Aisthesis

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Foreword*

Filippo Fimiani, Daniele Guastini

Western modernity has long insisted on the separation between aesthetic experience and practical-and everyday-life. The Kantian legacy, reinforced by later formalist interpretations and philosophy of arts, carved out a conception of the aesthetic as autonomous, contemplative, disinterested, even elitist, and fundamentally detached from any concrete efficacy. Yet the broader history of Western culture, from the archaic to the digital, contradicts this epistemological narrative. Across very different epochs, images, performances, stories, and, more generally, symbolic forms have been repeatedly invested with therapeutic agency and value. The Platonic *pharmakon*, the Aristotelian *katharsis*, the Christian *agalma*, the incubation rituals and the devotional or apotropaic image traditions, all attest to the deep confidence in the iconic potentiality and power to intervene in bodies, souls and minds, to change the life of people and to transform a single or a collective destiny.

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Today, under radically different technological and socio-cultural conditions, these beliefs in iconic agency return with new intensity. We inhabit an iconosphere designed by digital infrastructures and algorithmic pre- and re-mediation, populated by ubiquitous and circulating images, shaped by micro-rituals and routines of equivocal forms of subjectivation and sociability, and driving fragile and precarious exercises of attention and care to ourselves and the world. Even in our contemporaneity, the link between aesthetics and therapy isn't dead or overcome, it is an anthropological persistence affecting our experiences and practices with and by the images as operational *pharmaka* – virtually both for good and for evil. Far from to being art-based or encrypted into solipsistic behaviours, aesthetic experience reappears today as a way of regulating and orienting our situated presence in world and with other beings and devices, of reorganising our embedded habits and embodied meanings, and of sustaining our ontologically inadequate capacities – externalized in, and supplied by, technical gestures and technological prosthesis.

This issue of *Aisthesis* explores this actual and vital intersection between representation and care, between image and health, through a set of contributions which aims to renew and remobilise a red line stretching from ancient poetics to contemporary digital therapeutics. The issue includes papers developed from the seminar organised by Daniele Guastini (PI of the eponymous PRIN PNRR 2022 project "Aesthetics and Therapeia") at the Sapienza University of Rome, held from 12 March to 9 May 2025, as well as additional contributions selected from proposals submitted to the editorial board, all evaluated through double-blind peer review. Read together, in chronological and thematical order, these essays outline a genealogy both hermeneutical and critical of aesthetic therapy that moves across classical philology, anthropology, philosophy, media theory, film studies, psychiatry, and political thought.

The opening essay by Daniele Guastini returns to Aristotle with philological precision, disentangling the long-standing confusion surrounding the notion of *katharsis*. Correcting the interpretative tradition rooted in Bernays, Guastini reconstructs tragic catharsis as a dianoetic pleasure belonging to the *bios theoretikos*: not a purgation of emotions, but a refinement of judgment and perception through poetic form.

Remaining within the ancient horizon, Francesco Valagussa revisits catharsis through the conceptual lens of Carlo Diano. He emphasises tragedy's anticipatory function: by staging misfortune at symbolic distance, it performs a work of elaboration that resonates with modern theories of trauma and repetition. Representation becomes a space where the unassimilated can be shaped and transformed.

Moving toward early modern philosophical anthropology, Cecilia Muratori explores physiognomics as a philosophical practice grounded in the Pseudo-

Aristotelian *Physiognomonica* in its Renaissance articulations. Through a nuanced analysis of Giovan Battista Della Porta and Abramo Colorni, the contribution shows that images – whether statues, mirrors, or the studied surface of the hand – serve as tools for diagnosing and actively modifying the dynamic sympathy between body and soul, offering a model of therapeutic intervention rooted in the materiality of images and gestures.

A shift into modern rationality is marked by Serena Feloj, who rereads Kant to illuminate the relation between rationality, illusion, and pathology. She shows how transcendental illusion is an inherent dynamic of reason, and how the critical method acquires a therapeutic dimension by regulating reason's self-transcending impulses and ensuring communicability.

From Kant to Leopardi, Antonio Valentini reconstructs the poet's critique of modern rationalism and his proposal of an "ultra-philosophy" grounded in imagination, sensibility, and embodied thought. Poetic writing reorganises perception, restores relationality, and reawakens an intimate contact with the world.

Focusing on another fundamental structure – and in a way not dissimilar to other interventions, including that of Fimiani and Sabatino –, Marina Montanelli examines the ambivalent power of repetition – from Freud's death drive to digital overstimulation. Against the exhausting rhythms of algorithmic cycles, she argues for an aesthetic capable of cultivating constructive repetition: rhythm, minimal variation, and forms of temporal coherence aligned with care.

These reflections converge in Paolo Vignola's reconstruction of Bernard Stiegler's philosophy of care – mentioned also in other contributions. For Stiegler, psychotechnologies can erode attention, memory, and desire; yet aesthetic practices retain the power to re-functionalise technics, regenerating the attentional forms necessary for individuation and collective life.

The genealogy then turns more explicitly anthropological with Andrea D'Ammando, who reinterprets Ernesto De Martino's concept of the crisis of presence. Symbolic practices – rituals, myths, communal narratives, artistic elaborations – function as cultural techniques that safeguard presence in moments of collapse, rendering crisis thinkable and shareable.

A decisive theoretical hinge is provided by Francesco Emilio Restuccia, who reconstructs Walter Benjamin's thought through the homeopathic paradigm of representation. By tracing a lineage that connects ancient debates on catharsis with Benjamin's theories of vaccination, shock, laughter, and perceptual training, Restuccia discusses Harun Farocki's operational images, the therapeutic architecture of *memofilm*, and the contemporary participatory dispositif of *Videopharmakon* to show how the homeopathic logic he reconstructs in Benjamin not only illuminates the past but also transits decisively into the contemporary, where audiovisual forms intervene in perception, memory, and care with renewed technological intensity.

The volume then moves to the contemporary media landscape with the extensive contribution by Filippo Fimiani and Anna Chiara Sabatino, who analyse comfort media and comfort cinema as therapeutic environments founded on perceptive, attentional and practical absorption, and on low-arousal rhythms and predictability. Discussing Jim Jarmush's *Paterson* and Wim Wenders' *Perfect Days*, their essay shows how minimal variation of ordinary rituals and routines remobilize the ancient and ambivalent dynamics of *pharmakon* within the everyday aesthetics' logic of "making special".

Building on this technological axis, Cavaletti and Terrenghi examine Virtual Reality as a paradigmatic modern *pharmakon*. Grounded in empirical research, their study clarifies how VR reorganises attention, modulates anxiety, and produces immersive therapeutic conditions, while also retaining the structural ambivalence of any potent perceptual device.

The dossier concludes with Sofia Pirandello, who investigates the use of Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, and Avatar Therapy in the treatment of schizophrenia. By externalising persecutory images and modulating them through digital interfaces, these therapeutic systems help patients renegotiate intrusive voices and restore symbolic mediation where fragmentation once prevailed.

Taken together, these twelve contributions compose a plural but coherent map of the therapeutic capacities of images. They show that therapy, in its aesthetic sense, operates not through sensory power or meaning's transcendence but through sensible form: through the structuring of attention, the shaping of rhythm, the cultivation of perceptual habits, the symbolic elaboration of crisis, and the maintenance of continuity.

If ancient tragedy refined judgment, contemporary media may soothe by sustaining perception. If ritual guarded presence, digital environments renegotiate the boundaries of imagination. If poetry restored the body's link with the world, comfort cinema restores the mind's link with time. In all these cases, representation is not an escape from life; it is a way of inhabiting it.

This issue of *Aisthesis* therefore proposes a broad, interdisciplinary reflection on aesthetics as a practice of care: a practice that helps us remain present to ourselves, to others, and to the world in a time when presence is increasingly at risk.