RESEARCH ARTICLE

Groundwork for a Vitalistic Semiotics

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Abstract

In the essay, I focus on two concepts that can open phenomenological horizons of semiotic and architectural meaning: the concept of "*lebensform*" (form of life), as developed by Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the concept of "*lebenswelt*" (life-world), as expounded by Edmund Husserl. I argue that wholistic concepts such as the above can transform the disciplinary matrix of semiology into uncharted possibilities: a "*vitalistic semiotics,*" where architectural space and the living body as an attuned environmental field will form the center and groundwork of sign analysis.

Keywords: *Lebensform*, *Lebenswelt*, Spatial Meaning, Way of Life, Attuned Environmental Field, Vitalistic Semiotics.

1. Introduction

Semiotics is the study of systems of signs that produce meaning. In an effort to avoid or transcend formalism, glottocentrism (Cobley, 2010: 3–8), and prevailing dualisms, I argue that semiotics needs to integrate wholistic concepts into its research agendas in order to open uncharted possibilities of interactions with other disciplinary matrices. Wholistic concepts are hybrid, ambiguous categories that cannot be reduced to analytical cognition through a segmentation into elements, parts, or constituent monads; they function as totalities, transcending prevalent dualities or usual dichotomies between subject/object, body/environment, language/reality, nature/culture. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht calls them "intermediate spheres" between the subject and the object (Gumbrecht, 1993: 746-753). Those conceptual indexes are ambiguous since they cannot be reduced to a representational, empiricist functioning of the brain in simplistic cognitivist ways; they always refer to complexes of bodily, affective, and emotional attributes of mental acts (Violi, 2008: 241-264). I argue that those noetic acts of semiosis are always already anchored in specific situations, places, and concrete contexts of everyday life, articulating meaningful, embodied, and motivated configurations (Violi, 2008: 256–260).

I claim that architecture is the core disciplinary matrix operating on the basis of the above practical, hybrid conceptual schemata, acting as a framing mechanism for experiential sensory data, focusing them, and organizing their manifold spatial attributes around symbolic centers able to generate meaning. Therefore, architecture as a research area could enrich the above semiotic quest. Indeed, I have claimed elsewhere that the spatial dimension of semiotic processes during the construction of meaning cannot be overlooked (Terzoglou, 2018: 120–132). "Space" in architecture is understood here as a vector and index of complex exchanges of information between different vital systems: a sign or trace of dynamic interactions between the body and the mind. Architectural space as a semiotic, meaningful environment articulates abstract concepts and ideas with specific situations, places, and concrete contexts of bodily performances, engagements, and affordances. My basic working hypothesis is that Juri Lotman's "semiospheres" (2005: 205-226) are spatial translations of the architectural envelopes or frontiers of José Enrique Finol's "corpospheres" (2014: 367–374), attuned with spiritual noöspheres (Vernadsky, 2012: 16–31). According to Finol (2021: 231-240), the body is a "living ensemble," always located in a place. In order

to orientate itself through modalities, gestures, and movements, it constructs the cartographic processes of semiosis and semiotization, signifying and making meaning. Extending Finol's argument, I claim that the body is the primary locus and ground for the generation of cultural meaning, articulating concepts in a practical state that aim at concrete situations and actions to be performed within a specific architectonic environment.

In order to unravel the above hypothesis towards the inauguration of a phenomenological and vitalistic semiotics, in the present paper I will focus on *two wholistic concepts* that somehow bridge the gap between the body and the brain, subject and object, mental signs and material places, implicitly forming an original semiotic locus, perspective, horizon, and ground for the spatial production of cultural meaning based on what I would like to call "concrete, attuned environmental fields." A similar notion to this concrete field is Jakob von Uexküll's idea of the *Umwelt* as a significant surround, a phenomenal, modeled self-world of the organism, or Jesper Hoffmeyer's concept of a "semiotic niche" (Emmeche, 2010: 239–240) (Sebeok, 2010: 179–181) (Kull, 2010: 348–349).

Those wholistic categories are: the concept of "*lebensform*" (form or way of life), as it was developed in the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), and the concept of "*lebenswelt*" (life-world or world-of-life), as expounded by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) in his unfinished text titled *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. The aim of the present paper is to present a comparative analysis of the two aforementioned concepts in order to open and highlight the phenomenological and vitalistic horizons of meaning-making.

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein: The concept of "form of life" (*lebensform*)

The emergence of the concept of "form of life" in the framework of the later works of Wittgenstein is an organic part of the relevant theory of the meaning of language in relation to its use. In this context, different "language games" correspond to distinct conditions of living (Pelegrinis, 2004: 728). These linguistic conventions presuppose the existence of constituted everyday practices, a nexus of inherited cultural situations: ways of living (Baldwin, 2003: 735). The *form of life* thus denotes a meaningful experience that takes place in a determined geographical and historical context; that context *already has* a form of organization (Audi, 2011: 204–205, 1361–1362).

Wittgenstein's references to the term "form of life" are scant and leave much to be desired. For example, we read in *On Certainty* (§ 358) that a form of life is a difficult subject to deal with, to think about correctly, and even to express (Wittgenstein, 1975: 46–46e). This is perhaps because, as a "way of life" ("Art des Lebens") (Wittgenstein, 1998: 92–92e), it is related to faith, to a whole set of beliefs and certitudes. Quite so, in the collection of fragments titled *Culture and Value,* Wittgenstein implies that a way of life or a form of life presupposes a specific attitude, a form of conduct (*Verhalten*) (Wittgenstein, 1998: 69–69e). If we then read *Philosophical Investigations,* we realize that this attitude is related to the learning and practical usage of a language (Kishik, 2008: 1–8). Wittgenstein writes: "*To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life*" (2009: 11–11e). Further, he again emphasizes: "*...the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life*" (2009: 15–15e).

It seems as if the "form of life" is set as an axiomatic truth, a primary concept that cannot be analyzed and is not reducible to anything else. Wittgenstein confirms our interpretation, writing: "*What has to be accepted, the given, is—one might say—forms of life*" (2009: 238–238e). According to Konstantinos Boudouris, a form of life is "*the substratum on which we build and support the rest of our conceptual and cognitive world*" (Boudouris, 1989: 15–16, 19–20). There are, as Wittgenstein reminds us, many *forms of life* (*Lebensformen*), many "tissues of faith" (2000: 212) that guide our involvement in everyday activities and intentional practices. Those references strengthen the enigmatic, puzzling, and cryptic nature of the term and its inherent vagueness (Wittgenstein, 2000: 246; Kishik, 2008: 120–123). A possible direction towards solving the problem might be provided by a fragment on the topic of religious faith written by Wittgenstein on December 21, 1947: "*It appears to me as though a religious belief could only be (something like) passionately committing oneself to a system of coordinates. Hence, although it's a belief, it is really a way of living (Art des Lebens), or a way of judging life. Passionately taking up this interpretation*" (1998: 73–73e).

I find this phrase extremely important. First, it shows that a way of life, or a form of life, has a certain *spatiality*, a spatial *texture*, namely a form of organization: it is a system of references (instituted by "shared human behavior") (Wittgenstein, 2009: 88–88e), which organizes a space, or, as Wittgenstein puts it, *a system of coordinates (Koordinatensystem).*

Second, it seems to imply that this virtually *geometrical-mathematical* organization of space conceals an interpretation, a judgment, a decision, and an evaluation: a way or a form of life involves a *moral dimension*. Stelios Virvidakis correctly notes that a form of life is connected to a "*solid ground of practice*" that determines a "*place where values emerge*" *(2000: 150–158)*. Naomi Scheman (1996: 383–410) has articulated a preliminary investigation of a certain "spatial" texture of the "form of life" in relation to ethics and politics, calling it "rough ground." Konstantinos Boudouris also suggests spatial definitions and metaphorical descriptions such as "cultural environment," "living whole," or "cultural tradition in a definite place" (1977: 224, 228, 229–230).

Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, in their seminal book titled *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, argue that the concept of "lebensform" has a Viennese origin, recalling Adolf Loos's architectural theories or Eduard Spranger's contribution to characterology. The authors claim that the *lebensform* has to do with a *contextual framework* that ascribes cultural meaning to language, design artifacts, and human experience. However, Wittgenstein's treatment of *Lebensformen* moved away from Spranger's schematic and abstract exposition of different lifestyles to a concrete, almost *anthropological,* investigation of the *actual features* of every-day practice (Janik; Toulmin, 1973: 230–232).

From this perspective, a form of life transcends its possible biological interpretation. Adopting Stanley Cavell's terminology, we could speak about an "ethnological" nuance of the concept, which lays emphasis on the differences between various cultures (Cavell, 1996: 288–289). Simultaneously, as Michael Kober has shown, what is important is the fact that those different forms of life are in need of a *community* that shares similar practices, manners, and customs, institutions, and habits; that is to say, a form of life requires a *locality* and a social group that will constitute a collective world picture (Kober, 1996: 417–418). As David Kishik notes, a "form of life" is a life experienced within a "shared, public space" (2008: 101, 25–26).

3. Edmund Husserl: The concept of "life-world" (*lebenswelt*)

The "natural attitude," namely our immediate involvement in the objects of the world, the "ontological sphere," the world as a meaningful horizon—a noematic framework—and a background of our experiences and beliefs, are some of the interspersed motifs found in Edmund Husserl's overall work, which can be characterized as possessing a circular and dynamic structure (Gadamer, 1976: 182-183). These themes perhaps prepare the thematic material for the problems structured around the concept of "life-world" (Føllesdal, 2010: 38–45). According to David Woodruff Smith (2007: 344), probably the term "Lebenswelt" originates with Georg Simmel. For Husserl, the "world of life" is a polemical concept (Evans, 1996: 58): it is conceived as a pre-scientific, everyday world of experiences that has its own structures of appearing (Audi, 2011: 1323–1325). It is a social world of preconceived notions (Baldwin, 2003: 672–673). In other words, the "world of life" appears as a *lived world of experiences*, a world of symbolic qualities and senses, an everyday surrounding world that is constituted through forms of meaning (*Sinnesgestalten*) (Husserl, 2002: 152-157, 163-165). Hans Gumbrecht has rightly located an inherent ambiguity of the *lebenswelt* as a "scheme of reference" or a "stock of knowledge": it seems implicated in historically specific cultural situations while characterized by metahistorical, a priori, or transcultural features of human existence (Gumbrecht, 1993: 754–757).

In either case, the participation of human subjects in this everyday environment of meaning is taking place through their organic, living bodies (*Leib*), which Husserl (2002: 153–154) distinguishes from the idea of a physical body (*Körper*). From this perspective, we could say that through bodily actions and deeds, a common world of meaning is instituted, or a form of life, to use Wittgenstein's term. This "life-world" reminds us of the concept of a spatio-temporal "*environment (Umgebung)*", a "surrounding world" as was expounded by Husserl in his lectures on *Thing and Space* in 1907 (Husserl, 1997: 1-4) (Smith, 2007: 344).

There are various instances in Husserl's overall work where concepts that bear a family resemblance to *lebenswelt* emerge. They reveal Husserl's stable front towards biologism, naturalism, and objectivism (Husserl, 1970b: 269–271, 292-293). This tendency opens a possible affinity between the concept of the "life-world" and the idea of a "form of life," as was developed in Wittgenstein's later work. Moreover, it could forge a relationship between Husserl's phenomenology, vitalism, and the tradition of "*lebensphilosophie*" (Wilhelm Dilthey, Rudolf Christoph Eucken) (Pelegrinis, 2004: 622).

This family resemblance led Edward Casey to advance

certain arguments regarding the spatial dimension of Husserl's *lebenswelt*. In his important study, *The Fate of Place*, he shows how, in the early work of Husserl, the human living body (*Leib*) is entangled with a "system of locations" (*Ortssystem*) that defines a "bodily space" (*Leibesraum*), a "core world" (*Kern-welt*). He then proceeds to almost identify the *lebenswelt* with this *leibesraum*. In other words, the *lebenswelt* would be a continuous system of possible extended locations of the living body (Casey, 1997: 216-220, 224-228, 437 n. 141).

However, I argue that what seems quite interesting in Husserl's observations concerning the life-world is that it does not necessarily coincide with the material world of extension, following a Cartesian logic, nor does it express the sum total of the material things of the natural world. From this point of view, Husserl's lecture titled *Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity*, delivered in Vienna in 1935, is revealing. There, he concedes that "*the constant fundament of a subjective work of thought is the surrounding life-world; it is always presupposed as the ground, as the field of work*" (Husserl, 1970b: 295).

Nevertheless, this world is *intuitively* given, purely subjective, and *already within* consciousness as its universal horizon (Husserl, 1970b: 281, 295). Husserl elucidates: "'*Surrounding world' is a concept that has its place exclusively in the spiritual sphere. That we live in our particular surrounding world, which is the locus of all our cares and endeavors—this refers to a fact that occurs purely within the spiritual realm. Our surrounding world is a spiritual structure in us and in our historical* life" (Husserl, 1970b: 272).

In other words, a life-world is not the objective world, i.e., a system of objective locations, but is instead a lived experience of this network. It is the world that has acquired *semiotic meaning through vital practices* and activities that define a "*purposeful life accomplishing spiritual products; in the broadest sense, creating culture in the unity of a historical development*" (Husserl, 1970b: 270, 273).

Those ideas crystallize in his major, later work, which kept him busy from 1934 until 1937, *The Crisis of European Sciences*, where he elaborates on the hidden presupposition, precondition, and unrecognized foundation of scientific research: the "life-world" (Husserl, 1970a: 111–12). As Husserl explicitly states, "*Science is a human spiritual accomplishment that presupposes as its point of departure the intuitive surrounding world of life, pregiven as existing for all in common. For us, this surrounding world has only the ontic meaning given to it by our experiences, our thoughts, and our valuations*" (Husserl, 1970a: 105, 121).

It becomes obvious that the ambiguous concept of *lebenswelt* functions as a common field of reference, a *system of references* that provides for the public spatiality of a "form of life." I argue that *forms of life* and *life-world* interconnect in a dialectical interweaving of common spaces and communal practices of togetherness. According to my interpretation of Husserl's argument, they delineate the primary, vital ground (*Grund*) for the constitution of any conscious grasp of the world, forming a mental configuration, a meaning-construct (*Sinngebilde*) (Husserl, 1970a: 113). Seen from that perspective, a life-world is a horizon of life-projects characterized by a particular cultural historicity, or, as Paul Ricoeur writes, "the *reservoir of meaning, the surplus of sense in living experience*" (Ricoeur, 2002: 592–593).

The life-world is conceived as a field of *overlapping horizon-validities*, an inter-subjective synthetic unity of sectors of the world (Husserl, 1970a: 143–147, 161–164). If we carefully examine the various sections in the *Crisis*, where Husserl analyzes the particular structure of spatio-temporality that characterizes the life-world, we will discover that its differentiation into particular regions gives birth to subjective systems *of correlations* (Husserl, 1970a: 165–167), through which the way of perceiving the "world-of-life" is mapped.

These systems of correlations evaluate a given system of locations through the lens of a specific form or way of life (Engelen, 2010: 143). The *lebenswelt* is a mental space that ascribes semiotic meaning to a place, capturing the qualitative experience of a locality; it is a cultural world. It is a "subjective-relative a priori" that constitutes "*a world-horizon as a horizon of possible thing-experience*" (Husserl, 1970a: 138–140).

I claim that a life-world is this subjective "system of correlations," that is to say—and establishing a connection with Wittgenstein's thinking—a "system of references," a singular, *mental coordinate* system (*Koordinatensystem*) that organizes and gives meaning to everyday experience. In other words, the Husserlian life-world is a phenomenological, vitalist, and semiotic structure of meaning that possesses a spatial texture (Smith, 2007: 344; Føllesdal, 2010: 27–37). Following David Carr (1977: 208–211), we could claim that a "life-world" is a cultural world of values (*Wertewelt*) (Smith, 2007: 383–387).

4. *Lebensform* and *lebenswelt*: Common characteristics

The concepts of "lebensform" and "lebenswelt" seem to share some common characteristics, properties, or attributes:

- Both conceptions transcend biologism and psychologism; they delineate an *intermediary area* between the pragmatism of particular events or things and the solipsism of private feelings. They are both *borderline* concepts—hybrid and wholistic.

- The entanglement of the "lebensform" in collective linguistic constructions and the correlation of the "lebenswelt" with an inter-subjective dominion that constitutes the world answer for a *community of vital life practices*.

- This creation of a collective horizon of meaning shows that a "way of life" has a dimension of value and presupposes a system or a scale of values that gives meaning to empirical reality, demanding certain moral attitudes and behaviors towards the "real" world.

- This ethical stance needs, in order to function, a "tissue of faith," a *system of references* or coordinates (Wittgenstein; *Koordinatensystem*), or a *system of correlations* (Husserl).

- The most crucial common characteristic of the two concepts is their *spatial dimension*. Every 'way of life' fits into a social context, an environment, or a cultural place.

Based on the above five points of convergence, it would be interesting to examine whether Edmund Husserl and Ludwig Wittgenstein adhere to a similar phenomenological research program that is somehow related to semiotics and the questions of meaning, noesis, and noema (Zilhão, 1994: 956–964). According to Van Peursen, "*a common accent with both thinkers is on the phenomena in their meaningful structures*," namely within "*fields or systems of reference*," horizons, grounds, surroundings, or situations that "*lend significance to every single proto-phenomenon*" (Van Peursen, 1959: 184–185, 188–189). Husserl's idea of intentionality is reminiscent of a sign that, like an arrow, moves towards the phenomenon or thing. A collection or a *system* of similar signs forms the intersubjective world of language, which corresponds to the Wittgensteinian agreement in a "form of life" (Van Peursen, 1959: 188–189). Jaakko Hintikka supports this line of argument. He claims that Wittgenstein and

Husserl "*were both phenomenologists*," despite their differences: Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is "*an exercise in phenomenology*," proving he is "*a far purer phenomenologist than Husserl*" (Hintikka, 1997: 101–102, 111).

5. The spatial texture of *lebensform* and *lebenswelt* as ways of life

Since our hypothesis that Husserl and Wittgenstein both belong to the phenomenological tradition cannot be adequately answered within the bounds of the present paper, it would be useful to point out that the concepts of "lebensform" and "lebenswelt," considered as different tropes of the category of "way of life," presuppose a questioning around *spatiality*, a discussion, and thinking about space. That this is the case can very clearly be attested to by the various rich metaphors used to describe the two concepts under consideration.

Wittgenstein's "lebensform" is explained by scholars using the following expressions: substratum, solid ground, place of emergence, environment, rough ground (Van Peursen, 1959: 189), enclosed arena, background, river bed, platform, bed rock, skeleton, and axis of a door. Roger Paden (2007: 35–36) has convincingly argued that Wittgenstein's involvement in the architectural design and construction of the famous *Palais Stonborough* from 1926 until 1928 led him to a new conception of language in relation to real conditions and ways of life. Indeed, architecture is the art *par excellence* that is responsible for the organization and design of the spatial framework, leading and enabling the development of various "forms of life." Therefore, architecture was perhaps also responsible for giving birth to, or at least, instigating the conception of a plurality of different life forms so characteristic of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. According to Van Peursen's interpretation of Wittgenstein, "*every expectation is embedded in a situation*" (Van Peursen, 1959: 188).

Husserl's "lebenswelt", respectively, is analyzed using the words or terms: surrounding world, shared environment, horizon, solid or absolute foundation (Gurwitsch, 2009: 470), base, field, place of care, primary or common ground, sub-soil, meaning-foundation, original matrix and actual context (Carr, 1987: 230, 237), basis, earth, groundwork, sedimented, layered receptacle, reservoir, and even, absolute substratum (Lyotard, 1991: 61–64). Following Van Peursen's argument, Husserl believes that "*everything is located in certain surroundings.*

Without these, the object would have no significance" (1959: 186).

All of the above descriptions make use of *spatial, geological, and architectural metaphors*. I claim that this is not accidental; this fact originates from the *inherently vital and spatial texture* of "ways of life," which those concepts attempt to analyze and map. I argue that Wittgenstein's *lebensform* and Husserl's *lebenswelt* can become very useful for contemporary architectural and semiotic theory.

6. Conclusion

As a conclusion, I would like to put forward the hypothesis that architecture should have a very special value and a pivotal role within the context of a future *phenomenological or vitalistic semiotics*. The proposed branch of Semiotics is conceived as a new disciplinary matrix at the intersections between architecture, philosophy, and spatial design methodology. As the previous analysis of the concepts of *lebensform* and *lebenswelt* has revealed, architecture functions as a *primary metaphorical field* for expressing structures and textures of spatiality within semiotic processes. Apart from providing a rich reservoir for *metaphorological* indexes, according to Hans Blumenberg's research agenda (Adams, 1991: 152-166), architectural spatial organizations are also *proto-phenomena* that ground forms and worlds of life. Architecture as a proto-semiosis produces framing mechanisms and spatial envelopes, facilitating the process of building meaningful orientations in the wholistic concrete environmental field (*Umwelt*) (Kull, 2010: 348–349) that involves the lived body, its metabolic code (Cobley, 2010: 4–9), and their dynamic, vital interactions with the architectural matrix or background of life. Within this background, sign action, namely semiosis, *builds* a world of signs. Habits (*gewohnheiten*) and "typicalities of behavior" forming the Umwelt (Gurwitsch, 2009: 454, 478), typical situations (Vesely, 2010: 189–200), ethos, and common sense play an important role in the construction of a vital semiosphere.

I argue that architecture is one of the most important ontological and epistemological presuppositions for the building of "symbolic spaces" that articulate Juri Lotman's semiosphere according to specific, focused attributes and operators of meaning. Architecture molds the "lebenswelt," instituting meaning structures and creating the "sub-soil" of experience (Carr, 1987: 241-243). Therefore, I would like to claim that architecture is a primary modeling system, the ground zero of cultural semiotics and the groundwork

of vitalistic semiotics, an originary framework, horizon, and *field of reference* for meaningful relations (Van Peursen, 1959: 186–188), hierarchies, and differentiations of qualitative values between things and bodies that take place, literally. I propose to call these qualitative environmental evaluations an "*architectono-sphere*" or "architecture-sphere." Semiotic research, enriched and expanded through phenomenology and vitalism, should try to map their intricate, complex, and labyrinthine spaces, places, and structures. This is a promising project for the future, one that could open the epistemological and methodological horizons of semiotic discourse into interdisciplinary, architectural areas of investigation.

7. References

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