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The Flywheel of the Collective. Bruno Latour on Aesthetic Habits and the Practice of Sensibility

CHRISTIAN FRIGERIO

Università degli Studi di Milano
christian.frigerio1@unimi.it

Abstract. This paper will consider the role that aesthetics, understood as the theory of sensibility, plays in Bruno Latour's philosophy. Aesthetics is the keystone of Latour's thought because it connects his peculiar metaphysical theory of effects as coming before their causes, with his view of how we come to accord moral respect to other beings, and finally with his conceptualization of political (and especially ecological) praxis. The paper will argue that the role Latour assigns to art and science depends precisely on their capacity to extend sensibility; that sensibility is the motor for the creation and the maintenance of the «collective»; and that it is always sensibility that provides the ground for political action, making it possible to generate the affects without which any issue would remain ineffective.

Keywords. Latour, sensibility, aesthetics, ecology, Anthropocene.

1. *Introduction: sensibility all the way down*

Bruno Latour has been an innovator in both metaphysics and political thought, and aesthetics, understood primarily as the theory of sensibility, is the keystone of the connection be-

tween them. While the role of Latour in renewing both metaphysics and political thought has been variously assessed (see Harman [2009], Harman [2014]), the role of aesthetic in this renewal has not yet received a proper defense. This paper will provide such defense, showing how Latour's «effect-oriented» ontology remains unintelligible unless a proper place is given to his theory of sensibility, which is actually a *practice* of sensibility.

«There are many things to which we try to render ourselves sensitive. To capture that activity, I will use the word aesthetic in the original Greek sense of *aisthesis*-perception, or making oneself sensitive to something» (Latour [2015b]: 315). The role that Latour assigns to sensibility begins with the body: as he writes drawing on Isabelle Stengers and Vinciane Despret – but also, more intermediately, on Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze –, «to have a body *is to learn to be affected*, meaning “effectuated”, moved, put into motion by other entities, humans or non-humans. If you are not engaged in this learning you become insensitive, dumb, you drop dead» (Latour [2004]: 205). He defines the body as «*an interface that becomes more and more describable as it learns to be affected by more and more elements*. The body is thus not a provisional residence of something superior – an immortal soul, the universal or thought – but what leaves a dynamic trajectory by which we learn to register and become sensitive to what the world is made of [...]. Acquiring a body is thus a progressive enterprise that produces at once a sensory medium *and* a sensitive world» (Latour [2004]: 206-207).

But Latour does not limit aesthetics to bodily affectivity. According to the relational metaphysics he defends, entities («actors») have no properties except those they acquire through relations («attachments»). To use the terms of classical metaphysics, for Latour actors have no «intrinsic properties», only «extrinsic» ones. This is why there is no essential difference between bodily sensibility and the sensibility obtained through various kinds of prostheses. Art is one of these prostheses: over the years, Latour has been involved in several artistic projects, in particular in plastic arts and theatre¹. The role that Latour ascribes to art concerns above all its capacity to *expand the sensibility* of the spectator: this is how he links the two meanings of aesthetics.

Importantly, however, such an expansion of sensibility is not limited to art. Latour began his career as a science and technology scholar; in the light of the recent developments in his thought, we may say that *one of the reasons of his attention towards sciences was their capacity to expand sensibility* by admitting new «actors» within the «collective», where «collective» is a reconceptualization of society so to include even non-human actors. An experiment is in fact an «event» which always extends the list of actors needed to make it happen (Latour [1999a]: 124-125), and scientific apparatuses, along with works of art, are the greatest enhancers of sensibility: «I will make no distinction between making oneself sensitive for scientific purposes and making oneself sensitive through

various formats associated with the arts [...] the ridiculous distinction between art and science is part of the history of primary qualities, mapped on the aesthetic as strictly subjective» (Latour [2015b]: 315, 322)². Just think how poorer our collective would be without the beings revealed to scientists by particle accelerators or microscopes. Laboratory instruments thus serve as true prostheses enhancing our sensibility and opening up our world to more and more actors.

Given the equal role of art and science, one of the theses of this paper will be that Latour's concept of sensibility is a *univocal* one: according to Latour, *there is no difference between sensibility and sensitivity*, since for him the capacity to be affected and the possibility of registering the subtlest differences are one and the same thing. Moreover, for Latour there is a continuum from perceptual sensibility, to representational sensibility, to affective sensibility, to moral sensibility: sensibility is equally distributed throughout the collective, and it is the universal key through which entities of all kinds get connected.

The continuum goes all the way to *political* sensibility. Aesthetics has a political function as well. This is particularly evident in Latour's work on political ecology. What scandalizes Latour is the disproportion between the ecological threat and the answers that governments have been able to give. According to Latour, this is a problem of *affectivity*: people still lack the sensitivity needed to face the Anthropocene. Indeed, one of the features of contemporary risks is their invisibility and nonlocality (Beck [1986]: 21). This is why transmitting information about the risks we are running may not be enough. Against the «deficit model» of science communication, according to which informing citizens would be enough to get them to act (see Wynne [1995]), we need an «aestheticization of information»: «If we say it's just given, that worries me a bit because it means you just seize and receive it. But in fact you actually elicit it [...]. I have been slightly worried that we only think of aestheticization in connection with art and that we're not thinking about it in the sense of its etymology, which has to do with creating and enhancing a new sensitivity to things [...]. Aestheticizing data might be understood as a shifting of real data into the display, into the design, into the architectural part of the work» (Latour [2017]: 172). This is, for instance, the reason Latour gives such importance to Tomás Saraceno, whose work allows to visualize what Latour means by a «network»: «As Deleuze and Guattari have shown, a concept is always closely related to a percept. [...] it is one thing to say it, for instance in political philosophy, that no identity exists without relations with the rest of the world – and it is quite another to be reminded visually and experientially of the way this could be done» (Latour [2011b]).

In this paper, I will frame the role that Latour gives to sensibility in terms of *aesthetic habits*. Taking advantage of the double meaning of «aesthetic», I will use aesthetic habit to point at *habits of sensibility*, at certain *capacities to be affected*, to be sensibly moved by the actions of other actors. For Latour, habit is

a specific «mode of existence», and the entire tenth chapter of his *Inquiry into modes of existence* (Latour [2012]) is devoted to exploring it. Habit is the mode that keeps us from living in a world of sheer discontinuity, where we would have to redefine every encounter without presuppositions: «We can say of habit that in effect it makes the world habitable, that is, susceptible to an ethos, to an ethology» (Latour [2012]: 268). Moreover, like a good pragmatist, Latour uses habit to explain the stabilization of entities without resorting to a fixed essence: «The universe is made of essences, the multiverse, to use a Deleuzian or a Tardian expression, is made of *habits*» (Latour [2004]: 213; cf. Latour [1999b]: 241).

I will argue that the habits to which Latour gives such an important role of stabilization are primarily aesthetic habits, and that they are needed to create a collective, to enable it to cope with political issues, and to define its opposition to other collectives. We will see that art and science are both fundamental to grounding *political composition through the creation of a shared sensibility*. William James, one of Latour's philosophical heroes, famously described habit as «the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent» (James [1890]: 121). To paraphrase James while adhering to Latour's famous rejection of any talk about «Society», we may say that, for Latour, *aesthetic habits are the flywheel of the collective*, since they unify the collective and define the «issues» it copes with.

In the remainder of this paper, I will account for this claim. I will begin with the role that sensibility plays in Latour's metaphysical construction. Then I will focus on how sensibility is linked to the way we assign moral consideration to other beings: in Latour's work with Émilie Hache, modernity appears as a long exercise in de-sensitization, as the creation of an an-aesthetic habit that has rendered people incapable of perceiving the agency of things. This brings us to our final section, in which the environmental problems issuing from the modern absence of sensibility are addressed through Latour's engagement with political ecology: here too, nothing would happen without the capacity of art and science to arouse sensibility. In order to make up for the absence of literature on this side of Latour's thought, the bulk of the paper will be descriptive. However, the conclusion will address two possible criticisms, one of which, regarding Latour's univocal conception of sensibility, needs to be taken seriously. Throughout the paper, the creation of new and more adequate aesthetic habits shall appear as the primary goal of our shared practices, and its necessity as one of the major legacies of Latour's work.

2. *Sensing differences: how actors go on stage*

According to Latour's «actor-network theory», the primal stuff of the world is what he calls the «plasma», an unformatted «metamorphic zone» made of «pure

effects» or «waves of action» (Latour [2015a]: 101). The plasma gives rise to an actor when it is included within a «network», a system of coordinates that stabilizes it. If we take a map as an example of a network, we may say that plasma is the territory *minus* the map. This is how Latour explains the constitutive openness of the networks to the plasma: «Contrary to substance, surface, domain, and spheres that fill every centimeter of what they bind and delineate, nets, networks, and “worknets” leave everything they don’t connect simply *unconnected*. Is not a net made up, first and foremost, of empty spaces? [...] the inescapable question is: What sort of stuff is it that does not get touched by or is not hooked up on those narrow sort of circulations?» (Latour [2005]: 242).

So, the plasma consists of pure effects to which a cause still has to be attributed. One of the most original traits of Latour’s metaphysics is that it places effects *before* their causes: Ramses II died before the isolation of the tuberculosis bacillus which, as we know since Koch, caused it; the souring of milk was recorded long before Pasteur isolated lactic yeast. Latour takes this «before» literally. According to him, these causes only come into being when some effects are *attributed* to them. We witness an effect or a certain agency, and only subsequently do we attribute such effects to a cause. This cause is what Latour calls an *actor*. An actor is nothing more than a stabilized list of effects, a set of agencies: «all entities manipulated by scientists start as a list of actions and slowly coalesce later into the name of an object that summarizes or stabilizes them for further retrieval» (Latour [2016a]: 81); «An actor emerges little by little from its actions; a new substance emerges from its attributes [...]: yeast becomes an agent whose properties can then be deduced» (Latour [2015a]: 89). As Gerard De Vries explains, «Whatever caused milk to turn sour before Pasteur *became* “lactic yeast” – a being with new characteristics, namely a being that is visible to the human eye and that can be isolated, sprinkled and transported – only after having been translated in Pasteur’s experiments» (De Vries [2016]: 134). We can say that Latour defends a bold *realism of effects*, but a radical *underdetermination of actors*, whose definition depends on the *inter-definition* of effects within a network. This is perhaps the best summary of Latour’s position:

there is no other way to define an actor but through its action, and there is no other way to define an action but by asking what other actors are modified, transformed, perturbed, or created by the character that is the focus of attention. This is a pragmatist tenet, which we can extend to (a) the thing itself, soon to be called a “ferment”; (b) the story told by Pasteur to his colleagues at the Academy of Science; and (c) the reactions of Pasteur’s interlocutors to what is so far only a story found in a written text. (Latour [1999a]: 122)

This means that, before an actor can be defined, the agencies it condenses must be *registered*. This is where sensibility comes in: the metaphysical role of

sensibility is precisely to explain how things *get connected*, how they enter the network. Agency is defined as that which «does make a difference under trials» (Latour [2005]: 71)³. Latour writes:

An invisible agency that makes no difference, produces no transformation, leaves no trace, and enters no account is *not* an agency. Period. Either it does something or it does not. If you mention an agency, you have to provide the account of its action, and to do so you need to make more or less explicit which trials have produced which observable traces. [...] the questions to ask about any agent are simply the following: Does it make a difference in the course of some other agent's action or not? Is there some trial that allows someone to detect this difference? (Latour [2005]: 53, 71)

In order to count as such, an effect must be registered; that is, there must be something capable of perceiving it, something *to which* it makes a difference: «Things can come to you, but if you don't render yourself sensitive to them, you just don't get it» (Latour [2015b]: 319). Latour's virtual plasma consists of those differences that are incapable of making a difference, of those effects that have not yet found anyone capable of sensing them. This is why sensibility is so important: an increase in sensibility means an increase in the reality we can confront. A good example is given by the training of a nose to become sensitive to differences in odours; what Latour calls «articulation» in the following quotation is nothing else than sensibility:

Before the week-long session, the pupils were inarticulate [...]: *different odours elicited the same behaviour*. Whatever happened to the world, only the same obstinately boring subject manifested itself. An inarticulate subject is someone who whatever the other says or acts always feels, acts and says the same thing [...]. In contrast, an articulate subject is someone who learns to be affected by others – *not by itself*. [...] a subject only becomes interesting, deep, profound, worthwhile when it resonates with others, is effected, moved, put into motion by new entities whose differences are registered in new and unexpected ways. Articulation thus does not mean ability to talk with authority [...] but being affected by differences. (Latour [2004]: 209-210)

We have already said that for Latour there is no essential difference between bodily sensibility and the sensitivity produced by laboratory prostheses. The following quotation from *Politics of nature* provides a perfect example:

Thanks to the cooper, thanks to the gas chromatographer, we have *become sensitive* to differences that were invisible before, some on our palate, others on logarithmic paper [...]; thanks to the multiplication of instruments, we have become capable of registering new distinctions. [...] The more devices we have at our disposal, the more time we spend in the cellar or in the laboratory, the more our palate is exercised, the more adept the cellar master, the more sensitive the chromatographer, the more realities abound. [...] reality grows to precisely the same extent as the work done to become sensitive to differences. The more instruments proliferate, the more the arrangement is artificial, the more capable we become of registering worlds. (Latour [1999b]: 85)

Scientific apparatuses are instruments designed to register otherwise imperceptible differences, and scientists «can be defined as *bodies learning to be affected by hitherto unregistrable differences through the mediation of an artificially created set-up*» (Latour [2004]: 209). Science is the aesthetic mediator *par excellence*. Latour's most convincing move in defending this surprising claim is to appeal to scientific papers themselves. Latour stresses that a peculiarity of scientific literature lies in the need to create a commensurability between the scientists' own sensibility and that of the untrained readers, a traceability from scientific facts to everyday perceptions:

When most of the actors mobilized in a narrative are *not* known in advance, you have to render them familiar to the readers through their most minute behavior. It is only once you have assembled enough of those behaviors that it becomes possible to summarize their actions by the shorthand of their name. An agency is added to the actions. Scientific papers solve this question of the lack of familiarity by going down to the most elementary features of perception – in the case of the pulsar, for instance, by showing in the text the very graph of the pulse left by what has begun to coalesce as the action of an optical pulsar [...]. This is where the relative opacity of the scientific literature comes from: you have to constantly fall back on elementary perceptions to achieve familiarity with entities that had no common presence in the world until then. The invisible and the far away is slowly built up from successive layers of amazingly simple perceptive judgments that have to be assembled one after the other with as little gap as possible between every layer. (Latour [2016a]: 86)

There is no access to a network, but the sensibility of those who already form it. Now, the network has a political counterpart, what Latour calls a *collective*. This is an assemblage of human and non-human actors sharing a concern for an *issue*. Needless to say, such an issue has to be filtered through public sensibility. This means, first, that a necessary condition for the creation of a collective is a *shared sensibility*, and second, that such sensibility must be induced, maintained and nourished. This is where science and art come in a second time as sensibility enhancers, and this is why we can say that aesthetic habits are the flywheel of the collective. The next section will provide the bridge between metaphysics and politics by examining Latour's view of *morality* as a question of sensible habits.

3. *Passionate interests and an-aesthetic habits*

The issues around which a collective revolves need not be matters of life and death. Take the example of Aramis, the Paris experimental transport system whose project was aborted before it could be tested. According to Latour, this abortion was not due to any technical problem: Aramis' defenders were simply unable to arouse the public *interest* that was needed to sustain experimentation.

We may say that interest is the collective side of sensibility, and that for Latour there is a continuum from the sensibility of the actors to public interest. The case of *Aramis* is important because it shows that even the apparently more automatic sides of the collective, the technical ones, need solicited interest – Latour comes to speak of a *love of techniques*, the subtitle of the *Aramis* book (Latour [1993]) – in order to be sustained and developed. Interest is not an economic category, but an *emotional* one, to the point that Latour often uses the conjoint expression of «passionate interests»: «interest [...] is everything that lies between, everything through which an entity must pass to go somewhere; as for passion, it defines the degree of intensity of the attachment» (Latour [2012]: 433)⁴. It should be clear by now that science also falls into this category: far from being a matter of exclusive objectivity, «scientific means interesting» (Latour [2004]: 215; see Latour [1987]: 146 ff.).

Once more, we see why aesthetic habits, understood as habits of sensibility, are the flywheel of the collective. They are needed to create the collective and to keep it in existence: «Everywhere, building, creating, constructing, laboring means to *learn how to become sensitive* to the contrary requirements, to the exigencies, to the pressures of conflicting agencies where none of them is really in command» (Latour [2003]: 34-35). Actors enter the collective through sensibility and can fall out of it as soon as the other actors lose interest towards them.

This means that, contrary to most of the classical views (Hirschman [1977]), interest is connected to *morality* in a fundamental way. Consider the important paper *Morality or moralism*, written together with Émilie Hache. The authors describe it as «an experiment or exercise in sensitization and desensitization, in the immunological sense of those terms» (Hache, Latour 2010: 312). Hache and Latour examine four papers – from Comte-Sponville and Kant to Michel Serres and James Lovelock – looking at the way these authors distribute sensibility among different kinds of human and non-human beings. This is the result of their investigation: «Kant began a process of desensitization to the call of nonhumans whose return to our attention is marked by Serres's text and to which Lovelock's marks a resensitization. Comte-Sponville's text here represents the zero point in sensitivity to the moral issues that nonhumans pose. [...] the texts in tandem permit us to offer a definition of moral sentiment as a revival of scruple and, accordingly, an extension of the class of beings to which the responsible subject learns to respond. Conversely, we can define immorality as the loss of scruple and progressive restriction of the class of beings toward which we feel obliged to respond» (Hache, Latour 2010: 313). This implies, first, that rhetorical means are as good as any other for enhancing or suspending sensibility, that there is not only a sensual dimension to concepts but also a conceptual dimension to sensibility; and, second, that for Latour there is a continuum from perceptual or representational sensibility to moral sensibility. To register the appearance of a

difference is already to *valorize* it (Latour [2012]: 435). A difference that is not valorized is as good as indifferent. This is why morality and metaphysics are so closely related: the work with Hache is a sketch for the genealogy of their connection in modern thought.

The most interesting analysis is that of Kant: contrary to what one might expect, nature for Kant is not a priori devoid of any moral status; in order to establish modern «moralism», Kant had to *make himself insensitive* to its call:

Nature is not silent for Kant: the noise it makes is for him frightful and calls out with such force that humanity feels impotent, small, and indeed silent before it. For this reason, *we must learn to become insensitive* to its call. To become moral in the modern way, it is necessary to take shelter from the world and to observe nature as a spectacle “all the more attractive for its fearfulness”. [...] the chief interest of the text is that the storm and the elements that compose it seem (unlike Comte-Sponville’s cat) to be thoroughly alive. [...]. For Kant, despite the empirical and cognitive richness of the encounter with nonhumans, and despite the promise of intellectual joy and mutual admiration in possible meetings, the issue is one of obliging ourselves to give all that up, to turn away from the temptation, so as not to commit an error in judgment. To change his way of thinking, Kant engaged in an intellectual, even spiritual, exercise in renunciation. The huge effort that he had to make to desensitize himself stands out in the distance between what he claims in his philosophical argument – nature can no longer humiliate us – and what the same nature does in his text (it calls out in a thunderous, terrifyingly powerful voice). It is Kant’s hesitation before the nascent division between facts and values, between amoral nonhumans and moral human beings, rather than any affirmation of the superiority of humans as moral beings, that constitutes the moral dimension of his text. (Hache, Latour [2010]: 317-318)

Modern insensitivity to non-humans is not something natural: it has been imposed through texts such as Kant’s. Modernity has been a long exercise in de-sensitization, in the creation of an *an-aesthetic habit*. When Serres extends morality to rocks, when Lovelock includes the whole Earth in it, they are simply restoring the primal sensibility to the call of things. Hence Hache and Latour’s conclusion: «ecological morality is always approached as if it were a matter of authorizing or prohibiting an *extension* of the moral category to *new beings* (animals, rivers, glaciers, oceans), whereas exactly the opposite is the case. What we should find amazing are the strange operations whereby we have constantly *restricted* the list of beings to whose appeal we should have been able to respond. From this point of view, there is nothing less “natural” than philosophical modernism» (Hache, Latour [2010]: 325).

If, despite this, Latour is so surprised by our lack of sensibility to the ecological crisis, it is because he thinks sciences have provided us with all we need to become sensitive to it. What remains to do is to create the means to capture this «emission of morality»: «just as no one, once the instrument has been calibrated, would think of asking the geologist if radioactivity is “all in his head,” “in his heart,” or “in the rocks,” no one will doubt any longer that the world *emits mo-*

rality toward anyone who possesses an instrument sensitive enough to register it» (Latour [2012]: 456). As the final section of this paper show, this creation is one which implies *politics* in a fundamental way.

4. *Huge but barely visible: sensing gaia*

For Latour, the Anthropocene is the era in which non-humans have become so sensitive to human actions that they begin to react; on the other hand, it seems that humans have yet to be raised to the same level of sensitivity. «Gaia», James Lovelock’s name for the Earth considered as an actor, stands for the status of shared sensibility that is supposed to bring humans and non-humans together: «How do we make ourselves sensitive to one specific character, an unusual character that has become increasingly important: Gaia? This character brings together a strange mixture of science, religion, law, and politics» (Latour [2015b]: 315). Indeed, the «socially organized denial» of climate change has an essential connection with the way we manage emotions (Norgaard [2011]), and Latour’s last book, written with Nikolaj Schultz, is entirely devoted to coping with the apparent incapacity of environmentalists to elicit proper *affects* (Latour, Schultz [2022]). Here are some of the ways in which Latour conceptualizes the need for new aesthetic habits in the Anthropocene:

The slow operation that consists in being enveloped in sensor circuits in the form of loops: this is what is meant by “being of this Earth.” But we all have to learn this for ourselves, anew each time. And it has nothing to do with being a human-in-Nature or a human-on-the-Globe. It is rather a slow, gradual fusion of cognitive, emotional, and aesthetic virtues thanks to which the loops are made more and more visible. After each passage through a loop, we become more sensitive and more reactive to the fragile envelopes that we inhabit. [...] This is what it means to live in the Anthropocene: “sensitivity” is a term that is applied to all the actors capable of spreading their sensors a little farther and making others feel that the consequences of their actions are going to fall back on them, come to haunt them. When the dictionary defines “sensitive” as “something that detects or reacts rapidly to small changes, signals, or influences”, the adjective applies to Gaia as well as to the Anthropos – but only if it is equipped with enough sensors to feel the retroactions. (Latour [2015a]: 139-141)

Collectively, *we choose* what we are sensitive to, what we need to react to quickly. Moreover, in other periods, we have been capable of sharing the suffering of perfect strangers very far removed from us, whether through “proletarian solidarity,” in the name of the “communion of saints,” or quite simply out of humanism. In this case, it is as though we had *decided to remain insensitive* to the reactions *of beings of a certain type* – those who are connected, broadly speaking, to the strange figure of matter. [...] What doesn’t manage to get through to

people bombarded by bad news about the ecological mutation is the activity, the autonomy, the sensitivity to our actions, of the materials that make up the critical zones in which we all reside. These people seem incapable of responding to the agency of these materials. (Latour [2015a]: 191, 207)

Latour's clearest statement comes perhaps when he defines the gluing role of the concept of *performance* for art, science, and politics in the Anthropocene:

This other meta concept [performance] does not simply mean the older arts of dance, music or theatre but a much larger set of transdisciplinary skills that provide players and audience with a sensitivity for situations where there was none before. What I have called the "political arts" is a way to explore the three aesthetics of arts, science and politics, where aesthetics is understood as gaining a sensitivity for the new planet on which we are supposed to land – sensitivity which is gained by scientific instruments, by political representation but also by what the arts have to offer. Performances have the crucial advantage of allowing the *dramatization* what is at issue, but also the *dedramatization* of issues since they are artificially staged. No politics of the Anthropocene is possible as long as its players are paralyzed and inarticulate. Without the arts, people will remain stuck in the old planet without moving an inch, terrified by guilt and willful ignorance. (Latour [2016b]: 10)

Latour makes no secret of the need to make the threat hauntingly present to the public: «What is coming, Gaia, has to appear as a threat, because this is the only way to make us sensitive to mortality, finitude, "existential negation" – to the simple difficulty of being of this Earth. This is the only way to make us conscious, tragically conscious, of the New Climate Regime» (Latour [2015a]: 244). Still, unlike other theorists⁵, Latour believes that the «sublime» is an outdated aesthetic category, both descriptively (the Anthropocene was created by us and therefore we should by now conceive ourselves as equal to the power of nature) and normatively: what we are witnessing today is a «gloomy neo-sublime», a «deeply perverse sublime», a «pornography of the catastrophe» (Aït-Touati, Latour [2022]: 51) that makes it impossible to act. This is why, elsewhere, Latour's view seems less gloomy, for instance when he considers the crucial role of art in determining the new sensibility: in an interview about the theatrical pieces he wrote with Frédérique Aït-Touati and his daughter Chloé, he claimed that, given his impression that the more alarms were ringing, the less people reacted, theatre could be a way of «disseminating anxiety under another form», making us aware of the threat while spreading alternative feelings that tend towards elation rather than depression: «There are many possibilities of establishing an affective link with the new climatic regime!» (Aït-Touati, Latour [2022]: 48).

Art is a precious ally of the environmental movement, but obviously sciences are also fundamental. This is because of «a very important feature of controversies over ecological entities. They are not visible without the mediation of scien-

tific disciplines. If the problems of the public, as John Dewey said, is to visualize through inquiries the unintended consequences of our action, it is extraordinary difficult to produce a “public” concerned with ecological problems because of the enormous complexity, the long distance between causes and consequences, the lag time, the rupture in scale, and the erasure of national and administrative boundaries. In order to visualize the consequences, we need to go through some laboratories to learn new techniques, to be confident in the results of some instruments, and to appeal to some experts» (Latour [2011a]: 9). Indeed, James Lovelock would never have conceptualized Gaia if he had not previously invented the electron capture detector, a veritable «prosthesis» that allowed him to appreciate the subtlest variations in planetary atmospheres and imagine the effects of life on them⁶. As Latour writes, accounting for the necessary integration of science with other forms of knowledge:

In matters of politics, it is prudent to follow John Dewey’s advice that we cannot expect to know the best solution in advance, but only that we can improve the quality of the sensors – both instruments and people – that detect shortcomings and the speed with which we rectify the course. If in politics the blind lead the blind, then hope rests on finding the best way to activate the white cane to fumble in the dark. This is where the scientific establishment will play a crucial role in multiplying the sensors, improving their qualities, speeding the dissemination of their results, improving models, and proposing alternative explanations to phenomena. Such an infrastructure cannot, however, be limited to scientists: They must collaborate with citizens, activists, and politicians to quickly realize where things are going wrong. Creating an infrastructure of sensors that allows tracking the lag time between environmental changes and reactions of societies is the only practical way in which we can hope to add some self-awareness to Gaia’s self-regulation. (Lenton, Latour [2018]: 1068)

Sensibility, elicited by art and science, is thus the most powerful weapon of environmentalism. But making sensible the reach of the ecological menace does not exhaust the role of aesthetic habits. Latour calls the «people of Gaia» or «the Terrestrial» the collective formed by those who take the Anthropocene as a real political issue and are engaged in problems of «generation», of creating the conditions for the renewal of Earth’s habitability. The people of Gaia, however, are *at war*: they are at war with climate skeptics. Following Carl Schmitt, Latour understands politics as a militant divide between friends and foes. «We» (the people of Gaia) are at war with the climate skeptics because their reasons are just as good as ours. If rights and wrongs were distributed in advance, political ecology would be what Schmitt called a «police operation». Despite the growing scientific consensus on the reality and on the human origins of climate change, climatology is a science of uncertainty: it has become the paradigm of what epistemology calls «post-normal science» (see Glover [2006], Hulme [2013], Edwards [2013]), a science whose nature is *performative* because of the involve-

ment with a tangle of facts, values, disciplines, and interventions. Policies can no longer be derived directly from scientific facts. What climatologists say is bound up with how our future policies will affect the object of their study. This is why any scientific position on ecological issues always implies a political stance. We may say that the constructivism about science that Latour always defended only found its perfect object when he devoted himself to political ecology: everybody could *de jure* be made sensible to the «effects» (polluted air, global warming, extreme climatic events, etc.), but there can be no final certainty regarding their attribution to a unified actor. There would be no ecological party if someone had not previously been made sensible to the agency of that actor we now call Gaia.

Thus, it is precisely a difference in aesthetic habits that divides the warring parties. Climate skeptics and the people of Gaia have different sensibilities, they *feel* the world differently, and to that extent they live in different worlds. If the people of Gaia will win, it will be because of stronger alliances with scientists and artists, because of a better capacity to make others feel the call of Gaia and the reality of our current crisis. For Latour, much of the future of the world lies in aesthetic habits.

5. Conclusion

Aesthetic habits are the flywheel of the collective. This paper has used the term «aesthetic habits» to point at the way in which various media (mainly art and science, but also philosophical treatises) *make us sensible* to the effects that compose the world. We can summarize their functioning in five points. Aesthetic habits have (1) a *metaphysical* role, grounding the possibility of perceiving the effects by which actors are defined; (2) a *stabilizing* role, defining the interests that guide the development of the collective; (3) a *moral* role, defining the entities to which we accord moral respect; (4) a *political* role, since they are necessary to focus the issues around which political movements revolve; (5) a *militant* role, dividing the parties at odds in what Latour, with Schmitt, calls a war. This paper has framed the first role through Latour's concept of an unformatted «plasma» to which we must become sensitive; the stabilizing role has been addressed through the concept of «passionate interest», needed to sustain even the most seemingly automated parts of the collective, such as technological development; the moral role has been explored through Latour's work with Émilie Hache, which focuses on the ways in which modernity has made us insensitive to the agency of «natural» actors; finally, the political and the militant roles have been addressed through Latour's involvement in political ecology and his concern that environmentalism still lacks the capacity to arouse the affects needed by political action.

Few thinkers have given sensibility a position comparable to Latour's. Perhaps the most valuable lesson we can draw from his account is the need for an aesthetic channel for political action.

As a conclusion, I will address two possible, interrelated critiques of Latour's view of sensibility. The first concerns the connection between aesthetics, science and politics. Someone might argue that, despite Latour's claims about the need for a renewed realistic outlook to overcome the excesses of critical philosophy, his aestheticization of science leads him back to a strong form of relativism: climate change would only exist for those who have been made able to sense it; the capacity of scientific objects to affect the public would become more important than their actual existence. From a political point of view, this means charging Latour with defending "post-truth", that the Oxford Dictionary defined precisely as «relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief»⁷.

This critique seems misplaced. That science needs aesthetics does not mean that aesthetics is more important than science. Latour's stance is not normative, but empirical: he does not mean that the aesthetic appeal of science alone matters; he just means that even scientific information would remain silent without an aesthetic capacity to affect people in various ways. Latour is simply concerned with the conditions of political efficacy of science – and we may add that in linking climate science and affectivity he is in the company of many environmentalists who could never be accused of eliciting antirealism⁸. His lesson is for both scientists and the public: let your sensibilities grow together if you want our best weapon, science, to be effective within the collective.

The second criticism is directed at Latour's concept of sensibility itself. Latour often seems to mistake sensibility for *awareness* or for knowledge. A Geiger counter makes us aware of the presence of radiation; so, when Latour says that the counter makes us sensitive to radiation, he is using sensibility as a synonym for knowledge. Indeed, we were affected by gravity long before Newton's formulae made us «sensitive to it», and Ramses II died well before Koch discovered the tuberculosis bacillus. As Harman notes, «Latour seems [...] to conflate action on human knowledge with action tout court» (Harman [2014]: 50). Latour's univocal conceptualization of sensibility seems to deprive it of any specificity. Latour has a point when he shows that knowledge has an irreducible aesthetic dimension, but it is problematic to claim that knowledge and sensibility are simply the same thing. Knowledge, rather than aesthetic habits, would then become the pivot of the collective.

This becomes particularly problematic because, unlike sensibility, knowledge and awareness cannot be easily generalized to non-humans. This contradicts the egalitarian, symmetrical view of the collective that Latour has always defended. It is not absurd to claim that even «things» are «sensible» in their own way: in-

deed, every element of the universe is affected by others in many ways, and the various brands of «new materialism» have long defended this affective view of materials. It is more difficult though to claim that non-human actors are capable of knowledge, and Latour never claimed this. Thus, identifying sensibility with knowledge contradicts his own view of the collective by placing human actors at its center.

This shows that, despite his project of distinguishing many «modes of existence» (Latour [2012]), Latour has always clung to some radically univocal concepts. While these aimed to make his views all-encompassing, they occasionally ended up making them simply inadequate. Perhaps, against Latour's univocal view of sensibility, we should claim that *sensibility is said in many ways*: a richer taxonomy of the modes of sensibility could possibly allow us to salvage the place Latour gives to aesthetic habits, while taking into account the different ways in which actors are affected. By allowing more kinds of actors to contribute to the definition of reality, this would also open the way for the bolder form of realism that the later Latour sought.

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Notes

- 1 For a review of his work in art, see Manghi (2018).
- 2 Latour supports this aesthetic view of science with some recurrent references, for instance Daston (1988), Jones, Galison (1998), Riskin (2002).
- 3 This is a variation over Bateson’s famous definition of information as a difference which makes a difference (Bateson [1972]: 321).
- 4 *The science of passionate interests* is also the title of Latour’s introduction to Gabriel Tarde’s economic anthropology (Latour, Lépinay [2009]).
- 5 See Kainulainen (2013) and Williston (2016). Latour’s position is more akin to the one expressed for instance by Fressoz (2016). For an overview of aesthetics in the Anthropocene, see Horn, Bergthaller (2020): ch. 7.
- 6 Latour even talks about a «haptic technology» that climate sciences would have been developing, literally putting us «in touch» with ecological problems (Latour [2016b]: 7).
- 7 The paradox is well expressed by a 2018 paper-interview about Latour’s realistic turn: *Bruno Latour, the post-truth philosopher, mounts a defense of science* (Kofman [2018]).
- 8 Reprising Heidegger’s notion of «moods» as a means for the disclosure of the world to us, Dipesh Chakrabarty has claimed that the climatologists’ descriptions of climate change should become capable of influencing such moods if they are to move people: «Motivating globally coordinated human action on global warming necessarily entails the difficult, if not impossible, task of making available to human experience a cascade of events that unfold on multiple scales, many of them inhuman» (Chakrabarty [2015]: 47). Some have insisted on the importance of more specific affects: while fear is possibly the most popular option (Davis [1999]), Clive Hamilton has revalued «grief», usually seen as a detrimental and disabling affection, claiming that only grief would allow humanity to detach from the «old future» and to imagine a different one (Hamilton [2010]: 212); mixing ecological and Marxist concerns, Andreas Malm has instead defended the need for an «ecological class hatred» that could mobilize populations against climate change and capitalism at once (Malm [2018]: 195). We may also recall the «I want you to panic» motto used by Greta Thunberg during the 2019 Parliaments tour.

