

# INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

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## GENIUS LOCI

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It. *Genio del luogo*; Fr. *Esprit du lieu*; Germ. *Geist des Ortes*; Span. *Espíritu del lugar*. The Latin term *genius loci* literally means "spirit of place". According to the ancient Romans, all individual human beings had their own genius. Similarly, *certain* places also had their own genius: a local guardian spirit. It was believed that this genius constituted the character of a person or a place.

A place has such a *characteristic* spirit either through itself, as a kind of innate spirit (*ingenium loci*; cf. Ovid, met. 3, 157-162) or through what people have inscribed in it, whether materially or immaterially. But whether innate or inscribed, what is decisive is that this spirit is an evolved one, one that has grown *naturally* and/or *historically*, a "spirit of becoming" (Kozljanič 2004a: 28-78).

Characteristic *nature*-dominated places tend to maintain their spirit through themselves or through the expressive-atmospheric properties *in situ*. Examples of such places include characteristic springs, hills, creeks, rocks, coves, groves, caves. The nymphs are, of course, important local spirits too, in antiquity and throughout art history: the often lovely spirits of trees, springs, mountains and bays. The art-historical *topos* of the *locus amoenus* traces back to such nymphic places. Even the muses have originally been nymphs themselves, singing mountain nymphs. Hippocrene, their sacred well at Mount Helicon, where they appeared to Hesiod (cf. Hes. Theog. 1-10), became the symbol of poetic initiation and inspiration (Curtius 2013: 183-202, 228-246, 474-5). The place and atmosphere of Hippocrene can still be seen and sensed today. *Locus amoenus* and *genius loci* appear again and again in art history as commonplaces (cf. Hunt 2022).

A description by Seneca (1st century CE) shows that the atmosphere of a *genius loci* site can be not only graceful, beautiful and lovely, but also sublime, eerie, oppressive, overwhelming and above all numinous: "the mysteriousness [*secretum*] of" this grove, "and your marvel at the thick unbroken shade in the midst of the open landscape, will prove to you the presence of the numinous [*numinis*]." (Sen. Epist. 4, 41, 3).

Unlike natural sites, distinctive *cultural* sites obtain their spirit primarily through social references, human imprints and immaterial inscribings; for example, through cultural codifications and interpretations, historical traditions and stereotypings, collective memories and narratives, social functions and psychic projections and through architectural design and structuring. Numerous imperial testimonials provide direct evidence of the domestic significance of the genius of the home. Many inscriptions bear witness to a village or civic cult: to the genius of a village, the food stores, the customs office, the theatre, the military camp, the school, or the baths. A genius of the port is known from Ostia, a genius of the city from Lugdunum/Lyon (cf. Kozljanič 2004a: 58-72; Kozljanič 2006).

All of these local deities belong to the so-called lower mythology and were considered a *numen* or *daimon*. "The true daimon is the daimon of a place, of an area, of an element, changing with their appearances, accepting the sacrifices of its devotees" (Klages 1981: 1264; cit. in Bishop 2018: 101-2).

#### CURRENT PHENOMENOLOGICAL DEBATE

In the last 20 years, the phenomenon of the *genius loci* has been more accurately described. G. Böhme, T. Griffero, R. J. Kozljanič, J. Pallasmaa, E. Relph, D. Seamon and T. Valena should be mentioned in this context. These authors have one thing in common: they take pre-theoretical lifeworld experiences seriously and use a new phenomenological approach in which the concept of lived space, felt body and spatially manifest atmospheres is important or even crucial. In doing so, they revise older phenomenological and life-philosophical theories by L. Klages, M. Heidegger, M. Merleau-Ponty, O. F. Bollnow, C. Norberg-Schulz – but above all H. Schmitz.

Hermann Schmitz was able to describe the phenomenon of the *genii locorum* more precisely as situational atmospheres. These atmospheres reveal the spirits of place in bodily felt *interwoven ambiance-ensembles* – "situations" – with internally diffuse but rich structure. There are two main types of situations: 1. Impressive-present situations; suddenly and significantly appearing in an overall impression of felt presence. 2. Segmented-complex situations; appearing fragmented and incomplete in one or few segments and therefore requiring further knowledgeable additions and contextualisation (Schmitz 2003: 91). A specific feature of these subjectively experienceable and intersubjectively communicable situations is that they are atmospherically charged and become tangible and articulate in their spatially extended "flowing" atmospheres. When we are in a mood of affective involvement and resonance, they show up as spatially given, i.e., actually lying in the landscape and not (as is often assumed) psychically projected or even socio-culturally constructed. Schmitz says of the Loreley and other siren-like spirits of place that they draw their "power of suggestion from the nimbus of a powerful atmosphere", from a "highly emotive" mood (Schmitz 1977: 150). This also applies to what Schmitz calls "local divine atmospheres", and thus especially to all numinous *genius loci* sites (Schmitz 1977: 128-134). Schmitz emphasises these atmospheres – or rather their fundamental layer – as quasi-climatic, fragrance-like, and spatially flowing phenomena (Schmitz 2019: 94-98, 101).

The ambiguous term “sense of place” comes quite close to this concept of atmospheres. David Seamon speaks of the “atmospheric qualities like sense of place” and says: “To clarify the lived subtlety of sense of place is one task of phenomenological research.” (Seamon 2022) “Sense of place” could be paraphrased as felt meaning of a place. At the same time, it also means the sensuous ability to feel this meaning. With reference to Edward Relph (2009), Seamon distinguishes between the *genius loci* and the “sense of place” (in a narrower meaning). The former is described as “the singular qualities of a particular landscape or environment that infuse it with a unique ambience and character”; the latter as “the synaesthetic and largely unself-conscious facility of human beings to recognize, feel, and sense the uniqueness of a particular” place (Seamon 2022). *Genius loci* thus represents the intersubjectively perceived object side, “sense of place” the bodily felt subject side. If the phenomenologist hasn’t developed and cultivated her/his sense of place, she/he isn’t able to detect and analyse any *genius loci*. Or, with Seamon’s words: she/he will not be able to sense the “common presence”. The concept of “common presence” is similar to Schmitz’s concept of a common impressive situation, but is less formal and closer to lived experience. Seamon is arguing that the relative togetherness of entities in space – material and human qualities as well – sustains an environmental “common presence” that emerges as a sensible quality shared by these local entities. And “the common presence of a place refers to its degree of ‚life‘ and its environmental character” (Seamon 2018: 87-90). It is obvious that this “common presence” cannot be caught up theoretically, but only through phenomenological “field research”; this means: through participation and “thick description” (Geertz 1973). Jürgen Hasse (2017) as an important pioneer in the field of thick (neophenomenological) description of everyday, ordinary places, must be mentioned here.

In his seminal study on *genius loci* in architecture, Christian Norberg-Schulz (1980) does not make the distinction between place, landscape and climate zone. However, it is important to distinguish between these units and to be aware that his *genius loci* types are landscape or even climate types and not place types. Places are delimitable, small-scale locations (usually smaller than a football field), landscapes are panoramatically overviewable, large-scale regions (that can extend to the horizon) and climate zones are huge geographical units that reach much farther than the eye can see (unless you are in outer space; Kozljanič 2004b: 258, 309-320). As Robert J. Kozljanič has also shown, atmospheres are not only quasi-climatic, fragrance-like, and spatially flowing “diffusivities”. If we concretise Schmitz, we can say that atmospheres are also condensed in a place and anchored in specific things and shapes. They can be experienced empathically, perceived physiognomically and communicated intersubjectively as thingly phenomena within affective-expressive encounter-situations (Kozljanič 2004b: 310-314, 330-335; Kozljanič 2012: 82-88). These thingly phenomena and their shape are of crucial importance: if they are removed or technically dominated or superstructured, the atmosphere and character of the place will seriously be damaged. This happened to the Loreley, which has almost completely lost its threatening and mysterious atmosphere due to construction works: Railway line and tunnel in 1862, then quay and road, blasting of the river stones in the 1930s, construction of an open-air Nazi theatre on the summit 1935-39. A modern equivalent of the Roman term *numen* seems to be “aura”, used by Walter Benjamin in his famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935): Every original and ingenious work of art has or can have a special “aura” – and loses it through reproduction and instrumentalisation. Following

Benjamin, the same can be said of original and ingenious places. Five essential components are to be distinguished: 1. The uniqueness of the object. 2. The sensuous presence of the original. 3. The aesthetic and pathic-contemplative distance of the viewer. 4. The enchantment of the contemplator by a “mesmerizing” thing. 5. The multi-layered testimony-character of a memorial-like object (Kozljanič 2014; cf. Böhme 1995: 25-34; Böhme 2013: 149-150).

The most recent contribution to a phenomenology of the *genius loci* is by Tonino Griffero. He too revises and concretises Schmitz’s concept of atmospheres. Central to this is the term “affordances”, which he adopts from the psychologist J. J. Gibson: the affordances of the environment are what it offers, provides or furnishes in and throughout a complementary relationship (Griffero 2020: 81). However, Griffero then places aesthetic-pathic suggestions alongside the pragmatic-active options for interaction. This completes the ethologistic concept of “affordances”, deepens it and gives it enormous phenomenological relevance. “Affordances” now means: stimulating options *and* “mesmerizing” significances radiating from the people-place-interactions, people-place-correlations, people-place-empathies, e. g. kinetic suggestions *or* psychic image-initiations, correspondence offers *or* resonance possibilities, bodily-activating triggers *or* bodily-pathic resonances. These affordances arise from the situations and their effects, whether they are embedded features, functional dispositions or expressive atmospheres. Either way, Griffero’s focus is on “pathic aesthetics”. He is primarily concerned with “pathic affordances, responsible for our spontaneous-intuitive evaluations”. His forward-looking idea is that “atmospheres function as (amodal) affordances, i.e., as ecological invitations or meanings that are ontologically rooted in things and quasi-things, namely as demands that are not only pragmatic-behavioural and visual. While the environment can invite a certain action or even urge a person to do something, to an atmospheric affordance indeed one does not necessarily react with a given behaviour. [...] one may also react to atmospheric *qualia* with an (also aesthetic) distance, in the sense that we can feel the atmosphere [...] from a distance” (Griffero 2020: 101). *Genius loci* sites are thus marked by auratic and expressive-atmospheric affordances: “My hypothesis is therefore that a place has its own *genius* only if (when and where) it radiates an intense and authoritative specific atmosphere” (Griffero 2020: 145; cf. Griffero 2017: 29-38; and: Tedeschini 2017).

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