Lost Dimension – Problematic Field and Questions

Before digging into the details and subject of this research, it is important to state that this research plan represents merely an intermediate step. *Spirituality* is deeply personal and even during this first initial period my own perspective and understanding of it shifted. Most probably it will continue to do so. This attitude is vital to encounter the subject in an appropriate way. The research conducted so far within the field of *spirituality* made clear that although the goal is a scientific outcome, there is the chance of it getting into spheres that do not belong to the classic reductionists' way of thinking present in most sciences. Some of the themes addressed are even considered a taboo. (Goodall 2003) It touches upon a dimension that is not perceivable by science at least the way it is taught in school.

The problematic that will be treated in the research concerns the alienated and disconnected way we perceive our environment and therefore also the way we encounter and interact with it. This is mainly due to the established unnatural societal systems, conventions, and the behavior that is the result of a constructed human centered realities. This touches for instance upon economic and political factors that impact the modes of living and issues of health on a personal level, but also affect the global scale e. g. climate crisis, sixth mass extinction. Present remedial activities to ameliorate the seemingly desperate situation are insufficient. Consequently, a shift in mentality and an alternative way of approaching these precarious circumstances is needed. (Braidotti 2018)

The proposal is to pursue an approach that is characterized by an idea of *harmony*. By breaking the scientific taboo and integration of *spirituality* into our thinking we might (re)discover a dimension that has been forgotten and neglected in most societies. Through a process of unlearning the established modes of interaction with our environment, but also other species and fellow human beings could be transformed into a more empathic encounter and communion.

The notion of the forgotten here relates to the innate human capability to communicate and understand other species, it refers to the relational aspects also referred to as *Animism*. (Taylor 2010) Some claim that every child is blessed with an innate ability to perceive this dimension. The American Buddhist-Animist and Pulitzer Prize winning author of *Turtle Island*, *Gary Snyder* calls what I'm referring to an animistic perception (Davis 1993), and states "I was born a natural animist. It wasn't a moral or intellectual thing, from early childhood, I felt the presence of other beings … I think most kids are natural animists." (Snyder 1993). His way of expressing it might not be fitting for everyone, nevertheless it shows the idea of the innate.

The neglected knowledge pertains to the indigenous or traditional knowledge of ecology. A knowledge that is dynamic and cumulative, mostly dealing with local environmental phenomena and species. This knowledge is based on a cultural transmission through generations, often through an oral and collective event of storytelling. (Berkes 2018)

The main question arising from these recognitions is:
How can we deal with the disconnectedness from our environment in a way that enables us to transform our alienated view of it into an understanding and empathic relation with it, so that a more harmonious togetherness can be facilitated?

But also:
Can spirituality help us to regain an interest and empathic feelings for other species and our surroundings?

Consequently:
How does a society that is fully aligned with its environment look like? What attitude, behavior and spaces do we need to trigger spirituality and animistic perception? How can this ability be (re)discovered and nurtured?

The goal of this research will be to create an understanding of what *harmony* is through an exploration of the *spiritual dimension*, that may never be revealed in its full extend. The subject is by nature vague. It might be the quest of this journey to find out what this *lost dimension* is or better what it is for me. Other descriptions for it are Hegel's *Geist*, Lao-Tzu's *Tao*, Plotinius' "One" or Spinoza's "substance". It can be described as a form of unity (Levine 1997) or as I propose to call it *harmony*. It can be found in philosophy, poetry, visual art and music or in nature. It has something to do with the sublime and beautiful. (Taylor 2010) It can be called divine or *spiritual*. As you can already tell by now it is something intangible and tangible at the same time. Something abstract and concrete. This is what makes it so difficult to understand and yet so fascinating.

Dealing with Complexity – Methodological Positioning and Approach

Facing the complexity of the subject and the tragic past and present developments that shift away from a once so prominent and extensive spiritual understanding of the world, that result in an alienated interaction and treatment of our environment, it is easy to plunge into the depths of despair. (Berkes 2018) For that reason, I have promised myself to maintain a rigorously *optimistic* stance, taking advantage of *curiosity* as a main driver of this research. The problem in such an approach is to risk falling into a naive perception, which I will most certainly try to avoid. My goal is to bring different worldviews into account and by reasoning on them creating an approach that is as much as possible *diversified*. Afterall accepting and embracing diversity means paving the way for *harmony*. (Lomas and Xue 2022) Creating an understanding of the single parts and their interrelatedness and interdependence, unifying the strengths of *science* and *spirituality* could lead to as Jane Goodall puts it "the final stage of human evolution, *spiritual evolution*". (Goodall 2008) *Bron Taylor* in reference to *Thoreau's* moral anthropology mentions a "*moral evolution*: the necessity of human moral/spiritual/scientific growth." (Taylor 2010) By shifting away from the mainstream perception, I expect to make unexpected discoveries and to gain new insights. Clearly there is wisdom that has been forgotten, neglected, or even displaced especially in the western hemisphere but also elsewhere often through European insensitive dominant cultures. (Berkes 2018)

As already hinted, I intent to go beyond the human involving all species and as a matter of fact beyond the living including the inanimate to aim for an authentic earthly *harmony*. (Bennett 2010) Calling this *lost dimension,* I was referring to in the beginning, *harmony* is a conscious choice as it makes clear that it is dealing with the relations or a fragile balance between subjects and things rather than trying to pin it down to a term or a certain entity. It is focusing on the process more than everything else, a *pragmatic experimentation*. (Savransky 2021) Acknowledgement of the vulnerability and preciousness this *harmony* consequently asks for a *sensitive* manner, in which I shall conduct this research.

However, I don't want to disregard the human dimension including politics, economy, media, philosophy, physics, biology, as a in humanmade sciences or practices. For instance, in relation to politics the problematic of the current system of national states receives critique from *Gary Snyder* that advocates for a *bioregional* reinhabitation. He suggests that through "carefully learning the local lore, plant and animals that are found in particular places. When one does this mindfully, he believes, appropriate lifeways that respect the place can be (re)discovered. By going back to the land, people can rediscover their affective connections to nature." (Snyder 1977; Taylor 2010) This *holistic* approach involves what *Felix Guattari* would call the *mental*, the *social* and *environmental ecologies* or *Rosi Braidotti's zoe/geo/techno*. It has something to do with *Bateson's* relation of *mind* and *nature,* but even more with the *pattern which connects* reminding of the processual focus.

The approach is

Posthumanist as it implies a notion that shifts away from the anthropocentric Weltanschauung and facilitates a production of knowledge involving the non-human, it fights the ideology of dualism in questioning divisions like mind and body or living and inanimate. "A posthumanist methodology has to be adaptable and sensitive." Furthermore, applying such a method means consciously thinking of the multilayered effects of something. (Ferrando 2012)

Genealogical as firstly it represents a different form of analysis. Secondly it constitutes a more powerful mode of critique. Thirdly it allows a way to confront different bodies of knowledge in a suspicious manner (Hook and Bowman 2007) in my case that would be the bodies of science and *spirituality* which promote seemingly different worldviews and ways of perceiving. By making use of *analogical reasoning*, meaning that I will try to see communalities between two different systems (Bartha 2022), I'm expecting a multitude of diverse outcomes.

Ethico-aesthetic as an alternative view to the neo-liberal ideology opening up to new modes and potentialities of thinking and living. This refers to a processual and event-centered reconstruction of the human subject. (Dahlberg 2016; Hynes 2013) Seeing the human as equal part of the environment and speculate with the consequences of this scenario, resulting in limitation and vulnerability. I want to remind of the *genealogical approach* and that in speculations many of the methodological injunctions of *genealogy* can be exemplified. (Hook and Bowman 2007)

Eclectic as it is a personal, complex subject concerning matters of belief and modalities of perception often dealt with through powerful institutions and actors, but also concerning non-quantifiable spheres like those of emotion. Through selecting within a diverse range of practices and ideologies an appropriate system and understanding is ensured. (Mcclellan 2003) The challenge lays in navigating through this sheer quantity of possibilities. A selection of the fields that I started to investigate and want to continue pursuing is presented in the next chapter.
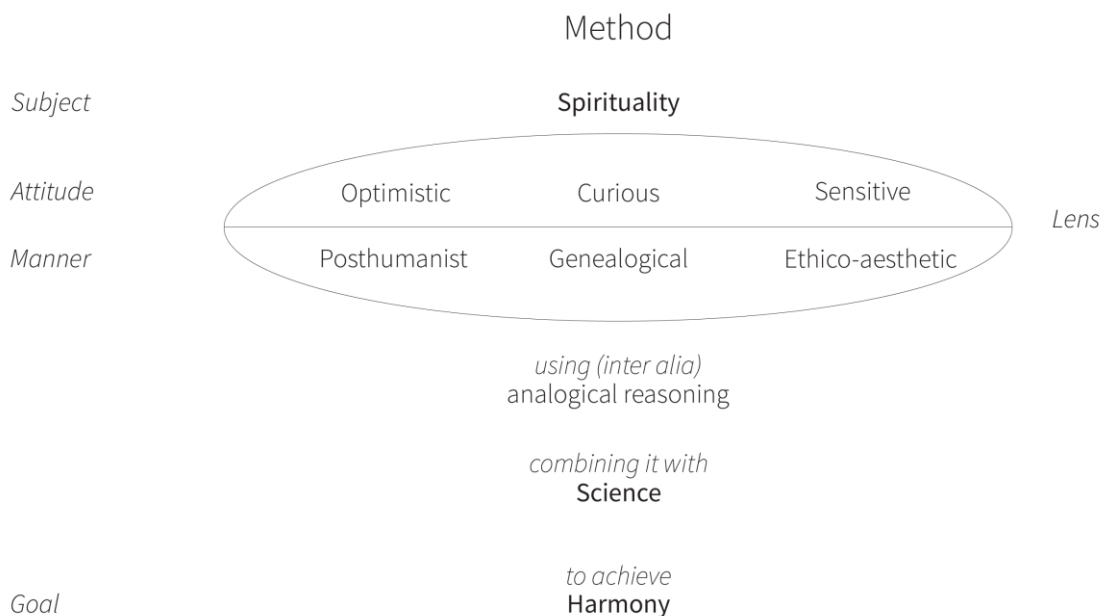
Method

Subject		**Spirituality**	
Attitude	Optimistic	Curious	Sensitive
Manner	Posthumanist	Genealogical	Ethico-aesthetic

Lens

using (inter alia)
analogical reasoning

combining it with
Science

to achieve
Goal   **Harmony**

Figure 1 - Diagram Methodology by Author

Spiritual Ecologies – Research Field

Terminology is essential to communicate clearly their relations, but also and specially to indicate the similarities and differences. Thus, etymology and the fact that words change in terms of meaning based on time and subjective perception or interpretation must be respected in some way. Even though I'm treating a subject and sensations that from time to time can be tough to express in words. Some argue that the way we communicate might be the reason why we got alienated from this world in the first place. When it comes to *spirituality* terms like religion, theism, God, deity, divine, sacred, sublime or awe are frequently used and associated with a wide range of diverse experiences and worldviews.

Edmund Burke's view in reference to those terms can be found in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* that can be seen "as one of the earliest examples of the scholarly study of religion." (Taylor 2010) He argues that they "arise from the human experience in nature" and are "evoked by … feeling of 'Astonishment' that comes from encounters with terrifying power". (Taylor 2010) Whereas Jaques Rousseau's position differs and links the sublime to beauty in nature. Rousseau also "believed that in a true state of nature there is sublime *harmony*, equality, beauty and contentment" (Taylor 2010) to be found.

Another big aspect of *spirituality* is belief and the terms that relate to it e. g. monotheism, polytheism, atheism or the different niches like Heathenism, Paganism, Pantheism, Panentheism, Pansophism, Animism, Organicism. In the beginning of this journey, I was thinking to go into the direction of researching eastern religions that are generally accepted, established, and understood as such by mainstream society. Namely Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Shintoism, Taoism and Confucianism. The latter is only arguably a religion as it is often seen more like a philosophy. (Brown 2023)

What got me into this field in the first place was a side note in a lecture *Rosi Braidotti* gave at *The 5th World Humanities Forum*, where she mentions some of the religions I stated in reference to a "nature-culture continuum" and "becoming one". (Braidotti 2018) I encountered the posthumanist perspective during a critical inquiry on *Biophilic Design* that is based on a romanticized idea with humans and nature at its center neglecting the technological aspect in architecture and is therefore of esoteric, unconvincing nature as I concluded. Whilst conducting this research I also had first contact points with *dark ecology, deep ecology,* and notions of *ambience.*

Dark ecology reminds of the possibility of an existence of *ambience* without a human, therefore the opposite of anthropocentrism. (Aretoulakis 2014) The crucial point is that *dark ecology* theoretically only eliminates the human aspect of the living. Animals don't feel the urge to practice architecture, at least in the human sense of planning as far as I know. Meaning in a world without the human architecture and the profession becomes pointless, and therefore theorizing about it as well. This world that would be completely harmonic and unproblematic at least from a non-human perspective. Whereas from a human perspective my goal is to achieve a *harmonious togetherness* with a human agency, that is a part of this entirety. To enable this possibility an understanding of the interdependence is vital. *Deep ecology* engages with this interdependency and the meaning of the parts that is gained by their position in the collective with a human.(Aretoulakis 2014)

Connected to *deep ecology* but in a more *spiritual realm* the notion of *Dark Green Religion* introduced by *Bron Taylor* comes into play. Here I see a correlation between what I was originally searching for in *Biophilic Design*, the natural aspect and the *spiritual realm* that offers another dimension. Maybe the missing part? The most interesting subsection within *Dark Green Religion* that *Taylor* divides into four main categories for me are the two he calls *Natural Animism* and *Gaian Naturalism* and represent the *Naturalistic Dark Green Religion*. *Naturalistic Dark Green Religion* is characterized by a skeptic approach and often combined with a scientific understanding. Although the differentiation between science and nonscientific is difficult when it comes to *spirituality*, as I explained in the introduction. The *Animism* in the *Animistic Religions* (*Spiritual Animism* and *Natural Animism*) deriving from the Latin word anima, meaning soul, life intention or consciousness is concerned with an understanding of natural forces to create mutually beneficial and respectful relations with all living beings. *Gaian Earth Religions* (*Gaina Spiritualism* and *Gaian Naturalism*) have a more holistic conception and are aiming for an explanation of ecosystems or the universe and their functions. (Taylor 2010)

What I hope to gain by looking into these *spiritual ecologies* is an interaction with our environment and the application of architecture in a more empathic way, that is informed by *science* and *spirituality*. Ultimately the objective is a liberation from static structures such as fixed theoretical frameworks and use of references. An alternative approach requires deviation from the established procedures. Something that I still find myself struggling with. Only in rare occasions I feel like successfully escaping this mindset, most of the time whilst being in contact with nature, poetry, music or art. As *Shanti Sumartojo* stated during a lecture titled *Atmospheres, Ineffability and Powers of Attention: Attuning to Architecture* it is more about "trying to be ready to perceive instead of going to search for it". (Sumartojo 2023)

Although I partially agree with her statement I cannot fully do so, as I'm convinced of a reciprocal relation between space and experience. Therefore, I want to address what is seemingly in order or throughout designed. I believe that there lays a great potential in *spontaneity*. But if a place is completely thought through than it is limiting as in there is specific things that are supposed to happen there or a way it is to be perceive. This regulating factor is depriving it of the ability to host possibilities. On the other hand, something that is perceived by the public as chaotic can be regarded as a *natural composition* that is defined by *harmony*. A perfectly harmonious place therefore is a place with endless possibilities characterized by the absence of expectations. To allow *natural composition* means to renounce some of the decision-making power the designers or architects possess. It means to replace some authority with a sense of collectivity. A collectivity that is made up of more than the human agency.

Metaphor – Method

Metaphors can help to transform an elusive concern into something more graspable, without becoming to concrete. The layer of interpretation leaves room for creativity. A translation of our imagination and understanding of those metaphors can become a basis for creation, an architectural act. Inspirations for this process can be found in the making of art or composition of music. Traces of this artistic aspect are also found in architecture and must gain more attention.

Cartography – Method

The representation of this research will be a *Cartography* displaying the relations between different terms that represent parts of our environment and the diverse worldviews and ideologies. It is thought as visual aid, merely a different way of depicting what I was trying to explain until now. In an ideal scenario it would be the result of discussion. Being produced by me it is subjective and personal it can only serve as a starting point for discussion. I'm expecting the result to be complex and dynamic not set in stone, but as it will be text written on a paper it will reveal only a moment, as does this whole research plan. Below this passage are shown a few snapshots of a work in progress that is nowhere near completion and not up to date, just to give an idea of the representation.
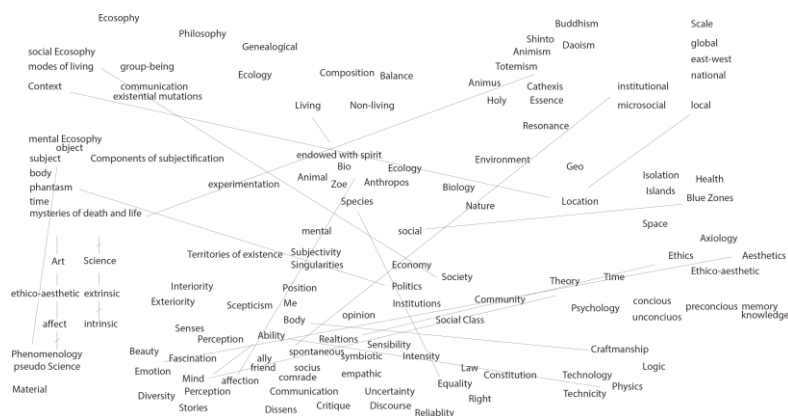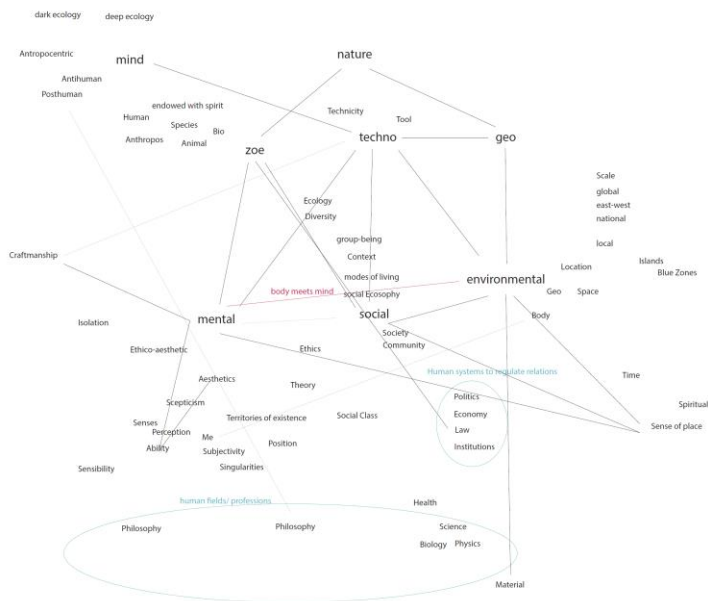

Figure 2 - Cartography 1 by Author

Figure 3 - Cartography 2 by Author

I must admit that the result might be confusing at first look, perhaps also after looking at it for a longer time. Nevertheless, from a personal stance I can assert that working on these illustrations made me help to see the broader picture. However, I intend to improve the visual mode of communicating the findings, therefore I started thinking about the limitations of these graphics. A few of these thoughts can be seen beneath.
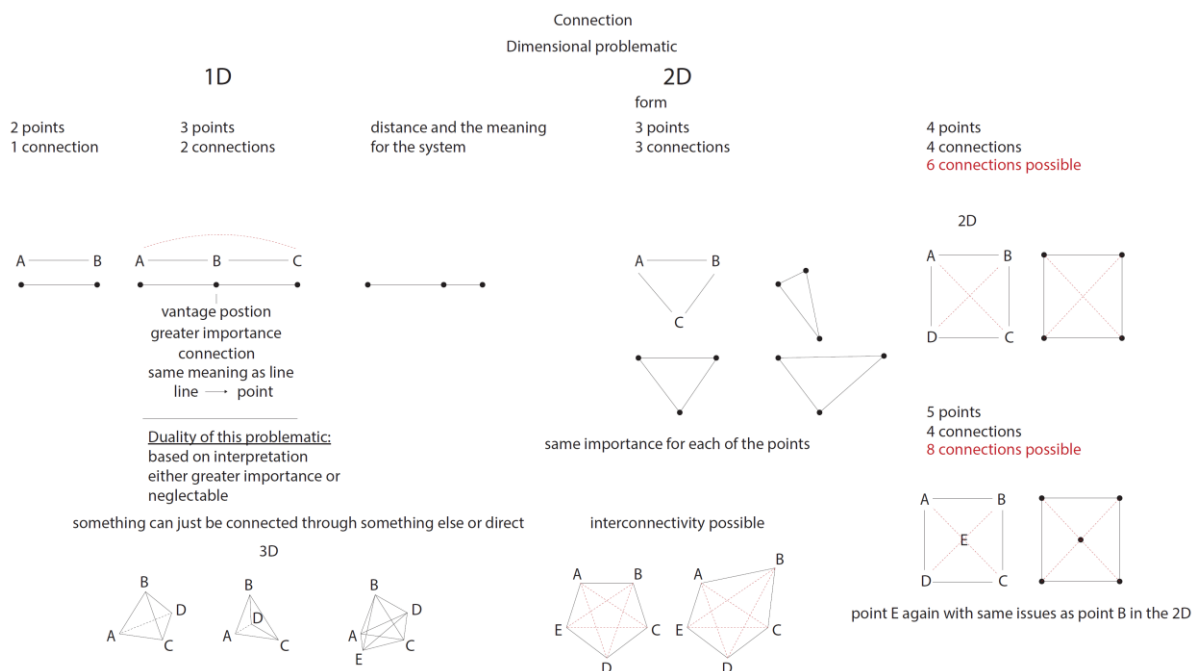

Figure 4 - Technicalities of Cartographies by Author

Spiritual Perception Enhancement Center – Design Idea

Regarding the design assignment, I intend to create a space that can enhance the perception of humans. As stated previously, the *spiritual perception* especially amongst adults is believed to be lost during the process of growing up. (Snyder 1993) Following but inverting *Gunilla Dahlberg's* idea of an integration of an ethico-aesthetic paradigm into childhood education, I want to provide an alternative approach to education. (Dahlberg 2016) Imagining a place where the roles of the adult teacher and the child student are reversed. Whilst *Dahlberg* in her approach focuses on the societal aspect of education within a human made system, I'm aiming towards an expansion of the sense of collectivity into the realm of all living beings.

The *Spiritual Perception Enhancement Center* wants to offer an environment, that enables children to teach adult a different way to experience and perceive the world. At the same time, it enables children that usually are supposed to follow adult's advice, to turn the tables and thereby experience a sense of appreciation and a boost of self-confidence. In addition to adult's rediscovery a safeguard to the children's animistic perception is guaranteed. The difficulty lays in a successful integration of the other than human agency.

Terri Irwin in reference to her husband's connection to nature claims: "Years in the wilderness lent him a deep understanding of the natural world and reinforced a unique connection with wildlife that would stay with him throughout his whole life." (Irwin 2007) *Bron Taylor* in his book *Dark Green Religion* when it comes to lifechanging or *spiritual encounters* with large predators mentions e. g. *Val Plumwood* a leading environmental philosopher and author of the book *Becoming Prey*, who survived a severe attack of a crocodile, and afterwards explains that it "helped her to break past an assumed sense of human superiority and separateness from nature". (Taylor 2010)

Although I can at least in some way understand the feelings *Plumwood* experienced, the lesson learned in the *Spiritual Perception Enhancement Center* will not involve encounters with large lethal predators. Instead, I envision an involvement of only domesticated animals or harmless wild animals. It could incorporate a reintroduction hub for wild animals. In that way a win-win-win situation could be established. For adults, children, and members of other species.

The SPEC tries to give an answer to *Dahlberg's* question that has to be seen in correlation with *Brian Massumi's* ideas: "How do we create a school in which the teacher operates as an artist – as an artist who experiments and where materials are used in unpredictable ways so as to produce unpredictable art?" in order to create an environment where " the teacher's actions are, therefore, more of 'an experimental tweaking of an autonomous process than a molding of dumb matter'" (Dahlberg 2016; Massumi 2002)

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