International Lexicon of Aesthetics

Autumn 2018 Edition, ISSN 2611-5166, ISBN 9788857551654, DOI 10.7413/18258630044

Life-World

By Claudio Rozzoni

(First published November 30, 2018)

It. *Mondo della vita*; Fr. *Monde de la vie*; Germ. *Lebenswelt*; Span. *Mundo de la vida*. English translation of the German "Lebenswelt" (Leben, "life" and Welt, "world"). The term was introduced into philosophical debate by Edmund Husserl, the founder of Phenomenology, although it had previously been referenced by authors such as Simmel (1912) and Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1951). More precisely, its first occurrence by Heinrich Heine dates back to 1836 (for a detailed development of the "hidden history" of this expression in the 19th century, particularly in the fields of biology, geography, paleontology, and zoology, see Bermes 2002).

The notion of the life-world is a seminal concept in what may be considered Husserl's philosophical last will and testament, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. This work stems from the famous lectures Husserl was invited to give in both Vienna and Prague in 1935, but was published in its definitive – though still fragmentary and unfinished – form only posthumously, in the Husserliana edition in 1954 (Husserl 1970).

In *Crisis*, the life-world is the world of the "pregiven" lived experience we take for granted, the aesthetic-intuitive ground functioning as implicit presumption of all our unintuitable "substructions", particularly those shaping the "objective-scientific world" that the modern sciences have developed out of Galileo's conception and mathematization of nature.

The Contemporary Debate

The life-world is a "problematic" concept (Carr 1970), one that stands for "a whole new and very complexly structured dimension" (Brand 1973: 144). Husserl opens *Crisis* by acknowledging the "enduringly compelling successes" of the positive sciences (Husserl 1970: 4). In fact, the "crisis" he refers to concerns not their results, but their significance: modern sciences, he argues, are incapable of addressing the

"questions [....] decisive for a genuine humanity". In their search for an "objective truth", they "abstract from everything subjective" (Husserl 1970: 6), excluding all "so-called secondary qualities" from their scope of consideration (Carr 1970: 333). Moreover, the objective data involved in the scientific praxes is construed as the cipher of a 'true' world (that of *episteme*) (Husserl 1970: 127), which is then held up as a contrast to our private and subjective, 'non-scientific world' (that of the *doxa*). This abstraction, in turn, affects the ways in which we seek to understand ourselves. As Husserl laconically states: "merely fact-minded sciences make merely fact-minded people" (Husserl 1970: 6).

As a consequence, what remained unknowingly forgotten is this very life-world, which might be understood as the anonymous "horizon" (Moran 2015: 123-124) underlying human practices, "the concrete world in which we insert ourselves" (Brand 1973: 150). This theoretical construction leaves an entire *aesthetic* dimension out of the equation, a qualitative dimension against which the positive scientist juxtaposes an objective neutrality unaffected by differences in sensation. It is not by chance that, when Husserl developed his life-world concept in the 1920s, he tied it strongly to his idea of "transcendental aesthetics" (see Sowa 2008: L).

In an effort to overturn this widely entrenched definition of "truth", Husserl points out that the intuitive life-world is the ground within which everyone, including scientists, lives and interacts with everyone else; even more significantly, he notes that the life-world is the unexplored fundament from which scientific ideation itself arises.

Thus, in *Crisis*, Husserl contends that this calls for a kind of double *epoché*. The first of these – the "first step" (Husserl 1970: 135) concerning the objective sciences – would help us to avoid falling into their deceptive tendency to absolutize "idealizing substructions" (Husserl 1970: 218). The second would be a "transcendental", "universal" *epoché* on our "natural attitude" (Husserl 1970: 148), on the everyday life all of us share, in order to bring to the fore the structures of a *life-world* that is "always there, existing in advance for us, the 'ground' of all praxis whether theoretical or extratheoretical" (Husserl 1970: 142). Only then, Husserl argues, would the "pregivenness of the life-world become a universal subject of investigation in its own right" (Husserl 1970: 148).

Whereas the first *epoché* may put the emphasis on the division between the "unintuited world of science" and the "intuited" life-world (Held 2003: 60), the second one reminds us that their relationship cannot exclusively be characterized in terms of contrast – it is also a relationship of continuity, albeit of a problematic variety. Specifically, it can be difficult to distinguish among the different layers comprising our life-world. To understand this complex interplay, phenomenology must turn away from static distinctions between a "pregiven" life-world and an objective-scientific "true world", in favor of a genetic account of the relationship between those two poles (see Ferrarin 2006: 12).

Focusing on this dynamic relationship gives rise to one central issue: through the process of "genetic sedimentation", non-intuitive, objective results can "flow into the intuitable horizons of non-scientific praxis" (Held 2003: 60) and become part of the life-world horizon, such that it can no longer be interpreted in strict opposition to the objective "substructions" of the sciences. From this perspective, the life-world takes on both historical and cultural dimensions (Carr 2010; Moran 2015: 121): different streams of

sedimentation may stem from different ages and traditions, thereby giving rise to multiple life-worlds. This seems to highlight a contradiction within the concept itself: the fact that we may speak in terms of a plurality of life-worlds (as Husserl himself does, Husserl 1970: 147) seems at odds with the notion "that there is just *one* life-world" (Føllesdal 2010: 41), a singular pregiven ground shared by everyone (see Husserl 1970: § 37).

However, as has been noted (Føllesdal 2010: 42), the concept of multiple life-worlds is not, in fact, at odds with the idea of a unique life-world "for all human beings and for all societies", construed "as an invariant with respect to the multiple socio-historical environments" (Gurwitsch 2009: 168). The task of a transcendental phenomenology would be that of funding a "science" of this primordial dimension, bringing to the fore the *a priori* structure of a life-world "to which everything that exists relatively is bound" (Husserl 1970: 139). That would give rise to a "new" and "peculiar" – not objective and logical – and more "valu[able]" science that no scientist has ever been able to inaugurate. Only by investigating this realm of anonymously functioning phenomena can philosophy aim to establish itself as the "universal and ultimately grounding science" (Husserl 1970: 112. See also Sowa 2010 regarding the concept of the "science of the life-world", which Sowa describes as a "two-stage" science, entailing an empirical and an eidetic stage).

Nevertheless, art can also represent a privileged way to unearth aspects of this unexplored, "infinite realm" (Husserl 1970: 110), as advocated by the phenomenological enterprise of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who in 1939 became the first scholar outside Husserl's circle to consult unpublished sections of the *Crisis* manuscripts at the Husserl Archive in Leuven. For the French philosopher, Paul Cézanne, who "wanted to paint" the "primordial world" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a: 13) preceding and underlying theoretical scientific constructions, is paradigmatic of the power art can hold in investigating the life-world. Significantly, his last finished work, *Eye and Mind*, starts by stating that "science manipulates things and gives up living in them" (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 159). Instead, breaking this objective closeness, the artist (and specifically "the painter") can become master of a "secret science" (Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 161) that "gives visi[bility] [...] to what profane vision believes to be invisible". Moreover, in offering an access to the lived dimensions of the precategorial life-world, the painter's "*idios kosmos* opens [...] upon a *koinos kosmos*" (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 166). Thus, artistic practices also help reveal another essential dimension of the life-world: its "intersubjectivity".

This aspect played a pivotal role in the work of the Austrian philosopher and sociologist Alfred Schutz, who attended Husserl's Vienna and Prague lectures of 1935. Taking Husserl's line of investigation in an original and independent direction, Schutz asserted the social nature of the life-world, which became a key concept that allowed him to open up a new field of research in social studies aiming at establishing "the foundations for a comprehensive social theory" (Schutz, Luckmann 1973: XXII). Aside from inspiring other seminal authors in this field such as Habermas (see for example Habermas 1987), Schutz's concept of the life-world remains an important source for contemporary developments of the life-world idea both inside and outside the social field (Endress *et al.* 2005).

Indeed, nowadays the life-world seems to have become a theoretical touchstone for multifarious elaborations – not only within the phenomenological sphere or in other philosophical schools, but at a vastly interdisciplinary level encompassing fields such as architecture, cognitive science, ecology, geography, neuroscience, and pedagogy, among others. On the one hand, such vaguely defined boundaries might give rise to misunderstandings (Ferrarin 2006: 9), but on the other hand, this rich variety of input can become a powerful methodological-critical instrument against any attempt to "naturalize" the lived experience, and can foster exploration of the fullness of the aesthetic dimension supporting and underlying our idealizations.

It is highly significant that, just as Husserl originally intended back in 1935, the life-world concept has come to be valued as a genuine "contribution to the philosophy of science" (Carr 2010: 83, see also Ströker 1979). For example, the notion has been called into question in order to stimulate a "critical" approach to neuroscientific data in brain-imaging studies, as a warning against the naïve possibility of "a clean translation [...] from measurable processes in the brain to the fullness of the meaningful, personal, and interpersonal experience of the life-world" (Gallagher 2011: 86). As Gallagher puts it, "we cannot 'PET' or 'fMRI'" the life-world (Gallagher 2011: 90).

Finally, the notion of the life-world also proves truly pivotal as regards current reflections in the field of aesthetics. Consider, for instance, the recently proposed idea of "pathic aesthetics". Inspired by Hermann Schmitz's "new phenomenology" (which deeply investigated and developed the notion of "lived space", Schmitz 2009) and Gernot Böhme's "aesthetics of atmospheres" (in which "aesthetics becomes what it really is", i.e. a "doctrine of *aisthesis*" heeding "the aesthetic value of our life-world", Böhme 2017), "pathic aesthetics" aims to allow the "qualitative-expressive richness of the life-world" (Griffero 2017: 53) to emerge, with specific reference to the "atmospheric feelings" inhabiting our horizon and not to be confined to the interiority of subjects.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

C. Bermes, *"Lebenswelt" (1836–1936): Von der Mikroskopie des Lebens zur Inszenierung des Erlebens*, "Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte", 44 (2002): 175-197.

G. Böhme, *The Aestethics of Atmospheres*, London, Routledge, 2017.

G. Brand, *The Structure of the Life-world According to Husserl*, "Man and World", 6/2 (1973): 143-162.

D. Carr, *Husserl's Problematic Concept of the Life-World*, "American Philosophical Quarterly", 7/4 (1970): 331-339.

– *The Crisis as Philosophy of History*, in D. Hyder, H.-J. Rheinberger (eds.), *Science and the Life-world. Essays on Husserl's Crisis of European Sciences*, Stanford (CA), Stanford University Press, 2010: 83-99.

M. Endress *et al.* (eds.), *Explorations of the Life-world. Continuing Dialogues with Alfred Schutz*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2005.

A. Ferrarin (ed.), *Passive Synthesis and Life-world*, Pisa, ETS, 2006.

D. Føllesdal, *The Lebenswelt in Husserl*, in D. Hyder, H.-J. Rheinberger (eds.), *Science and the Life-world. Essays on Husserl's Crisis of European Sciences*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2010: 27-45.

S. Gallagher, *Scanning the Life-world: Toward a Critical Neuroscience of Action and Interaction*, in S. Choudhury, J. Slaby (eds.), *Critical Neuroscience: A Handbook of the Social and Cultural Contexts of Neuroscience*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011: 85-110.

T. Griffero, *Quasi-things: The Paradigm of Atmospheres*, Albany (NY), SUNY, 2017 (orig. ed. 2013).

A. Gurwitsch, *The Collected Works of Aron Gurwitsch (1901-1973)*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2009.

J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. II. *Life-World and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, Cambridge, Polity, 1987.

K. Held, *Husserl's Phenomenology of the Life-World*, in D. Welton (ed.), *The New Husserl. A Critical Reader*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2003: 32-62.

H. von Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke: Prosa II*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, 1951.

E. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1970.

– *Die Lebenswelt. Auslegungen der vorgegebenen Welt und ihrer Konstitution. Texte aus dem Nachlass (1916–1937)*, HUA XXXIX, Dordrecht, Springer, 2008.

M. Merleau-Ponty, *Cézanne's* Doubt, in Id., Sens *and Non-Sens*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964a: 9-25 (orig. ed. 1945).

M. Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, in Id., *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964b: 159-190 (orig. ed. 1961).

D. Moran, *Everydayness, Historicity and the World of Science: Husserl's Life-World Reconsidered*, in L. Učník *et al.* (eds.), *The Phenomenological Critique of Mathematisation and the Question of Responsibility. Formalisation and the Life-World*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2015: 107-131.

H. Schmitz, *Kurze Einführung in die Neue Phänomenologie*, Freiburg i. Br., Verlag Karl Alber, 2009.

A. Schutz, T. Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life-World*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973.

G. Simmel, *Die Religion*, Frankfurt am Main, Rütten & Loening, 1912.

R. Sowa, *Einleitung des Herausgebers*, *Die Lebenswelt. Auslegungen der vorgegebenen Welt und ihrer Konstitution. Texte aus dem Nachlass (1916–1937)*, HUA XXXIX, Dordrecht, Springer, 2008: XXV-LXXI.

– *Husserls Idee einer nicht-empirischen Wissenschaft von der* Lebenswelt, "Husserl Studies", 26/1 (2010): 49–66.

E. Ströker, *Lebenswelt und Wissenschaft in der Philosophie Edmund Husserls*, Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann, 1979.

HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

C. Rozzoni, *Life-World*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Autumn 2018 Edition, URL = https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2018/autumn/LifeWorld.pdf, DOI: 10.7413/18258630044.

Please note that this URL is fixed, since it belongs to *ILAe*'s archived edition. This allows readers to quote a stable document for academic purposes.

This entry also belongs to the first volume of *ILAe*'s printed edition. Each issue of this edition collects *ILAe*'s Spring and the Autumn online editions per year. The proper reference of the printed edition is:

C. Rozzoni, *Life-World*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 1, Milano, Mimesis, 2018.