worship belong.) This requires, that instruction is necessary about the meaning of such sites - e. g. as to history, theological meaning, aesthetic symbolism - but also that they be made experientially accessible as (mystagogic) 'sites of power', of aesthetic and spiritual experience, as places to relate to one's history, and to connect with it, as sites of pilgrimage, or of deliberate experience: They are meant to raise and provide emotional experiences of 'connectedness', to be enlivened. An investigation of the 'self' thus needs to take the life-world and its relation to it into view.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Gander H, Selbstverständnis H, Lebenswelt, et al. Self-understanding and life world. basic traits of a phenomenological hermeneutics. Frankfurt a. M.: Vittorio Klosterman; 2001. pp. 415.

<sup>5</sup>Idem. 113 p.

<sup>6</sup>Idem. 122f.

<sup>7</sup>Idem. 127p.

<sup>8</sup>Idem. 145p.

<sup>9</sup>Idem. 287f.

The collective aspect, of a shared life-world, and its role for shaping perceptions, values and identities is emphasised in Hans Blumenberg, who contrasts the concept of 'life-world' - derived from Plato's reference to 'ideas' (and relatedness), as foundation for a deeper understanding of reality - to that of 'reality' as it presents itself in a merely objective and utilitarian way:

"It is under the aspect of his life-world that we must view the significance of 'intersubjectivity' for the further developments of phenomenology. Intersubjectivity founds the reality concept, as consolidated in objectivity of the consensual context of consciousness."<sup>10</sup>

This can be extended to the aspects of shared values and of identities.

The connection between the symbols of sacred sites, as of cathedrals, and their internalisation in the individual and collective psyche, is based, according to Luigi Aurigemma, on mutual co-evolution of both, by which the symbols (and values) have a basis in the psyche, as projections, and act on it in turn.<sup>11</sup>

These insights have consequences for the custodianship of such sites, for the agencies concerned, to provide, to initiate and to mediate such experiences. It also has implications for the shaping of individual and collective selves, and identities, thus shaping and reinforcing them. In a recent presentation at an international conference of a Jungian analytical society,<sup>12</sup> the sociologist Wilhelm Heitmeyer, present documentation on the increase in violence in Western societies, which is going on for years; he attributed it to a fragmented sense of individual identity, without guiding integration into significant communities, with their symbols, meanings, values, sense of belonging and of sharing. These need to be provided, experienced, and sustained, to give those who belong to them, as stable sense of self, of shared values, of recognition, and of purposes, beyond narcissist self-assertion, greed, and lack of sense of community and belonging, of detachment in interpersonal, environmental and social dimensions.<sup>13</sup> The life-world, with its significant sites, their symbols, their experiences, and the sense of belonging that they can provide, are eminently important in this regard. They provide 'Beheimatung' (literally: 'be-homing' in grounded way, that 'territorialises' the individual - as the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu noted, in a study on the symbolic habitus. In it he related the symbolism of cathedrals to the meaning of 'habitus' as significant and collectively shared forms of conduct, and values that are embodied and expressed in a way collectively readable and shared.<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu thus relates individual and collective expression of habitus, to the significant life world, with its symbolic eminent sites, and to values, shared sense of collective self, and belonging, even to specific regions and social environments. 'Sites of 'power' and meaning have a special role herein.

<sup>10</sup>Blumenberg H. Life-world and consciousness. essays for aaron gurwitsch. In: Embree LE, editor. Evanston; 1972. pp. 425-444.

<sup>11</sup>Aurigemma L. The awakening of consciousness. Paris: L'Herne (coll. Carnets); 2009. pp. 208.

<sup>12</sup>Heitmeyer W, The autumn conference of the International Society for depth psychology ev. Lindauer Herbsttagung: Zusammenhalten, Lindau, Vielstimmig und streitbar, Beherzt und besonnen. 27-31.10. 2024.

<sup>13</sup>Heitmeyer W. The brutalization of society - eine soziologische Analyse, Lindau, 28. 10. 2024. ibidem.

<sup>14</sup>Bourdieu P, Schultheiss F, Eggert S, et al. Pierre Bourdieu: Habitus and practice. writings on collective anthropology. Berlin: Suhrkamp Vlg; 2020. pp. 361-391.

### **History of the concepts of 'aura', the 'inverted perspective' and relationality as foundations for the notion of 'sites of power':**

The experience and reverence of such sites was conceptualised as 'aura' by the philosopher of culture, Walter Benjamin. He applied it fore mostly to works of art, with an emphasis on their uniqueness, and to the 'power' and authority, the awe and reverence that they convey. It can thus be well applied to 'sites of power' in nature, and to eminent religious buildings.

These experiential aspects form a basis for their authority as symbolising collective values, and of their power to shape and invigorate individual and collective identities.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Walter Benjamin, introduced the concept of 'aura' into theory of art, with an essay, in which he argued that the aura of a work of art is determined by its uniqueness, its singular location in time and space, that gave it 'authenticity'. He attributes a religious or spiritual quality to them conveyed by their 'aura'. This, he feared, got lost, by modern means of reproduction of works of art.<sup>15</sup> He added, that works of art often had their context in religious ritual, which added to their aura. Bertolt Brecht, with whom he collaborated, recognised this source, writing [in my translation]:

"He assumes, fundamentally, something that he calls 'aura', which is connected with dreams (the waking dreams). He says: When you feel a look directed at you, even in the back, you respond to it (!). The expectation, that what you look at, looks at you, create this aura: Allegedly it is in decline in recent times, together with the cultic."<sup>16</sup>

Benjamin attributes 'aura' to both objects - especially those of art, and to persons, as Brecht's report about Benjamin's explanations, indicate. According to both, 'aura' is felt, or senses, by a person as emanating from either another person, or from an eminent object, especially when it has 'cultic' status, or from some works of art, that capture it, as Benjamin indicates, referring to van Gogh's art, with its representations of halos, and of energetic qualities of objects, rendered by colour and movement. 'Aura' thus has objective and relational aspects, as it presents itself in experience.

One may compare this notion of the 'aura' of a sacred site, or work of art, unfolding in the specific relation, of veneration, to it, to the status of an 'icon' in religious art, as conceptualised in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: its process of creation, its consecration, its placement, either in a church or a private shrine, and its veneration, all contribute to its 'powers'. Possibly, Rainer Maria Rilke introduced had introduced Benjamin to the idea of the 'iconic'. Rilke was familiar with it after his intensive engagement with Russian Symbolism, and authors of 'Mir Iskusstvo'. In his time, the theory of the 'icon' was developed philosophically, fore mostly by Pavel Florensky.<sup>17</sup> From here, this idea was received in to theory of art, in Russian Symbolism, and beyond, also to Rilke, who applied it in his own poetics and poetry.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Benjamin W. The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Illuminations. London: Fontana; 1969. pp. 214-218.

<sup>16</sup>Brecht B. Work journal. Hecht W, editor. Volume 2. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp. 1973. pp. 217.

<sup>17</sup>Antonova C. Visual thought in russian religious philosophy. Pavel Florensky's Theory of the Icon. London: Routledge; 2020.

<sup>18</sup>Kleinhempel UR. Rilke's translation of "the song of igor's campaign" in the context of his spiritual and poetological development. In: ALITER - scientific and theoretical Journal. 2017;8:3-32.

Although Rilke did not know Florensky, he was familiar with the idea of the 'inverted perspective' of the icon, and what it implies for the relationship of beholding.<sup>19</sup> (This mode of perception, with its energetic connotations, also characterises the approach of 'sites of power'.).

The point of comparison for Rilke's concept of 'iconic vision' and Benjamin's idea of 'aura' is probably the experience of the 'auratic', in the sense of the transformative power of an eminent object perceived aesthetically. Rilke describes such an experience of a walk, with the aesthetic and energetic perception of a landscape as (re-)presenting a symbolic image that creates its expected reality in the beholder. Thus, his poem *Spaziergang*<sup>20</sup> (*Walk*), Muzot (1924) [with my translation]:

"Walk: My look is already at the hill, the sunny, / The pathway, that I just began, ahead, / Thus, seizes us, that, what we could not grasp, / full of epiphany, from afar – / and transforms us, even though we don't attain it, / into that, what we, barely knowing, are; / a token, blowing, answering our sign ... / But we, do only feel the headwind" [in my translation]

Rilke thus describes an aesthetic experience of an energetic quality: The 'token' of the landscape 'blows to him, transforming him. (He also mentions resistance to it.) By this mode of experience, the subject is transformed. The mountainous landscape becomes 'iconic', its experience (trans) formative. This can likewise be applied to 'sites of power' of culture and religion.

## Discussion

Whilst the concepts of 'sites of power' and of 'aura' may appear as esoteric, and that of 'iconic seeing'<sup>21</sup> as confined to Orthodox Christianity, the relevance of these concepts for a participatory and

relational mode of perceiving symbolically eminent sites (of religious and cultural history) in the 'life-world', and its role for shaping identities, is discussed with implications in the spheres of politics, of education about experiencing and understanding such sites, as factors for the shaping and reinforcement of individual and collective identities.<sup>22</sup> The understanding of these connections is thus presented as relevant to social cohesion.

## Conclusion

In a time when individual identities have become precarious, with their emphasis on individual and heterogeneous identities,<sup>23</sup> with reference to a diversity of significant sites for the individual, the importance of sharing a life-world, with its symbolic sites, and with experiential ways of relating to them, appears as eminently important for the creation and sustenance of collective identities in a shared life-world beyond its pragmatic aspects. The public attention that cathedrals in France have received in recent years, and the debate on them as icons of common heritage, collective identity and values,<sup>24</sup> have brought this feature to renewed attention. A shift is perceptible from an 'objective' attitude to a relational mode of aisthesis that explores their significance for shared identities (and values) anew.

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None.

## Conflicts of interest

The author declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

<sup>19</sup>Endreva M. The conception of art in Rilke's art-critical writings. [Diss. Univ. of Sofia, 2011]. Berlin: Peter Lang Vlg; 2014. pp. 192.

<sup>20</sup>Rilke, Rainer M. Complete works. In: Zinn E, Sieber Rilke R, editors. Frankfurt a.M.: Insel Verlag; 1962. Volume 3. pp. 161.

<sup>21</sup>Antonova C. Visual thought in Russian religious philosophy. Pavel Florensky's Theory of the Icon. London: Routledge; 2020.

<sup>22</sup>Gander H, Selbstverständnis H, Lebenswelt, et al. Self-understanding and life world. basic traits of a phenomenological hermeneutics. Frankfurt a. M.: Vittorio Klosterman; 2001. pp. 415.

<sup>23</sup>Heitmeyer, W. Die Durchrohung der Gesellschaft – eine soziologische Analyse, Lindau, 28th October. 2024.

<sup>24</sup>Badré V. Notre-Dame de Paris reveals our relationship with heritage identity. In: La Croix, 2019.