Aisthesis

Pratiche, linguaggi e saperi dell'estetico

Aesthetic Habits

edited by
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MIMESIS

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Pre-foreword

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Starting with Issue No. 1, Volume 17 of 2024, our journal will be published by Mimesis Edizioni. By accepting Mimesis' proposal, we believed that "Aisthesis", a well-established publishing entity both nationally] and internationally, would experience significant growth by partnering with a publishing house specializing in the field of philosophy and being the publisher of numerous philosophical journals. The Editorial Team of "Aisthesis" views this transition as a combination of continuity with the efforts that led to its establishment and development over the years, and as a fresh start that requires us to strengthen our dedication by expanding our already extensive network of contributors.

As we inform our readers about this shift to a new publisher, we wish to express our deep appreciation to our previous publisher, Firenze University Press, and specifically to Drs. Fulvio Guatelli and Alessandro Pierno, as well as the current president, Prof. Dimitri D'Andrea. Through our longstanding collaboration with Firenze University Press, our journal has gained significant international recognition and index-

ing. As we begin this new journey with the release of this issue, heralding the start of a fresh chapter for "Aisthesis", we are dedicated to staying on the course we have followed over the sixteen years of publication.

Aisthesis

Foreword

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In recent years, the concept of habits has emerged as a focal point within international philosophical discourse, particularly through historical, theoretical, and empirical lenses encompassing and integrating, among others, philosophical, psychological, neuroscientific and sociological perspectives. Habits, understood as dispositions that facilitate individual and social activities, influence everything from mundane daily practices to highly specialized skills. They shape the interaction between organism and environment, playing a pivotal role in personal and collective identity formation, cultural education, social coordination, organization and change, and the manifestation of political engagement.

However, the exploration of habits within the realm of aesthetics is a relatively new and intriguing domain. This special issue of "Aisthesis" seeks to bridge this gap by examining the intricate relationship between habits and the aesthetic life. Traditionally, habits have been perceived as antithetical to creativity and aesthetic experience, often associated with monotony and

routine. Yet, this issue aims to challenge that notion, proposing that habits and aesthetics are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

As the articles collected in this issue variously argue, aesthetic habits encompass a broad spectrum of activities and dispositions that are central to artistic practices, taste formation, and social rituals. They not only influence how we create and appreciate art but also how we engage with the world aesthetically in our everyday lives. From the shaping of judgments of taste to the role of aesthetic experience in social and cultural practices, aesthetic habits play a crucial role in defining our interactions with our environment and with each other. Thus, the discussion of the relationship between habits and aesthetics involves examining how habits influence aesthetic experiences and practices, and conversely, how aesthetic and artistic activities, experiences, and emotions impact and shape our habits.

The concept of aesthetic habits prompts several key questions, such as, but not limited to, the following ones: How do habits influence our perceptions and experiences of beauty and art? In what ways do they contribute to or disrupt social norms and practices? How are they shaped by and, in turn, shape our interactions with new technologies and media? Without aiming to exhaust the topic, but rather to propose an urgent and promising subject for philosophical and aesthetic discussion, the various sections of this issue of "Aisthesis" address these and other crucial questions from diverse perspectives.

The sections of the issue provide a comprehensive overview of the diverse perspectives and insights on aesthetic habits. The first section, *Historical Discussions*, delves into the historical dimensions of aesthetic habits, tracing their development and theoretical foundations through different epochs. Moving from Aristotle, Mariagrazia Portera explores the theory of the human aesthetic as a habitual disposition, arguing that our aesthetic sensibilities are deeply ingrained in our habitual behaviors and that the topic of aesthetic habits allow philosophers to investigate intriguing interconnections between aesthetics and analytic metaphysics, on the one hand, and the ethical theory of virtues on the other hand. Giuliano Gasparri examines, in his paper, mechanical models of habits and aesthetic perception in the works of Descartes and Gassendi, highlighting how early modern thinkers integrated notions of habit into their theories of perception and aesthetic appreciation. Along the lines of a historical-philosophical investigation, Alessandro Nannini in his contribution discusses the development of beauty as a set of habits in the Early Modern Age, arguing for a "hexiologia aesthetica" that considers beauty as a habitual disposition formed through cultural and intellectual practices.

The second section (*Aesthetic Habits and Experience*) addresses how aesthetic habits shape and are shaped by our experiences, with a focus on contemporary philosophical and psychological insights. Alessandro Bertinetto investigates the interplay between habits and aesthetic experience, challenging the notion that aesthetic experiences are inherently non-habitual and proposing that certain hab-

its are essential for cultivating aesthetic sensitivity. Gregorio Tenti introduces the concept of Biophilia Aesthetics, exploring how our innate tendencies towards life and nature influence our aesthetic experiences and how these experiences, in turn, shape our habits. Bruno Latour's ideas on habits and sensibility is the topic addressed by Christian Frigerio: in his article he discusses how Latour's philosophy integrates aesthetics with ecological and political praxis. Giacomo Pezzano's contribution offers a pluralistic understanding of thinking habitus, emphasizing the role of both verbal and visual thinking in shaping our habitual aesthetic practices.

The relation between *Habits and Art* is the focus of the third section. It explores the role of habits in various artistic practices and how these habits contribute to creativity and cultural expression. In her article, Roberta Dreon argues for the intelligent nature of artistic habits, suggesting that artistic practices are deeply rooted in habitual behaviors that exhibit a form of intelligence responsive to the environment. Dwiyana Habsary and Muchammad Bayu Tejo Sampurno discuss aesthetic habits and cultural symbols in Indonesia, examining how traditional practices and modern influences shape aesthetic identities. Francesca Raimondi's and Yulia Tikhomirova's contributions are devoted to the role of habits in performing arts: Raimondi explores body techniques in theatre and performance art, highlighting how aesthetic technologies developed in avant-garde practices can transform social habits; Tikhomirova examines the abandonment of aesthetic automatisms in performative practices, focusing on the work of the Italian duo Didymos and their use of doubt to challenge conventional aesthetic habits. Finally, Robert Valgenti's and Claudia Tosi's papers deal with habits in artistic and aesthetic practices that problematize the very status of art and the link between art and life: Valgenti reflects on habits in the kitchen, proposing that culinary practices and recipes are sites of aesthetic habit formation and transformation; Tosi, on her part, considers the role of habits in documentary filmmaking, discussing how habitual practices influence the creation and recognition of documentary works.

The final section (*Normativity, Taste, and Education*) delves into the normative dimensions of aesthetic habits, exploring their impact on taste, education, and social practices. Alessandro Bertinetto's second contribution to this issue of "Aisthesis" delves into the aesthetics and normativity of habits, examining how aesthetic norms are established and maintained through habitual practices. Emanuele Arielli discusses the self-construction of preferences and tastes, arguing that habits play a crucial role in the development and transformation of individual aesthetic preferences. And *last, but not least*, Alberto Simonetti explores the aesthetic value in social education through the lens of Eric Kandel's work, highlighting how aesthetic habits can foster new forms of social coexistence and ethical practices.

The articles in this issue collectively highlight the significance of aesthetic habits in shaping our artistic, cultural, and social landscapes. The theoretical research presented invites readers not only to become aware of the role of habits in aesthetic life and artistic experience but also to engage actively in acquiring good habits within our aesthetic environments – considering their ecological impact as well. This special issue of "Aisthesis" thus aims to contribute to both philosophical and practical understanding, encouraging a mindful and sustainable approach to our aesthetic engagements.

As always, "Aisthesis" hosts also a "Varia" section, which includes for this issue four articles. The first contribution is by Fabrizio Desideri and is devoted to exploring the philosophical relevance of the human voice as inherently "dramatic", i.e., taking the form of an action. The essay derives from the "Lectio" delivered by Fabrizio Desideri on March 3, 2023, at the Aula Absidale di Santa Lucia in Bologna, marking the opening of a lecture series on the voice organized by the International Center for Humanistic Studies "Umberto Eco" and the University of Bologna. Included in the "Varia" are also a contribution by Michael Jenewein, discussing the notion of style in Wölfflin and Wiesing; one by Kelin Li, discussing some crucial aspects of Chinese landscape painting, and one by Emanuele Mariani, who draws an interesting connection between Husserl's phenomenology and Pessoa's poetics".

Historical discussions

Aisthesis

A Swallow Does Not Make a Summer
Towards a Theory of the Human Aesthetic as a Habitual Disposition

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Abstract. This paper is part of a broader effort to reinterpret the human aesthetic through the lens of the notion of habitus or disposition, considering the recent resurgence of interest, within the field of contemporary aesthetics, in Aristotelian virtues ("aesthetic virtue") and, within the field of analytic metaphysics, in the concept of power. Assuming that virtues in aesthetics are excellences of the character that enable us to cor-respond appropriately to (active) aesthetic objects, this paper explores how and to what extent an (aesthetic) subject can achieve self-knowledge of having reached that "level of excellence" of their (aesthetic) disposition or power. Additionally, it suggests that experiences of failure might have a role, *ex negativo*, in this process. The text is organized into paragraphs, each addressing one of the following points: 1. what a disposition (or habitus or capacity or power) is; 2. dispositions in ethics (Aristotelian virtues); 3. why and to what extent the human aesthetic can be understood as a disposition or power, referencing some recent literature on the notion of "aesthetic virtue"; 4. the relationship between aesthetic dispositions and the experience of (aesthetic) failure.

Keywords. Power, virtue, excellence, self-knowledge, failure, latency, habitus.

What is a disposition and how can we cultivate it? What is the relationship between powers, dispositions, virtues, habits and the aesthetic domain? What are aesthetic habits? (Bertinetto [2024], this volume). This paper is part of a broader attempt to reinterpret the human aesthetic through the lens of the notion of disposition or habit(us) (Portera [2020, 2020a, 2022, 2023, 2023a, 2024]). This inquiry is prompted by a relatively recent resurgence of interest within contemporary aesthetics in Aristotelian virtues ("aesthetic virtue"; see Kieran [2010, 2012]; McIver Lopes [2008]; Goldie [2007, 2008]) and within analytic metaphysics in the concept of power (see Austin, Marmodoro, Roselli [2022]; Boccaccini, Marmodoro [2017]; Marmodoro [2012, 2010]). In particular, assuming that virtues in aesthetics are excellences of the character that enable us to cor-respond (Perullo [2024], in press) appropriately to (active) aesthetic objects, I shall explore whether and to what extent an (aesthetic) subject can achieve self-knowledge of having reached a "level of excellence" in their (aesthetic) stable disposition or power (habitus). I will also suggest that experiences of failure might play a role, *ex negativo*, in this process.

The text is organized into the following sections: 1. what a disposition (or habitus or power) is; 2. dispositions in ethics (Aristotelian virtues); 3. why and to what extent the human aesthetic can be understood as a disposition or a power, with reference to some recent literature on the notion of "aesthetic virtue"; 4. the relationship between aesthetic dispositions and the experience of (aesthetic) failure. For the sake of simplicity, the concepts of disposition, habitus, power, and dispositional property will be used synonymously throughout this paper. A distinction will be made between the notions of "habit" and "habitus" based on their different gradients of stability, with "habitus" indicating a stable and firm disposition, and "habit" indicating a temporary and relatively transient instantiation of a habitus. The two concepts however, as we will see, are strictly inter-connected.

1. *What dispositions or powers really are*

Recent years have seen a significant increase in interest in the notions of disposition or power, especially in the field of analytic metaphysics (see Austin, Marmodoro, Roselli [2022], Boccaccini, Marmodoro [2017], Marmodoro [2012, 2010]). Indeed, aside from research trends in the academic scientific community, if we look at everyday human life, dispositions truly seem to play a crucial role in our experience as human beings. Also called powers or dispositional properties, examples of dispositions include fragility, poisonousness, and generosity. We protect things that are fragile; we avoid things that are poisonous; we admire people for their generosity or, coming closer to my point in this paper, for their capacity to engage in rewarding aesthetic experiences.

As a starting point for my argument in this paper, I suggest that we make a distinction between what I call *innate* dispositions, which are *per se* properties of things (both animate and inanimate) in the world or part of their intrinsic set of features, and *acquired* dispositions, which are not innate (except for the fact of individuals being endowed with a pre-disposition to cultivate them) but rather necessitate time, repetition, and a process of habituation to develop and cultivate. My focus in this paper is on acquired dispositions; an example of acquired disposition is virtue. In the Aristotelian understanding, virtues are the (reached) excellences in dispositions, also called habitus or *hexeis* (*Nic. Eth*. 1105b 19 ss.). As we shall see, they result from a process of habituation and need practice. Consider an individual named Lisa, who has started to perform acts of generosity. While she may be naturally predisposed towards the acquisition of virtues (*Nic*. *Eth.* 1103a 19-30), turning this pre-disposition into a proper "habitus of generosity" or virtue requires something more than mere nature: time, effort, and exercise. Indeed, as Aristotle argues, «From this it is also plain that none of the moral virtues arises in us by nature […]. Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit» (*Nic*. *Eth.* 1103a 19, 24-25). Now, how can Lisa, interested in cultivating by habituation her disposition towards generosity and devoting time and effort to this aim, attain self-knowledge of having made it perfect and reached "the top" – that is, at a certain point in time along the process of habituation, of having achieved excellence in being generous, thereby attaining a *proper* virtue (*Nic*. *Eth.* 1097b 22, 1098a 20)? One of the aims of this paper is to tackle this question, which is *not* entirely Aristotelian in its spirit (see Donato [2018]). To unpack it effectively, I shall first define (in the simplest and most intuitive possible way) the notion of disposition (or power).

Dispositions, or powers, can be understood as entities in a state of readiness for action; when they interact with the environment, they become manifest. For example, a crystal glass is fragile, indicating that it has a disposition to break into pieces when struck with a stone or when it falls onto a hard floor. Currently, there is considerable debate in the scientific community regarding the nature of powers, including the ideas that (1) powers are the ultimate entities in the world (ungrounded powers), (2) everything that exists in the world is ultimately constituted of powers (pan-dispositionalism) or, conversely, that (3) powers always need to be grounded in more fundamental categorial properties to exist (see, for instance, Marmodoro [2010], Marmodoro, Mayr [2019]). However, it is not my aim here to delve into this specialistic debate. Following the insights of Marmodoro, Mayr (2019), we can identify some common features or characteristics of dispositions: latency, conditionality, stability, reciprocity. Let us begin with the first of these, latency.

Dispositions (or powers) are not always overtly displayed, meaning they are not directly perceptible and measurable. They are hidden capabilities, "things"

that individuals (or objects) possess alongside their other observable properties. This is also true for that specific disposition or power in human beings that I call "aesthetic disposition" or *hexis aesthetiké* – the fully developed inclination to engage in more or less rewarding aesthetic relations under appropriate circumstances; the readiness to act and behave aesthetically under appropriate circumstances –, which is not directly perceptible when possessed (unlike, for instance, other qualities or properties such as permanent bodily features or traits). It is akin a concealed power that only manifests itself when in action, i.e. when it generates observable effects in individual episodes of aesthetic experience.

The point is that an object (or a person) can possess a disposition without ever manifesting it. A crystal glass may be fragile without ever breaking. How does this apply to the aesthetic disposition? It would be obviously unjustified to attribute an "aesthetic disposition" to someone who has never exercised their virtue in aesthetic experiences. This is because the acquired nature (as opposed to innate; see Portera [2020]) of aesthetic dispositions implies that individual instantiations of the aesthetic power must have occurred in order for its overall acquisition process to be possible. However, the single repeated actions that facilitate the acquisition of a virtue (such as the aesthetic one), in an Aristotelian sense, are not necessarily identical to the subsequent actions resulting from that acquired virtue (I will revisit this point later). Furthermore, could someone who has ceased to exercise their acquired aesthetic disposition still be considered to possess it? If so, in what terms? Charles Darwin's late *Autobiography* offers an intriguing passage wherein he expresses regret over losing the pleasure in aesthetic experiences that he once enjoyed as a young man: «This curious and lamentable loss of the higher aesthetic tastes is all the odder, as books on history, biographies and travels (independently of any scientific facts which they may contain), and essays of all sorts of subjects interest me as much as they ever did. My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts, but why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain alone, on which the higher tastes depend, I cannot conceive. A man with a mind more highly organized or better constituted than mine, would not I suppose have thus suffered; and if I had to live my life again I would have made a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least one every week; for perhaps the parts of my brain now atrophied could thus have been kept active through use. The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature» (Darwin [1958]: 129). Bringing together emotions, habit, repetition and pleasure, this passage suggests that the aesthetic power is a disposition that requires exercise and efforts to be preserved over time; otherwise, it gets completely lost or vanishes.

Another crucial property of dispositions is conditionality, as they are often closely linked with conditionals. For instance, fragility is a dispositional prop-

erty because it relies on a counterfactual conditional: an object is fragile to the extent that it would, under otherwise normal circumstances, break if dropped from a height onto a hard floor. Similarly, a person possesses an aesthetic capacity to the extent that they would, under otherwise normal circumstances, engage in a more or less rewarding aesthetic relationship when encountering an aesthetic object (whatsoever) and interacting with it.

In addition to latency and conditionality, dispositions are stable – they are enduring features of an object or a person, though not entirely intrinsic properties. Objects or individuals do not possess their dispositions independently of external factors. Indeed, dispositions exhibit stability in a reciprocal manner, meaning that the fourth feature that we usually attribute to them is reciprocity. Dispositions do not manifest themselves in isolation, but in cooperation with other dispositions. A crystal glass that falls and breaks does so due to the combined dispositional properties of its molecular structure and that of the floor. This reciprocal interaction highlights that the manifestation of a disposition involves reciprocal dispositional partners. This aspect becomes particularly intriguing when applying the theoretical framework of powers and dispositions to the aesthetic domain. In aesthetics, there is no manifestation of an aesthetic disposition in the "subject" without a concomitant or cor-responding manifestation of an "object" (an aesthetic object) endowed with or even consisting of aesthetic dispositional properties or active affordances. This suggests that, as both are "made of" dispositions, the dichotomy between aesthetic subjects and aesthetic objects here blurs or even disappears. Both poles represent active dispositional bundles, each of which meets the conditions of manifestation for the other; having an aesthetic experience is an encounter of dispositions[1].

2. *Dispositions in ethics: Aristotle rules*

As is well known, dispositions are the bedrock of Aristotle's ethics, with the term "hexis" (ἕξις) denoting a relatively stable arrangement or disposition, and his favourite example of dispositions are ethical virtues. Dispositions are not passive: *hexis* is not a *diathesis* (as we can read in Aristotle's *Categories* 8b), which is a shallow inclination easy to remove; *hexis* is deeper and more active; «it is the constancy of desire» (Rodrigo [2011]: 12; Di Basilio [2021]). But a disposition is not *tout-court* an activity [*energheia*] either, «it makes, perhaps, no small difference whether we place the chief good in possession or in use, in state of mind [*hexis*] or in activity. For the state of mind may exist without producing any good result, as in a man who is asleep or in some other way quite inactive, but the activity cannot», which means that dispositions may remain in a condition of latency (*Nic. Eth.* 1098b 30 ss.).

As it is explained in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, *hexeis* are cultivated through habituation. Aristotle's central argument posits that we develop virtues like justice or injustice through habitual behavior – repeated actions typical of a virtue lead to the formation of a *hexis*. For instance, engaging in repeated acts of generosity fosters a disposition toward generosity – a readiness to act generously or the power to embody generosity as a guiding principle of action. To put it differently, virtues, such as justice and temperance, are cultivated through the consistent performance of corresponding virtuous acts. However, Aristotle's doctrine does not suggest that a stable disposition or virtue inevitably emerges merely through mechanical repetition of a single type of act.

Indeed, as Aristotle explains in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (1105a 30 ss.), true virtue is not possessed unless the individual performing virtuous acts (1) knows what she does; (2) chooses the act for its own sake, and (3) as the result of a permanent disposition. This is why, as mentioned in the title of this paper, «One swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a men blessed and happy» (*Nic. Eth.* 1098a 18).

Furthermore, while habitual repetition of certain actions contributes to the development of the corresponding virtue, it is crucial to recognize that the actions that *produce* a virtue are not in their inner nature but only in their external semblance like those that the virtue *produces*, because these latter are substantially enlightened by the insight into "their own principles". As argued by Zagzebski (Zagzebski [1996]: 136), a virtue (in a proper Aristotelian sense) is «a deep and enduring acquired excellence of a person, involving a characteristic motivation to produce a desired end and reliable success in bringing about that end»; on a similar note, Woodruff ([2001]: 24) describes virtues as «habits acquired over time which are excellences of motivation, distinct from skills, even where a skill is required for successful achievement of the desired end, and which reliably enables the person to bring about the desired end». This highlights a fundamental distinction between actions that facilitate the acquisition of a virtue and those that emanate from virtue itself, once it has been acquired.

It is worth considering, within this framework, the passage in *Nic. Eth.* 1098b 3-4 where Aristotle mentions: «of first principles we see (*theōrountai*) some by induction, some by perception, some by a certain habituation (*ethismōi tini*), and others too in other ways, and we must take pains to determine them correctly, since they have a great influence of what follows». This passage is significant of Aristotle's understanding of habituation as a method of acquiring knowledge, i.e. as one of the several avenues through which certain principles and norms can be apprehended, albeit in a way which is distinct from the rigorous, deductive knowledge characteristic of disciplines like mathematics and the sciences. Through repeated practice and exposure, individuals that get habituated engage their cognitive faculties in a manner that enables them to (at least partially) un-

derstand the principles and norms governing their actions, therefore suggesting that habituation involves a *bottom-up* approach to learning or discovering principles and norms. Aristotle's perspective stresses the cognitive dimension of habituation – *intelligent habits* – and its role in shaping our understanding and adherence to ethical principles and norms (see Chappell 2012).

3. *Dispositions in aesthetics: excellence of aesthetic capacities*

As Kieran ([2012]: 13) posits, virtues in aesthetics are «intrinsically valuable excellences of character that enable us to […] appreciate all sorts of things from everyday recipes to the finest achievements of humankind». Recent scholarly discourse, notably within the Anglo-Saxon tradition, has delved into the idea of interpreting the human aesthetic through the prism of ethical virtues, as evidenced in works by Kieran (2010, 2012), McIver Lopes (2008), Goldie (2007, 2008). Broadly speaking, the virtue theory in aesthetics, as articulated by the aforementioned scholars, has placed a major emphasis on the *subject* of the aesthetic experience (their powers, inclinations, capacities and habitus), rather than on the aesthetic object. Moreover, it has tended to conceptualize the aesthetic object as the aesthetic activation of, paradigmatically, a *work of art*, thereby maintaining a clear distinction between the subject and the object of the aesthetic encounter, with a predominant focus on art.[2]

As proposed by Roberts (2018), it could prove beneficial to adopt a distinction, drawn from the field of epistemology and advocated by certain epistemologists interested in intellectual virtues, between virtue responsibilists (Roberts [2018]: 430) and virtue reliabilists. Virtue responsibilists argue that virtues constitute an integral aspect of an agent's enduring character trait, closely intertwined with their patterns of motivation, interest, and affect. Conversely, virtue reliabilists contend that virtues stem from the agent's capacity to achieve specific outcomes, such as (in the case of the aesthetic virtue) experiencing a fulfilling aesthetic encounter or enjoying aesthetic pleasure. Embracing the notion of the aesthetic virtue as grounded in the stable traits of an agent's character implies that the agent bears responsibility for this capacity, in the sense that they have acquired and nurtured this facet of their character over time, thereby transforming it into a habitual trait or habitus. Conversely, if we conceived of the aesthetic virtue as a faculty or skill, this might be innate and the subject might not necessarily have invested efforts in its cultivation or enhancement and/or might lack interest or concern for the value of the virtuous experience. This definition – of virtue as an (innate) skill – diverges from Aristotle's account, which asserts that for an act to be virtuous in the genuine sense, it must be firmly rooted in the character, the agent must possess some understanding of the principles guiding their actions

and it must result from efforts repeated in time. One may excel as an aesthetic perceiver without their faculties or skills being driven by a specific concern for the value of the experience, as noticed by Goldie (2007, 2008). In this regard, Goldie has argued that the sole genuine aesthetic virtue, or the only authentic approach to understanding the human aesthetic or human aesthetic capacity as a virtue, is to appeal to character traits rather than skills[3] (but see also Woodruff [2001], on this point). Therefore, in the subsequent sections of this text, the term "aesthetic virtue" shall denote a firmly entrenched disposition to engage or correspond with aesthetic affordances (Perullo 2024, in press) through thoughts, emotions and actions (aesthetic appreciation, acquired through time and repeated exposure).

4. *Becoming aware of our (excellent) dispositions: a role for failures*

Let us summarize the key points discussed thus far: 1) dispositions are latent, conditional, reciprocal, stable; 2) virtues for Aristotle are dispositions acquired (in the specific sense of "perfectionated") through effort, repetition and time investment, and they are excellent; 3) habituation, the practice through which dispositions as excellences emerge, is not a mechanical process but rather a means of grasping principles and norms. This implies that our (ethical) virtuous habits always engage also our cognitive powers, at least to some extent; 4) there is a distinction between the actions we repeatedly perform to acquire an (excellent) habitual disposition or virtue, and those that emerge or derive from it once the disposition has been acquired. Returning to one of the questions asked in the opening section of this paper: how do we realize or self-acknowledge, at a certain point, that we have reached the pinnacle of our habitual disposition or virtue?

Reconstructing Aristotle's conception of how stable dispositions can be self-recognized proves to be a challenging endeavour; more radically, it has been argued that the issue itself of self-acknowledging one's own possessed virtues is not inherently Aristotelian (Donato [2018]). The only point that Aristotle raises is focused on pleasure: the pleasure that one feels in performing a virtuous action indicates that a stable *hexis* has been acquired (*Nic. Eth*. II 3 1104b 3 ss: «We must take as a sign of states of character the pleasure or pain that supervenes upon acts […] For moral virtue is concerned with pleasures and pains; it is on account of the pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of the pain that we abstain from noble ones. Hence we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth, as Plato says, so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought; for this the right education»). However, Aristotle does not offer a detailed explanation of the specific type of pleasure that serves as a true indicator of a genuinely acquired *hexis*. Pleasure, particularly in

aesthetics, *leghetai pollakòs* and Aristotle is aware of the difficulty, inasmuch he stresses that the pleasure (or happiness) we get «from an isolated swallow» should not be confused with the pleasure (or happiness) deriving from «a whole summer», as in the passage I have quoted in the preceding section, and which gives its title to this essay. His emphasis on this distinction implies that getting confused about these two kinds of pleasure is not so uncommon. One might concur with Marmodoro (Marmodoro [2009]) that stable dispositions (virtues) and their manifestations are not separate entities, and that the manifested disposition is the same disposition as the one in potentiality, only in a state of activity, but the difficulty does not disappear.

Furthermore, pleasure (see Donato [2018]) appears insufficient in providing individuals with a robust*,* enduring awareness of their acquired stable dispositions. Pleasure, by its nature, is transient, lasting only for fleeting moments. This implies that the awareness of acquisition is anchored solely to the present moment. But what happens *post festum*, once the pleasure subsides? We know that dispositions are stable; they endure even when not actively manifested; they persist in a latent state, devoid of accompanying pleasure; but how do individuals self-recognize this "latent" state? Aristotle offers no explicit answers beyond the intermittent, momentary experience of pleasure. Many philosophers following Aristotle, including Thomas von Aquinas, have attempted to address this perceived deficiency or lacuna in Aristotle's theory, which they viewed – correctly or not – as a limitation (Donato [2018]).

As I approach the conclusion of this paper, I would like to suggest a change in perspective, about aesthetic habitus and self-acknowledgement, that may serve as the foundation for future analyses: rather than focusing on pleasure as a direct indicator of the presence of acquired (aesthetic) virtues my suggestion is to shift the focus from pleasure to aesthetic failures, as a means of indirectly, *ex negativo* grasping one's excellent aesthetic virtue or habitus.

I refer among other sources, in this regard, to a recent paper by Bertinetto, Andrzejewski (2021), wherein they advocate for a re-evaluation of failures and mistakes in artistic and aesthetic appreciation as avenues for attaining genuine aesthetic satisfaction and as a valuable, albeit risky, artistic/aesthetic strategy. Bertinetto and Andrzejewski identify two possible ways in which failures and mistakes can open new possibilities for a deeper and more fulfilling aesthetic experience, one centered on imagination and the other on expectations. They write: when a viewer or an aesthetic perceiver undergoes an experience of failure or mistake, such as an unsatisfactory ending to a book, movie, or artistic performance, they are «given the chance to imagine [their] own alternative solution, for example [their] own ending, to correct the failure and, thus, imaginatively make Y perfect (and successful) in reference to what [they] take as the standard of success», which can be (aesthetically) extremely satisfying. Focusing on ex-

pectations and norms, they also argue that «failure as imperfection with respect to a predetermined normative aesthetic canon can simply overturn our expectations, taking us by surprise and provoking an aesthetic pleasure intensified precisely by lack of expectation. In this case, as claimed by Yuriko Saito, "Rather than imposing a predetermined idea of what beauty has to be, we are letting the object in various forms speak to us even if at first it may defy our usual expectations of beauty" (Saito 2017, §2)» (Bertinetto, Andrzejewski [2021]: 18).

I posit that this capacity to effectively address and relaunch the aesthetic "issue" by leveraging failures is precisely contingent upon possessing an already stable, deeply ingrained aesthetic habitus (or disposition or power). A sporadic aesthetic skill, not fully developed yet, would falter in the face of failures, remaining mired in them. Conversely, a rooted, firmly acquired aesthetic virtue would have the capacity to capitalize on failures to expand, renegotiate and deepen the aesthetic experience through the allocation of additional imaginative and improvisational resources. In this sense, every time an individual adopts a constructive approach towards failures and mistakes, this approach may serve as an indirect indicator, to some extent transparent to the individual themselves and to the observers, of them possessing a genuine aesthetic virtue. The advantage of focusing on failures as a sign of a stable aesthetic disposition, rather than on pleasure, mainly consists in failures ensuring an access to continuity which is not available to pleasure. Indeed, as said, pleasure is transient by its nature, lasting only for fleeting moments. This implies that, if we focus on pleasure, the awareness of the acquisition of the habitus is anchored solely to the present moment. But what happens once the pleasure subsides? Unlike pleasure, when an aesthetic perceiver endowed with a stable and enduring aesthetic habitus encounters failures, this is at the same time an experience of setback *and* of relaunch of the aesthetic issues in new terms, therefore of dis-continuity (due to the unmet and frustrated expectations) and of continuity (due to the setback becoming, simultaneously, a chance for successful transformation, both of the norms regulating the aesthetic experience and of the expectations of the perceiver; see Bertinetto, Andrzejewski [2021]). If I had to suggest an image to visualize the development of an aesthetic experience relying on a genuine *hexis*, this would be a serpentine line with typically karstic features, rather than a broken line.

In a poignant reflection in one of his books, Roger Fry once wrote: «There are days of lowered vitality when one may wander disconsolately in a gallery like the Louvre, in despair at one's incapacity to respond to the appeal of the great masters, whom one had thought to be one's friends, but who suddenly seem to speak an alien tongue» (Fry [1951]: 40). In light of his past experiences, and of a repeated, habitual practice with works of art, Fry legitimately expected to be able to engage in some rewarding aesthetic dialogue with the Louvre's great masters, but – much to his despair – that day nothing happened. He failed. In the

wake of such an experience, one might wonder how Fry coped with this sense of failure. Did he endeavour to revisit the gallery in subsequent days, hoping for a renewed connection with the masters? Did he persist in his efforts to engage with the artworks, seeking to re-ignite and re-negotiate the aesthetic dialogue that had previously enriched his experiences? Did he capitalize on this failure, exploring through it new avenues for an aesthetic cor-responding?

As said, failures and unsuccessful aesthetic encounters – if experienced constructively – can signal the stability of an aesthetic disposition that has been cultivated to such a level of excellence that it is prepared to reassess its norms, principles and expectations according to the contingencies of the aesthetic encounter, rather than being overwhelmed or extinguished or blocked by failures. It is worth noticing that this disposition, once it has been "made perfect", is stable in the only manner an aesthetic virtue can be stable: *briefly and (im-)provisionally*, i.e. blending habitual stability with improvisation, frustration with transformation, constancy with contingency, therefore able to cor-respond to the mutability and variability of the things in the world. In the quest for self-awareness of one's acquired virtue, the rhythm and temporality of the *aesthetic hexis* emerges as discrete, fragmented (i.e., susceptible to failures) *and* continuous, and the more so the further one progresses in the process of habituation.

Indeed, Friedrich Nietzsche's eloquent portrayal of "brief habits" in the *The Gay Science* resonates with this notion of a fleeting yet profound, flexible yet stable, sweet-bitter habitual experience that I am discussing here: «I love brief habits and consider them invaluable means for getting to know many things and states down to the bottom of their sweetnesses and bitternesses […]. I always believe this will give me lasting satisfaction – even brief habits have this faith of passion, this faith in eternity – and that I am to be envied for having found and recognized it, and now it nourishes me at noon and in the evening and spreads a deep contentment around itself and into me, so that I desire nothing else, without having to compare, despise, or hate. And one day its time is up; the good thing parts from me, not as something that now disgusts me but peacefully and sated with me, as I with it, and as if we ought to be grateful to each other and so shake hands to say farewell. And already the new waits at the door» (Nietzsche 1882, aphorism 295; see Portera 2024). In my interpretation, Nietzsche's portrayal of these bitter-sweet brief habits, which may be considered as paradigmatically aesthetic, suggests that brief habits rely on a dynamically stable "subjective" ground – a virtue or habitus or *hexis* – that becomes apparent only indirectly through the succession of relational disenchantments – perhaps of delusions. In other words, a stable *hexis* becomes apparent in that ephemeral moment in which one singular habit has declined and the subsequent one, although not fully developed yet, is on its way to arise.

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Notes

1   As mentioned, I argue here – although space constraints preclude a detailed exploration of the topic in this paper – that the two poles involved in the aesthetic encounter, which for the sake of simplicity may be called subjective pole and objective pole, have both dispositional nature; more than this, through the adoption of the dispositional approach the very distinction between a subjective pole and an objective pole of the aesthetic encounter blurs. As for the potentiality and limitations of the idea of interpreting aesthetic properties (of the object) through the lens of dispositions, see for instance Levinson 2001, 2005. In this paper, my focus is however restricted to dispositions as powers or virtues of the subjective pole.

2   As mentioned in Note 1, in this paper, my interest is primarily focused on the dispositional/habitual properties of the *subjective pole* (temporarily and for the sake of brevity and clarity, I still use here the label "subject/object"). However, I am aware (see Note 1) of the existing literature regarding the dispositional interpretation of the aesthetic properties (*of the object*). A further development of this paper will involve examining how the application of the dispositional lens can contribute to rethinking the subject-object poles in aesthetics in a non-dichotomous manner.

3   Roberts, however, argues that: «any complete account of aesthetic virtue must make essential reference to the faculties of the agent», that is to her skills; moreover, «it is not always possible to fully specify the trait virtues without appeal to corresponding faculty virtues» (Roberts [2018]: 437).

Aisthesis

Mechanical Models of Habits and Aesthetic Perception in Descartes and Gassendi

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Abstract. The early modern age saw an increasing use of mechanical models in order to explain sense perception, imagination, emotions, memory, and habit. René Descartes and Pierre Gassendi tried to innovate music theory in the light of such models. Thus, the bodily mechanism of habits accounts for the skill in playing music, singing, and dancing, but also – to a certain extent – for the perception of beauty and the shaping of taste.

Keywords. History of aesthetics, Habits in aesthetic perception, Early modern philosophy, Descartes, Gassendi

1. *Introduction*

Within the studies on the history – or rather *prehistory* – of aesthetics, there is a growing interest in René Descartes' thought. Although Descartes did not develop a comprehensive theory of beauty and art, and although aesthetics does not feature in his classification of philosophical sciences (what he calls the "tree of philosophy"), in some passages of his early *Compendium Musicae* of 1618 and his 1630 correspondence with father Marin Mersenne, also on music theory, we find opinions

which seem to point to the idea of the subjectivity of aesthetic judgement that will come into the foreground in eighteenth-century theories of beauty[1].

The recognition of this subjectivity crops up in the context of the physiological study of the bodily basis of sense perception, emotions, and behavior according to mechanical models – a context in which a new conception of habit plays an important role.

This paper will touch on the following points: it will briefly introduce what we may call the physical turn in the study of habits which takes place in early seventeenth century, and see how Descartes applies a mechanized theory to artistic creativity and taste. Secondly, Descartes' ideas will be compared with those of one of the most important philosophers of his time, Pierre Gassendi, who also had a physical, mechanistic approach to the study of sense perception and emotions, but contrary to Descartes did not come to recognize the relativity of aesthetic judgement. Lastly, it will give a philosophical explanation of the reasons why the so-called "rationalist" Descartes, even though within given limits, was able to acknowledge such a relativity, whereas the so-called "empiricist" Gassendi, together with the great majority of their contemporaries, was not.

2. *Descartes*

Descartes' early theory of music takes shape at the time of his friendship with Isaac Beeckman, the Dutch atomist scientist to whom Descartes offered his 1618 *Compendium Musicae*. Like Beeckman, Descartes had began to treat sound and musical consonances from a physical point of view, performing experiments and measurements on the frequency of vibrations ("*secousses*", "jolts") transmitted by the air from an instrument string to the ears. These studies were innovative compared to the merely mathematical approach of the Pythagorean tradition in music theory. At the same time, Descartes started to think of the perception of beauty, or agreeability of music, as something irreducible to the objective features of sound, or composition (that is, the object of aesthetic perception), but rather something dependent on the varying bodily structure and personal history of the listening subject. In the *Compendium Musicae*, on one hand, Descartes still has the traditional conception of beauty in mind, focusing on the harmonic characteristics inherent to the work of art[2], and he tries to find rules to help composers write their music. But at the same time, he proves to be aware that the objective features of a work of art do not suffice to explain why we take more or less pleasure in it.

The virtues of consonances in bringing about our emotions, Descartes writes, «are so various, and rely on such intangible circumstances, that a whole volume would not be enough to treat them thoroughly» (Descartes [1964-1976]: X, 111).

Coming back to the same issue in his 1630 correspondence with Mersenne, the philosopher openly states that it is practically impossible to determine the principle which makes a piece of music – or any other object – "beautiful".

Some scholars see the subjective turn marked by Descartes' aesthetic thought as a consequence of the general tendency of modern philosophical enquiry to shift from the object of knowledge to the subject of knowing. While this is certainly true, Descartes' views on this specific topic depend, in particular, on his physical, material and mechanical approach to the study of sense perception, an approach based upon atomistic premises. In the same period when they were studying the physics of sound and music, Descartes' friend Beeckman developed mechanical explanations of the perception of flavours. He derived from Lucretius the idea that we find food more or less tasteful according to the degree by which the shape of food particles conforms to the shape of the pores of our tongue and palate. This conformity ("*convenientia*") is compared to that of a key to its lock[3].

Another important idea that Beeckman drives from ancient atomism (and particularly from book 2 of Lucretius' *De rerum natura*) is the idea that sensibility can arise from non-sensitive things. Therefore, although being extremely subtle and complicated, at least theoretically, sensibility can be studied in physical terms, without taking into account any immaterial mind. The advantage of this approach is that physio-mechanical processes can be represented by human imagination as analogous to sensitive and measurable macrophenomena that we encounter in our common experience. In contrast to ancient atomists, of course, Descartes believes that human beings hold an immaterial soul, but he is aware that mechanical models bear a higher explicative power than abstract speculation on the spiritual substance, so he follows this research path together with his empiricist colleagues. He is thus led to deduce the subjectivity of aesthetic perception from the different features of the physical perceiving subjects, and not from the metaphysical *ego*.

From these observations Descartes derives the conclusion that perfection (for instance in the case of a perfect consonance, i.e. the most simple, or sweet) does not necessarily coincide with beauty, given that even a dissonance can sound more agreeable than a consonance, depending on its position in the whole of the composition. He therefore does not establish a correspondence between given sound consonances and given emotions of the soul. Descartes develops these ideas in his 1630 letters to Mersenne, comparing musical pleasure to the experience of finding food more or less tasteful, or something more or less beautiful to our sight (Descartes [1964-1976]: I, 108, 126).

In the letter dated 18 March 1630, Descartes writes:

> You ask whether one can discover the essence of beauty […] But in general "beautiful"
> and "pleasant" signify simply a relation between our judgement and an object; and be-

cause the judgements of men differ so much from each other, neither beauty nor pleasant-
ness can be said to have any definite measure […].
To explain what I meant [in my treatise on music] by «easy or difficult to perceive by the
senses» I instanced the divisions of a flower bed. If there are only one or two types of
shape arranged in the same pattern, they will be taken in more easily than if there are ten
or twelve arranged in different ways. But this does not mean that one design can be called
absolutely more beautiful than another; to some people's fancy one with three shapes will
be the most beautiful, to others it will be one with four or five and so on. The one that
pleases most people can be called the most beautiful without qualification; but which this
is cannot be determined. (Descartes [1984-1991]: III, 19-20)

These views are compatible with the detailed psychology of perception and
emotions that Descartes will expound in his final work, the *Passions of the Soul*
(1649), devoted to the interaction between mind and body. In fact, the pleasure
we feel when looking at something we find beautiful, or when listening to music,
is a "passion of the soul", that Descartes calls "*agrément*". It arises in connec-
tion with some movements of the "animal spirits" (subtle particles of matter)
from the sense organs, through the nerves, into the pineal gland at the base of
the brain. Beauty, thus, pertains to the domain of the union of body and soul: it
implies not only a judgement of the mind, but also an impression in the brain,
and that is why, contrary to intellectual truth, it cannot be precisely determined
in rational terms.

In the same letter to Mersenne, Descartes mentions the influence of memory
of past experiences on the emotions evoked in the subject by music:

Secondly, what makes some people want to dance may make others want to cry. This is
because it evokes ideas in our memory: for instance, those who have in the past enjoyed
dancing to a certain tune feel a fresh wish to dance the moment they hear a similar one;
on the other hand, if someone had never heard a galliard without some affliction befalling
him, he would certainly grow sad when he heard it again. This is so certain that I reckon
that if you whipped a dog five or six times to the sound of a violin, it would begin to howl
and run away as soon as it heard that music again. (Descartes [1984-1991]: III, 20)

The comparison with the dog at the end of this passage makes it clear that
Descartes is talking about the effects of a bodily mechanism (since he holds that
animals do not have a rational soul), that is, a sort of bodily memory, which acts
on an unconscious level. He mentions an analogous mechanism relating to sight
in a letter to Hector-Pierre Chanut from 1647, where he recalls his inclination
to like cross-eyed persons, due to the fact that he had once been in love with a
young girl who had a similar defect, thus the impression caused by the sight of a
cross-eyed person was connected in his brain to the impression which gave rise
to the emotion of love in his soul (Descartes [1964-1976]: II, 56-58).

Generally speaking, the mechanical approach in the study of sense percep-
tion goes along with an analogous approach in the study of the bodily basis of

memory and habits. Scholastic tradition conceived habits as qualities or dispositions inherent to the soul, or superposed to the soul and endowed with their own reality. During the first half of the seventeenth century, especially within the current of empiricism, even intellectual or spiritual habits begin to be thought of as effects exerted upon the activity of understanding and will by the very same brain mechanics that produces bodily habits, in human beings as well as in animals. We acquire both bodily habits and spiritual habits by virtue of repeated acts, which produce the impression and disposition of given traces, or folds, in the brain. According to Gassendi, for instance, habits are determined by "phantasms", that is, nothing but configurations impressed in brain matter. They do not pertain to understanding, a power of an immaterial substance lacking the rigidity, which is necessary to the impression of "phantasms". Even the fact that we are quicker or slower in understanding something does not depend on mind, but on the disposition of our organs (meaning a certain relation among bodily parts; whereas mind has no parts).

According to Descartes, habits depend either on body, or soul and body together. In fact, contrary to what a stereotypical image of Cartesian dualism might suggest, Descartes is well aware that human soul depends on body for most of its functions. When we act according to a habit and at the same time by will, this means that our will is following an inclination (similar to a natural inclination), which is caused by a given emotion, thus by a given movement of animal spirits, in turn dependent on the complexion of the body and the disposition of the brain. Experience can cause the association between certain movements of the body and certain thoughts, so that animal spirits are almost automatically determined to flow through the same pores and nerves through which they had previously flown, thus causing a seeming reaction, or action. Nevertheless, given that Descartes radically distinguishes soul from body, and conceives soul as a simple substance, then the functioning of intellectual habits cannot be explained by any comparison to material things (the same problem arises with memory). This is the reason why some of the so-called *petits cartésiens* – the numerous minor philosophers who followed Descartes' teaching – shifted the focus onto the physical ground, going as far as to identify habits with brain mechanics itself (as Gassendi and his followers did). So for example Pierre-Sylvain Régis, whom we might describe as a Cartesian empiricist, claims that memory, bodily habits, and spiritual habits all depend on the same principle, the only difference being that bodily habits (for instance the aptitude for singing, or dancing) depend mainly on the easiness by which animal spirits flow through outer parts of the body in order to move them, whereas spiritual habits (for instance the aptitude for studying, or meditating) depend on the easiness by which the spirits go through little paths which took shape in white matter of the brain in order to move from one trace to another. Therefore, it is wrong to think that spiritual habits are called "spiritual"

because they do not depend on body (something impossible as long as soul and body are joined): they just depend on it in a more subtle, and less sensitive manner (Régis [1691]: 331-332).

Descartes applies the notion of habit to an extremely wide range of phenomena. Habits influence perception, and the whole of human behaviours, including the interplay of emotions and moral virtue, of both thought and action. Indeed, Descartes does not depart from the Aristotelian tradition in that he holds that virtue is nothing but habit. As for artistic practice, it should be noted that arts differ from sciences, first of all, precisely because sciences «consist solely in mind knowledge», whereas arts «demand some exercise, and some *habitus* of the body» (Descartes [1964-1976]: 10, 359), where "*habitus*" means the disposition, acquired through habit, to accomplish a certain kind of actions (the Aristotelian "*hexis*"). Even poetical skills depend on bodily mechanisms: in a 1649 letter to Descartes, princess Elizabeth of Bohemia asks the philosopher the reason why she felt the impulse to write verses while she was ill, and he answers that this is the result of a strong excitation of animal spirits, which would entirely disturb the imagination of those who have a tender brain, whereas it warms up the imagination of those who have a firm brain, and inclines them to think (Descartes [1964-1976]: V, 281). Władysław Tatarkiewicz observed that this physiological explanation of poetical gift is quite far from the classic aesthetics of Descartes' times, as it demands no theoretical knowledge of the rules of the art of poetry (Tatarkiewicz [1968]: 31).

As mentioned before, notwithstanding these original remarks on the subjectivity of pleasure feeling, and on the relativity of the judgement based thereupon, Descartes did not develop an aesthetics in the sense of the empiricist theories of taste of the eighteenth century. Why? He probably had no interest in doing so, precisely because, contrary to the domains of physics and metaphysics, the domain of arts did not offer any clear and distinct truth, but only pleasure, something which would hold a secondary rank in the life of a philosopher, compared to what he considered proper wisdom.

3. *Gassendi*

Now let us move to the views of Descartes' contemporary Pierre Gassendi on the same matter.

Like Descartes, Gassendi wrote a treatise on music theory (*Manuductio ad theoriam musicae*, 1636), where he treats sound and music from a mathematical and physical point of view. Other interesting remarks on musical pleasure, taste, and beauty in general can be found in Gassendi's *Animadversiones* of 1649, where he discusses Epicurean philosophy, and in the *Syntagma philosophicum*,

which is the *summa* of his own philosophy and physics, published in 1658, three years after his death.

In the *Animadversiones*, Gassendi follows Epicurus and Lucretius in explaining why the same sound could be experienced as more or less sweet by different persons, or by the same person at different times, on the basis of a mechanics similar to the one we have mentioned above about the perception of flavours that Isaac Beeckman endorsed likewise:

> According to Epicurus, the corpuscles which reach the ear, and affect the organ, are arranged in a particular configuration, and (as it will be said about odors, flavours, and the like)[4] any sweetness, or harshness of sound results from nothing but the fact that the corpuscles reaching the organ shape and agitate it according to the mode of smoothness, or roughness of their configuration. (Gassendi [1649]: I, 276; my transl.)

In the *Syntagma philosophicum*, Gassendi explains that beauty ("*pulchritudo*") is what pleases us in an object, and makes us love it. Sense perception depends on the individual bodily constitution, so what one feels as agreeable can be felt as unpleasant by another. This is also evident if we think of the fact that we like different things in different times of our lives, or depending on our health conditions. This diversity, Gassendi says, is due to the habit ("*assuetudo*") of the sense organs, consisting in the arrangement of their corpuscular texture. In the case of the sense of taste, for instance, it is the shape of the pores of taste organs that changes through time, and makes us enjoy flavours that we did not like before. It is more difficult to explain how pleasures of the mind work, Gassendi admits, because mind is an incorporeal substance. But in our earthly life, mind is embodied, and acts always together with phantasy (that is, brain matter) as if they were a unique principle of action, so that if a species (a "phantasm", that is an image physically impressed in our brain) is unsuitable for our phantasy, it is also unsuitable for our mind (Gassendi [1658]: II, 488).

All this seems to go in the same direction of Descartes'. But the picture is actually quite different. Contrary to Descartes, Gassendi follows the ancient Greek tradition by holding that beautiful and good are synonyms. Beauty has its own *ratio*, which lies in the symmetry and proportionate measures of the object. These features are best discerned by the senses of sight and hearing. We then transpose them to the objects of our mind – which is like the eye of our soul – and call beautiful such immaterial things as God, the angels, truth, honesty, and so on (Gassendi [1658]: II, 487-488).

Also on the conception of habits, Gassendi seems close to Descartes, but only up to a certain point. According to Gassendi, everyone judges the beauty (or "grace": in Latin "*decus*") of something on the basis of their own feeling. Like Descartes, he mentions the fact that even defects, like moles, can please us when they belong to a person we love. This is due to the fact that the habit of receiving

the image of the mole together with the strongly attractive image of the beloved person exerts an influence on the disposition and texture of phantasy, so that the image of the mole will afterwards please us in itself (Gassendi [1658]: II, 491). He gives a similar explanation for the mechanism of habit in the cases of food taste and musical taste (Gassendi [1658]: II, 358 and 365).

Discussing the example of the mole on a person's skin in another passage of the *Syntagma*, Gassendi remarks that although it is true that habit can make us love the mole, when habit is associated with a more perfect conformation our pleasure is certainly greater:

> Just as different things please different beings, and everybody judges of the grace of something according to his own disposition, in the same way, generally speaking, it can be said that a form looks beautiful when it lacks nothing in terms of integrity, and conformation. Because when somebody is delighted by a mole, or crooked limbs, this is an effect of habit; but take the same habit together with a more perfect conformation, and the delight will be undoubtedly greater. (Gassendi [1658]: I, 301, my transl.)

This means that in Gassendi's opinion, contrary to Descartes', beauty is still quantifiable in terms of greater or smaller perfection of the object, and perfection is something that goes beyond the subjectivity of individual perception, or judgement.

Indeed, in Gassendi's natural philosophy, the word "beautiful" is often attributed to the world. The beauty of the world is seen as evidence that it has been designed by divine wisdom, against Epicure, who claimed that it resulted from the fortuitous encounter of atoms (Gassendi [1658]: II, 287). In other words, Gassendi still sticks to a traditional Pythagorean, Platonic, and scholastic framework, insofar as his idea of beauty is connected to the idea of the harmony of the cosmological order – which, being a work of God, is not only "beautiful", but also "good".

From this point of view, when habit makes us perceive moles on a beloved person's skin as pleasant, it acts as a disturbance of perception. Gassendi mentions the negative role of habit also when dealing with the issue of vegetarianism. He thinks that human body is naturally formed in order to eat vegetables: the shape of our teeth is similar to that of herbivorous animals, and children spontaneously prefer eating fruits rather than meat. It is only by a perverse habit that this natural inclination has been altered (Gassendi [1658]: I, 301-302). While Descartes holds that habits are natural instruments that can play a positive role (not only in the perception of an artistic object, but also in morals), Gassendi opposes nature to habits, and gives the latter the same negative connotations that we find in a wide tradition dating back to Saint Paul, and Saint Augustine. A similarly negative conception of the influence of habits can still be found in eighteenth-century aesthetics, for instance in the entry "Goût" of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Dictionnaire de musique* (1768), where the Genevan philosopher does recognize that

perception of beauty is a matter of subjective sentiment, but at the same time sees habits as a source of prejudices which often disturb the good judgement of taste, and «change the order of natural beauties» (Rousseau [1768]: 843)[5].

3. *Conclusions*

Let us now try to answer our initial question: why did the idea that beauty could be a merely subjective matter crop up in Descartes' mind, while it did not find a way into Gassendi's?

In Gassendi's view there is an aesthetic pleasure that depends on individual taste, and has a sensitive origin. This varies from one person to another according to the structure of sense organs, the mechanics of imagination, emotions, and habits. But there is also an objective beauty, which pertains to symmetry and proportion in the object of our perception, akin to the symmetry and proportion of the world, which in turn reflects and recalls the divinity of the Creator. It is the same beauty that a scientist often encounters observing with wonder and admiration the skies during his astronomical studies, or while trying to unveil the complicated secrets hidden in the innermost recesses of nature, where the tiniest beings reveal their place within the perfect design of God's ends. Gassendi just cannot question this absolute beauty, since it presents a crucial proof of the existence of God. This does not mean, of course, we should pretend that we can know exactly God's reasons, nor that a human sense of beauty coincides with God's, just as an animal's sense of beauty does not coincide with ours (a bull, for instance, would find any cow more beautiful than Helen of Troy). Nevertheless, according to Gassendi, there exists "some sort of harmony" ("*harmonia quadam*") among the parts of the world, and the best findings of human science, like Kepler's astronomical laws, still bear a "shadow of analogy" ("*umbra quadam analogiae*") with regard to the work of God[6].

In Descartes' view, on the contrary, there is nothing divine in aesthetics. He also studies nature to find out the laws that make up the order of the world, but he never says that this order, nor the world itself, is "beautiful". He sometimes says that the world is immense, and in this sense it hints at the infinity of God, but this is just to remind us that we will never be able to reach an adequate knowledge of the infinite Creator, nor can we understand what he had in mind when he created this world. So there is no way, according to Descartes, from the beauty of the world to God, just as there is no way, generally speaking, from the world to God. In fact, Descartes' three demonstrations of the existence of God all take place at the metaphysical level of the thinking substance, while he disregards the traditional, more widely accepted arguments used to prove the existence of God from the existence, order, and finality of the world. As Descartes wrote to

father Mersenne in three celebrated letters of the spring of 1630 – a few weeks after the letters on music theory we have quoted above –, God has not created the world according to a pre-existing rational order, i.e. according to a set of "eternal truths" equally intelligible to God and human minds. Rather, he created the world *and* its order arbitrarily, out of his free will: theoretically, being omnipotent, he could have made a completely different world, in which different physical, logico-mathematical, or moral truths would hold (he could have made that two and two made five, or that what has happened in the past had not happened, or even that the love towards God was a sin). God could even change the actual order at any time, even though we do not understand how this might be possible (Descartes [1964-1976]: I, 145-146). The order of the world is contingent upon God's will, and this makes it impossible to read in the book of nature anything about God's reason and ends.

This does not mean that the world was made with no reason, nor that there are no ends in nature; it just means that we cannot understand them, because the arbitrary acting of God goes beyond human teleological parameters. A true philosopher has thus to renounce final causes in the study of nature, and stick to efficient causes, i.e. the kind of causes that operate according to a mechanical model, and are fully comprehensible to our understanding[7]. Yet efficient causes do not tell us anything about God (who acts as an "eminent" cause, meaning that he causes, and is caused by himself, in a radically different manner in comparison with created causes). No analogy can be drawn between the way God reasons and acts, on one side, and on another side the way creatures, including human beings, act[8].

According to Descartes, we must indeed admit that the universe as a whole, being God's work, is perfect, inasmuch as it needs perfectly correspond with God's design; but we cannot know the universe as a whole, because it is immense (Descartes [1964-1976]: 7, 55-56). An we cannot say in which manner the perfection of the universe relates to God's. Thus no proportion is possible between God's perfection and the perfection of the universe, nor between the perfection of the universe as a whole, and that of a single part of it. This entails not only that we can say that no object in the world is perfect, but also that we cannot say, of any object in the world, if it is more or less close to perfection – that is, if it is more or less objectively beautiful (perfection, as understood by the above-described ancient tradition, being what the objectivity of beauty is anchored to).

Descartes' radical position is criticised by Gassendi in his *Disquisitio metaphysica* (the work of 1644 in which he extensively discusses Cartesian *Meditations on First Philosophy*), where he reproaches Descartes for disregarding the use of final causes in physics, and having abandoned the traditional proof of God's existence, the «royal way indicated by the Holy Scripture and followed by all wise persons, which consists in the contemplation of this wonderful universe» (Gassendi [1644]: 329).

To conclude, Descartes' idea of the subjectivity of aesthetic judgement *emerged* from his mechanistic physiological approach to the study of music perception, but the *acknowledgement* of this same subjectivity was likely made possible by his peculiar theological views.

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Notes

1   From this point of view, paradoxically, Descartes' ideas seem far from matching with the so-called "Cartesian" (i.e. rational, rule-based) theories of music, such as Jean-Philippe Rameau's. See Prenant (1942), Van Wymeersch (1999), Lamouche (2013). On the *Compendium of Music*, see also Frédéric de Buzon's introduction to Descartes, *Abrégé de musique* (Descartes [2016]: 123-148), and Buzon (2019).

2   Descartes employs this conception of beauty as harmony and proportion also in a 1628 letter, in order to praise the elegance of Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac's writing style (Descartes [1964-1976]: I, 7).

3   See Beeckman (1939-1953): 1, 149-150. The passage is inspired by Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, 4, 617-627.

4   On the perception of flavours, see Gassendi (1649): I, 292.

5   In contrast, see the like-named entry of the *Encyclopédie*, where both Voltaire and D'Alembert emphasize the positive role habit plays in refining taste (Diderot [1751-1772]: VII, 761-762, 768).

6   *Examen philosophiae Roberti Fluddi* (1630), in Gassendi (1658): III, 233. On the limits of Pythagoreanism, see also *Syntagma philosophicum*, in Gassendi (1658): I, 556-557. For Mersenne's opinions on the same subjects, see Buzon (1994) and Buccolini (2024).

7   See *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, resp. 5, 4 (Descartes [1964-1976]: VII, 374-375); *Principia philosophiae*, part 1, art. 28, and part 2, art. 2-3 (Descartes [1964-1976]: VIII/1, 15-16 and 80-81); *Entretiens avec Burman*, 1 (Descartes [1964-1976]: V, 158)

8   The most well-known study about this "loss of analogy", is Marion (1981). On Descartes' peculiar notion of divine causality, see Carraud (2002).

Aisthesis

Habits of Beauty

Towards a "Hexiologia Aesthetica" in the Early Modern Age

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Abstract. In this paper I make a case that the identity of disciplinary aesthetics in its inception is grounded in the habituation of αἴσθησις rather than in αἴσθησις as mere epistemic apprehension. To do so, I examine how disciplinary aesthetics arose within the revival of *habitus* and intellectual virtues in the early modern age, and argue that its ultimate goal was to develop beauty as a specific set of *habitus* of sensibility. Accordingly, I interpret Baumgarten's doctrine of the six perfections of sensible knowledge as guidelines of ascetic pathways aimed at restoring the health of the lower faculties of the soul. While the internalization of *habitus* gives identity to the aesthetic subject, I conclude, this identity takes life only if «inspired», hence in a fruitful exchange with the environment in which the subject is embedded, and in general with the whole universe. In this sense, nascent aesthetics is both ascetic and environmental.

Keywords. Baumgarten; habitus; spiritual exercises; habitat; environmental aesthetics.

Introduction

As is well known, the crisis of aesthetics as a philosophy of art around the 1970s coincided

with a rediscovery of Baumgarten's aesthetic thought. Baumgarten, the baptizer of aesthetics, was recognized as the herald of a different meaning of the discipline revolving around the kerygmatic core of αἴσθησις, namely sensible knowledge. But does αἴσθησις have to do with ἐπιστήμη alone? Is aesthetics only the systematization of a kind of knowledge in the form of a science? Some of the latest research on the germinal stages of philosophical aesthetics across Europe has rather brought to the fore the importance of the ascetic dimension of spiritual exercises, for example in the regulation of imagination (see Trop [2013], [2015]; Rydberg [2017]; Bacalu [2023]). Interpreted from this point of view, Baumgarten's project seems to aim primarily at the practical making of beauty in one's own thought, and ultimately in one's own life.

If this is true, then at the heart of nascent aesthetics we should find not only a body of knowledge, but also a set of habituation techniques. What role does *habitus* play in the emergence of disciplinary aesthetics? What relationship exists between αἴσθησις and ἕξις in this context? How can αἴσθησις be habituated? In what follows I intend to contribute to the framing of these questions. First, I will show that the investigation in this direction provides new insights into the relationship between nascent aesthetics and the noetization of modern metaphysics, where the Aristotelian theme of intellectual virtues was central. Second, I will focus on the possible extension of the discourse of intellectual virtues to sensibility, starting from the notion of εὐαισθησία. Third, I will examine the theme of aesthetic exercise in Baumgarten, as well as its role in the development of *habitus pulchre cogitandi*. Fourth, I will focus on the habitual directions of sensible thinking advanced by Baumgarten, looking at his six criteria of epistemic excellence as guidelines for the achievement of aesthetic virtues. Finally, I will consider the relationship between *habitus* and habitat in the moment of aesthetic inspiration. While *habitus* contribute to the identity of the aesthetic subject against the backdrop of the tiny perceptions from which it emerges, I will argue, this identity will take life precisely in the moment in which the subject becomes aware of the usually non-perceived threads which connect it to the whole universe from the point of view of its body. In this sense, I will conclude, nascent aesthetics is at once ascetic and environmental.

A science of habitus

One of the main achievements of late Scholastic philosophy, inextricably linked to the birth of modern ontology, is the noetization of metaphysics. According to the Calvinist Clemens Timpler (1563-1624), the godfather of modern ontology who established the standard of *Schulmetaphysik* in the Protestant world (Freedman [2009]), the most fundamental notion of metaphysics is no

longer, as in the Aristotelian tradition, *ens quatenus ens* (being qua being), but *intelligibile quatenus intelligibile* (intelligible qua intelligible), or rather πᾶν νοητόν, *omne intelligibile*, hence everything that can be objectified by the intellect[1]. In this sense, Timpler goes as far as to think that the notion of νοητόν is even more general than the distinction between *nihil* (nothing) and *nonnihil* (or *aliquid*: not nothing or something), thereby granting metaphysics supreme universality. Among the consequences of this approach is a renewed interest in the problem of knowability. Indeed, if a being is such only insofar as it is accessible to knowledge, it will be necessary to preliminarily examine the cognizable as such, regardless of the object known. This examination is carried out by a new propaedeutic discipline of metaphysics that authors such as the Lutheran theologian and philosopher Abraham Calov (1612-1686) call «gnostology» (Calov [1650]). Gnostology intends to study not simply the punctual apprehension of knowledge, but the human *habitus* underlying that apprehension, specifically the *habitus* of contemplating the cognizable *qua talis*[2].

The centrality of *habitus* following the cognitive turn in metaphysics is crucial to our discourse. As is well known, Aristotle expounds his influential doctrine of *habitus* particularly in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and connects it to the acquisition of virtue. As Aristotle points out, «excellence [or virtue] (ἀρετή), then, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual excellence in the main owes its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral excellence comes about as a result of habit (ἐξ ἔθους)» (1103a15-b25, trans. W. D. Ross). In both the intellectual and moral spheres, then, the acquisition of ἀρετή requires a process of habituation. Commenting upon the Aristotelian doctrine and its reception, Timpler devotes a whole treatise to the problem of *habitus*: *Hexiologia, hoc est, Doctrina generalis de habitibus* (1618), where *habitus* or ἕξις is considered as «a permanent quality by means of which a human being is inclined to act well or badly» (Timpler [1606a]: 28; [1618]: 84). More specifically, the good *habitus*, which enables the perfecting of the subject in which it is inherent, is called «virtue» and the bad *habitus* is called «vice» (Timpler [1618]: 104[3]). Intellectual virtue will then be that which enables the subject to be perfected in relation to intellectual actions, and disposes the subject to know true and false well (Timpler [1618]: 124[4]).

The good *habitus* concerning the intellect, namely intellectual virtue, had already demonstrated its theoretical relevance in a preparatory treatise to the second edition of Timpler's *Metaphysica* (1606), with title *Technologia*, where Timpler discusses the nature and mutual relations of the liberal arts to one another. Timpler here asserts that the liberal arts (theology, philosophy, and philology with their derivations) are not just systems of rules towards the perfection of the human being (Timpler [1606a]: 1), but can also be viewed as *artes liberales internae*, that is, as intellectual *habitus*, arising from the assimilation of these rules

in one's life (Timpler [1606a]: 27[5]). Intellectual *habitus*, then, is here a discipline from the subjective point of view, that is, the outcome of the reconversion of the practitioner's existence following the learning of that given *ars*.

In the early-modern revival of the doctrine of *habitus* and intellectual (and moral) virtues, the reconversion stemming from the process of habituation is often viewed through a Christian lens, insofar as the resulting virtues aim to provide a tool to make up for the weaknesses of human nature corrupted by sin. Johann Heinrich Alsted (1588-1638), a Calvinist polymath and encyclopedist influenced by Timpler's metaphysics, argues in his own *Technologia* that if philosophy is to remain true to its vocation as *medicina mentis*, then each discipline will be summoned to medicate one of the powers of the soul, either the intellect (theoretical and poetic) or the will (Alsted [1620]: col. 80[6]; see on this Hotson [2000]: 70-2). By developing a second nature through *habitus*, each discipline will thus make a contribution to the cure of the humans' tainted being, at least as far as it is possible without divine grace.

To accomplish this process of habituation which is also a process of remodeling of human nature, a triad of efficient causes is necessary, that is, nature or wit, hence the inborn disposition to acquire a certain set of rules; *doctrina*, the set of rules to be learned; and *exercitatio* (ἄσκησις), the frequent repetition of similar acts, which ensures enduring assimilation (Timpler [1606a]: 28-9[7]). While the first two features are remote causes, the latter is the proximate cause of any internal liberal art. Ἄσκησις is thus the primary means for shaping *homo habitualis*, hence also the main medicine for possibly restoring his health.

From εὐαισθησία to beauty

If the *habitus* of the mind primarily concerns intellect and will, so that the resulting virtues are either intellectual or moral, what about sensibility? The position of the German philosopher Jakob Thomasius, professor of Aristotelian philosophy at the University of Leipzig and one of Leibniz's mentors, can be of help in this regard. In his *Philosophia practica* (1661), Thomasius deals with pleasure, which results from the concurrence of two perfections, one *ex parte facultatis cognoscentis* and the other *ex parte objecti cognoscibilis* (Thomasius [1661]: table XXX). While in the latter case the perfection has a different name according to the organ that receives the stimulus (beauty in the case of visible objects, sweetness in the case of tasteable objects, truth in the case of intelligible objects, etc.), the perfections of the cognitive faculty can only be two, one of the senses and one of the intellect. In the case of the intellect such perfection is a *habitus intellectualis seu virtus*, while in the case of the senses Thomasius uses the term εὐαισθησία, keen sense-perception, a term already used in classical

Greek (see Plato, *Timaeus*, 76d2) and considered to be a kind of somatic virtue (see Philo, *De Abrahamo*, 263). In Thomasius εὐαισθησία is the sensible counterpart of intellectual virtue and represents, as it were, the health of the senses, their εὐεξία. Although Thomasius does not elaborate on the subject, this observation calls for further investigation. For if εὐαισθησία is a kind of virtue, what is the ἕξις of αἴσθησις? In what way can αἴσθησις be subjected to habituation? It is against the background of these questions that disciplinary aesthetics will enter the domain of philosophy.

As is evident from the beginning of his *Metaphysica*, Baumgarten is well aware of the cognitive turn in metaphysics, which he generically attributes to the Schoolmen in the *Sciagraphia* (SC §§ 125-127). In this sense, Baumgarten defines metaphysics as «the science of the first principles in human knowledge» (M § 1). If it is true that «the more general predicates of a being are the first principles of human knowledge» (M § 3), then the something-as-possible is the representable (M § 8). The choice of the term «repraesentabile» over, for example, the term «intelligibile», linked with the intellect in the strict sense, is significant. As Baumgarten writes in his *Philosophia generalis*, the intelligible as νοητόν cannot be considered the defining feature of philosophy in the sense of metaphysics (PhG § 23), for along with νοητά (the something as intelligible) there are also αἰσθητά (the something as sensible) (Baumgarten [1735]: § 116; K § 1). By using the neutral term «repraesentabile», Baumgarten therefore implicitly includes both νόησις and αἴσθησις as specific *modi considerandi* of the *res*; in the αἰσθητόν the determinations of the being are not abstracted as much as is the case with the νοητόν, thus giving peculiar access to the material truth of the *res* itself (see for ex. AE § 560). It is on this gnostological-metaphysical basis that aesthetics can carry out its gnoseological-instrumental task of correctly directing the lower faculties of the soul, hence of pursuing the perfection of sensible knowledge[8].

With this legacy in mind, we can now better compare Thomasius' conception with Baumgarten's. For Baumgarten as well as for Thomasius the perfection of sensible knowledge has two aspects: one related to the perfection of what we sensibly perceive and the other related to the perfection of sensible knowledge as such[9]. Baumgarten, however, unlike Thomasius, traces both aspects back to beauty. Beauty, then, is not related solely to the material dimension of sensible knowledge; rather, it can have both a material and a formal dimension. From this perspective, the εὐαισθησία of which Thomasius speaks, the good αἴσθησις, corresponds to the perfection of sensible knowledge *qua talis*, hence to beauty in its formal aspect, which is the goal of aesthetics according to Baumgarten (AE § 14[10]). Aesthetics must then teach how to refine sensible knowledge even if the object of thought is imperfect (AE § 18[11]). In aesthetics thus resonates the requirement of gnostology, which intends to analyze the cognizable *qua talis*,

regardless of the type of object of our knowledge: the cognizable as a possible object. Interpreted in the broader context of the cognitive turn of scholastic metaphysics, aesthetics claims its transcendental vocation from the very beginning.

Aesthetic subject as ascetic subject

How is it possible to perfect the formal dimension of sensible knowledge? If εὐαισθησία represents the counterpart of the intellectual *habitus* or virtue, it is evident that beauty also has an ascetic dimension. It is this ascesis of the sensible within the sensible that aesthetics is properly concerned with. Aesthetics thus provides the rules and tools for directing the lower faculties of the soul in a way that leads its practitioner to develop a *habitus pulchre cogitandi*, a skill in thinking beautifully (AE § 47[12]).

The aspect that interests us most in this regard is that of aesthetic exercise, which constitutes the core of the cultivation of the sensible: «To the character of the gifted aesthetician one requires […] exercise, and aesthetic exercise» (AE § 47; see Trop [2013]; [2015]: ch. 1; Frey [2016]; Pollok [2021]). Baumgarten contrasts exercise with external imposition, for example that of Orbilius, Horace's schoolmaster, who did not hesitate to use the cane with his students. Conversely, exercise is «the frequent repetition of homogeneous actions or similar actions in relation to a specific difference» (M § 577; AE § 47). Exercise plays a key role in the development of *habitus*. In the *Metaphysica*, *habitus* or proficiencies, which Baumgarten already discusses in ontology (M § 219), are psychologically defined as «greater degrees of the faculties of the soul» (M § 577; the *habitus* of the cognitive faculties are called «theoretical»). In this way, the formation of *habitus* turns out to be crucial in the very process of subjectification. In fact, since the notion of *subjectum* in Baumgarten no longer just refers to the soul as a bearer of properties, but also indicates an agent with greater or lesser power to produce effects (M § 527; see Menke [2003]: 748-751; 2014; see more in general Karskens [1992]: 235-240; Kruglov [2011]: 100-102), the increase in the degree of the faculties by means of habituation will be functional to the increase of the subject's agency.

Just like Timpler ([1618]: 109-110), Baumgarten distinguishes *habitus* into inborn, acquired, and supernaturally infused. *Habitus*, therefore, are not only acquired through exercise, as Wolff had asserted among others (Wolff [1732]: § 430: «*Habitus* is not acquired except through exercise, and disposition is transformed into *habitus* through exercise»), for a naturally strong disposition of the soul can already be called *habitus*; in any case it must then be further augmented by exercise, since a *habitus*, as unanimously recognized, recedes due to the interruption of the frequent actions that support it or due to the acquisition of opposite *habitus* (AE § 48; K § 48; Timpler [1618]: 97-98; Wolff [1732]: §§ 431-433).

Habitus (proficiency) is strictly linked with *consuetudo* (habit), *consuetudo* being «the proficiency that reduces the necessity of attention in certain actions» (M § 650). While for Wolff *consuetudo agendi* as «habitus agendi ex determinatione praeterita» (Wolff [1732]: § 923) takes on a suspicious connotation, since it depends on motives remembered only confusedly (Wolff [1732]: § 924: «A habit of acting is the proficiency of acting on the basis of a past determination, or that which occurs by virtue of past motives, as we remember in a confused manner what we have perceived»), in Baumgarten *consuetudo* assumes a neutral meaning, as it can greatly shape the cognitive faculties in both a positive and a negative direction (M § 650)[13]. The point will then be to develop the customary virtues (*virtutes consuetudinariae*) in a positive manner (E § 242).

To lend foundation to the theme of *habitus* and *consuetudo*, Baumgarten appeals to Leibniz. As is well known, Leibniz had admitted the existence of «tiny perceptions» (see Otabe [2010]), which lie below the threshold of consciousness. Tiny perceptions make it possible not only to explain the knowledge of things that are singularly imperceptible (such as the sea waves lapping the shore), but also the power of habits, which are acquired through a series of repeated actions to which we do not individually pay attention. Although according to Leibniz it is impossible to directly guide the development of habits, it is, however, possible to act on them indirectly, for example, countering a habit by setting an opposite habit against it (Leibniz [1710]: 137[14]).

In Baumgarten's perspective, this means that we must obscure the distinct representations we want to acquire through their reiteration, and thus plunge them deeper and deeper into the ground of the soul, until a certain virtue becomes «a kind of second nature» (E § 242; see Nannini [2021])[15]. To this end, we must make sure that the representations absorbed into the ground of the soul, the source of desires, are aimed at the beautiful (K § 54). Aesthetic exercises will thus enable the functionalization of tiny perceptions by giving them an order and a shape as habits of beauty[16]. In this way, Baumgarten can provide his aesthetic hexiology with a psychological basis[17].

Baumgarten suggests two basic types of exercises in the *Aesthetica*: one concerning the individual lower cognitive faculties, so that their good natural disposition may be strengthened, as explained in ethics and in the various sections of empirical psychology – a discipline that for Wolff was already intended to describe as well as to develop and train the faculties of the soul (Wolff [1732]: *Praefatio*, 17*; on *habitus* in Wolff, see Park [2004]); the other concerns the collaboration of the various faculties, cognitive and appetitive, in thinking beautifully about a certain subject: these are properly called «aesthetic exercises» (AE §§ 47-51). One of Baumgarten's examples is that of a painter, who often uses his paintbrush to make something beautiful (K § 47). As apparent, the *habitus* resulting from the customary activity of the painter is

not a mere mindless iteration of one and the same action, but the ability to react to circumstances appropriately, according to an open set of actions of which *habitus* represents the dynamic pattern.

In the classification of aesthetic exercises, presented according to a progressive target age (see Krupp [2006]), Baumgarten starts from the exercises based on the almost innate instinct to imitation and expectation of similar cases; in fact, Baumgarten argues, a wit with an inborn disposition to beauty tends to exercise itself even without the guidance of theory, as when «the child talks, while playing, especially if he is the inventor of the games or the little commander among his companions, and devotes himself to them with earnest effort, and does and endures much, while looking, while listening, while reading things that he can understand in a beautiful way» (AE § 55).

As the years go by, to these childhood exercises it is necessary to add the theoretical study of aesthetics. This study is presented in the section on the discipline of aesthetics, where the increase in the generality of the rules will lead the *pulchre cogitaturus* from the individual liberal arts to the aesthetic art, which Baumgarten ultimately intends to establish as a science, providing it with universal and certain principles (AE §§ 62-77). This investigation must in any case be also accompanied by exercises, since rules without exercise do not provide the expected benefit (AE § 77). Such exercises are undoubtedly more complex than early childhood improvisations, but just as important for thinking beautifully. Only if both types of exercises join forces, the practitioner will succeed in developing beauty as *habitus pulchre cogitandi*, which involves together the cognitive faculties (*ingenium*), the appetitive faculties (*indoles*) and the body (*temperamentum*) (AE § 59). At the end of this process, then, aesthetics will no longer be just a theoretical collection of rules about beauty – an external art to use Timpler's words – but rather the practical ἕξις of those rules, which must constitute the common ground for the practitioners of all the liberal arts[18].

Hexiologia aesthetica

After elucidating the genealogy and systematic role of *habitus* in the origin of disciplinary aesthetics, it is necessary to flesh out the specific kind of aesthetic *habitus* which Baumgarten discusses. For assuming that nature is to be amended through exercise and theoretical study, what are the directions in which these tools should lead us in order to think beautifully? What, in short, are the rules of Baumgarten's method?

From the very first paragraphs of the *Aesthetica*, Baumgarten names six perfections of sensible knowledge: «Wealth, greatness, truth, clarity, certainty and life of knowledge […] give the perfection of all knowledge» (AE § 22; on the

genealogy of the list, see Nannini [2020]). In contrast, «poverty (*angustiae*), worthlessness (*vilitas*), falsehood (*falsitas*), obscurity (*obscuritas*), wavering (*dubia fluctuatio*), inertia (*inertia*), constitute the elements of imperfection of all knowledge. As phenomenal objects, they sully sensible knowledge in general, and are the main vices of things and thoughts» (AE § 23). The proposal I advance is to consider the six perfections of knowledge not simply as aesthetic categories, but also as goals of specific ascetic pathways aimed at developing the respective *habitus*[19]. So far Baumgarten scholars, when not entirely disdainful of the structural role of the perfections (for a rectification see Tedesco [2008]: 139-140), have seen in such elements a legacy of rhetoric or a canon of epistemic excellence. Already the fact that their antonyms are regarded as vices suggests in any case that these categories might be more properly understood as intellectual virtues, or rather their counterparts on the aesthetic level – aesthetic virtues[20].

In his *Elementa philosophiae instrumentalis* (1703), Johann Franz Buddeus (1667-1729), a Lutheran theologian and philosopher close to Pietism and certainly known to Baumgarten (see Grote [2017]: 142), had distinguished the vices and virtues of the intellect in all its workings and faculties, starting from its state of weakness (*imbecillitas*) due to the Fall. While the vices (see Kivistö [2014]: 19-21), including *ignorantia*, *angustia cognitionis*, *obscuritas, error seu falsitas*, *dubitatio*, etc., are for Buddeus «morbi intellectus», the epistemic virtues (such as truth, clarity and efficacy or life) constitute the health of the intellect, making it fit to acquire true and sound erudition (Buddeus [1703]: 120-135). As patent, the list of epistemic vices and virtues is not very dissimilar to that of Baumgarten, who probably used it as one of his sources (see Nannini [2020]: 481).

Whereas Buddeus merely speaks of the intellect, though, Baumgarten extends the doctrine to the plane of αἴσθησις. In Baumgarten, the six perfections thus constitute the poles of beauty as εὐαισθησία, of beauty as the wisdom of αἴσθησις. Such wisdom partially remedies the malady corrupting sensibility after the Fall, thereby making its own contribution to the restoration of the image of God in us (cf. K § 12). It is to this wisdom that aesthetics intends to guide the readers, so that they may finally achieve the *habitus pulchre cogitandi* in their own life.

This process of habituation was very apparent in Descartes's method: «[A]s I practiced the method I felt my mind gradually become accustomed to conceiving its objects more clearly and distinctly» (AT, VI, 21; CSM, I, 121; see Davies [2001]; D'Agostino [2017]: part 2). Albeit addressing the use of sensibility rather than the use of reason, Baumgarten's method, too, has as its primary purpose to change the diet of the mind to healthier habits, internalizing the λόγοι, the categories of aesthetics, into an ἦθος, a habitual character, that guides us spontaneously from within.

It is no coincidence that in the sections devoted to each of the six perfections Baumgarten does not merely explain them as perfections of knowledge in the abstract, but also mentions possible exercises that can lead the reader or listener of his lectures to appropriately train and habituate their sensible thinking in that direction, thus increasing the subject's aesthetic agency. Not only that, but, again like Descartes (AT, VI, 18), Baumgarten brings to the fore a kind of meta-rule that comes ahead of the actual treatment of the rules of thought he intends to propose: that is, the observance without exception of the rules themselves, their constant exercise. «Nulla dies sine linea» (no day without a line), Baumgarten asserts with the words which Pliny the Elder had applied to the Greek painter Apelles (AE § 77; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, 35, 87).

As for the concrete methodological precepts, Baumgarten begins with the richness of sensible thinking. The beautiful mind must conduct experiments to decide whether the subject matter is rich enough before taking it up as the theme of its own thought: for this purpose, it will be able to make use of two specific arts: first, the art of analogy, whereby something similar can be derived from a beautiful thing already known, as in the case of mature imitation or parody; second, topics, the art of recalling to memory the predicates of a certain subject (AE §§ 129-130)[21]. Here, it is useful to train oneself with universal topics (AE § 137), for example, analyzing a certain subject based on the famous line: «Who? With what aid? What? How? Why? Where? When?» (AE § 133) or Aristotle's ten categories. While exercises with universal topics give only common predicates, like a kind of standard clothes that should fit all human beings, more useful will be the exercises with special topics, as they are more appropriate to the individuality of the things with which aesthetics is concerned (K §§ 137-138). As examples, Baumgarten outlines two specifically aesthetic topics that can serve as an exercise in the richness of beautiful thinking: the first is an artificial topics, in which the beautiful spirit must ask whether the chosen theme can be profitably thought according to the six perfections mentioned in the opening of the treatise. The second is a psychological topic (AE § 140; K § 140), in which the beautiful mind must check whether all the lower faculties are adequately involved in thinking sensibly about a certain theme (AE § 140).

Exercises are also important for the acquisition of the second perfection of thought, greatness, in particular the subjective greatness of the mind (AE § 59; see Mirbach [2008]); in fact, only by assiduously attending to what is noble and beautiful will one learn to think and desire nobly and beautifully (K § 45). In this case, it is necessary to support with steady exercise and discipline the inborn inclination to *magnanimitas*, the tension of the appetitive faculties of the soul toward what is great (AE §§ 44-45; K §§ 44-45; AE § 352; § 354), though without reaching the severity of the Stoics (K § 353), so as to make honorableness and nobility a second nature («altera natura», AE § 363)[22].

The same need for habituation is also crucial for truth. The *studium veritatis* does not only require a wit naturally suited to the task of thinking subjectively about truth, but also «a wit exercised with great effort and accustomed to investigate aesthetico-logical truths thoroughly; and not just any propensity is understood, but the firm purpose on the part of the mind to infer from its reflections the maximum of truth which […] they can admit» (AE § 555). Once again, Baumgarten emphasizes the meta-rule of constant endeavor and zealous diligence, here by means of exercises that foster the acquisition of consequential and contradiction-free thinking (K § 555). The importance of ἄσκησις also applies to the two perfections discussed in the second volume of the *Aesthetica* (1758): in the case of aesthetic light, it is necessary to acquire the *habitus* that enables one to discern the splendor of thoughts from false embellishment (AE §§ 628; 712); in the case of certainty, it is necessary to develop the *habitus* to persuade in a verisimilar way, without indulging in falsehood (AE §§ 838-839).

Perhaps the most significant element of the second volume in this respect, however, is already in the preface. In this very brief text, in which Baumgarten explains the health issues that led him to leave the *Aesthetica* unfinished, and lacking even the section on life, the sixth and supreme beauty of knowledge, Baumgarten addresses the faithful reader who has followed him so far: «[Reader friend, learn] from me, who for eight years now have been wandering in a labyrinth of illnesses from which there seems to be no escape, how necessary it is to accustom oneself in time to think well of the best things (*maturius bene cogitandis optimis assuefieri*). What I would do in my condition, indeed, if I were for my part incapable of doing this, I certainly do not know» (AE: 241). With this final admonition, tested in the crucible of affliction, Baumgarten confirms that the practical acquisition of the *habitus* of «bene cogitare» is the ultimate end of his aesthetics. The goal of the treatise *Aesthetica*, Baumgarten thus suggests, is precisely to help the reader achieve in his or her own existence that *assuefactio* to good thinking that for Baumgarten proves so decisive precisely at the most difficult moment of his existence. Baumgarten thus brings his own life (and death) as evidence in favor of the soundness of his work.

From habitus *to* habitat

Forming the *habitus* of thinking beautifully, however, still does not mean thinking beautifully. In fact, based on the Aristotelian distinction between ἕξις and ἐνέργεια (*Eudemian Ethics* 1218b; *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098b33), *habitus* is just a potential matrix and not yet its actualization. According to Baumgarten, aesthetic impetus or inspiration is required for the actualization of beautiful thinking (AE §§ 78-95). Inspiration is understood here as the advent of some-

thing we perceive as radically other to ourselves, which, however, at the same time resonates in the subject's innermost being, raising the degree of its powers in a sudden and unexpected manner. Traditionally, this advent is explained by the doctrine of ἐνθουσιασμός, the coming of the god in us: «The god, here is the god!», exclaimed the Cumaean Sibyl when Apollo took possession of her (AE § 82). Yet, Baumgarten maintains, the visitation of such otherness – the «breathing into oneself of something greater» (AE § 80) – might be more correctly explained as the abrupt clarification of forgotten, unnoticed, and unforeseen perceptual threads which are usually dormant in the ground of the soul (AE § 80).

As we have observed above, the acquisition of *habitus* functionalizes the tiny perceptions into identity patterns sedimented in the *fundus animae* as a second nature; however, these perceptions are never fully under our control, as they bear trace to our obscure relations to the whole universe[23]. Of such relationships we become especially conscious precisely during inspiration, when these perceptions suddenly awaken from their habitual slumber in unpredicted ways and times owing to our point of view, hence to the position (or posture) of our body in the environment. While *habitus* provide a sort of self-made armor, a παρασκευή[24], that makes it possible to give a temporarily stable identity, an ἦθος, to the aesthetic subject, the aesthetic subject will be such, that is, effective in thinking beautifully, only when that identity is shaken by the renewed awareness of the nexus of which it is part. The otherness we sense in inspiration, the god visiting us, is precisely the experience of the e-vent, of that which comes from outside, causing us to feel the connections that run through our self with utmost intensity. In that moment we no longer deal with the object of our sensible thought as something isolated or separated from us, but perceive ourselves as entangled within the same web of relations (cf. M § 357: «in mundo non datur insula»; M § 544), as open-ended poles of that very network. It is in the successful convergence of *habitus* and *habitat*, ἕξις and τύχη that the aesthetic act is finally accomplished.

From this standpoint, the distance between the Stoic sage and the aesthetic sage comes into the open. As portrayed in the frontispiece of Wolff's *Deutsche Ethik* (1720), the Stoic-like sage is identified with a rocky outcrop above the stormy clouds and winds – what Aristotle called the πάθη of the atmosphere (*Meteorologica*, 371a). Baumgarten, as is well known, takes issue with this image in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* (K § 7), since the philosopher is «homo inter homines» (AE § 7) and errs if he considers his own sensible faculties, hence also his affects or πάθη, foreign to himself. Along with this anthropological reading, an ecological interpretation is also possible. While the Stoic sage trains himself to erect an impenetrable barrier to external factors, taking abode in a «semper innubilus aether» (Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, 3, 21), a supralunar sphere devoid of atmosphere (Seneca, *Ad Lucilium*, LIX)[25], the aesthetic sage is aware of being

continually pervaded by the environment: «The ether is purer, but here we must breathe air», maintains Baumgarten in the *Ethica philosophica* (E § 246).

In such allegiance to aerobic breathing, aesthetic *in-spiratio* can reveal its ecological significance, insofar as it captures the feeling of interconnectedness which the beautiful mind senses through its bodily immersion in the environment. The equipment, the παρασκευή, of the aesthetician as «an athlete of the event»[26] thus does not take the shape of an impermeable shield, but is more like a sail, capable of making the most of the sudden blast of propitious zephyrs (AE § 141). Rather than a vertical ascesis toward the acropolis of wisdom, the beauty which aesthetics aims at is the fruit of a constitutively intramundane ascesis, where aesthetic *habitus* do not immunize from the πάθη of the habitat, but prepare to take advantage of their never entirely predictable advent as a factor of creativity and vivification.

Conclusion

Looking at the rise of disciplinary aesthetics *sub specie ascetica* allows us to cast new light upon the rise of the aesthetic subject. In fact, nascent aesthetics reveals a number of neglected relationships with the noetization of metaphysics and the resumption of the theme of *habitus* and intellectual virtues in the scholastic discussion of the early modern period, where hexiology becomes a full-fledged discipline. As I have suggested, one of the foundational elements of aesthetics is precisely the attempt to delineate and internalize a hexiology of sensible thinking. Rather than marking a merely epistemological revolution based on the emancipation of sensibility, disciplinary aesthetics in its inception thus outlines a practical itinerary of self-reformation that leads to an enduring redirection of one's existence.

From this point of view, the six perfections of sensible knowledge listed by Baumgarten do not come down to a sheer canon of aesthetic categories, but rather amount to methodological guidelines, that is, directions of habituation of sensible thinking. To properly assimilate the doctrine of aesthetic richness, then, it is not enough to study the relevant chapter of the *Aesthetica*, but it will be necessary to carry out the suggested exercises, so as to develop the ἕξις of thinking richly; likewise, nobility has to become the ἕξις of thinking primarily about noble themes; truth, the ἕξις of thinking constantly about verisimilar events; and so on. As is evident, in the transition from systematic categories to imbibed ἕξεις, the perfections cease to be nouns and become adverbs (ars *pulchre* cogitandi), hence modes of being. In this adverbial perspective, beauty is not to be understood as an object we look at from a distance or a momentary feeling, but a quality of our making, or better, something we become.

By means of the training of one's inborn sensible dispositions through drills and theoretical study, the beginner (*pulchre cogitaturus*) will thus be able to forge a kind of παρασκευή, an armor or, better, an equipment, composed of a set of *habitus* providing matrices of action to behave appropriately when required. While such a παρασκευή makes it possible to mold into identity patterns the crawling otherness inhabiting the aesthetic subject, it will never become so impenetrable as to immunize toward the environment from which the subject itself emerges. Precisely the immersion of the subject in the infinity of relations that tie it to the entire universe underlies that *inspiratio* where the potentiality of *habitus* can actualize itself into concrete acts of beautiful thinking, thus turning the *pulchre cogitaturus* into a *pulchre cogitans*. It is in this delicate balance between a formative and an immersive instance that the aesthetic subject makes its debut on the philosophical stage.

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Notes

1   «Proinde nos latius extendimus rem in Metaphysica consideratam, ut sub ea πᾶν νοητόν, hoc est Omne intelligibile comprehendatur» (Timpler [1606b]: 7). For the context, see Wundt (1939); Funke (1961); Courtine (1990).

2   «[Gnostologia] exhibens Cognoscibilis, qua talis Naturam, Principia, Affectiones, & species. Hoc est Modum apprehendendi quodcumque Objectum, cui innititur omnis humana cognitio» (Calov [1650]: 1). As for the definition, Calov declares: «Gnostologia est habitus mentis principalis, contemplans cognoscibilis, qua tale». See Sgarbi (2018).

3   «Cum omnis habitus sit qualitas permanens, per quam ens facile & promptum redditur ad operandum, posset quis inde concludere, omnem habitum perficere subiectum, cui inest. Verum distinguendum est inter habitum bonum & malum: quorum ille dicitur virtus; hic vitium».

4   «[M]elius est definire virtutem intellectualem, quod sit habitus intellectualis, per quem homo perficitiur & disponitur ad bene cognoscendum verum & falsum».

5   «[S]equitur ars liberalis interna, quae nihil aliud est, quam habitus intellectualis hominem perficiens, doctumque & aptum reddens ad artificiose contemplandum vel operandum».

6   «Hic numerus [seven, the number of the liberal arts] etiam convenit cum imperfectione hominis ut est homo, quam sanare debet philosophia: quae ob id Platoni dicitur medicina sanans morbos animi. Nam philosophia theoretica tollit caliginem ignorantiae, quae est in intellectu theoretico; practica malitiam, quae est in voluntate; poëtica inertiam, quae conspicitur in intellectu poëtico».

7   «[C]uilibet manifestum est, ad comparandum etiam liberalem artem internam, quae est species habitus intellectualis, necessario tria illa requiri, nempe naturam, doctrinam & exercitationem […]. Ex quib. natura & doctrina a quibusdam dicuntur causae remotae habitus; exercitatio vero causa efficiens proxima».

8   Gnoseology, one of Baumgarten's several neologisms, is defined as «the science of knowledge in general», dealing as much with sensible knowledge as with intellectual knowledge; in this sense, gnoseology is synonymous with logic in the broad sense, including logic in the strict sense and aesthetics, and constitutes the main part of organic or instrumental philosophy (SC § 25), devoted to the refinement of the entire cognitive faculty (K § 1). While gnostology, as a propaedeutic to metaphysics, is a contemplative discipline, gnoseology, as logic, is an operative discipline. From the point of view of gnoseology, we might argue, there are two ways of considering a possible object of knowledge that gnostology studies theoretically, one κατ´αἴσθησιν and one κατὰ νόησιν; both must be operationally directed to the respective perfection.

9   As is known, for Baumgarten αἴσθησις refers to the cognition resulting from all the lower powers of the soul, not only from the senses (see already Baumgarten [1735]: § 116).

10   «Aesthetices finis est perfectio cognitionis sensitivae, qua talis. Haec autem est pulcritudo».

11   «Pulcritudo rerum et cogitationum distinguenda est a pulcritudine cognitionis, cuius prima et primaria pars est, et pulcritudine obiectorum et materiae, quacum ob receptum rei significatum saepe, sed male confunditur. Possunt turpia pulcre cogitari, ut talia, et pulcriora turpiter».

12   «Ad characterem felicis aesthetici requiritur II) Ἄσκησις et exercitatio aesthetica, crebrior repetitio actionum in hoc homogenearum, ut sit aliquis ingenii ac indolis, §§ 28-46 descriptorum consensus in datum thema, s. ne quis ab Orbilis data themata cogitet, in unum cogitandum, in rem unam, ut habitus pulcre cogitandi sensim acquiratur».

13   *Consuetudo* is discussed by Wolff in the section on the will of his *Psychologia empirica*, while Baumgarten deals with it in the section on reason, hence in relation to the cognitive dimension of the soul. In Baumgarten *consuetudo* is thus subject to the domain of *analogon rationis*, which confusedly perceives the nexus of things (M § 640).

14   «Elle [l'âme] a cependant quelque pouvoir encor sur ces perceptions confuses, bien que d'une manière indirecte; car quoiqu'elle ne puisse changer ses passions sur le champ, elle peut y travailler de loin avec assez de succès, et se donner des passions nouvelles, et même des habitudes».

15 According to Baumgarten, *virtus* is in general «habitus, sibi factu quod sit optimum, libere faciendi» (Baumgarten [1763]: § 41).

16 The link between ascesis and *habitus* is also evident in the field of logic. Baumgarten devotes the last, very short chapter of his *Acroasis logica* (1761) to *Ascetica, seu de adquirendo habitu in logices applicatione* (Baumgarten [1761]: 208), in which he recommends practice for each section of his logic. The chapter comments on § 5 of ch. 16 of Wolff's *Deutsche Logik* («Wie man eine Fertigkeit in der Ausübung der Logick erhalten soll»), inserted in the fifth edition of 1727. See Schwaiger (2017): 182-183.

17 The psychologization of the sciences as *habitus*, as suggested above, was already in place in Timpler (see Schmidt-Biggemann [1983]: 83 and 85).

18 Aesthetics is therefore a theory of the liberal arts, a *technologia* to use Timpler's word, as well as an art it itself (both internal and external). In Baumgarten, however, the liberal arts are closer to Batteux's system of the fine arts than to Timpler's list. On the relation between aesthetics and the liberal arts, see Hernández Márcos (2003): 109-121. On the importance of *habitus* for the German concept of «schöne Wissenschaften» (belles-lettres), see Strube (1990): 139-141.

19 According to Baumgarten, the six categories are objects of care (*curae*) for a subject (*subiectum*) who intends to think of an object (*obiectum*) in a beautiful way (AE § 115). This does not mean that the categories cannot also be applied to the object of thought, see for example AE §§ 118; 189 (in this case, they should act as criteria for the choice of the theme of our thinking).

20 With regard to *perfectio intellectus*, Wolff distinguishes the material, object-related intellectual virtues (the traditional five Aristotelian intellectual virtues) from the formal intellectual virtues, which concern only the cognitive process (such as *soliditas*) (Wolff [1750]: § 143; see Dioni [2015]); if we borrow this distinction, we might say that the virtues we analyze here are a kind of formal virtues of sensibility.

21 It should be emphasized that for Baumgarten the use of topics is commendable only as a preparatory exercise and not for the act of thinking beautifully itself. For the difference between topics as «ars in memoriam revocandi» and heuristics, see Schwaiger (2017): 192-196. For the wider context, see Buchenau (2013).

22 The relevant exercises are set out in the *Ethica philosophica* which I cannot discuss here.

23 On the basis of the universal *nexus rerum*, the soul thinks in every moment of the whole universe; however, since the soul thinks of it according to the position of the body, the vast majority of its representations remain obscure and therefore unconscious (M §§ 512-514; 741-743; see Nannini [2022]: 106).

24 On the importance of παρασκευή as the equipment for handling future events in ancient philosophy, see Foucault (1982): 320-327.

25 «Talis est Sapientis animus, qualis mundi status super Lunam. Semper illic serenum est».

26 «The Stoic athlete, the athlete of ancient spirituality also has to struggle. He has to be ready for a struggle in which his adversary is anything coming to him from the external world: the event. The ancient athlete is an athlete of the event» (Foucault [1982]: 322).

Aesthetic habits and experience

Aisthesis

Habits and Aesthetic Experience

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Abstract. It is often assumed that habits and aesthetic experiences are fundamentally and irreconcilably opposed. Typically, aesthetic experiences are considered to necessitate non-habitual behavior and to provoke unexpected mental states and extraordinary affective sensations. This article challenges this assumption. Moving beyond potential structural analogies between habitual behavior and aesthetic experience, I focus on two key aspects. Firstly, I argue that the experience of beauty and aesthetic experiences in general actually depend on certain habits, specifically those engaged in aesthetic agency and appreciation, which I term «aesthetic habits». Secondly, I propose that habits have an aesthetic origin, as they virtuously evolve and adapt to their environment. This transformative capacity, along with their ability to resonate with specific situational demands, embodies an improvisational quality that should be encouraged, reflecting the inherently unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of aesthetic experience.

Keywords. Habits, aesthetic experience, improvisation, passivity, style.

1. *Introduction*

In philosophical discourse, the notion of aesthetic experience lacks a clear and univocal definition. It is understood as an experience of dis-

interested pleasure, disconnected from functional or cognitive relationships with practice (Kant [1790]; Hilgers [2017]), or as a particularly intense, unusual, and emotionally rewarding engagement with objects and aspects of the world (Dewey [1934]; Berleant [2013]; Matteucci [2019]). Furthermore, it can be perceived as a contemplative experience or a participatory experience, or alternatively as a transformative experience, or on the contrary, merely distracting. Yet, regardless of the disagreement about its definition and constitution, aesthetic experience is generally considered a hedonic, affective, and cognitive state of mind that arises in response to art, nature, and everyday phenomena. This state of mind is often considered a special one, because it allegedly transcends ordinary practical dimensions, occupations, and concerns. Consequently, it is often assumed that habits are incompatible with aesthetic experiences. Becoming accustomed to an experience could seemingly undermine its aesthetic quality. As Martin Seel articulates, the aesthetic caliber of an experience hinges on de-habituation (Seel [2014]: 260).

In this article, I will challenge this view and argue that habits are not impediments to aesthetic experience. Instead, habits enable aesthetic experience. Moreover, they are deeply intertwined with aesthetic experience because, when they operate felicitously, they inherently respond sensitively to environmental changes and challenges.

2. *Habitual practices as a source of aesthetic experience*

My thesis is that, far from being a-aesthetic or anti-aesthetic, *habitual practices can be a source of rewarding aesthetic experiences*. In fact, we not only derive pleasure from everyday activities and experiences (see Haapala [2005]; Saito [2017]), but we are inclined to weave these aesthetic experiences of ordinary practices into our habitual lifestyles: the very ordinariness of an experience becomes aesthetically valuable precisely when we relish the rhythm of daily routines. This value complements the aesthetic qualities of everyday landscapes and objects, such as a cherished coffee cup or a vintage stereo system[1]. In other terms, an artifact that is part of our ordinary routines can be aesthetically appreciated precisely because of this habituation.

This view is not new. It holds a crucial place in the aesthetics of 18th-century Britain (Szécsényi [2022]). Joseph Addison suggested that a routine activity, such as an evening walk, could evoke a «state of bliss and happiness» (Bond [1965]: 476) and that almost any element in one's surroundings could elicit pleasure. As Richard Steele (1671-1729) articulated, we are naturally predisposed «to receive a certain delight in all we hear and see» (Bond [1965]: 421).) – a propensity that is judicious to cultivate by indulging in «innocent

pleasures» (Bond [1965]: vol. 3, 539), hence fostering habits of self-enjoyment. This mindset accentuates the joy of the ordinary, finding satisfaction in habitual interactions with objects, places, and people.

3. *Habits as causes of aesthetic value?*

Elaborating on the previous considerations, it can be argued that *habits themselves determine the aesthetic value of experience*. This idea has been articulated by Steno Tedeschi (1881-1911) in the early 1900s. A cousin of the Italian novelist Italo Svevo (1861-1928), Tedeschi developed an aesthetic proposal that engaged with representatives of the Grazer Schule's aesthetics. His thesis is that habit is the cause of attributing beauty, or aesthetic value, to objects, places and person (Tedeschi 1907; 1909a; 1909b).

> A garment fashioned according to a recent fashion is initially deemed unattractive, but gradually […] it acquires, through suggestion, value and hence beauty in our eyes. (Tedeschi [1907]: 10; my transl.)
> A city that was initially indifferent to us but in which we stayed for an extended period will, over time, become dear to us; […] in general, places, things, people that are not distinguished by any inherent value become precious to us simply out of habit. (Tedeschi [1909]: 10; my transl.)

Thus, we perceive the building we see every day as beautiful, as contemporary everyday aestheticians assert, precisely because we see it every day, on a habitual basis. This perception would be due to the fact that the effort to grasp it perceptually decreases, making the experience increasingly enjoyable. Similarly, a melody that initially seems odd and dissonant becomes aesthetically valuable with familiarity, as the effort to perceive it – to have a holistic representation of it – lessens. Thus, objects we become accustomed to seem aesthetically normal (and, therefore, good) compared to unfamiliar ones.

In a nutshell, repeated exposure to phenomena makes them familiar, and therefore aesthetically enjoyable. Yet Tedeschi realizes that habituation can also result in a dulling of sensitivity, thus obstructing aesthetic enjoyment. When the aesthetic aspect is not due to the appreciation of forms but to the feelings evoked in the observer, habit is the cause of this dulled aesthetic enjoyment (Raspa [2014]):

> Habit dulls, numbs feelings, which, upon continuous, uninterrupted repetition, find no resonance in our emotional strings. The sentimental premise that shook us so profoundly before the habit now leaves us cold, insensitive, accustomed. (Tedeschi [1907a]: 13; my transl.)

Thus, on the one hand, habit seems essential for aesthetic experience, while on the other, it seems to hinder it. If the habitual experience – be it perceptual,

imaginative, or emotional – involves a particular activity, especially an attentional activity, its repetition refines this activity, resulting in aesthetic pleasure. If, instead, it involves mere passive exposure to a representation, it results in a habituation that diminishes its aesthetic scope.

This is a the aesthetic version of the so-called «double law of habit», observed by many philosophers (among others: Hume, Butler, Maine de Biran, Ravaisson; see Piazza [2018]: ch. 5; Portera [2021]: 53-59). According to this law, (a) on the one hand, habit weakens, leading to habituation, the (passive) experience of sensation (indeed, repeated exposure to the same stimulus decreases the reaction to its impact); (b) on the other hand, habit strengthens sensitivity for the active exercise of perception, judgment, and sensorimotor patterns (indeed, the voluntary repeated practice of action sequences, like playing patterns on a musical instrument or driving maneuvers, reduces the effort and even the explicit will of the action).

Thus, (a) while a habit acquired passively through forced repetition would lead to the anaesthetization of the corresponding experience, (b) a consciously exercised habit would lead to heightened sensitization. This sensitization is, in itself, an aesthetic trait of the habit. This suggests that the relationship between habits and aesthetic experience is characterized by inherent ambiguity and that it is untrue that habit always hinders aesthetic experience. In fact, habit exercised attentively is a condition of aesthetic enjoyment.

4. *Passivity in habits and aesthetic experience*

However, the aesthetic experience can also be seen as something beyond the individual's active control. Indeed, it seems plausible to argue that the condition for an effective aesthetic experience is its occurrence to the experiencer in a surprising manner: it is an overwhelming experience that involves and captivates the subject unexpectedly, unforeseeably, and in a way that cannot be actively controlled and steered. The aesthetic experience occurs when we are surprised by a spontaneous feeling of wonder, of which, so to speak, we are spectators – involved and participating spectators, of course – rather than active initiators (see Bertinetto [2022]: 156 f.).

Interestingly, habits too, when functioning regularly, in a certain sense seem to happen to the individual rather than being guided by them (see Pelgreffi [2018]). When we act habitually, we act *mindlessly*, or, as it were, under the guidance of an autopilot. Rather than being under the conscious control of what we do, we undergo habitual behavior, although, usually, when something strange, irregular, or innovative occurs, we regain conscious control of the habit underlying our actions, we thematize it, and perhaps we change our behavior. If, as I will elaborate

in the following section, a virtuous habit is such that it can plastically adapt to the changing environment, transforming or giving way to other habits, then a well-functioning habit, given a certain environmental situation, is a habit which acts smoothly and fluidly. We participate in its flow without exercising consciously and rigidly active control: we follow it spontaneously.

Hence, another argument supporting the compatibility of habit and aesthetic experience – an argument which is informed by the phenomenological tradition and its recent progress – relates precisely to a potentially meaningful analogy between the aesthetic and habitual experiences as *passive* dimensions of human behavior; that is, experiences that are, at least in part, passively endured rather than actively performed.

On the one hand, aesthetic experience can be understood as an event that we undergo, rather than actively create. Although we might set the preconditions (such as attending a concert or museum), the actual aesthetic experience remains largely out of our control. Aesthetic experience entails a deep immersion/absorption in one's actions or unfolding events to the point of *self-forgetfulness* (Høffding, Roald [2019]; Mäcklin [2021]). This immersion leads to a state of enrapture, and this inherent passivity appears to be central to the aesthetic aspect of agency. This *passive agency* distinctly marks the exercise of aesthetic creativity in practices characterized by flow or fluency.

On the other hand, this *flow dimension* also appears to be a key aspect of agency guided by habits (see Lanzirotti [2020]; Miyahara et al. [2020]). When habits work well and smoothly we perform actions in a state of *flow*, that is, without explicitly directing them and without thematizing what we are doing: it feels as though we are merely observers of our own behavior. Habits guide us, rather than being actions of which we are thematically aware[2].

This would seem to suggest that the habitual experience, precisely because of its habitual nature that well organizes and regulates our attunement with the natural and social environment, can be a source of satisfaction: a source of aesthetic-type satisfaction and well-being, in the sense that we enjoy the harmony and rhythm of a behavior that makes sense under the conditions of its practice.

5. *The aesthetic origin of habits*

These reflections pave the way to a further argumentative step: the view that the close connection between habit and aesthetic experience is rooted in the idea that habits themselves have an aesthetic origin and functioning (see Portera [2020; 2021]; Bertinetto [2023a]). At first glance, this thesis may appear unconventional. However, it can be substantiated by drawing upon a concept of habit originally formulated by John Dewey. Dewey [1922] posits that hab-

its encompass not only mechanical routines but also dynamic, adaptable, and intelligent methods of life organization. Habits are not merely routines generated by, and comprising, the (almost) automatic and unconscious repetition of behavioral patterns – (stable) skills/dispositions by which humans engage with the world in an unreflective, unconscious, and unintentional (mindless) manner (Dreyfus [2002]). Rather, habits are practical forms of (organizing) life that can be more or less rigid and repetitive or elastic/plastic, changeable and intelligent, i.e., capable of adapting to the circumstances in which they operate (see Levine [2012])[3]. Accordingly, when healthy, habits are effective means of orchestrating the interaction between individuals and their environment (both natural and social). They are shaped through responses to environmental affordances (Noë [2009]; Gibson [1979]; Chemero [2003]) and are sustained by the (inter)actions they facilitate, as noted by Aristotle ([2011]; Di Paolo et al. [2017]). This perspective acknowledges that habits can be simultaneously repetitive and adaptable. However, even intelligent habits can become rigid, evolving into purely mechanical, repetitive behavioral routines beyond our control. Conversely, the tendency towards fixation can be mitigated by disengaging from the automatic pilot mode when needed.

The capacity to adapt felicitously to environmental affordances can be seen as an essential factor in the very formation of habits. In fact, their acquisition appears to involve a refinement process, including the capacity to respond effectively and adaptively to the environment. As Luigi Pareyson (1958-1959) noted, it is not the mere repetition of the same gesture that cultivates a habit. Instead, habits (or at least certain habits) are formed through a process wherein gestures become increasingly precise, more attuned to situational and environmental specifics. Felicitous responses to environmental affordances shape perceptual, sensory-motor, cognitive, affective abilities that, in turn, scaffold, organize, and regulate our behavior. In essence, the pleasure obtained from successfully adapting to environmental conditions encourages the reiteration of such behavior in a way that is attuned to new affordances, thus establishing a (plastic) behavioral pattern which is the more efficacious (intelligent and virtuous) the more it embodies adaptability, by cultivating a (meta)habit of responsive sensitivity and attentiveness to specific environmental affordances and needs (Magrì [2019]): from basic needs, such as feeding, to educational and cultural development This refinement of habit through the (meta)habit of responsive attention to the particularities of the situation is a habit of responsively and sensitively adapting habitual behavior and can be considered an aesthetic process.

One can argue that habits are shaped and acquired aesthetically, as their acquisition and development demand attentiveness, sensitive and plastic adaptation, and enjoyment (or discomfort): enjoying (the success of) a behavior, gesture, action, or ordinary practice – such as making coffee or squeezing oranges every

morning – while adapting it to changing contingent situations, is foundational for forming a (good) habit. At the core of habit formation, there appears to be the savoring of a gesture or behavior that, due to its aesthetic satisfaction, is reiterated by the agent and refined in response to environmental challenges and opportunities to make it more aesthetically satisfying or pleasing.

6. *Aesthetic habits*

To the view developed so far one might object that emphasizing an alleged aesthetic origins of habits does not shed much light on the relationship between habit and aesthetic experiences and practices. In response to this, I contend that aesthetic experiences, both within the realm of art and beyond, are contingent upon, and scaffolded, by habits. As Ernst Gombrich (1979) argues, our perceptions are governed by habits that organize experience through patterns, thereby building predictive mechanisms and generating expectations (Clark [2016]). This is evident in the phenomenon known as «perceptual narrowing» (Richards [2022]: 108): our sensorial systems tune out actual sensory inputs and lose sensitivity to unexperienced stimuli. Repeated exposure to specific perceptual patterns – be they visual, auditory, olfactive, tactile, or gustatory – leads to the development of perceptual habits. These habits, on one hand, ease the perception of analogous patterns, creating experiential expectations, and on the other hand, obstruct the perception of divergent patterns and structures. As remarked by Gombrich, the order of experience is based on the strength and tenacity of such perceptual habits. Regular exposure to certain perceptual patterns engenders perceptual habits that empower us to grasp and appreciate the organization of forms. Consequently, the habitual exposure to artifacts (for example, movies and pictorial or photographic images, but also particular kinds of music, etc.) that promote specific perceptual patterns can lead to a different organization of our perceptual experience, that is, changes in our perceptual habits (see Fingerhut [2020]).

Elaborating on this view, it may be proposed that aesthetic practices are manifestations of habits and patterns of perception, imagination, cognition, and agency that have become sedimented through repeated exposure: *aesthetic habits*. These are patterns of behavior that both constrain and enable aesthetic performances and experiences. It might be for this reason that Tedeschi posited that *habits engender beauty*.

Acquired through sustained immersion in aesthetic and artistic experiences, aesthetic habits play a multifaceted role. First and foremost, they foster aesthetic expectations and shape expressive-aesthetic styles of behavior. In this regard the notion of *style* deserves a special consideration. *Style* is «a quintessential aesthetic phenomenon» (Noë [2023]: 143). It is an organization of perceptual patterns

that provide regularity and recognizability – «To have a style […] is to inhabit a visible way of doing something» (Noë [2023]: 143) – and is in itself an aesthetic trait of behavior and action, as well as of artifacts and works of art. As such, it defines the perceptually recognizable features that characterize the organization of the perceptual experience of reality and the expressiveness of persons, communities, aesthetic practices, artistic genres and artworks (Merleau-Ponty [2012]: 153, 174, 177, 208-222, 382 *passim*). Moreover, the incorporation and expression of a style involve the acquisition of skills that, by responding through training and corrections to the affordances of the natural and social environment, become habitual, shaping aesthetic values and preferences, thereby becoming normative for aesthetic experience and agency (see Boncompagni [2020]: 185; see Noë [2023]: 149). As such, styles are, on one hand, (expressions of) aesthetic habits of perception, agency, cognition, and imagination: they form the recognizable kinetic and expressive[4] qualities that characterize individual behavior, as well as the highly regarded values and typical patterns of thinking that delineate their character[5]. On the other hand, styles are also aesthetic habits that shape and establish normative standards for aesthetic practices, including artistic traditions, genres, and movements (see Dewey [1934]: 264-265).

Beyond their expressive manifestation in styles, aesthetic habits exert a broader influence on both the production and the reception of art, encompassing its the creation, enjoyment, and appreciation. They cultivate proficiency and enhance sensitivity across various facets of aesthetic agency. Furthermore, the context-specific exercise of aesthetic agency – including perception, imagination, cognition, as well as creation and performance – influences aesthetic habits, aiding in their evolution and transformation. The scope of aesthetic habits is extensive. It spans from perceptual habits, performing and creative skills, expressive gestures, and stylistic orientations to preferences in art, fashion, cuisine, décor, travel, and beyond. The formation of these habits relates to our engagement with aesthetic/artistic practices, aesthetic tools and technologies, cultural traditions, etc.

Aesthetic habits are formed both actively and passively. They may be cultivated deliberately, for example, to develop or enhance specific perceptual and performing skills – such as attending certain types of concerts to deepen one's appreciation of a particular music genre. However, habits can also arise inadvertently through the repetition of certain satisfying experiences, which may then take on a normative role in shaping our actions and aesthetic perceptions. For instance, one might frequently attend concerts of a specific musical genre, influenced by the enjoyment of companionship with friends who share this interest. Over time, this genre evolves into a normative benchmark for the individual's musical taste, becoming a part of their «aesthetic self» (Fingerhut et al. [2021]).

Regardless of how an aesthetic habit is formed – intentionally or unintentionally – the central point remains: our aesthetic engagement with the world, wheth-

er through artistic creation or aesthetic appreciation, is informed and shaped by our aesthetic habits. Thus, it is an oversimplification to regard aesthetic experience solely as an unexpected event that contrasts with ordinary experiences and habitual behavior. In fact, the possibility of an aesthetic experience relies on the perceptual and performing abilities as well as cultural frameworks that shape an individual's aesthetic sensibilities within specific socio-material and historical milieus. For example, those not attuned to perceiving quarter tones may overlook the subtle nuances of Indian classical music. Similarly, someone unversed in the radical ethos of avant-garde art may struggle to appreciate its innovative forms and expressions. This underscores the importance of habits in enabling genuine aesthetic experiences. In line with Tedeschi's perspective, the occurrence of an aesthetic experience and the appreciation of beauty – or what may be described as the aesthetic value or success of an object or event – are dependent upon a developed familiarity with that type of object or event.

7. *An objection, and a reply*

A critical response to the aforementioned considerations might posit that aesthetic experience is a special, somehow extraordinary event not reducible to the usual daily behavior and that, accordingly, the aesthetic value and impact of efficacious aesthetic practices do not reside in their accommodation within our routine aesthetic habits, but rather in their capacity to stir and disrupt the established aesthetic habits of the appreciators. Consider, for example, avant-garde art, radical musical improvisation, and street art: the actualization of their aesthetic experience is hindered by entrenched, conventional, traditional aesthetic habits and necessitates the challenge or transcendence of such habits, which are tied to standardized, homogenized artistic and aesthetic practices and are hostile to the challenge of novelty.

This observation is undeniably accurate. Indeed, the peril of rendering our tastes homogenous and rigid, leading to a suffocating aesthetic conformity, is a constant threat. The establishment of an aesthetic habit (perceptual, affective, cognitive, and so forth) renders one attuned to particular patterns while desensitizing to others. In this way, we become habituated to a certain taste, losing the ability to value what deviates from the assimilated aesthetic convention. Yet, some types of innovative aesthetic practices, especially certain kinds of particularly disruptive or revolutionary art, are capable of revealing to us the ossification of our aesthetic and artistic preferences, perhaps inviting or even pushing us to change them.

Nonetheless, it is irrefutable that the appreciation of innovative artistic endeavors does not necessitate the annihilation of all habits, but rather the culti-

vation of different habits. First and foremost, even artistic disruption, including the irreverent, revolutionary, alternative, and nonconformist actions emblematic of the avant-garde, can itself become a prosaic routine, something to which we can become accustomed and that is no longer capable of stimulating relevant aesthetic novelty: as already Adorno (1955) noted, *Neue Musik* swiftly becomes a boring cliché if its aesthetic motivations are not perpetually rejuvenated and reinvigorated. Similarly, so-called *Free* or *Non-idiomatic* musical improvisation – that is, not tied to specific harmonic and melodic stylistic patterns – evolves into a standardized idiom, with its own conventions and clichés if it solidifies into a slogan or an aesthetic dogma, no longer acknowledged as an apt response to the exigencies of a particular cultural milieu (see Goldoni [2022]). In short, countering aesthetic habits that have become mechanical, routine, and cliché can itself become a sclerotic and conformist habit.

Secondly, habit is not solely an impediment to aesthetic experience, or to certain aesthetic experiences. Habits, or at least some habits, are necessary for undergoing aesthetic experiences, even in the case of particularly disruptive, critical, or challenging art. Without adequate aesthetic habits, one cannot aesthetically appreciate artworks that question conventional or conformist modes of aesthetic experience. The appreciation of revolutionary or critical works of art requires different or new aesthetic habits. Cultivating these alternative habits demands a capacity – or indeed, an habit – to perceive and interpret differently, to grasp the essence of the novel, and to react appropriately. This also applies to maintaining the disruptive power of innovative art, which otherwise becomes a new cliché. Rather than the obliteration of all habits, what is imperative in the realm of aesthetic experience is the reinforcement of responsiveness and attentiveness – which, as delineated in Section 5, are intrinsic elements of a virtuous or intelligent habit. Elaborating on this premise, it becomes evident that to abandon ossified aesthetic habits, for instance in order to appreciate disruptive art – and in order to do so in such a way that disruptive art does not itself become another of the conformist aesthetic routines, an aspect of mechanical adjustment to trite and worn aesthetic conventions[6] – one should foster the positive habit of perceiving and valuing distinctively, i.e. the propensity for developing a fine aesthetic sensitivity in response to the aesthetic demands of the situation.

The general point can be put as follows. Habits enable aesthetic experience; yet, they also constrain and, eventually, even suffocates it. As Shakespeare's Hamlet claims, habit (or custom) is a *monster* because, while it certainly makes actions fluent (and, for this reason at least, is an angel), it also dulls our perceptual sensitivity (and that is why is «of devil»)[7]. Therefore, when it comes to the relation between habits and the aesthetics, it is arguable that balancing advantages and drawbacks is crucial.

On the one hand, it is a widespread belief that when we form a habit, this leads to a reduction in attention towards our movements, actions and perceptions. In turn, this diminished attentiveness can bring about a conformist aesthetic attitude even with respect to aesthetic and artistic practices that, on paper, should, could, or would intend to creatively stir our aesthetic behavior and enrich our aesthetic self with different and unprecedented experiences. Accordingly, one might argue that when attention diminishes, so does our alignment with the specific context and situational opportunities, implying a decreased contribution of aesthetic sensitivity to our overall experience of the world. As we know, this is also what Steno Tedeschi argued: repeated exposure to an emotional-expressive stimulus leads to desensitization and reduces its aesthetic impact, to the point where the factor that triggers it – an artwork or another aesthetic artifact like, e.g., a cloth – ends up leaving us indifferent.

On the other hand, however, as I argued drawing from John Dewey (1922), the incompatibility between habits and aesthetic experience applies only to mechanical habits that solidify into mere repetitions of behavioral patterns, insensitively disconnected from reality and its changes, entrapping agents in routines that stifle creativity. As we have just seen, this can also happen to artistic practices and experiences that make the disruption of what is aesthetically habitual their flag. And yet, it is possible to cultivate intelligent and virtuous habits that enhance attention, sensitivity, and responsiveness to the specifics of the situation. In fact, and importantly, the effective response to each unique situation reinforces the habit itself, making it more fluent and proficient at organizing experiences precisely because of its flexibility in adapting to the situation.

In other words, promoting and invigorating the renewal of aesthetic habits – not solely in terms of refinement but also transformation – is highly advisable, to reinforce their effectiveness in organizing and regulating behavior, making our actions and perceptions fluent and attuned to the situation. This is undeniably a laudable *aesthetic* (meta)habit, which, as we have seen in Section 5, regulates the good formation and proper development of all habits, and indeed is at their origin, and which, all the more so, is particularly required in the realm of aesthetic experience. In the conclusion of this article, I will briefly elaborate on this point.

8. *Conclusion. Improvisation and brief habits*

The reflections carried out so far in this article seem to suggest that within the realm of aesthetic experience in general (not limited to art), it is necessary to educate and refine – making it a habit – the attitude of attentiveness and sensitivity to the specifics of the situation in which our agency is exercised, as it seems to be at the origin of habit formation itself. The issue of aesthetic habits, therefore,

involves the important theme of aesthetic education, an education that must cultivate the habit of plastically renewing habits.

Furthermore, this habit, or (meta)habit as I have termed it, appears to be normatively opportune for the proper functioning of our aesthetic experience and agency. However, the issues concerning the relationship between habit and aesthetic education, as well as between habit and aesthetic normativity, undoubtedly require further reflection, which I cannot fully develop within the confines of this article[8]. What I can do, in concluding this article, is discuss a crucial aspect of these issues, the *capacity for improvisation* that habits seem to require in order to be aesthetically felicitous and virtuous.

The point is as follows. The activation of habit that is aesthetically virtuous because it feeds back into its own patterned structure, thereby making it attuned to its situation and appropriate, is inherently improvisational: improvisation is not just permitted by the habit (as Pierre Bourdieu, seems to suggest, by defining the *Habitus* as the «durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations»; Bourdieu [1980]: 57); rather, improvisation is required to ensure that the habit remains good, intelligent, effective, and sensitive. Human proclivity to vary and adapt one's own habitual schemata of behavior by inventing new ways of merging the old competence and the new repetition can be understood in terms of an improvisational use of habit (see Pelgreffi [2020]).

Merleau-Ponty ([1967]: 120-121) illustrates this point with the examples of the organist and the typist, who embody habitual patterns of action that allow the execution of movements and gestures in an automatically fluid manner, precisely because they are capable of plastic modification and invention based on the unforeseeable demands of the situation. Indeed, habitual patterns guide an improvisational exercise of the related actions, which in turn, plastically modify the patterns, adapting them to new tasks and situations. The attunement of the habit in relation to the situation of its exercise is therefore a plastic *improvisational adaptation* that makes the habit appropriate to the specific use, by making it aesthetically sensitive and attentive. Hence the activation of habits makes sense not based on abstract criteria, but by generating behavioral patterns or forms capable of acquiring normative traction, «as we go along» (see Miyahara et al. [2020]; Bella [2020]).

To reiterate: the inadequacy of an aesthetic habit – or the aesthetic inadequacy of a habit – stemming from a dulled sensitivity, does not necessitate the eradication of all habits in order to facilitate a successful aesthetic experience. Rather, what is needed to enable such aesthetic experiences that can invoke wonder and elation is the reinforcement of habits' responsiveness and attentiveness. Overcoming a stagnant aesthetic habit involves and necessitates the enhancement of the good habit of perceiving and appreciating differently, *the habit of improvising new patterns of behavior*, or rather the *habit of improvising an aesthetic sensitivity in response*

to situational affordances – e.g. those generated by unexpected artistic practices that may be surprising perhaps simply because they originate from cultures different from our own. The aesthetic otherness that clashes with cultural and aesthetic habits rooted in our habitual environment (Bertinetto [2024]) can therefore be a stimulus to renew our habits, awakening the (meta)habit of attentiveness to what the situation demands.

More generally, cultivating the ability to renew the habits related to aesthetic experience, especially by refining our sensitivity to the varied and nuanced aspects of artworks and other aesthetic phenomena, is advisable. This cultivation helps prevent the dulling of our capacity for satisfying aesthetic experiences and ensures that we continue to be surprised by the diverse facets that can capture our attention. Such an attitudinal resource is fundamental for engaging with aesthetic experiences, which, as suggested in Section 3, possess appreciative and affective dimensions that are often surprising, overwhelming, and unexpected. They can indeed be seen as forms of experiential improvisation. Therefore, the (meta)habit of improvising upon our habits is virtuous because, all things being equal, it allows for a satisfying aesthetic resonance with the world. In fact, the improvisational practice of habits, including aesthetic ones, sustains and enhances their efficacy, fluidity, and aesthetic resonance[9]. Consequently, habits are not inherently obstacles to the creativity of aesthetic experiences; rather, they support our aesthetic life and experiences, which are rooted in *aesthetic sensitivities that are both habitual and improvisational*.

Undoubtedly, as I previously noticed, the risk of homogenizing our taste in a negative way, the risk of *cliché*, is ever-present. This risk can, however, be reduced, if not entirely avoided, by developing and enhancing the aesthetic (meta)habit of adapting, refining and changing our aesthetic habits through forms of experiential and experimental improvisation. In this regard, in the field of aesthetic experience, we can welcome the suggestion, evoked by the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi and by German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, to form *brief habits* (see Leopardi [1817-1832]: vol. I: 827, 919; Nietzsche [1882/1887]: § 295, 167f.)[10]. *Habits*: that is, patterns of behavior that organize and give shape, coherence, and meaning to the experience. Yet, *brief* habits: this means habits inclined to fade and transform improvisationally to aesthetically accommodate the changes of the world we live in, thereby avoiding rigidity and stagnation. Brief habits thus have an «ecological nature», as they are

> capacities to quickly establish new productive practices (and to quickly dispose of them) as environmental stimuli change, […] «improvising» based on the random variations that present themselves from time to time. All this, mind you, is due to the solid baggage of past habits that [the aesthetic agent] has acquired: one does not improvise to improvise, but rather becomes accustomed – with practice and exercise – to dance improvisationally with the contingencies to which we are exposed. (Portera [2023]: 22)

Brief habits are virtuous and desirable because they can incorporate the ever-changing environment as Dewey ([1922]: 15) suggests. Furthermore, as Leopardi observed ([1817-1832]: vol. I, 966, 919), such brief habits are indicative of creative talent and aesthetic genius, which are characterized by a tendency to frequently alter habits in order to adapt improvisationally to varying circumstances.

After all, in art, as in life, an *effective style is a lively one*: a pattern that, although recognizable, is capable of renewing itself on every different occasion. Usually, it is only *ex-post*, when the existential and/or cultural event has concluded its course, that it is possible to recognize in different works the same style (as when only with time can we recognize the style of an era over time, for example in cinema or music). When style, as the expressive dimension of habit, is put into practice, its manifestations are never identical; this is because style shapes itself improvisationally in each instantiation. This aligns with Aristotle's conception that habit is formed by the very actions it enables (see Section 5), indicating that habit is a process of/in continuous transformation. Getting attuned to brief habits, then, is a way to aesthetically respond to the fact that a habit may be suitable at one moment and inappropriate at another. Moreover, this attunement to brevity should not be seen as a rigid, unchanging rule; sometimes, the maintenance of a long-standing habit may be the most fitting response to the given circumstances. This principle holds true in the aesthetic domain as well.

However, a more adequate understanding of the issue requires examining the relationship between habits and aesthetic normativity, a topic to which another article is devoted (Bertinetto [2024]). In this paper I aimed to argue for the relevance of habits to aesthetic experience, including the idea that there are specific aesthetic habits: habits that foster, even by constraining their operational and normative scope, certain aesthetic practices, activities and experiences. Certainly, much more can be said to explore this topic further, but I hope to have proposed at least a promising line of research[11].

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Notes

1   The aesthetic experience might even overshadow any negative aesthetic properties of an object (like the habitual clutter on my desk) when they suggest a gratifying existential rhythm that is inherently pleasurable – say, a consistent workflow.

2   Nonetheless, we can retake control over habits and intervene for changing them. Therefore, passivity does not preclude habitual behavior from having intentional and normative significance (see Bertinetto [2024]).

3   On these two main views of habits see Carlisle [2014]: 3.

4   More generally, it is plausible to believe that emotions, including their artistic expression, have a practical-cultural dimension and are thus habits that also take shape within artistic

practices. On this topic, particularly in relation to expressiveness in musical improvisation, see Bertinetto (2023b).

5   This point is elaborated in relation to Husserl by Sheets-Johnstone (2014).
6   This conformist aesthetic attitude into which one can easily fall by conforming to conventional taste can be understood as expressing a relevant aspect of Martin Heidegger's *«das Man»*. This concept is often translated as *«the They»* in English, which describes the anonymous way in which people can be absorbed by conventional norms and social expectations, losing their authentic personal engagement with life (see Heidegger [1927]: 163-179).
7   Shakespeare ([2004]: 193-194): «That monster custom, who all sense doth eat, / Of habits devil, is angel yet in this,/That to the use of actions fair and good / He likewise gives a frock or livery / That aptly is put on».
8   I have discussed the relationship between habits and aesthetic normativity in Bertinetto (2024). I will devote a future work to the (of course, very Deweyan) issue of habits and aesthetic education.
9   On resonance, aesthetics and improvisation, see Matteucci (2022).
10   On Leopardi's and Nietzsche's view of habits see Portera (2023).
11   Previous versions of this article have been used for talks I gave at the conference *Aesthetic Experience: Philosophical, Psychological and Neuroscientific Perspectives* (Fondazione Amendola, Turin, November 2023), as well as at a series of Japanese universities (Kanazawa, Sapporo, Waseda and Sophia in Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto) during a research stay in 2024, generously supported by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Sciences. I would like to thank those who attended my talks for their valuable comments, questions, criticisms, and suggestions.

Aisthesis

Biophilia Aesthetics
Ungrounding Experience

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Abstract. The biophilia hypothesis refers to the idea of an innate human tendency towards life and its manifestations. The article takes its cue from the debate on biophilia to investigate how evolved psychobiological constraints structure human experience. First, the various positions in favor of biophilia are assessed as to their aesthetic connotations, that is, as to the notion of "experience" they convey (par. 1). A post-cognitivist approach, at the intersection of the enactivist, ecopsychological, and pragmatist traditions, is then indicated as the most suitable solution in order to conceptualize the biophilic aspects of human experience (par. 2). It is finally clarified in what sense human experience is expressively reminiscent of the archaic past of our organism and how the notion of habit can be used to conceive of evolutionary constraints (par. 3). A conclusive paragraph elucidates the epistemological status of the naturalizing discourse on experience.

Keywords. Biophilia, Aesthetic Habits, Post-cognitivism, Environmental Aesthetics, Ancestrality.

The so-called biophilia hypothesis revolves around the idea that human beings innately tend towards life and its manifestations[1]. Strolling through a forest is a restorative experience, en-

countering an animal awakens affections of wonder and serenity; climbing up to a mountain lake conveys the feeling of being immersed in a place where life expresses itself most freely, and this is a source of profound pleasure. All these responses would derive from a more general tendency towards what is living, a tendency hardwired into our psychobiological structure. In archaic phases of homination, developing this tendency would have granted our species an evolutionary advantage.

To date, there is no conclusive experimental evidence in favor of biophilia as an overarching scientific hypothesis (see Kahn [1999]; Joye, De Block [2011]; Joye, van den Berg [2011]) – which fact has raised doubts as to the possibility for it to provide a sound empirical basis for environmental ethics (Levy [2003]). In this article I will not address biophilia as a scientific hypothesis, but rather as a naturalistic speculation on the stratification of human experience. I will contend that, when we prefer a certain object or context of experience for their being somehow connected to or endowed with life, we are conveying the resurfacing of our own conditions as natural beings. When we experience a manifestation of life, we manifest pre-reflectively the murky memory of our species, a history torn between different paths and rooted in the evolution of the planet itself. To support this claim, I will first try to pinpoint the best suited concept of "experience" and then proceed to investigate in what sense experience is constantly reminiscent of the evolution of our organism.

In the biophilic aspects of human experience, the sphere of "philia" (tendency, attraction, preference, taste) seems to go hand in hand with the sphere of "phania", which is linked to any form of expression including emotion, active ordering of experience, and action. We are drawn towards the manifestations of life because deep, abysmal life manifests through us. In this sense, biophilia is always also *biophany*. This duplicity responds to an exquisitely aesthetic problem; and it is not by chance that the biophilia hypothesis has been always articulated also through aesthetic arguments. Explicating the aesthetic implications of biophilia, as we will see, is necessary in order to understand what biophilia is.

In the course of this article, an aesthetics of biophilia will then be framed in a broader archaeo-ecology of experience, namely a reflection on the archaic conditions of human experience. Here the notion of evolutionary habit will come to the fore. The adaptations through which our species has evolved have produced experiential constraints that shape our particular way of "having a world", simultaneously anchoring us to a telluric past. The evolutionary norm transfuses into psychobiological habitus, something in between an instinct and a custom. Even after losing their survival function, the phantasms inscribed in our organism mold our prehension of reality and provide species-specific navigational advice.

1. *Fascination and perceptual preference*

One of the most commonsensical features associated with biophilic experience is that nature can evoke intense ancestral emotions in us. Naturalistic literature is peppered with first-person accounts of subjects invaded by a whirlwind of feelings that seem to connect them to the Great Chain of Being. When Darwin recounts his first encounter with the majestic Brazilian rainforest, he famously describes himself as a sort of new Adam in the Garden of Eden: «It is easy to specify the individual objects of admiration in these grand scenes; but it is not possible to give an adequate idea of the higher feelings of wonder, astonishment, and devotion, which permeate the soul and elevate the mind» (Darwin [1846]: 32). The whole inner life of the subject placed in front of nature is mobilized by an emotional expansion of the I.

Stephen Kellert, one of the leading theorists of the biophilia hypothesis, writes:

> The complexity and power of the aesthetic response to nature are suggested by its wide-ranging expression from the contours of a mountain landscape to the ambient colors of a setting sun to the fleeting vitality of a breaching whale. Each aesthetic experience evokes a strong, primarily emotional, register in most people, provoking feelings of intense pleasure, even awe, at the physical splendor of the natural world. Many people view the aesthetic response to nature as reflecting one's individual preference, as if each person and every culture cultivated its own unique sensibility. But the universal character of most aesthetic responses to living diversity suggests otherwise. (Kellert [1996]: 14-15)

In this first sense, deeply indebted to a romantic approach to nature, biophilia is associated with a subjective state generally referred to as "fascination". Fascination with nature appears to be common to all human beings, and certainly not reserved for the naturalist – who is, in this sense, «just a specialized product of a biophilic instinct shared by all» (Wilson [1984]: 22). Fascination is a complex emotional state that includes positive, neutral, and even negative feelings such as fear. Wilson dwells on the example of the snake, an animal harbinger of negative relations within the experiential boundaries of humans, with respect to which our species has developed an automatism of fear that can be categorized as a case of "biophobia". Far from refuting the biophilia hypothesis, biophobia is just another demonstration that «life of any kind is infinitely more interesting than almost any conceivable variety of inanimate matter» (Wilson [1984]: 84). The biophilic bond develops when an adaptive interest requiring direct attention towards a certain class of objects transforms into an experiential constraint based on effortless attention[2].

It is no coincidence, Wilson continues, that the snake is the protagonist of basically every human mythology, by virtue of the terror and veneration it arouses in the human mind. A biological automatism deriving from a survival interest of the species (surviving to the perils represented by snakes) produces

innate emotions (the fear of snakes) that takes roots in human culture intended as an externalized system of inheritance. The intertwinement between biological and cultural memory is crucially mediated through emotional activation, which favors both the application and the inscription of the evolutive norm. In this sense, the functioning of internalized (i.e., phylogenetic) and externalized memory is just the same.

Speculations about the emotional nature of biophilia have gone so far as to inform a few concrete research paths (Ulrich [1983]; Barbiero, Marconato [2016]). More often than not, however, the emotional approach to biophilia does not find articulation in rigorous arguments and relies too much on factual evidence and introspective anecdotes, content with drawing attention to the spiritual side of our relationship with nature. This fact could be inherent to the idea of experience underlying such approach. The emphasis on emotions here presupposes an interiority invaded by the natural setting regarded as a marvelous source of inspiration; the sacred flame of imagination, ignited by universal feelings, reconnects the individual to the Whole. The suspicion is that an approach marked by such sensibility ends up trivializing the overall complexity of biophilic experience.

A different approach to biophilia also endowed with significant aesthetic assumptions is that of so-called "preference and perception research". This strand of research attempts to map out human preferences on environmental configurations by means of empirical studies on perception and attention[3]. One famous hypothesis developed through this approach, the "Savannah Hypothesis", claims that our species is psychobiologically inclined to regard more favorably a landscape similar to the one in which it has evolved, namely the ancient grasslands of Africa and – later – of Europe and Asia (Orians, Heerwagen [1992]; Orians [2016]). The phenomenal qualities of open but not deserted, orderly but not geometric spaces endowed with sufficient salient features (like trees and rock formations) and a few specific elements (like streams and elevated geological formations) would be "naturally" preferred by us, as they have been the most suitable habitat for *Homo sapiens* over the hundreds of thousands of years of its evolutionary history.

In this second approach, the emphasis is on the properly philic element (preference conveyed by perception) and on the recognition of objective environmental features rather than on the arousal of subjective states. Taking on this direction, some authors have identified specific visual properties that would govern human interest towards landscapes, such as "mystery" (Stamps [2004]), "legibility" (Herzog, Leverich [2003]), "coherence" (Stamps [2004]), "custodianship" (Dramstad et al. [2004]; Ode, Fry [2002]), "openness" (Tveit et al. [2006]), "naturalness" (S. Kaplan et al. [1972]; Lamb, Purcell [1990]; Tveit et al. [2006]; Fry et al. [2009]), "complexity" (Fry et al. [2009]), and

"disorder" (Tveit et al. [2006]). Some of these parameter sets are explicitly defined as "aesthetic" (Berto et al. [2018]).

The crippling limitations of preference and perception research and of all the hypotheses and theories descending from it (such as the Savannah Hypothesis, the Prospect and Refuge Theory, the Habitat Theory, the Attention Restoration Theory) are widely recognized. The effort to trace eidetic structures or markers through the empirical study of attention is based on a fictitious notion of experience as static, disembodied, predominantly visual, and guided by rigid and universal eidetic constraints – a conception fundamentally vitiated by a neo-positivistic pretension of universal measurement. An emptied, automatic subject is matched by a landscape reduced to a scenic representation separated from the observer. The only antidote to such perspectives is a healthy ecological objection (Gobster, Nassauer, Daniel [2007]; Jorgensen 2011).

2. *A post-cognitivist approach*

The emotional and the perceptual approaches fail to grasp the complexity of biophilia by reducing it to just one aspect of human experience; even considering them as complementary, other fundamental aspects would be excluded. My contention is that biophilia, regarded as an essential modality of our experience in general, cannot consist simply in a rush of emotions felt by an individual interiority nor to the recognition of universal patterns performed by an eye-mind system that acts as a mere vestibule isolated from its context.

In order to bring into play a more thorough notion of experience, let us mention the words that naturalist Trileigh Tucker uses to describe her walk through a forest. With a vocabulary of clear phenomenological extraction, Tucker speaks of a gradual loss of her own sense of the I and temporal coordinates through a process of «experientially becoming a verb» (Tucker [2014]: 99), a flow experience deriving from the active yet effortless navigation of the environment. «By the time I reach the forest's edge, my attention is fully engaged in *seeking:* searching my environs for interesting sights, sounds, and movements. I shift from being-in-myself to *being* "seeking"» (Tucker [2014]: 93). Here cognition is not obliterated by emotion, perception, and action: on the contrary, it integrates with them as a modality of full presence.

Though still burdened with romantic overtones, this perspective has the merit of shifting the focus to an embodied experience of engagement with the environment grasped as a plastic and yet resistant context. The emphasis falls on the behavior and experience of an organism exploring and constructing a territory shared with other entities, that is also a partially indeterminate domain of possible actions, affections, and relationships. This is a perspective developed from

different viewpoints by pragmatism, enactivism, eco-psychology, and – to some extent – contemporary phenomenology, all ideally converging in what is today called "post-cognitivist paradigm" (see Wallace et al. [2007]; Chemero [2009]; Crippen [2020]; Heras-Escribano [2016]; Id. [2021], Read, Szokolszky [2020]; Segundo-Ortin [2020]).

In reaction to the determinism of stimulus and response advocated by behaviorism, cognitivism brought attention to the mind as an intermediate process of sensory information processing and a source of decoupling between what comes from the environment and what returns to it. In doing so, however, it introduced an abstract explanation of cognition, which laid the groundwork for a new claim to absolute empirical measurement (no longer of visible behaviors, but of the mind itself). Post-cognitivism takes on the task of returning subjective experience and the emergence of cognition to their organismic complexity. In this way, it reintroduces the notions of organism and behavior (which cognitivism had expunged from the psychological discourse as incarnations of old behaviorist positivism) and reforms the idea of exchange between subject and environment, no longer based on the model offered by mathematical information theory.

The post-cognitivist subject of experience is a body (i.e., an organism) constituted in relation to its environment, which emerges within the experience itself as an axiological context of behavior[4]. Experience, in this sense, is a subjective-objective (or "superjective", to use a Whiteheadian term) emergence of values, i.e., of elements of saliency and relevancy. For an organism to behave means to pre-reflectively organize a dynamic constellation of elements to which it can relate into a system of representations that serves as experiential framework. These constraints are relative to the organism (they are salient and relevant *for* it), but are also expressions of reality in some of its aspects[5] – otherwise they would not serve their navigational function, and therefore never emerge at all. Which particular aspects of reality come to expression depends on the incalculable number of circumstances that determine the evolutionary history of a species.

Like any other animal, we live in a phantasmagoric world where "objectivity" (that is the possibility to share it with similarly structured entities) is elaborated from a jumble of markers, tonalities, signs, and zones of salience governed by functional parameters. The whole *Umweltlehre* of Jakob von Uexküll was formulated to assimilate this one Kantian lesson: life is the faculty of a being to act in accordance with its own representations (Di Bernardo [2020]: 209). In other words, life – from its autocatalytic origins to the emergence of human cognition from experience – is values-oriented agency. But life is also historical. Our ways of acting according to our own representations (that is, of organizing objective reality) are the result of a historical development, and as such they are

contingent, precarious, flawed, and always subject to further modification. Even the fundamental parameters that stabilizes our experience without coming in the foreground – like space, time, and movement – are nothing but evolutive adaptations of our organism. All coordinates of experience, in this sense, are historical byproducts of a more fundamental navigational instance.

Biophilia can be regarded as one important parameter of experience, as it allows the contents associated with "life" to emerge and orients us towards them. One of the innumerable conditions in relation to which our navigational system of representations has developed is indeed 'living nature' intended as the environmental complex of what favors human biology[6]. And this is shown by the fact that living nature activates a *pure navigational mode*, characterized by a kind of exploratory awareness that allows for continuous value investment[7] – by presenting us with a world that is still not semantically saturated and yet already populated. When immersed in nature, we can be in that "seeking" state that underlies the creation of meaning, indulged by our ancestral memory. Biophilia has to do with the joy of a genetic reopening of experience[8].

The most suited conception of experience in order to conceptualize biophilia is thus one that can account for the pre-reflective axiological construction of the environment we perform when we navigate our species-specific world. Not only does biophilia allows for experience thus understood, like other a priori structures such as space, time, or movement; it also enhances it through specific experienced contents. Being more "spurious" – and probably less ancient and stable – than other a priori, it has the power of intensifying our experiential flux from within.

3. *Archaeophany and evolutionary habits*

Biophilia plays a formal role in granting the possibility of our experience as such, but in relation to particular contents that once were a posteriori[9]: it is, in this sense, a "spurious" transcendental. The saliency of certain natural elements within our experience concurs to the stability of our representational system; as it is the case with space and time, its "naturality" lies in its functionality. If devoid of the contents targeted by biophilia, human experience does not fall into chaos: it just continues to work in the absence of some of its reference stimuli, which produces disorientation and consequence dysphoria, sense of menace, etc. Biophilia does not activate only in the presence of life manifestations, but works always in the background of our representational system: this means that it is not a particular kind of experience, but a set of constraints of experience as such. Its content-relativeness refers to its being tied to specific patterns, markers, etc. that *once* were just empiric.

This spurious transcendentalism (or «descendentalism», to quote Grant and Mackay [2018]: 104) reveals that the formal constraints of our experience are evolutive products of the history of our organism, that is, of its relations with the environment. All transcendental forms have had an ecological development and, in their present arrangement, they all manifest an ancestral past. All experience, in this sense, is archaeophanic[10]. The way we perceive-and-enact the world is constitutively reminiscent of an archaeopsychic architecture that finds expression in the present: an expressive «transit within archaeopsychic space, triggered by aesthetic response» (Mackay [2018]: 103). Precisely due to its "phanic" nature, however, archaeophany is not only a practice of remembrance, but also the active application and continuation of a plastic norm. The development of transcendental forms is always ongoing.

Experience is archaeophanic in the sense of a phylogenetically acquired norm that guides present behaviors but is also reformulated through them. Archaisms are an intricate series of mediations that play an expressive or performative role in relation to the evolutive norm, in the sense that they contribute to transform it as they convey it. Evolution unfolds above the level of our perception but also *through* our experience. If human behavior is a continuous ontogenesis (in a psychobiological sense), then archaeophany ontogenetically recapitulates phylogenesis[11].

Here comes into play the notion of evolutionary habit[12]. The evolved constraints of our experience are not immutable, deterministic laws: their temporal scale is sufficiently close for us to understand that they change (and, at least to some extent, how). But they are still incomparable to the rules and customs that human groups and individuals consciously assign themselves in a certain moment of their history. Evolutionary constraints, like habits, are passively received by the individual but also expressed in a necessarily new way, although still pre-reflectively: they transform through the contingencies of their "interpretation". Only in this sense can we claim with Wilson ([2017]: 149) that «the adaptive habit becomes aesthetic habit»: not simply because what once was functional appears now as beautiful (see Kellert [1997]: 49), but rather because adaptation produces constraints that become deeply embedded into our experience.

In the case of biophilia, evolutive habituation marks the passage from direct to open attention (Barbiero, Berto [2021]) and is thus responsible of the emergence of an innate and pre-reflective tendency. Habituation does not produce automatisms, but sense-making postures and behaviors: biophilia needs to be activated and exercised through its singular performative executions[13], where it finds a possibility of further (although relative) development. Just like habits (Heras-Escribano, Segundo-Ortin [2021]), evolutive norms depend on the feedback loop with their single performances, and phylogenetic conducts remain in-

separable from their ontogenetic manifestation[14]. We can therefore conclude that the biophilic bond is an example of set of evolutionary habits[15] aimed at orienting our experience within and towards "living nature".

4. *Final remarks*

Human experience has an archaic history that never ceases to retrace its own steps. It therefore needs to be reflected upon as an ongoing development emerging from the relationship between human organism and environment: as the subject of an "archaeo-ecology". If an archaeo-ecological discourse implies a gesture of naturalization, it does so under certain epistemological conditions, the most important of which is that it does not aim at an original state or objective truth to be found in a mythological past: it is not a discourse on hidden causes. There is no trace of the archaic, because there is no trace at all: biological memory works through sculpting and shaping forms, not through transferring contents (see Malabou [2022]: 287-296).

As I argued in the last paragraph, the manifestation of the evolutionary past in the field of experience and behavior always means further expression of the archaic. Ontogenesis (intended as the continuous development of the individual through its behavior) opens phylogenesis to the future just as much phylogenesis anchors ontogenesis to the past. Making experience, in this framework, is an increment of future and an illumination of realizable histories. It follows that every archaeological gesture is as prospective as it is retrospective. Retracing the archaic conditions of present behaviors cannot be a rational operation aimed at unravelling a first cause: it can only be an exercise of inverted imagination aimed at producing further meaning, thus retaking the unceasing task of experience itself.

The activity of reflecting upon ontogenesis and phylogenesis, taken charge by the scientific and the philosophical discourse, is not performed by a transcendental I capable of superintending reality, but rather within a transcendental portion of reality that is «co-extensive with all the instants of the nature that is constituted in it» (Bitbol [2020]: 18)[16]. Arguing for the historical nature of transcendentals must produce the re-immersion of the veridical discourse into the genetic course of reality (see Grant [2020]; Moynihan [2020]: 5-8). Evolutionary narratives, after all, are one of the most absurd and incomplete kinds of veridical discourse: asserting that humans come from fishes and whales from mice has something logically perverse because it hints at a non-linear and non-exhaustive chain of causes. Evolution is in fact a (very serious) reverie that exceeds the limits and manners of modern rationality, and this because it is intrinsically anarchic (Kupiec [2019]), in the sense that it includes an irreduc-

ible and decisive component of chance and unpredictability. The natural origin to which the naturalizing gesture refers is just a relentless semantism that negates the present state of things. Every archaeo-ecology, then, must also be an "anarchaeo-ecology".

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Notes

1   The definition by famous biologist Edward O. Wilson reads: biophilia is «the innate tendency to focus on life and life-like processes» (Wilson [1984]: 1). Eighteen years later, Wilson attempted to provide a more precise formulation that could allow for empirical verification of the hypothesis. This second definition reads: biophilia is «our innate tendency to focus upon life and life-like forms and, in some instances, to affiliate with them emotionally» (Wilson [2002]: 134). In the wake of the general process of greening of the American sciences during the second half of the 1900s (Krčmářová [2009]), the biophilia hypothesis has undergone significant development in the fields of evolutionary psychology, ecopsychology, and psychobiology; it has also been employed and elaborated in the fields of ecological culture (Barbiero [2017]; Id. [2021]), environmental ethics (Wilson [2002]; Santas [2014]) and phenomenology (Tucker [2014]), with relevant implications for developmental psychology (Kahn [1997]), preventive medicine (Frumkin [2001]), and even architecture and design (Joye [2007]; Kellert, Heerwagen, Mador [2008]; Kellert [2018]).

2   In the approaches illustrated in this paragraph, biophilia is associated with a type of effortless attention activated without intention called "involuntary attention" (Barbiero, Berto [2021]: 45).

3   See the landmark studies by Rachel and Stephan Kaplan, among which R. Kaplan [1977], S. Kaplan [1987]; R. Kaplan, S. Kaplan [1989].

4   As Heras-Escribano (2021: 338) writes, «cognition should be taken as the sum of all flexible, skillful capacities that an organism possesses for dealing with the environment. In the post-cognitivist approach, cognition is not inner information-processing, but adaptive behavior».

5   They are indeed «both physical and psychic, yet neither», as goes the famous Gibsonian definition of affordance (Gibson [1979]: 129). This middle position between subjectivism and objectivism is gained by post-cognitivism by mediating enactivism (often associated with idealistic constructivism) and eco-psychology (associated with objectivist realism) through the lesson of pragmatism (Baggs, Chemero [2020]; Id. [2021]; Heft [2020]).

6   This includes both what was once vital to our survival (like animals and plants, but also abiotic elements like water, soil, and certain geological formations) and eidetic features associated with life-as-we-know-it (among which even complex configurations like fractal geometries: see Hagerhall, Purcell, Taylor [2004]; Hagerall et al. [2008]).

7   A state of attentiveness called «open attention» (Barbiero, Berto [2021]: 45-48). Open attention differs from involuntary attention (which is involved in the emotional and the perceptual approaches to biophilia) as it is not just effortless and pre-reflective, but also – and at the same time – aware and meaning-making.

8   This can reshape our idea of aesthetic pleasure, usually understood as the pleasure aroused by a beautiful object or objectified setting. Rather, aesthetic pleasure derives in a more fundamental way from picking up the thread of our experiential investment and reworking the phylogenetically inherited fabric of relationships between our organism and our environment. It is a joyful projection on the plane of the species, as we sense the symmetric plasticity of ourselves and our context. This argument could be extended to the experience of art by claiming that art dramatically condenses the meaning-making operations originally required of us by nature. This, however, goes beyond the scope of the present article.

9   This thesis underlies, among others, Konrad Lorenz's work *Behind the Mirror. A Search for a Natural History of Human Knowledge* (1973).

10   I take the notion of archaeophany from Mackay (2018). «I would merely insist», writes Mackay (2018: 103), «that any discourse on aesthetics that doesn't involve itself in decrypting human experience down to at least premammalian strata can only be a quaint parochial addressing protocol; it remains superficial in the sense that it's stuck at the stage where the geologist might name a geological stratum "Devonian"… […] Aesthetic experience is fundamentally archaeophanic».

11   This extension of the Haeckelian recapitulation thesis can be found again in Mackay (2018) and in all those authors who ascribe themselves to so-called "geotraumatics", like Moynihan (2020).

12   The connection between habituation and evolution is a *Leitmotiv* of evolutionism since its very beginnings and survives nowadays in neo-Lamarckian accounts (see Švorcová, Lacková, Fulínová [2023]; Portera, Mandrioli [2021]; Id. [2022]). William James took the term "habit" from Darwin himself, defining it as the «biological correlation of the idea of natural law in the inanimate universe» (see Blanco [2014]).

13   Wilson (1993: 31) explicitly claimed that biophilia is «not a single instinct but a complex of learning rules»: an innate, trans-cultural tendency, that however needs to be activated and cultivated through education and culture.

14   The pragmatist vein of the post-cognitivist approach is particularly apt to conceive of this aspect, as pragmatism has always intended habits according to their adaptive status and adaptation according to the model of individual habituation, emerging from organism-environment coordination. The same holds, in different terms, for enactivism and eco-psychology (see Barandiaran, Di Paolo [2014]; Crippen [2021]: 3).

15   Like all habits, evolutionary habits tend to aggregate in sets and rarely come alone, perhaps due to the fact that they derive from the interaction with a heterogeneous but integrated context of stimuli.

16   I would define this as an aesthetic (or better "phanic") solution of the problem of ancestrality famously posed by Quentin Meillassoux (2009). While Bitbol leans towards a post-phenomenological declination of this «consequent correlationism» (Bitbol [2019]: 31), Grant (2020) and Moynihan (2020) are there to remind us that naturalizing is always an unsettling operation of hyper-semantics that challenges the narcissistic image of the human.

Aisthesis

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

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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 theatre[1]. 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 aft er 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 theorists[5], 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 them[6]. 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 antirealism[8]. 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 expresses 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.

Aisthesis

Ways of Thinking
Towards a Pluralistic and Inclusive Understanding of Thinking *Habitus*

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Abstract. The paper outlines a pluralistic and inclusive understanding of thinking as an aesthetic habit. Taking as a starting point Noë's recent idea that thinking is a graphical practice (§ 0), I propose a general and interdisciplinary interpretation of thinking as a *habitus*, which offers an articulation of how verbal and visual thinking unfolds and places emphasis on the entanglement between words and images inside the mind and on technologies of the word and the image outside the mind (§ 1). Then, I claim that such an interpretation can help to address two pressing phenomena of our time: the resurgence of technologies of the image, which questions the "mediatic discrimination" linked to the shared mediatic primacy of the alphabet and printing (§ 2); the vindication of subjectivities who were traditionally marginalized from knowledge practices and representations, which raises the issue of "epistemic injustice" and its undesirable consequences (§ 3).

Keywords. Enactivism; media philosophy; writing; image; epistemic injustice.

1. *Second-order practice: thinking and graphemes*

In the most recent phase of his work, the philosopher Alva Noë articulates the thesis that

thinking should be considered a second-order (i.e., disclosing, manifesting or displaying) practice which has the function of reorganizing our first-order (i.e., biological, routine, or organizational) activities: in its true essence, such a performance consists in «using graphical means to think about the world and our problems» (Noë [2015]: 50). More precisely, the two main graphical technologies or «graphemes» (Noë [2023]: 59) for engaging the world cognitively would be drawing and verbal writing (i.e., pictures and words), so that art and philosophy emerge as two of the basic «strange tools» through which we human beings think, that is, reflexively reorganize our lives: art and philosophy represent our two fundamental methods of research, «aiming at illuminating the ways we find ourselves organized and so, also, the ways we might reorganize ourselves»; namely, they «expose the concealed ways we are organized by the things we do» by taking up «the painterly and the writerly attitude» that characterize us (Noë [2015]: 26-27, 55).

I take Noë's position – just outlined above – as a general starting point and hold that thinking, conceived as a *graphical practice*, conveys at least three fundamental elements:

i) Thinking always involves a particular aesthetic habit, in the general sense that it concerns perceptions, movements, sensations, gestures, actions, expectations, and so on: it is not a mere disembodied spiritual activity, but it has its particular concrete and living anthropological conditions of production and unfolding, first of all with respect to its graphic dimension.

ii) Thus, such a process presupposes a link – or better, to use a key term of Noë's, an entanglement – between internal and external aesthetic habits, that is, between the pictorial and verbal "dress" of our infra-mental thoughts and representations and the pictorial and verbal "attire" of our extra-mental media and expressions: internal and external "markings" go together.

iii) The fact that art and philosophy are subspecies of a larger common genus (i.e., achieving self-transformation and understanding: reorganizing ourselves) means that they – and thus percept and concept, incarnation and abstraction, image and word – are not simply contraposed, or even put in hierarchy, assigning dominance to the second pole; rather, they express «distinct styles of involvement with the world» (Noë [2023]: 68-70).

Briefly, all this now means that thinking can be seen as an aesthetic habit through which internal pictorial and verbal representations and external pictorial and verbal media march together, and visual and verbal knowledge and reflection cooperate on the common task of reorganizing our activities and lives. In what follows, I go through these ideas, first proposing a general interpretation of thinking as a *habitus*, viz., as an aesthetic habit, which takes its cues and ideas

from classical philosophy, the philosophy of mind, psychology, cognitive science, media studies, mediology, image studies, and game studies (§ 2). Then, I show the possible relevance of this notion of thinking, claiming that it can help us to overcome, or at least to problematize openly, two interrelated kinds of bias or prejudice that we seem to have inherited from our tradition: a "mediatic discrimination", connected to the historically shared mediatic primacy of alphabet and printing, which tends to devalue all forms of non-textual knowledge and thinking (§ 3); the potential "epistemic injustice" which considers some ways of thinking – i.e., the visual ones – "second-class" or even less human, especially with respect to verbal-written thinking (§ 4).

2. *From outdoors to indoors and return: a radiography of our thinking habitus*

Plato was the first (cf. *Philebus*, 38e-39c) to stress that our soul or mind is like a coworking space, hosting two types of "graphic designers": a writer who plots words and a painter who plots images. Since that time, we have described our inner representations, that is, our thoughts, as if they were walking the psyche's catwalk wearing two basic types of clothes: some that are linguistic and others that are pictorial. This provides a basic schema of our thinking *habitus* – both in the sense of *habitudo* and *vestis*, of habit and dress (Tab. 1):

Habitus
Word
Image

Tab. 1. The core of our thinking *habitus*.

This basic distinction remains valid even today in our common sense as well as in our various intellectual discussions, including the most philosophically sophisticated ones, where we find the assumption that cognition unfolds as a process of writing and reading and/or painting and observing. An iconic example is the already classic "great debate" between those who say that mental representations are like words or sentences in the head and those who instead say that they are like pictures or figures in the head (see e.g., Block [1981]; Tye [2000]) – with someone taking more sharply a less dichotomous «dual coding» approach, according to which verbal and image representations are necessarily always connected (Paivio [1971], [1986]). Moreover, this characterization includes some-

thing else worth noting: the technological or mediological model of the *graphein* – already used by Plato – tells us that if we have words and images in our heads, it is because we already employ *technologies* of the word and of the image *outside* our heads, that is, because we write and draw, in the broadest sense. Hence, the schema in Tab. 1 can be further articulated (Tab. 2):

Internal *habitus*	External *habitus*
Word	Writing
Image	Drawing

Tab. 2. The double-sidedness of our thinking *habitus*.

When I have a thought about – let's say – a blind reviewer (hoping it won't be a nightmare), a word and an image appear as a "note" in my mind; but, I can also annotate them outside my mind, i.e., by hand-writing the words "blind reviewer" and by hand-drawing its figure on a sheet of paper – just to indicate the two most rudimentary instances. Further, those external annotations are not just extrinsic to my thoughts, because once these have turned into things – becoming visible, tangible, and in a broad sense manipulable – I can *return* to them: it is a virtuous circle made of continuous feedback relations, so that inner dress and outer habits are deeply intertwined. The "natural" words and images contained in the mind correspond with the "artificial" words and images given outside the mind: the mind acts like a scribe and a painter because one writes and paints outside of it. There are no inner marks without outer marks: thinking is intrinsically graphical, hence deeply aesthetic.

In order to fully understand this circle and its relevant implications, we can gather together at least four groups of disciplines or debates in an original and trans-disciplinary way: a) psychology and philosophy of mind, including some further articulation of the "great debate" just mentioned; b) the related development of cognitive science based on the "4E" approach, mainly of those insisting on the "E" of enactivism; c) mediology and media studies; d) image studies and game studies. Clearly, I cannot discuss all these approaches in detail here; my specific goal is simply to extract the concepts and ideas that can contribute my argument in the following way:

a) Words and images are both plural labels that can and should be further articulated: our mental words can take the shape of a live broadcast or an inner dialogue, or as a group of notes or a set of sentences; our mental images can take

the shape of a vivid and figurative painting or photography, as well as a more abstract and explorative diagram or map. Briefly, our mind can have noisy spoken words as silent written words, and full-bodied pictorial images as spectral spatial images: our inner discourse can be made of voices as well as propositions; our inner visualization can be made of objects as well as patterns (cf. e.g., respectively, Fernyhough [2016]; Roessler [2016]; Vendler [1977]; and Knauff [2013]; Kosslyn [1994]; Kosslyn, Thompson, Ganis [2006]). Even more precisely, we manage three kinds of internal representations, that run parallel and are each unique in themselves, but all capable of partial translation one into the other: not only the symbolic (i.e. language-like – be they vocal or textual), and the imaginal (i.e. image-like – be they pictorial or spatial), but also the motor, that is, action-like representations (Bruner, Oliver, Greenfield, *et. al.* [1967]: 11).

b) If cognition arises through a dynamic interaction between an acting organism and its environment, or – as Noë himself puts it – we have an experience «by making use of the resources available to us in the situations that we find ourselves in» and «among those resources are the tools and technologies» (Noë [2023]: 58), then the medial environment and tools are also included. Our scaffolded thinking is such that «pictures and spoken words, then written words and diagrams, and most recently the full firepower of interchangeable digital media rank high among the tools by which we press maximum problem-solving power from brains like ours» (Clark [2003]: 75). This means that we take cognitive advantage not just of the linguistic environment – as it is more easily recognized, often making linguistic media the ultimate artifacts – but even of the pictorial one, thus of a general "verbal & visual" ecomedia scaffolding us and whose affordances are always intertwined with effective and/or possible actions (cf. e.g., Fingerhut [2014]; [2020]; [2021]; Fingerhut, Heimann [2017]; Kondor [2008]; Parisi [2018]).

c) Human beings are shaped more by the nature of the media through which they communicate than by the content of the communication: media are not inert supports, simple message carriers, but are themselves the message – at least to a certain extent (cf. the classical McLuhan [1964]: 7-23). In fact, they restructure and transform what they supposedly just transmit and transport, thanks to a virtuous feedback and counter-feedback loop – and what goes for "bodily" prosthetics goes also for "mental" ones, as our history certainly reveals (see e.g., De Vos, De Kerckhove [2013]; De Kerckhove [1993]; Goody [1977]; [1986]; Havelock [1986]; Olson [1994]; [2017]; Ong [1982]). In addition, media do in fact have a history, so that the different technologies of the word and of the image enter into a troubled relationship through which their power relations and their status in the "knowledge market" vary over time (cf. e.g., Antinucci [2011]; Kittler [1986]; Manovich [2006]).

d) Video-game images[1] are a particular kind of image, insofar as their computational-simulative attitude pushes to its extreme limits the fictional, participa-

tive, and emulative dimension that – at least to some degree – was already proper to the theatre-image, tv-image, and cinema-image, presenting itself as paradoxically an-iconic (Pinotti [2020]) – but not simply unrealistic. In fact, gaming-images simultaneously express possible worlds and support interactions (see e.g., Arielli [2023]; Crevoisier [2019]; Klevjer [2019]; Meskin, Robson [2010]), that is, they transmit and communicate sets of effective and/or possible actions and experiences which are strangely both real and virtual (cf. e.g., Silcox [2021]; Nguyen [2020]), or – more precisely – *really virtual*, if we take such images as the objectification or externalization of our body schemes, i.e., of our heuristic and explorative mental model, now becoming materially and mechanically reproducible (Parisi [2021]). Hence, gaming-images are true sensorimotor images (see Eugeni, Catricalà [2020]).

So, putting together all these elements, our schema can be further developed and enriched (Tab. 3):

Indoor *habitus*		Outdoor *habitus*	
Verbal (Words)	Vocal	Technologies of the word (Writing)	Phonograph, dictaphone, radio, …
	Textual		Writing, print, typewriter, …
Visual (Images)	Pictorial	Technologies of the image (Drawing)	Sculpture, painting, photography, …
	Spatial		Map, model, chart, …
	Sensorimotor		Theater, television, movie, video-game, …

Tab. 3. A more refined spectrum of our double-sided thinking *habitus*.

No doubt, this table is far from being the ultimate representation of our thinking *habitus*, if for no other reason than – for instance – it does not consider the various possible thresholds and overlappings between different kind of images; nevertheless, a similar overview is enough to show us two primary things, strictly interrelated.

The first is that there is a deep correspondence between internal and external *habitus*, in the form of a constitutive relation, such that our ability to think

verbally and visually inside our mind (in all their sub-declinations) is at the same time supported, prolonged, encouraged, developed, enforced, restructured, shaped, organized, and so on (briefly: *made really possible*) by its interaction with the set of verbal and visual tools available outside our mind: thus, the general «recursive effect» that «the things that we make and our skills of making seem to have on human becoming», according to which we are made by the things we make (Ihde, Malafouris [2019]: 198), also applies – if not firstly – to our cognition and thinking, as we still tend not to highlight sufficiently. Our mind has as such «an artifactual character»: the very fabric of our thinking not only is exosomatically embodied, but it also unfolds through and is shaped by external objects and technical artifacts, which activate new modes of thinking (Aydin [2015]). Things in fact do shape the mind; thinking as such involves a material engagement – presenting itself as *thinging* (Malafouris [2013]): if we deal with verbal and visual representations, it is because we are materially engaging with verbal and visual things – and vice versa.

The second is that the possibility of placing a different emphasis on this or that internal *habitus* each time, stating for instance that our higher cognitive processes and more sophisticated thoughts consist in managing verbal concepts (more often) or visual concepts (more rarely, to say the very least), also depends on the history of such tools: in the "knowledge market" one sees the predominance or even the monopoly of verbal technologies and media (as it was in the past) or of visual technologies and media (as it is happening today), and this makes a difference both in the self-representation of our mind, i.e., in how we think of our own thinking, and – maybe even more importantly – in the way we actually think. In other words, surely simplifying, the more we make use of technologies of the written word, the more we tend to think textually and to conceive thinking in textual terms.

Such a framework is deeply reflective of the new "mediatic turn" in which thought is finally recognized as mediatically contingent (cf. e.g., Margreiter [1999]; Mersch [2017]), such that the metaphysical equation of thinking and being is gradually replaced by the realization that if the thinking of being develops in time (naturally as well as historically), then this also implies that it always requires an external medium: not only the natural one of language, but also the artificial ones represented by all cultural media of experience (de Mul [2008]: 155-157). More precisely, thinking always requires its own outsourcing and supplementation through the technologies of the word and the technologies of the image, which exteriorize, objectify, and convey our verbal and visual products, fixing them into an external support so that they become recognizable and sharable. Word and image media at the same time reveal and enhance our ways of thinking, namely, they *realize* them by concretely displaying their structure, functioning, performance, and so on: the fact that we can talk about – let's say – making mental films or the like

goes hand in hand with the production of extra-mental movies or whatever, in the specific sense that through cognitive prostheses we actually learn how to make inner films better, i.e., with more consciousness, more mastery, more richness, more freedom, more confidence, and more creativity.

In this sense, our thinking *habitus* is as such structurally aesthetic, a genuine aesthetic practice: it takes shape materially and sensorially, producing – according to Bourdieu's famous definition of *habitus* (Bourdieu [1980]: 53) – a set of peculiar structuring structures, i.e. an embodied disposition that generate and organize practices and representations. All this may seem somewhat trivial, but my claim is that we are nonetheless still far from having completely accepted it and fully developed its implications, first of all because we tend to fear that explicitly thematizing the plural conditions of the real possibility of thinking would mean undermining its validity rather than enlarging its understanding and substantiating its functioning, as is instead the case. So, in the following paragraphs my goal is to explain better why it is so important to endorse such a stance on the mind, namely, why we need to rethink our thinking *habitus* openly – and even radically. I will focus on two primary issues, which are directly connected: the "mediatic discrimination", which tends to devalue all forms of non-textual knowledge and thinking (§ 3); and the subsequent forms of "epistemic injustice" directed towards traditionally marginalized subjectivities (§ 4).

3. *What if we had a video-bible? Text bias and visual thinking*

One of the main claims of various pictorial and iconic turns (cf. at least Curtis [2010]) is that we are now becoming more and more aware of the influence of a contraposition pervading «almost the entirety of intellectual and cultural history», according to which «images and language are generally considered disjoint orders that differ in their semiotic registers» (Krämer, Ljungberg [2016]: 1). This contrastive difference would express «an old philosophical prejudice», which could be summarized through a series of oppositions that testify to what is clearly «the arrogance of the linguistic imperialism» (*sic!*): «images are to words what perception is to understanding, material to intellectual, passive to active, vague to precise, emotional to rational, and so on» (Roque [2009]: 4). Similarly, there are those who even say that we live under the «tyranny» of the restrictive mindset of «scriptism», which takes writing as «a general model for all processes of communication and understanding» (Harris [2009]: 11-12), or – with just a little less vigor – that our Western culture shows «a distinct preference for monomodality» (Kress, van Leeuwen [2001]: 1) and is built around a «single, exclusive, and intensive focus on written language» which has dampened «the full development of all kinds of human potential, through all the sensorial pos-

sibilities of human bodies, in all kinds of respects, cognitively and affectively, in two-and three-dimensional representation» (Kress [2000]: 157) – starting exactly with visual representation.

Definitely, speaking in these "guerrilla" terms goes a little bit too far, but at the same time it forces us to engage explicitly with the idea that the Western cultural and philosophical tradition could be characterized by a widespread «text bias», which would accustom us to take it for granted that «to know is to think thoughts expressible in words», namely, to think of knowledge «in terms of propositions or sentences» (Baird [2004]: 1-8, 122). Coming back to the terms used in § 2, it is as if, between the two "graphic designers" hosted in the coworking space of the mind, only the word-plotter is really welcome, while the image-plotter is an intruder; or – if you prefer – the first is the boss and the second the employee, if not a mere intern. One of the main consequences of such a pre-understanding would be that «a long history of suspicion attends to the role of the visual in western thought», so that we can still experience today «the longstanding distrust of visual methods as primary modes of epistemological work» (Drucker [2020]: 10-11).

Just think about how children in their early years of schooling are constantly encouraged to produce images which, however, are not corrected in the same way that words are: «unlike writing, illustrations are not "corrected" nor subjected to detailed criticism ("this needs more work", "not clear", "spelling!", "poor expression", and so on)», because they are seen as a mere medium of self-expression, rather than of communication and knowledge – that is, drawing is seen «as something which the children can do already, spontaneously, rather than as something they have to be taught» (Kress, van Leeuwen [2006]: 16). This would show concretely how drawing is viewed not as a rule-governed system acquired through a developmental period and whose structure can be grammatical or ungrammatical (viz., as a language akin to verbal-written one, the *Language™*), but as a simple skill «conditioned only by the expressive aims and abilities» of the drawer (Cohn [2013]: 3) – thus offering a glimpse of the «unwholesome split which cripples the training of reasoning power», that would be the result of the «prejudicial discrimination between perception and thinking» affecting «our entire educational system» (Arnheim [1969]: 2-3). The tenets of such effective "mediatic discrimination" would be so engrained in our comprehension of how cognition works that even young video-essayists today – twist of fate – can display them:

> writing is propositional in nature: it always carries the potential of meaning. Whenever we read words, they exist in the context of being true or false. […] But you don't judge whether a picture is true or false the same way you judge a sentence. […] There's no argument there. […] Images just don't call on you to judge them as true or false; they are there to evoke feelings. You can like or dislike an image, you can feel happy or sad or hungry because of it, but you can't prove this image is wrong. (oliSUNvia [2023])

I do not want to discuss here whether images are actually incapable of ever presenting an effective conceptual content because – for instance – they cannot support the basic logical operation of quantification and negation in the way that enunciations can (cf. e.g., Fleming [1996]; Fodor [2007]). Where someone sees an arbitrary usurpation and segregation, if not a ruthless and deliberate "culture war", we are more likely to have a simple distribution of roles, based on a real difference in terms of expressive, communicative and cognitive specializations. The problem, however, is precisely to shed light on the possible reasons for such a concrete diversity, without exacerbating the contrast between word and image and without explaining the different treatment they receive in essentialist terms. I therefore want to stress that if we had really been prone to consider concepts as «the meanings of words» and propositions as «the centerpiece, if not all, of the world of what we know», such that images never gained true credibility as possible bearers of genuine knowledge and thinking, it is because «knowledge and learning are almost always viewed in forms associated with current literacies; they appear to us through the lens of a literacy» (DiSessa [2001]: 65).

In other words, the rootedness of "text bias" in our epistemic practices as in our self-understanding of how our mind works is not the result of a conspiracy of secret imperialist powers (a kind of "Word Spectre") with no real material motivation, but it depends (also) on the fact what we have been living through the consequences brought about by the gradual combination of two main technologies of the word: alphabetical writing and movable type printing, which made (a muted and soundless) word – thus not the image – mechanically reproducible, hence widely available to potentially anyone (see e.g., Eisenstein [1983]; McLuhan [1962]). Not by chance, the metaphor of the world as a great and unique written book to be read has become the key representation of knowledge processes (cf. the classical Blumenberg [1986]).

But things are slowly changing, at least since the "democratization of image" typical of the second half of 20th century, by which capturing photographs started to effectively mean «note-taking on, potentially, everything in the world, from every possible angle» increasingly for everyone, so that «the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads – as an anthology of images» becomes more and more familiar, and if in the past «everything in the world exists in order to end in a book», with the rise of analog or film photography «everything exists to end in a photograph» (Sontag [1973]: 138, 1, 19). Only then can the «world-as-a-picture» model challenge the «world-as-a-text» model and thus contest the hegemony of the word as «the highest form of intellectual practice» along with the consequent treatment of visual representations as «second-rate illustrations of ideas» (Mirzoeff [1998]: 5): if this could have been stressed a couple of decades ago, what would we now say after the "upgrade" offered by the smartphone and its panoply of digital images, or the rise of the realm of infographics and dataviz?

More generally, we are all experiencing how visual communication and expression have started to become less and less the domain of specialists, and more and more crucial in the public domain as personal communication and expression. This is true not only as verbal writing becomes ever more hybridised with the most disparate types of images (websites, slides, TikTok videos, chats, etc.) and its visual-spatial dimension (line, word, and letter spacing, dimensioning, and colouring, etc.) gains attention in the attempt to build a «content-responsive typography» (Tufte [2020]: 49-64), but also when the graphic dimension of the alphabet itself is being exploited, as happens when the word (if it is still such) "v10l3nc3" is used in an Instagram post by a victim of sexual assault to avoid its categorization by "the algorithm" as an incitement to rape, shadow-banning, or even profile termination. The list of cases could be really long, but what counts here is the more profound anthropological condition we are currently facing: we are becoming more and more accustomed to thinking visually – be it as filmmakers, video-makers, game designers, graphic designers, data artists, and likewise.

How much longer then will we tolerate a secondary role for visual thinking in all its possible ramifications, blindly accepting assumptions like «the images do not argue or justify anything» (Han [2021]: 38)? After all, we have long been accustomed to «create and use a panoply of non-sentential representations throughout our ordinary lives» in order to think (Camp [2007]: 145), be they maps, charts, diagrams, pictures, drawings, sketches, and so on. But as such practices become the norm, or at least progressively common and obvious, the time seems ripe to re-interrogate how knowledge is produced, managed, shared, and conceived, outside our mind as well as inside it – to the point that we can imagine resetting and rebooting our entire "book civilization" as a "video civilization":

> What will soon end in the monopoly of bits and fiber optics began with the monopoly of writing. […] Writing, however, stored writing – no more and no less. The holy books attest to this. *Exodus*, chapter 20, contains a copy of what Yahweh's own finger originally had written on two stone tablets: the law. But of the thunder and lightning, of the thick cloud and the mighty trumpet which, according to scripture, surrounded this first act of writing on Mount Sinai, that same Bible could store nothing but mere words. (Kittler [1986]: 4,7)

> Writing, in the sense of placing letters and other marks one after another, appears to have little or no future. Information is now more effectively transmitted by codes other than those of written signs. What was once written can now be conveyed more effectively on tapes, records, films, videotapes, videodisks, or computer disks, and a great deal that could be not written until now can be noted down in these new codes. Information coded by these means is easier to produce, to transmit, to receive, and to store than written texts. Future correspondence, science, politics, poetry, and philosophy will be pursued more effectively through the use of these codes than through the alphabet. […] Many people deny this, mainly out of laziness. They have already learned to write, and they are too old to learn the new codes. We surround this, our laziness, with an aura of grandeur and nobility. If we were to lose writing, we say, we would lose everything we owe to such people as

> Homer, Aristotle, and Goethe, to say nothing of the Holy Bible. Only how do we really
> know that these great writers, including the Author of the Bible, would not have preferred
> to speak into a microphone or to film? (Flusser [1987]: 3)

To be clear, I am not suggesting that we are moving towards the end of writing in the sense that we won't be writing alphabetically anymore; rather, I am stressing that rediscussing and renegotiating how we define our thinking *habitus*, questioning the consolidated primacy of verbal-written thinking, is an unavoidable task at a time when visual thinking and the technologies of the image are gaining more and more anthropological relevance. Moreover, this also allows us to address the epistemic injustice fuelled by this inherited conception: let's delve into this now.

4. *Neurotypicality, autism, and deafness: can we avoid epistemic injustice?*

The issue I want to raise here is as simple as it is disorienting. The assumption that our thinking *habitus* is mainly or even exclusively verbal and more strictly textual, especially when it comes to the higher cognitive functions, may cause (unwanted, it goes without saying) forms of discrimination, that is, it may lead to a peculiar kind of *epistemic injustice*: a situation which disadvantages some people in their capacity as knowers.

Since its first appearances (see mainly Fricker [2007]), the concept of epistemic injustice has given rise to wide debates and applications, resulting in an increasingly refined articulation of the range of its possible meanings; however, for our purposes, I refer to the following general definition:

> those forms of unfair treatment that relate to issues of knowledge, understanding, and
> participation in communicative practices. These issues include a wide range of topics
> concerning wrongful treatment and unjust structures in meaning-making and knowledge
> producing practices, such as the following: exclusion and silencing; invisibility and inau-
> dibility (or distorted presence or representation); having one's meanings or contributions
> systematically distorted, misheard, or misrepresented; having diminished status or stand-
> ing in communicative practices; unfair differentials in authority and/or epistemic agency;
> being unfairly distrusted; receiving no or minimal uptake; being coopted or instrumen-
> talized; being marginalized as a result of dysfunctional dynamics; etc. (Kidd, Medina,
> Pohlhaus [2017]: 1)

So, to get straight to the point, if we privilege propositional representations in our mental "intellectual VIP parties" or "cognitive private clubs" and – correlatively – technologies of the written word in our material interactions and engagements, then we are also privileging certain kinds of persons in meaning-making and knowledge production practices, which excludes and marginalizes others, with all the implications attendant to similar conditions on the social-cultural level. I

am not just thinking of the current «generations of visual learners» comprised of people who even «struggle to finish the books they buy» (Carreras [2013]: 5), but more incisively – for instance – of those on the autism spectrum who think in a predominantly or almost exclusively visual way (on autism and epistemic injustice see more widely e.g., Catala, Faucher, Poirier [2021]). In fact, from their perspective, their own way of thinking has suffered a true misrepresentation, if not a complete silencing, due precisely to the dominance of text bias:

> when it comes to communication, language is the water we drink, the air we breathe. We assume that the dominance of language forms not only the foundation of how we communicate, but also the foundation of how we think – and in fact for centuries, we have been taught to believe just that. […] The first step toward understanding that people think in different ways is understanding that different ways of thinking *exist*. […] I am a visual thinker. […] The world didn't come to me through syntax and grammar. It came through images. […] The world comes to me in a series of associated visual images, like scrolling through Google Images or watching the short videos on Instagram or TikTok. (Grandin [2022]: 1-2)

> My mind works similar to an Internet search engine, set to locate photos. All my thoughts are in photo-realistic pictures, which flash up on the "computer monitor" in my imagination. […]. When I design livestock facilities, I can test run the equipment in my imagination similar to a virtual reality computer program. […] My concept is sensory based, not word based. […] When I read, I convert text to images as if watching a movie. The images are then stored in my memory. […] In my case, abstract thought based on language has been replaced with high-speed handling of hundreds of "graphics" files. (Grandin [2009]: 1437-1438, 1441)

Hence, the question becomes: are we willing to accept that these types of subjectivities and their thinking *habitus* deserve – if it goes well – a second-class seat in our understanding of the mind, and thus in our epistemic practices? Are we condemned to judge diverse communicative and thinking repertoires as "deficient" rather than as resourceful, thus also favouring the narrowing, distortion or flattening of our epistemic representations (Molinari [2022])? Significantly, things are already changing, mostly in education (just think of the attention given to the different learning styles), thus prompting – to cite a basic example – an examination of the conditions of accessibility for traditional writing, along with the redesigning of type and font size in printed text for readers with learning disabilities related to dyslexia; but we also find some attempts to reflect on the standardization of fonts and typefaces for commercial or institutional purposes[2]. Regardless, this is nothing more than the tip of the iceberg with respect to what is needed in order to truly question the longstanding tenets of our theoretical and practical comprehension of cognition – at least if we really want to take seriously those who claim to be epistemically banned, or nearly so.

For instance, it is surely important that contemporary behavioural sciences are abandoning the idea that «language and thought go hand in hand», according to

which grasping a thought is understanding a sentence and practical reasoning is to be understood in terms of transitions between sentences: acknowledging that there could be and there is thinking *without* words truly makes our understanding of thought and rationality more inclusive, allowing us to study how non-human animals and infants think, albeit in a nonlinguistic or prelinguistic way (Bermúdez [2003]: poss. 113, 392). Nevertheless, this does not preclude maintaining that the higher cognitive abilities, such as thinking logically, monitoring one's own processes of belief formation and argument, reflecting on the desires one wants to have, attributing thought to other creatures and the like, are strictly dependent on words and enacted propositionally: while «the gulf between linguistic and nonlinguistic thought should not be exaggerated», and the cognitive separation between creatures that have language and creatures who don't is a division «between two types of thinking», rather than «between thought and the absence of thought», it remains that «the separation is very real» and that «the type of second-order cognitive dynamics that involves explicitly reflecting on the inferential connections between thoughts and the likelihood of their truth» requires explicitly «taking thoughts as the objects of thoughts», viz., verbal-written language (Bermúdez [2003]: poss. 3306, 3340).

To put it otherwise, we should aim not just at an inclusive or less exclusive division between nonlinguistic and linguistic thought that coincides with a division between non-human (or not-yet-fully-human) thought and human thought, but at a further and more radically inclusive division within the realm of *fully human ways of thinking*. To be fair, I am not simply assuming that linguistic and pictorial experiences are the same, primarily with respect to their neurological bases (cf. Calzavarini, Voltolini [2023]), nor that the knowledge that we tend to consider of the higher level (e.g., philosophy, logic, or whatever) can actually be processed visually: all this is absolutely debatable. Besides, it may be noted that Grandin herself has been writing books for decades (with the valuable support of her editors), which shows not only that written words are best suited to express abstract ideas and general concepts, but also that the visual analogies of the mind she uses are nothing more than figures of speech[3]. This could even be the case, but we should then ask ourselves whether such a condition is actually an immutable fact and not a contingent situation: longstanding does not mean eternal – at least if we are willing to accept Kittler's and Flusser's idea of the "video-Bible" and, more generally, the premises and consequences of the "mediatic turn". What if – in other words – Grandin is still only a child of her own time, i.e., of the alphabetic-typographic and pre-digital age? This, too, is absolutely debatable. But that is exactly my point: such subjects are worthy of discussion, and this at the very least presupposes that we no longer take it for granted that higher thinking can in no way be associated with visual thinking, also because this could lead to the dangerous conclusion that some persons are essentially "lower thinkers" – if not dangerously "less human", or worse, inhuman.

Let me be even more frank: maybe we will conclude that persons on the autism spectrum who think in a predominantly or almost exclusively visual way actually cannot philosophize in the strict meaning of the term, or – as a less extreme alternative – that we are problematically called to redefine our same pre-understanding of philosophy as "neurotypical", considering that philosophy represents the alphabetic-typographic knowledge par excellence. But – I do believe – this is not a good reason to refuse an open discussion of the topic; in fact, quite the opposite. In a similar framework, it would be no coincidence, for example, that Wittgenstein – with his conceptual tribulation with language and expression – could be introduced as a key figure in "post-literacy philosophy", i.e., the attempt «to come to conceptual terms with the fact that the dominance of the printed book as the medium of communication has become challenged by the rise of the new, electric and electronic media» (Nyíri [2002]: 185). Indeed, if the Austrian philosopher was challenging «the literary bias of Western philosophy at a time when in everyday experience the sources of that bias were drying up» (Nyíri [2002]: 185), it was because he was trying to cope with his dyslexic condition, engaging in its philosophical articulation and generalization (Nyíri [2006]: 353). In this perspective, the famous proposition «whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent» should go hand in hand with a sentence such as "whereof one cannot write, thereof one can visualize".

Once again, I am not simply assuming that all this is irrefutably true, for Wittgenstein as well as for any other philosopher; but – to put it mildly – we are witnessing the rise of new issues and questions. In the same vein, I do not suggest that the overview of thinking *habitus* summed up in Tab. 3 is definitive and complete, not even in the sense of being totally inclusive: in fact, one could say that we should add to verbal and visual thinking also *corporeal thinking*, considering that we humans express concepts not only generating sounds and creating graphic representations, but also moving bodies, so that we have verbal, visual, and sign languages (cf. Cohn [2013]: 3-7). This would mean that Tab. 3 could be even better articulated as follows – limiting it to its first level (Tab. 4):

Way of thinking	*Fundamental medium*
Verbal	Word
Visual	Image
Corporeal	Body

Tab. 4. A possibly more enriched articulation of the spectrum of our thinking *habitus*.

As it is now clear, recognizing this would be important not only from a perspective such as «somaesthetics», which focuses on the several ways we do actually think through our bodies (see at least Shusterman [2008]; [2012]), as also from that of a «speculative pragmatism», which is focused on practices that think multiply, making a movement of the body immediately a movement of thought, with the aim of redefining knowledge in terms of doing and gesturing, going explicitly beyond the paradigm of the neurotypical individual (cf. Manning [2009]; [2016]). Similar proposals emphasise – each in its own way – that the body is not just a crucial topic of study, but an essential dimension of experiential learning, i.e. the basic instrument for any human performance – from perception to thought, for there is no mental life without somatic experience. This would challenge the anti-somatic bias by virtue of which intellectuals are generally so interested in the independent life of the mind and spirit that they take the body for granted and do not ask what different "unable" bodies can do, jumping to the (often implicit) conclusion that they are simply "deficient", thus also incapable of thinking.

But first and foremost, this more comprehensive way of considering our thinking *habitus* becomes salient from the point of view of deaf people, for whom sign language is in effect a true sign thinking (cf. Goldin-Meadow [2005]). Not surprisingly, among the psychological implications of deafness there exists a need for «a nonverbal approach to thinking» which can unveil several discriminatory tenets of our cognitive psychology and philosophy: «the assumption that ability to use language is the gauge of human intelligence and that language is indeed the key to all that is abstract and conceptually mature in man»; «the contingent assumption that language is essential for thinking»; the a priori identification of «"concept" with verbal concept»; the surreptitious implication that «conceptual or abstract thinking *is* thinking expressed in verbal terms»; «the ready association of thinking and language which prevailed in one form of another throughout the history of Western thought and education» (Furth [1966]: 228, 3, 8, 19, 144, 212).

Finally, reexamining the nature of our thinking *habitus* in a radical, pluralistic, inclusive perspective, paying specific attention to those modes of thinking traditionally neglected or worse, can help us be mindful of the dangerous drift from "different cognition" to "lower cognition" and finally to "inferior cognition", and thus avoid the persistent and well-hidden trap of that anthropological machine which «necessarily functions by means of an exclusion (which is also always already a capturing) and an inclusion (which is also always already an exclusion)» (Agamben [2002]: 37), distinguishing between who is completely human and who is instead diminutively and only partially such. An outcome which no one really desires.

Conclusion

In this paper, I began with Noë's idea that thinking is to be seen as a graphical practice, explicating some of its possible implications – in particular, that thinking consists in an aesthetic habit through which internal pictorial and verbal representations and external pictorial and verbal media march together, and visual and verbal knowledge and reflection cooperate on the common task of reorganizing our activities and lives. This was the initial background for proposing a general and interdisciplinary interpretation of thinking as a *habitus*, which offered an articulation of how verbal and visual thinking unfold, and stressed the entanglement between internal and external dress, that is, between word and image inside the mind and technologies of the word and of the image outside the mind. Afterwards, I claimed that such an interpretation can take charge of two demands which are particularly pressing today. The first comes from the late stages of media history, which vindicates the technologies of the image and directly questions the inherited "mediatic discrimination" that affects how we have been producing, sharing, and conceiving knowledge, and is linked to the joint mediatic primacy of the alphabet and printing. The second comes from the subjectivities that were traditionally excluded and marginalized from knowledge practices and representations, posing the problem of a potential "epistemic injustice" in which visual ways of thinking risk being considered "second-class", if not even less human, with respect to verbal-written ones.

Considering all this, to conceive of thinking in a radically pluralistic and inclusive way can represent at least a fruitful resource for addressing some of the most urgent anthropological challenges of our time.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1   I use the term here as a wider label comprehending all the images currently held under the umbrella of Extended Reality (Augmented Reality + Virtual Reality + Mixed Reality).
2   An example is the project *Cripping Times New Roman*, carried out by the scholars and activists Jennifer Scuro (who told me about it), Amy Gaeta, and Jillian Weise, inspired by the principles expressed in Hamraie, Frisch [2019].
3   I would like to thank the first anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.

Habits and art

Aisthesis

The Arts are Made of (Intelligent) Habits

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Abstract. Contrary to the traditional picture of "Art" as an autonomous realm separate from artisanal and technical activities, a view dating back to the second part of the eighteenth century, this paper claims that artistic practices are largely scaffolded by habits, understood as more or less flexible channelings of both organic and environmental energies. More precisely, the author suggests developing Dewey's idea of "intelligent habits" as a conceptual tool that can solve the issue of the peculiar intelligence associated with artistic practices, as well as get rid of the picture of artistic creativity as involving a radical break with one's habits. On the one hand, assuming that habits' intelligence consists in their sensibility to the environment, artistic habits would appear to be one entailing an enhanced sensibility to changes in the situation in which they are embedded, and to the interactions that are occurring between doing and perceiving. On the other hand, rejecting the standard view of artistic creation as radically original, innovative, and solitary and assuming a view of it as embedded in a shared form of life, supported by a common sensibility, collective practices, and norms of conduct, allows us to focus on the creative side of intelligent habits, as well as to appreciate how enhanced creativity is grounded in previously established habits and produces new or renewed ones.

Keywords. Artistic habits, intelligence, creativity, John Dewey, 4E cognition.

1. *Introduction: a critical point of departure*

Classical aesthetics from Kant onward has provided a series of interpretations of art as essentially foreign to technical abilities, crafts, and habitual practices. This opposition has been an important component of the picture of art as a separate and independent realm, requiring specific forms of experience (Stolnitz [1962]) and proper criteria of judgment (Gadamer [2004]). However, the history of the terms *tékhnē* and *ars* reveals a far more heterogeneous use of these concepts and an emphasis on mastery, expertise, and the capacity to process materials that has perceived as characteristic, for instance, of both painting and poetry, both rhetoric and the art of sailing (Kristeller [1951, 1952]). The turn of the nineteenth century witnessed a progressive emancipation of the artistic domain from both craftsmanship and scientific practice (Shiner [2001]), which was a novelty in comparison to early modern Europe (see Smith [2006]). Genius became alien to the manual labor of the craftsman and original creation was conceived of apart from forms of *inventio* consisting in the masterful re-arrangement of pre-existing materials and models (Shiner [2001]). Disinterested contemplation became the mark of aesthetic experience as the adequate attitude required by art objects (Berleant [1991]), while Art – written with a capital A, as a singular noun – acquired an «ethereal» status (Dewey [1989]). Within a conception of art where originality and novelty were seen as the seal of the artistic, no significant space could be left for repetition, and no constitutive role could be assigned to habits in the definition of art.

The strength of the image of art as opposed to craftsmanship, labor, the acquisition of habits, and techniques can be perceived through the sarcastic criticism formulated by Nietzsche against the idea of artistic inspiration and Schopenhauer's conception of art as the true metaphysics. Nietzsche contrasts the metaphysics of the genius capable of grasping the hidden truth of the world with the «earnestness of handicraft», after having defined all great artists as «great workers, unwearied not only in invention but also in rejection, reviewing, transforming, and arranging» (Nietzsche [1878-1879]: § 155).

> Do not talk of gifts, of inborn talents! We could mention great men of all kinds who were but little gifted. But they obtained greatness, became "geniuses" (as they are called), through qualities of the lack of which nobody who is conscious of them likes to speak. They all had that thorough earnestness for work which learns first how to form the different parts perfectly before it ventures to make a great whole; they gave themselves time for this, because they took more pleasure in doing small, accessory things well than in the effect of a dazzling whole (Nietzsche [1878-1879]: § 163).

In spite of Nietzsche's criticism, the idea of art as essentially foreign to handicraft, technique, manual practices, and habits was still alive 50 years later, when

Benedetto Croce wrote his entry for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, giving voice to a very influential conception of art. Croce profoundly disdained technique and emphasized its marginal role in communicating lyrical insights, which in his view found their internal expression before the arising of the merely practical problem of fixing them in a material object:

> The exact line that divides expression from communication is difficult to draw in the concrete case, for in the concrete case the two processes generally alternate rapidly and appear to mingle, but it is clear in idea, and it must be firmly grasped. Through overlooking it, or blurring it through insufficient attention, arise the confusions between *art* and *technique*. Technique is not an intrinsic element of art but has to do precisely with the concept of communication. (Croce [2014])[1]

However, if one espouses a view of the arts as human behaviors, continuous with other ways of experiencing the environment, this kind of opposition between the arts and technical capacities seems artificial. It appears to be one-sided when looking at the history of the concept of art, as others have already mentioned (Kristeller [1951, 1952], Shiner [2001]). Above all, this opposition seems misleading if we take artistic practices rather than art objects in isolation as our point of departure – e.g. balancing the strength of the various fingers when learning to play the piano, familiarizing oneself with the paintbrush or camera, or acquiring the ability to stand at the right distance from the scene one wishes to portray. Capacities, skills, and habits – be they more or less embodied – are also essential when focusing on practices related to the fruition rather than production of art: from very basic abilities, such as silently reading a novel, to more complex forms of perception, such as selecting the right features in a Cubist painting in order to grasp its subject. Sometimes people acquire these skills and habits through explicit training and imitation, more often through very early exposure to an already habitualized environment (Mead [2011]), almost osmotically (Bourdieu [1977]), and by means of attunement with pre-established social habits and practices that are already there when the individual agent makes her own gesture (Dreon [2022]).

In this paper, I will support the claim that habits are pervasive in artistic practices and experiences by adopting a Deweyan conception of habits as constitutive and pervasive features of humans' interactions with their environment, supporting perception, action, and cognition. To put it the other way round, artistic practices and experiences are largely scaffolded by habits – and this also applies to the typically avant-garde strategy of disrupting established habits of artistic production and fruition. If artistic or aesthetic practices are not separate from ordinary interactions with the world, the point is rather to try to explore the roles played by habits in the arts and the dynamics governing them, so as to acknowledge and appreciate any differences of degree between eminently artistic experi-

ences and other everyday exchanges. The enhanced role of intelligent habits in artistic practices, I believe, could explain some differences within the continuum of experience.

Of course, the claim that practicing an art involves the capacity to manage a complex system of habits must face at least two main objections that come from the aesthetic tradition and are still present in the current debate. If the arts are practiced through quasi-automatic habits, how can they display a form of intelligence, even one arguably different from other forms of intelligence? Is "Art" a purely intuitive expression, is it foreign to discursive rationality, as originally stated by Arthur Schopenhauer (Schopenhauer [1819])? Furthermore, if the arts are constituted through repetitive actions and almost impersonal behaviors, how can we explain creativity and originality, which have been – and continue to be – considered essential aspects of "Art" in late modern Western culture? I suggest responding to these objections by building on the concept of «intelligent habits», first introduced by John Dewey in *Human Nature and Conduct* (Dewey [1988]: 51), so as to argue that the arts are mostly scaffolded through intelligent habits.

After depicting a Deweyan view of habits as functions of the environment, a view that proves particularly useful for understanding artistic practices (§. 2), I will develop Dewey's idea of «intelligent habits» by arguing that they play a structural role in artistic practices and are a conceptual tool that can provide a decisive contribution to the current debate within strongly embodied, enacted, and distributed approaches to the mind (§. 4). On the one hand, I will show that Dewey's conception of habits as intelligent or artistic is useful for moving beyond the debate on the contrast between "mindless" or "mindful" coping with the world[2] and assuming a view of intelligence as refined responsiveness to the environment (Miyahara and Robertson [2021]: §. 3). On the other hand, so-called intelligent habits are crucial in order to understand artistic creativity within a post-metaphysical framework, where habits are seen not merely as a means to perpetuate a tradition (either a living tradition or an exhausted one), but as agents responsible for the novel use of pre-existing resources and new ways of attuning oneself to changed conditions (§ 5-6).

2. *Habits as function of the environment*

Artistic practices, ranging from everyday activities to more refined ones, involve a complex cluster of behaviors: various forms of «doing and undergoing» (Dewey [1989]: 54) through the array of resources available in a specific context. Let's take a couple of examples from both fields: taking care of one's own garden and appreciating contemporary art – say, Lucien Freud's figurative paintings within an already post-representational artistic scene. Creating and maintaining

a garden is no simple enterprise: it involves habits of attention, such as looking at the plants and understanding whether they are healthy or suffering because of excessive sun exposure, lack of water, and diseases. It involves even habits of active care, such as pruning plants at the right time of the year not only for the sake of their health and fertility, but also in order to maintain an equilibrium between the various plants, for instance by assigning one a more prominent role or limiting that of another. Sensibility to the specific conditions of plants' growth and flourishing is not simply a kind of school knowledge, so to say, but depends on habitual caring for the garden itself – putting one's fingers in the soil and understanding when a plant is thirsty, to begin with. Appreciating the details of Freud's painting – let's say his treatment of human flesh and skin – is equally complicated behavior, even though it places one in the position of a spectator: it requires a degree of familiarity with other ways of rendering facial and bodily surfaces – for instance, Rembrandt's or Egon Schiele's very different yet equally meticulous treatment of the human skin – and this depends on the specific training one has explicitly received at school or almost osmotically absorbed from one's environment (Bourdieu [1984]). It involves complex habits of selection, such as focusing on the skin, colors, and brushstrokes, by isolating the first element within a dense pictorial subject and the other two on the surface of the canvas – it implies «seeing in» as the twofold capacity to see both what is depicted and the plane surface (Wollheim [1993]: 188). In the case of an educated spectator, it implies the awareness of a deeply changed post-naturalist artworld, where a figurative painting can be perceived as either conservative or provocative – in other words, it implies extensive habitual exposition to abstract paintings, readymades, installations, performances, and so on.

Both cases, while very different, confirm Dewey's "ecological claim", so to speak, that is his idea that habits are functions of the organism as well as of the environment, i.e. of the way a specific interaction occurs (or, even better, "transaction": cf. Dewey and Bentley [1990]: 6-7).

Habits – Dewey states – are similar to physiological functions such as breathing or digesting, which depend on the functioning of the lungs and stomach as well as on the quality of the air and the kind of food one eats. Habits are not linear patterns of behavior, due to the repetition of a causal connection between a purely perceptual stimulus from the outside and a consequent motor response (Barandiaran, Di Paolo [2014]). Rather, habits must be framed within the complex interactions occurring between living organisms and their environment, insofar as habitual practices are already there within the natural environment and the social context one belongs to, yet at the same time are dynamically reconfigured by the habitual actions performed by individuals[3]. On my part, I have suggested a provisional definition of habit as the "more or less flexible channeling of both organic and environmental resources" (Dreon [2022]: ch. 4),

in order to emphasize that both individual resources from the agent (organic and cultural resources) and resources from the environment (natural and naturally social ones) enter into the constitution of a habit. This attention to the role of the environment in the constitution of habits also involves a clearly externalist implication, i.e. the idea that a habit is not – at least not primarily – an internal process occurring within the mind or the brain of the agent[4], but a kind of acting in the world out there: it is a way in which an agent provisionally and dynamically comes to terms with an environment. This is important in connection with the anti-representationalist use of the concept of habits in the current debate within post-cognitive approaches to the mind (Caruana-Testa [2022]). It is particularly relevant – I would argue – when considering artistic practices, where sensibility to environmental circumstances is peculiarly enhanced, insofar as such practices involve the capacity to use all the available materials, as well as to enjoy them as a constitutive means to attain specific results. Taking the surroundings into account, and constantly monitoring the changes they undergo, is crucial for artists, who – as pointed out by Dewey – must constantly consider the effects of their works on the perceivers (Dewey [1989]: 52)[5]. Now, the issue at stake here is how this process occurs – I mean the process of continuously being attentive and responsive to the various features of the environment, including others' perceptions of a work of art. Could it be interpreted as a habitual process or must it be conceptualized as conscious and explicit reasoning? In the next section, I will summarize the state of the art on mindless vs mindful coping with one's circumstances and show a Deweyan way out by developing his idea of "intelligent habits" and applying it to his conception of artistic production in *Art as Experience*.

3. *Mindless vs mindful coping and a deweyan way out*

Most habits involved in artistic performances are strongly embodied – for example, a talented pianist performing the Goldberg Variations once told me that coordinating one's breathing with the rhythmic movement of one's back toward and away from the keyboard, so as to support the effort required by the complex execution of the work, is among the most crucial aspects of playing the piano. This is especially true when it comes to intricate pieces of music like the one mentioned. In the field of gardening, pruning requires eye-hand coordination, moving one's body around the plant, and continuously adjusting the use of the shears as one's perspective changes – similarly, I guess, to the movements of a sculptor around a piece of marble. At the same time, artistic practices are heavily laden with knowledge, deeply stratified levels of meaning, theories, and structured interpretations – for example, there must be something like a «philosophi-

cal disenfranchisement of art» permitting us to enjoy Lucien Freud's naturalistic paintings in an artworld where the Imitation Theory has been largely transcended (Danto [1964, 2005]).

Consequently, the field of the arts seems to be the most challenging for the debate around the issue of contrasting allegedly mindless coping with the world with mindful perception and action – let's call it the Dreyfus-McDowell debate (Schear [2013]), for argument's sake. Another interrelated point regards the appropriateness of distinguishing between habits and skills within artistic practices, possibly following Gilbert Ryle's line of thought (Ryle [1984]).

Positions are varied in the field and all scholars tend to characterize their own stance in opposition to a simplified version of its counterpart. By focusing on skills acquired at an adult age through training, Hubert Dreyfus claims that both bodily/motor skills (such as driving a car) and intellectual skills (i.e. playing chess) are forms of intelligent behavior, although they do not entail the use of mental or brain representations. Differently from the beginner, who needs to follow an explicit behavioral rule and make decisions according to it and the specific context of its application, skillful action would depend «almost entirely on intuition and hardly at all on analysis and comparison of alternatives» (Dreyfus [2002]: 372). Here, Dreyfus' polemical target seems to be the very idea of mental representation as a necessary medium for mediating between the subject and the object. In previous publications (Dreyfus and Dreyfus [1986]), by contrast, this scholar's phenomenological analysis of skill acquisition seemed to involve a more radical claim, namely that «expert performance is guided by non-cognitive responses which are fast, effortless and apparently intuitive in nature» (Toner, Montero, Moran [2015]: 1128). Barbara Montero has criticized this view as a "just-do-it" conception of expert skill, defending instead what she calls the "cognition-in-action" conception, not least by drawing upon her experience as a former dancer. She supports the thesis that any form of skilled bodily performance – in the arts as well as in sports – does entail a variety of conscious mental processes, such as consciously monitoring one's own actions, planning, predicting, deliberating, and generally conceptualizing one's own actions (Montero [2016]).

Jason Stanley (Stanley [2015]) proposes an even more radically intellectualistic view, by presenting the allegedly mainstream idea in sociology, anthropology, and neuroscience as the claim that skills are independent of cognitive states, like knowledge and beliefs, and that practices fall outside the realm of rationality – a thesis he traces back to Pierre Bourdieu. Stanley rejects the view that procedural knowledge is independent of propositional knowledge and assumes that skilled action is grounded in settled or full beliefs, i.e. beliefs that we take to be infallible and not subject to doubt. But this is not enough to characterize skilled action as rational, according to Stanley, who adds that skilled actions must be understood as intentional, that is as actions in relation

to which we can give a reason for acting. Consequently, he argues that skilled action falls within the space of reasons (McDowell [2013]). Recently, Christos Douskos has preferred to stress the difference – within the field of non-deliberative behavior – between intelligent actions or skills and unintelligent, merely mechanical habits (Douskos [2019]). Drawing on Gilbert Ryle (Ryle [1984]), Douskos defines habits as the mere mechanical repetition of an act acquired through conditioning and training. Most importantly for the purpose of the present paper, he characterizes habits as single-track dispositions, i.e. one-way, rigid responses that are deaf to changes in the context. By contrast, skills appear to be intelligent capacities and multi-track dispositions involving sensibility to one's surroundings, the capacity to generate novel responses to changes in environmental conditions, and agents' critical dispositions toward their own actions and practices.

Recently, Miyahara and Robertson have suggested drawing on Dewey's idea of habits in order to solve what they call the «Intelligence Puzzle of Habits», namely the tension between two apparently opposing aspects of habits: habitual actions seem to constitute a form of intelligent behavior, despite being automatic and/or unintentional. Their way out of the puzzle passes firstly through a reconceptualization of intelligence, which they do not understand in primarily propositional, conceptual, and combinatory terms. Positions à la Ryle contending that habits are merely mechanical, non-intelligent single-track dispositions and intellectualist stances, grounded in the idea of knowing-how as a species of propositional knowledge (Stanley, Krakauer [2013]: 8), are unsatisfactory. Alternatively, «by intelligent behaviour, we refer to behaviours that unfold in line with goals, projects, plans, needs, norms and the like within the specific material and sociocultural constraints of the immediate situation» (Miyahara, Robertson [2021]). In other words, to use Deweyan vocabulary, intelligence can be said to entail "sensitiveness"[6] to the context as well as flexibility to changes in one's environmental conditions. At the same time, Miyahara and Roberston recover Dewey's idea that habits can be, and often are, intelligent rather than routine. Habits work as «holistic network[s] of perception, action and thinking» (Miyahara, Robertson [2021]) that are capable of responding to different circumstances via constant monitoring of their efficacy through environmental signals. Dewey's emphasis on the role of the environment in co-constituting behavior as clusters of multiple habits enables these scholars to conclude that the unfolding of habitual conduct is guided by the environment, and not by representations within the agent's mind.

My aim here is to take a more in-depth look at Dewey's idea of intelligent habits and to argue that they play a key role in artistic practices. However, before proceeding any further, I wish to say a few words on habits and skills. I am inclined to think that overlapping, fuzzy limits and family resemblances between

skills and habits are the norm in natural languages and real practices. Nevertheless, I believe it is worth maintaining a functional distinction between the two. Skills are complex capacities to do something, and one acquires them through training (different phases of their acquisition have been studied by scholars). People may learn a skill by having its acquisition as their main aim, but it is equally common for a skill to be learned because it is instrumental to something else. For example, although one may learn to drive a car by having the acquisition of the capacity itself as the main goal, I personally learned to drive simply because I needed a faster means of transport. The arts (i.e. painting, dancing, sculpting, etc.) are grounded in skills, in accordance with the original meaning of the Greek term *téchne* as capacity, ability, competence, or even mastery. Skills are constituted of a complex variety of habits, both routine habits and more intelligent ones, such as focusing our visual and acoustic perception on the potential dangers to be avoided in the street when driving the car, or attuning the movement of our back towards and away from the keyboard with the rhythm of our breathing when playing the piano. Skills are clusters of habits so to say, and many of them are not acquired intentionally, through an individual choice, but rather through attunement to the circumstances and the process of mutual adaptation of the different components interacting with one another. From this point of view, skills appear to be scaffolded by habits – habits of perception, selection, action, thought, etc.

4. *On intelligent habits*

My suggestion here is to approach Dewey's concept of «intelligent habits» as a particularly useful tool for interpreting artistic practices. Dewey is perfectly conscious that while habits are frequently conservative and even connected to the «monopoly of social power», they can also be productive, insofar as they constitute the actual means by which we can intervene in the world, for the better or worse. In particular, habits should not be seen as opposed to intelligence and thought, because habits support active thinking and knowledge in at least two complementary ways: on the one hand, by restricting the focus of attention, making selections, and fixing boundaries; on the other, by enlarging the range of possible actions, observations, imaginings, and opportunities (Dewey [1988]: 123). Both the limiting, restrictive function and the positive, creative side of habits are important, but the former can of course become an obstacle for growth and fertile interactions with one's surroundings if it leads one to become stiff and blind to changes in circumstances. Dewey introduces the distinction between intelligent and routine habits (Dewey [1988]: 51) in a few pages where he argues against a reductive image of habits as the mere repetition of previous actions and in favor

of a view of them as a kind of «ability and art, formed through past experience» (Dewey [1988]: 48). The connection between intelligent habits and the arts in the broad sense of the term is so clear that he speaks of «intelligent or artistic habits» as synonyms (Dewey [1988]: 52; cf. 55: «intelligent habit or art»).

Now, the point I wish to make is that the key aspect distinguishing intelligent habits from routine ones lies in their stronger or weaker sensibility to environmental circumstances. Habits are intelligent when they are sensitive to the environment and consequently more flexible and capable of envisaging new forms of interactions, of enlarging and enriching the field of possible transactions with the environment. Habits become routine – as frequently happens when we grow old (Sullivan [2021]) or within forms of artistic mannerism – when they become inattentive to changes in the context and simply continue to operate as they always have, regardless of environmental changes.

It is important to clarify that one should not take Dewey's distinction to mean that there are inherently intelligent and routine habits. It is not a matter of "what", but of "when", in the sense that being intelligent or routine is a phase that can belong to the development of any habit: an intelligent habit can become routine through mere repetition, laziness, and inertia, while routine habits can become intelligent when facing a crisis and an emotion arises as «a perturbation from clash or failure of habit» (Dewey [1988]: 54) – as happens when a person mechanically follows her usual way to work, suddenly steps into a puddle, and becomes aware that her summer sandals are not suited for a wet pavement; or when a tale by Calvino contradicts the reader's expectations about a linear plot.

To return now to the basic point just mentioned, enhanced sensibility to changes in the environment and any interactions that are occurring between doing and perceiving can be considered the distinctive feature of artistic habits. A good sculptor seems able not only to easily chisel a block of stone or marble, but also to overcome its unevenness; a masterful translator of poetry not only is capable of almost effortlessly finding semantic correspondences between words across two language, but can also perceive in advance how they will sound to the reader. This is perfectly in line with what Dewey says in *Art as Experience*, where he emphasizes that experiences become artistic when there is an enhancement in the perception of the relationship between what is done and what is undergone[7].

Note, however, that Dewey does not mention the label "intelligent habits" in this later work and, in a couple of cases that focus on artistic expression as involving a break in habituation, he uses the word «habits» to refer to habits that have become «blind routines» in ordinary experience (Dewey [1989]: 161, 178). It could be stated that one of the defining features of artistic experiences is that they frequently affect the spectator by changing one of her habits from routine to intelligent through an emotional crisis that makes her more sensitive to a new situation. I will return to this point in the last section.

In *Human Nature and Conduct* the emphasis on intelligent habits as artistic is also a response to the broad socio-political criticism of the dogmatic opposition between the artisan and the artist over the last two centuries. Artistic practices involve mechanisms and techniques because artists are not «winged subjects» in Schopenhauer's world (Schopenhauer [1819]), but fully embodied people. According to Dewey, it is the wish to maintain «the monopoly of social power» that nourishes the opposition between habits and intelligence, technical work and art, body and mind (idem). «The artist is a masterful technician», he says, because while «the mechanical performer permits the mechanism to dictate the performance» (Dewey [1988]: 51), the artist is flexible, processes materials and energies available in his surroundings, and is particularly sensitive to changes in the environment, as well as to the effects of what he does on the environment, including spectators. Consequently, Dewey presents literature as a paradigmatic case of intelligent habits, where linguistic gestures and habits do not simply perpetuate the forces that have produced them but «modify and redirect them», by disclosing new possibilities[8]. If this reading of Dewey's concept of intelligent habits is correct, a crucial consequence must be highlighted in comparison to the previous philosophy of habits and especially the so-called double law of habits, worked out by the French Spiritualist tradition[9]. This law states that «from the moment an action is repeated or continued over time, it produces a twofold effect, i.e. it makes the initial impression faint, but equally encourages activity, making movements more ready and confident» (Capodivacca [2008]: 16, my translation). By contrast, intelligent or artistic habits seem to combine fluid movements with a stronger awareness of the features of the material, the audience, and the complex situation with which they are interacting. This awareness cannot be reduced to a kind of intellectual knowledge; rather, it is a kind of enhanced perception or "sensitiveness" that Dewey characterizes as «special sensitiveness or accessibility of a certain class of stimuli, standing predilections and aversions» (Dewey [1988]: 32), namely predispositions to welcome or reject environmental suggestions. Frequently, it takes the form of a bodily sensibility that the artist has for her own medium and interlocutors; more broadly, I suggest considering it a sensibility towards the impact that environmental resources can have on the artistic process, as well as the impact that the artistic process can have on the audience[10].

5. *A different view of creativity*

Beyond the issue of habits and intelligence, supporters of the claim that the arts are largely scaffolded by intelligent habits must address the problem of the relationship between habits and creativity. If habits are mere repetitions

of the same responses to similar stimuli, and if artistic creativity means the production of some radical novelty, how can the two concepts be compatible? Solving this apparent paradox requires reframing both concepts, habit and creativity. As already stated, the pragmatist perspective rejects the behaviorist, mechanistic view of habits and, while acknowledging their role in stabilizing organic-environmental transactions, stresses their active function in scaffolding perception, action, cognition, and will, as well as their flexibility in dynamically adjusting action to changed circumstances. While I will return to the creative side of habits later, the point now is that the very idea of artistic creativity must be reoriented. Consolidated scholarship has already reframed the concept from a historical-cultural point of view. It has been shown that the current standard opposition between creativity and tradition is a relatively recent development in Western culture and that it is misleading to generalize this opposition and apply it to every culture and form of life (Kristeller [1983]). Scholars have noted the theological origins of the idea of artistic production as radical innovation and the creation of something unprecedented in the already existing world – a conception deriving from the very idea of *creatio ex nihilo* (Blumenberg [2000]). It has also been acknowledged that the conception of artistic production as a form of creation is closely connected to the late modern invention of Art as an autonomous system and independent realm, separate from craftsmanship. Within this perspective, completely original creation replaces invention as a form of artistic production consisting in the processing of pre-existing models, materials, and socio-cultural constraints (Shiner [2001]). Further scholarship has criticized the abuse of original creativity in the arts and ordinary life, by showing its collusion with neoliberalism and the capitalist economy (Benjamin [1969]; Reckwitz [2017]; Joas [1996]; Sennet [2008]).

I do not wish to enter this debate in the present paper. Instead, my focus is on non-dogmatic ways of conceptualizing artistic creativity, in such a way as to make this notion compatible with a view of the arts as supported by intelligent habits. Some authors have defended more or less pragmatist-inspired views of creativity: Hans Joas has supported an idea of creativity as a constant feature of human beings and human conduct, providing a view of it as "situated understanding", namely as concerning situations in which human agents are embedded and which require a new solution under certain conditions because they are challenging and cannot be tackled as usual (Joas, Sennet, Gimmler [2006]: 11). Richard Sennet emphasizes that the crucial point for creative behavior is not so much the production of something new, but experiencing resistance and the capacity to work with it (Joas, Sennet, Gimmler [2006]: 11-12) – a capacity that is shared by the artisan as well as the artist. Vlad Glăveanu has developed a conception of creativity contrasting

with the main view of the term in the psychology of creativity, which is usually centered on the individual and the creation of a product through a mainly mental process. By building on pragmatism, and a general approach to the mind as embodied, extended, enacted, and embedded in a social environment, Glăveanu has come to regard creativity as a social phenomenon, existing outside the mind of the individual subject in a specific cultural environment. Against the ideology of the isolated genius, he considers the creating subject to be a social agent, defined by the network of social relationships and the cultural traditions governing them (Glăveanu [2013]: 72). With an explicit reference to Dewey, he regards the creative act not as a mainly mental and linear process, but as a form of mutual adjustment of means to ends and the other way round that engenders continual loop effects between perception and action under the influence of external and material constraints (Glăveanu [2013]: 73). The creative output is the outcome of these continuous interactions and is permeated by the cultural models and behavioral patterns, habits, and rules in which creation is embedded. Finally, creative action responds to existing environmental affordances, i.e. to the opportunities provided by the context, and requires an engaged audience to interact with.

This picture of creativity can be completed, I believe, through a couple of further references to Dewey's approach to the arts. The first reference concerns the public character of artistic expression, so to say, while the second one concerns the re-conceptualization of the notion of the artist. A third Deweyan point, centered on resistance as a crucial aspect of artistic expression, will be examined in the next section.

Regarding artistic expression, Dewey insists that it is not the mere conveyance of a pre-existing mental state within the artist's mind (either an idea or a feeling). Instead, an artistic expression should be conceived of as the transformation or re-working of already existing sources and elements, a process intended to offer a new experience of the work of art to the people who will share it. According to Dewey, artistic expression can emerge from a variety of elements: sounds and colors, but also sensorimotor dispositions and behavioral habits, techniques, skills, and forms of mastery, as well as previous individual and shared experiences and meanings. In any case, the elements involved are for the most part socially shared, as is the expressive output, namely a re-organization of resources capable of giving birth to new ways of experimenting and sharing the common world (Dewey [1989]: 66)[11]. Consequently, the artist cannot be envisaged as a solitary genius, creating works of art *ex nihilo* (Dewey [1989]: 71). Dewey refers to the artist as «the alembic of personal experience» through which common materials, habits, and already shared meanings pass and are transformed into something new, essentially destined to be enjoyed or suffered publicly (Dewey [1989]: 88; see Dreon [2015]).

6. *Habits and creativity*

Rejecting the standard view of artistic creation as radically original, innovative, and solitary, and instead embracing a view of it as embedded in a shared form of life and supported by a common sensibility, collective practices, and norms of conduct, allows us to consider the intertwining of habits and creativity. The goal is to explain how and to what extent habits are or can be creative, as well as to consider the plausibility of a picture of creativity as scaffolded by pre-existing habits and giving rise to new habits of perception, thought, and eventually action, without being exhausted by habits.

Recently, Ross and Glăveanu have emphasized how habits support craftsmanship, particularly by mitigating the risks arising from the use of uneven materials, as well as by offloading certain aspects of an activity while allowing others to become more conscious and dominant (Ross and Glăveanu [2023]). In a previous article, Glăveanu defended the claim that creativity is an intrinsic part of habits and concerns the way in which a habitual action becomes attuned to different dynamic contexts, improves technical practices, and enables the acquiring of mastery (Glăveanu [2013]: 84). Although I agree that, as a phase of habitual interactions, creativity concerns their capacity to adjust to different contexts (Glăveanu [2013]: 84), I believe that the very concept of intelligent habits permits a more effective conceptualization of habitual creativity. Let us therefore return to Dewey and apply the concept of intelligent habits introduced in *Human Nature and Conduct* to his conception of artistic expression as presented in *Art as Experience*.

As already shown when defining intelligent or artistic habits as those habits that involve an enhanced sensibility to changed circumstances, it is clear that such habits are creative insofar as they imply a kind of flexible attunement, which is to say a relatively new channeling of pre-existing energies and resources in order to adjust to more or less different situations. Although Dewey does not mention «intelligent habits» and «routine habits» in *Art as Experience*, as already stated, in relation to the act of artistic expression he is clearly suggesting that intelligent habits scaffold artistic practices. He speaks of «motor dispositions previously formed», «motor sets of the body», and «channels prepared in advance» (Dewey [1989]: 103). It is clear that according to Dewey these habits are intelligent in the above-mentioned sense, for he explicitly states that «[t]he motor coordinations that are ready because of prior experience at once render his perception of the situation more acute and intense and incorporate into it meanings that give it depth, while they also cause what is seen to fall into fitting rhythms» (Dewey [1989]: 103). As previously noted, intelligent habits do not reduce sensitiveness to the context while making movements easier, as generally stated by the so-called double law of habits. On the contrary, they enhance the perception of ongoing transactions. They are intelligent because they function as an embodied

incorporation of meanings (cf. Bourdieu [1977]) and contribute to the aesthetic experience by facilitating the establishment of a satisfying rhythm in experiential transactions (cf. Vara Sánchez [2020]). They are also creative insofar as they involve the «diversion of immediate response into collateral channels» when the situation has changed or when one is facing a different context (Dewey 1989, 103). These habits are seen as a constitutive part of the surgeon's conduct as well as of the violin player's, according to Dewey's continuistic view of artistic practices and everyday experiences. Even the perceiver's experience is supported by some previously set habits and must be open to «indirect and collateral channels of response», should the music heard or the painting seen diverge from the person's expectancies (Dewey [1989]: 103). This can be seen as a first – and we might say basic – intertwining of habits and creativity in artistic production and aesthetic experience, a process that concerns the adaptability of intelligent habits to an ever-changing environment.

However, I think there is more to say about habits and creativity with reference to mainly artistic or aesthetic experiences for Dewey[12]. The crucial point is that an artistic expression involves some form of resistance which transforms an otherwise merely organic discharge of energies into an expressive act (Dewey [1989]: 102), namely the re-organization of pre-existing materials and energies. This impediment is signalized by an emotion, according to Dewey, that works as a "perturbation", «a clash or failure of habit» (Dewey [1988]: 54). This failure is key to eliciting a sort of affective-based awareness of doings and undergoings, as Dewey would put it, that is to say in turning the mutual dynamic adjustment between doing and perceiving typical of artistic production into a conscious process. In other words, artistic expression entails the crisis of a habit through an emotionally significant event or component that makes sensibility more acute and can cause the transformation of a routine habit into an intelligent one, the re-orientation of a previous habit, or even the new channeling of previous resources.

In a nutshell, creativity is grounded in previously established habits and produces new or renewed ones. It lies at the core of the transformation of habits from routine to intelligent, but also from intelligent habits to alternative intelligent habits. Enhanced creativity, so to say, concerns the reorganization of channelings of the bodily, cultural, natural, and social resources constituting habits, meaning the re-directing and modifying of existing habits, as well as their replacement with new ones.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to show that Dewey's idea of «intelligent habits» is a conceptual tool that can solve the issue of the peculiar intelligence of artis-

tic practices, as well as disprove the picture of artistic creativity as involving a radical break with existing habits. On the one hand, assuming that habits' intelligence consists in their sensibility to the environment, artistic habits appear to be those entailing an acute sensibility to changes in the situation they are embedded in, and the interactions that are occurring between doing and perceiving. On the other hand, rejecting the standard view of artistic creation as radically original, innovative, and solitary and assuming a view of it as embedded in a shared form of life, supported by a common sensibility, collective practices and norms of conduct, allows us to focus on the creative side of intelligent habits, as well as to appreciate the fact that enhanced creativity is grounded in previously established habits and produces new or renewed ones. As I put it, the enhanced role of intelligent habits in artistic practices could therefore explain certain differences between them and ordinary interactions within the continuum of experience. This claim clearly implies that it would be misleading to consider the rejection of established habits a universal and honorific feature of "Art", across all time and space. By contrast, it seems necessary to contextualize the typically avant-garde strategy of disrupting established habits of artistic production and fruition within the framework of the autonomist conception of Art that arose in the late eighteenth century and is thus rooted in a specific culture and form of life, where habit-breaking has become an established habit for most elitist high art. Certainly, it would be important to focus in detail on the dynamics of habit-breaking and disruption that are so widespread in avant-garde and contemporary art – to the point where, in this specific cultural context, habit-breaking could be regarded as a habitual gesture. Evidently, however, this is a matter for further investigation and must be postponed to another occasion.

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Notes

1   At the end of this section, Croce's tone becomes sarcastic: «Provided, that is, that the ideas are rigorously conceived and the words used accurately in relation to them it would not be worth while to pick a quarrel over the use of the word "technique" as a synonym for the artistic work itself, regarded as "inner technique" or the formation of intuition-expressions. The confusion between art and technique is especially beloved by impotent artists, who hope to obtain from practical things and practical devices and inventions the help which their strength does not enable them to give themselves» (Croce [2014]).

2   E.g. between the mindless or mindful playing of an instrument, dancing, listening to a piece of music, or being absorbed by the plot and the psychology of the characters when watching a TV series.

3   The proper dynamic of habits is that of the "organic circuit" rather than that of the linear process, as already emphasized by Dewey in his seminal work criticizing the reflex-arc concept (Dewey [1986]).

4   This, however, is not to deny the development of neurological paths within the nervous system, as stated by James (James [1981]: ch. 4). What I wish to state is that even neural processes are resources entering into a habit together with other processes and resources, for

example bodily movements, gestures, other people's actions, natural and cultural circumstances, habits and skills already at work within a social environment, etc.

5   I will quote the relevant passage in full, because it clearly shows that Dewey connects the perception of doing and undergoing with intelligence, which makes it very significant for the issue I will address in the next section: «Because perception of the relationship between what is done and what is undergone constitutes the work of intelligence, and because the artist is controlled in the process of his work by his grasp of the connection between what he has already done and what he is to do next, the idea that the artist does not think as intently and penetrating as a scientific inquirer is absurd» (Dewey [1989]: 52).

6   Miyahara and Robertson use the word «sensitivity», instead of the old-fashioned term «sensitiveness». As will be seen later in this paper, I prefer using the word «sensibility» in continuity with the research I have conducted in Dreon [2022], ch. 2.

7   «Because perception of relationship between what is done and what is undergone constitutes the work of intelligence, and because the artist is controlled in the process of his work by his grasp of the connection between what he has already done and what he has to do next, the idea that the artist does not think as intently and penetratingly as a scientific inquirer is absurd» (Dewey [1988]: 52).

8   «Language grew out of unintelligent babblings, instinctive motions called gestures, and the pressure of circumstance. But nevertheless language once called into existence is language and operates as language. It operates not to perpetuate the forces which produced it but to modify and redirect them [..] Literatures are produced [..] In short, language, when it is produced meets old needs and opens new possibilities. It creates demands which take effect, and the effect is not confined to speech and literature, but extends to common life in communication, counsel and instruction" (Dewey [1988]: 57).

9   For a clear picture of the two lines of thought which have developed the double law of habit – the English line sprung from Joseph Butler and David Hume and the French one sprung from Xavier Bichat, Maine de Biran, and Felix Ravaisson – see Piazza [2018], Ch. 5.

10   For a reframing of the word sensibility, see Dreon [2022], Ch. 2.

11   Interestingly, Dewey here uses the word "representation" in a sense that is quite remote from the common current use of it as a synonym of "mental content", as well as from the idea of "literal reproduction": «But representation can also mean that the work of art tells something to those who enjoy it about the nature of their experience of the world: that it presents the world in a new experience which they undergo» (Dewey [1989]: 89). On this issue, see Dreon [2012]: 78 and ff.

12   Even Glăveanu considers different modes or degrees of relationship between habits and creativity; more specifically, he distinguishes between habitual, improvisational, and innovative creativity (Glăveanu [2012]: 85).

Aisthesis

Negotiation of Aesthetic Habits, Cultural Symbols, and Identity of Lampung Culture

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Abstract. This study profoundly analyzes the balance between traditionalism and modernization within the Lampung culture. In most aspects, it dwells on the traditional value system of *Pi'il*, the philosophical symbolism of traditional dressing in cultures, and the cultural implications, which are synonymous with dance and ornamental art. Lampung's culture and identity as aesthetic habits are explicitly found in Pi'il as a source of dignity and harmony of the social body amidst contemporary globalization forces. Instead, Pi'il's adaptation to the present life forms seems to be characterized by young generations. The study also involves the deep-seated philosophical connotations hidden beneath forms or defined in chosen color and shape, and this form is another influence of Indonesian traditional culture; the *Siger* crown and *Ruwi* bracelet, which to Lampung's natives are more than mere aesthetic elements but signs of socio-cultural beliefs; and dance as aesthetic habits from its cultural values and precisely how the *Sigeh Penguten* traditional dance functions as such is researched. Dance like *Jong Simpuh* and *Ngrujung*, containing unique poses, represents three crucial cultural practices and values such as hospitality rights, social hierarchy, and ubiquitous relationships. Then, the significant patterns of visual art forms in the culture Lampung, "*Pucuk Rebung*" and "*jung*", are used as symbols

of identity in public places. These motifs and the regional script "*Aksara Ka Ga Nga*" are vital because they ensure a culture or identity awareness even in an era where modernization efforts threaten to oust older influences.

Keyword. Cultural symbols, aesthetic habits, Lampung culture.

1. *Introduction: balancing tradition and modernity through pi'il in lampung culture*

In the heart of Lampung society lies a cultural treasure known as "*Pi'il*". This deeply ingrained value transcends mere philosophy; it is the embodiment of dignity, serving as an unwavering compass guiding the lives of Lampung's people. *Pi'il* is not static; it thrives as a living testament to the Lampung way of life, providing moral guidance for harmonious social interactions. The essence of *Pi'il* revolves around the fundamental idea of dignity. In the local language, it is a concept that encapsulates not just personal pride but also collective honor. It underscores the importance of treating others with respect, upholding moral principles, and fostering a strong sense of community. For generations, *Pi'il* has been the cornerstone of Lampung's cultural identity. The steadfastness of *Pi'il* faces contemporary challenges in an ever-evolving world. The forces of globalization, urbanization, and modernization exert transformative pressures that can either strengthen or diminish cultural awareness (Khan [2019]; Finkbeiner et al. [n.d.]). Thus, our focus turns to a pivotal concern that Lampung, with its cultural identity at a crossroads amid rapid societal change, must now embark on the path of nurturing and fortifying cultural awareness among its residents and visitors (Richards, King, Yeung [2020]: 7)including attractions, events and tours, in Hong Kong. Four dimensions of experience (cognitive, conative, affective and novelty.

Pi'il, as a cultural ethos, is not limited to practices and beliefs only but is also a significant reflection of the consciousness at Lampung brought out in theses of human dignity and respect, including cooperative nature. This cultural asset – though standing on traditional grounds – will be subject to the tide of globalization and modernization in which it has few choices but to take up the same risks for preservation set for changes in cultural perspective. *Pi'il* essentially represents the principle of dignity, not pride; this is self-esteem but also a feeling from which all other beings are related. This concept is aligned with the philosophical discussion surrounding dignity coupled with various thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, who assumed that dignity was an inborn trait deserving of respect. Dignity in the village of Lampung's *Pi'il* can be seen mainly through how people interact, incorporating good ethics and mutual respect. Such a depiction reflects a communitarian perspective by which the individual's actions are inseparable from the fate of this individual's community.

In this regard, urbanization and the advancement of modern technology are some of the challenges posed by globalization, forming part of a unique paradox for *Pi'il*. These forces can weaken time-honored values and ways of life and offer new ways of expressing and conserving cultures. The fact that *Pi'il* has been adapted to modern properties, such as digital ones, leads to the conclusion of the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity. *Pi'il* as cultural values are inclined to be flexible in confronting change through such passiveness and tolerance towards new experiences. Lampung society's philosophical inquiry into the *Pi'il* subculture manifests an intriguing interplay between indigenous customs and values, dignity, and collective peace amid modernity. The conservation and development of Pi' il reflect the truthful dynamics of a culture that can always be adapted, interpreted, reinterpreted, and reconstructed in the world paradigm.

The broader global context underscores the urgency of this endeavor. In an era of unprecedented interconnectedness, the preservation and promotion of local cultural identities are of paramount importance (Hough [2011]: 61). The homogenizing currents of globalization loom, threatening to erode the intricate tapestry of cultural traditions worldwide (Facca, Aldrich [2011]: 91). Across the globe, communities are grappling with the challenge of preserving their unique cultural heritage while navigating the currents of modernity. As societies become more interconnected, cultures intermingle, creating both opportunities for enriching diversity and risks of cultural dilution (Ghermandi, Camacho-Valdez, Trejo-Espinosa [2020]). In this dynamic landscape, the role of cultural preservation takes on profound significance.

Cultural identity is not a static entity but a living, breathing organism shaped by history, environment, and the collective experiences of a community (Sajarwa et al. [2023]: 55). It is an intricate mosaic of customs, traditions, language, art, and values. When cultures fade away or are diluted, humanity loses a part of its collective memory, a unique perspective on existence, and a source of creativity and inspiration (Hanna [2010]). Within this broader context, the cultural landscape of Lampung holds its unique significance. Lampung, a province situated on the southern tip of Sumatra in Indonesia, boasts a rich and diverse cultural tapestry (Magat [2014]: 146). It is a land where tradition meets modernity, where ancient rituals coexist with contemporary aspirations (McDaniel [2017]: 7). The province is home to a myriad of ethnic groups, each with its distinct traditions, languages, and ways of life. Among these, the Lampung people stand out as one of the prominent groups, renowned for their unique cultural practices and deep-rooted sense of identity (Yudoseputro [2005]: 98).

The Lampung people take immense pride in their cultural heritage, and *Pi'il* stands as a testament to their commitment to preserving it. In Lampung, *Pi'il* is not a mere abstract concept; it is a lived experience ingrained in daily life. It guides the actions of individuals and the collective ethos of communities. It

underscores the significance of harmony, respect, and dignity in interpersonal relationships. *Pi'il* in Lampung society is often described as a guiding philosophy. It offers a moral framework for Lampung individuals, providing them with principles to navigate the complexities of social interactions. These principles encompass respect for others, a commitment to ethical conduct, and a sense of collective responsibility. The Lampung phrase "*Pi'il Pasenggiri*" encapsulates the essence of this philosophy[1]. "*Pasenggiri*" roughly translates to "honor" or "dignity." Thus, "*Pi'il Pasenggiri*" emphasizes the paramount importance of personal and collective honor. To be recognized as a trustworthy Lampung person, one must not only understand the philosophy but also live by its tenets.

Sakai Sambayan stands as the first principle, emphasizing the paramount importance of community solidarity. It transcends individual self-interest and calls for the consideration of the community's welfare as a whole. This principle fosters a spirit of togetherness and cooperation, emphasizing that the collective triumphs when individuals unite. *Nemui Nyimah*, the second tenet, lies at the heart of mutual respect. It is an encouragement for Lampung individuals to treat one another with respect, irrespective of social status, ethnicity, or background. *Nemui Nyimah* instills the belief that every individual, regardless of their circumstances, deserves dignity and respect. *Nengah Nyappur*, as the third tenet, underscores ethical conduct and moral integrity. It serves as a constant reminder for Lampung individuals to act with unwavering integrity, honesty, and fairness in all their interactions and dealings. *Nengah Nyappur* highlights the significance of maintaining one's moral compass amidst the complexities of life. The final tenet, *Bejuluk Beadek*, places a spotlight on humility and modesty. It discourages arrogance and egoism, encouraging individuals to embrace humility and modesty in their interactions with others. *Bejuluk Beadek* shapes a culture where individuals find strength in humility, and arrogance finds no place. In the collective observance of these tenets, *Pi'il Pasenggiri* comes alive. It transcends theoretical discourse to become a practical guide for Lampung individuals as they navigate the intricate terrain of social interactions. These principles collectively cultivate an environment where dignity, respect, and harmony flourish, nurturing a cultural awareness deeply rooted in mutual respect and shared values.

The Lampung region, particularly Bandar Lampung city, stands at an intriguing intersection of tradition and modernity. As urbanization accelerates and external influences seep in, it grapples with the challenge of preserving its cultural heritage while embracing the opportunities of the contemporary world (Yudoseputro [2005]: 110). In this dynamic context, Lampung recognizes that cultural awareness is not a relic of the past but a living force essential for forging a vibrant future. The urgency of this research are, *firstly*, it seeks to document and understand the evolving nature of cultural awareness in Lampung in the face of modernization. How are traditional values and cultural practices adapting to

the changing social landscape and what are the challenges and opportunities that Lampung faces in preserving its cultural heritage. *Secondly*, the research aims to shed light on the strategies employed by the Lampung region to nurture and strengthen cultural awareness among its residents and visitors. It delves into the role of visual stimuli, such as traditional attire, decorative patterns, and the Lampung regional script, in fostering a deeper appreciation of cultural values. Also, about how are these symbols employed, and what impact do they have on the community's cultural consciousness.

2. *Cultural aesthetics symbols and their philosophical significance in lampung traditional attire*

The utilization of artistic symbols as a means of introducing and preserving cultural heritage is a practice embraced by various regions across the globe. In the case of Lampung, this practice is not only acknowledged but also enshrined in local regulations that encourage the populace to employ artistic symbols as cultural ambassadors. These regulations extend their scope to include specific symbols, among them the ornate headgear known as the "*Siger*", and intricate decorative motifs. In the following sections, we will delve into an exploration of the various symbols employed and strategically placed in public spaces.

The introduction of Lampung's cultural heritage is often achieved through the placement of monuments depicting traditional attire in various locations. These monuments are dispersed throughout the city of Bandar Lampung and the surrounding districts within the Lampung region. The researcher's observations have predominantly focused on the areas within the city of Bandar Lampung. Traditional attire monuments typically feature bridal wear and accompanying accouterments, including head adornments or the traditional headgear known as "*kopiah adat*", worn by males. Additionally, the attire for females includes the iconic "*Siger*". Traditional attire from the Saibatin cultural region is characterized by its use of red hues and unique *Siger* designs. Furthermore, these variations in traditional attire are underscored by the usage of different fabrics, as reflected in the prominent textures of the monuments. These textural differences manifest as uneven surfaces on the monuments themselves.

Traditional attire in the Pepadun region encompasses several components that collectively contribute to its completeness (Suyatno & Lelepari, 2021, pp. 278-279). These components encompass *(1) the Siger, (2) Sesapur, (3) Seroja Bulan, (4) kopiah emas, (5) Bulan Temenggal, (6) Buah Jukun, (7) Bebe, (8) Gelang Kano, (9) Bulu Serati* and *Pending, (10) Gelang Burung, (11) Rambai Ringgit, (12) Buah Manggus, (13) Keris,* and *(14) Tanduk.* These costume components are invariably worn or employed during traditional ceremonies or festivities known

as "*gawi*". Moreover, the completeness of these traditional costumes often signifies the individual's status within a specific social group, a determination often influenced by the number of adornments worn. Each component of Lampung's traditional attire holds its philosophical significance. These meanings, when arranged from the uppermost position, are as follows:

– *Siger:* Symbolizing the nine rivers that flow through the Lampung region, emphasizing the significance of these waterways in sustaining the Lampung community›s livelihood.

– *Seroja Bulan:* Denoting elevated status and representing the three historical kingdoms that once thrived in the Lampung region. *Seroja Bulan* also reflects the philosophical outlook of the Lampung society.

– *Kopiah Emas:* While the meaning of this attire component remains undiscovered in this study, it presents an avenue for future exploration.

– *Bulan Temenggal:* Symbolizing peace and tranquillity.

– *Buah Jukun:* Depicting the community›s defensive capabilities and their ability to protect themselves.

– *Kanduk:* As of now, a specific meaning has yet to be uncovered for this component.

– *Gelang Kano:* Signifying the unity of a complete family, underscoring the Lampung society's emphasis on family bonds and relationships.

– *Keris:* No definitive meaning has been ascertained for the role of *Keris* in Lampung's traditional attire.

– *Pending and Rambai Ringgit:* These components are yet to be explored in depth.

– *Buah Manggus:* Symbolizing purification from impurities, primarily referring to human beings as vessels of faults.

– *Gelang Burung:* Representing the freedom of expression and the ability of the Lampung people to voice their opinions and thoughts openly.

– *Bulu Serati:* Symbolizing the enhancement of marital bonds.
– *Bebe:* Serving as protection against various ailments, *Bebe* is a fabric that covers the chest.

Additional sources shed light on the significance of the *Ruwi* bracelet, another piece of adornment worn by brides alongside *Gelang Kano*. *Ruwi* bracelets feature surfaces that resemble thorns. They are also commonly referred to as "*Gelang Mekah*". These bracelets signify perfection in adhering to Islamic teachings, particularly in terms of living in accordance with Islamic principles through marriage and abstaining from sinful acts (Rahardjo [1992]: 79). Beyond symbolizing the perfection of Islamic practices, *Ruwi* bracelets also underline the imperative nature of these practices, emphasizing the duty of adhering to obligatory religious duties and avoiding actions prohibited by Allah (Millie [2008]: 41).

Cultural symbols in traditional attire that often represent Lampung have a philosophical meaning, and what is revealed under analysis using semiotics and symbolism studies gives an insight into the world vision and values of the community. All dressing pieces, from *Siger* to Ruwi bracelets, are not simply decorating but carry a symbolic representation filled with meaning and cultural connotation. These signs connect the things we perceive in our physical world and what we cannot see, representing the heritage of the community's people as they believe in it and feel themselves to be a part of its society.

For instance, the *Siger* is much more than a decorative visit; it serves as what might be taken to be indicative of the Lampung community's link with its environment and history. One can consider this relation from the perspective of phenomenology, which was generally upheld by Martin Heidegger, who insisted that objects are essential in our constructs of meaning and sensemaking about both themes for us and our place in this world. In an ontological sense, the *Siger* becomes a phenomenological object that links the wearer to their ancestor heritage thousands of miles away; these elements create a collective identity when put together.

Likewise, the thorny surface that characterizes the *Ruwi* bracelet represents a commitment to Islam and reinforces its support for traditional values and religious beliefs found within this society. This sign implies the ethical living approach illustrated in Islamic philosophy, whereby one is headed for a good and morally significant life by sticking to religious conduct. Indeed, the *Ruwi* bracelet embodies a physical reminder that the community is pledging their faith and morality.

The symbolic structure includes the two concepts of identity and status among the members of the Lampung community in addition to philosophical exploration. In the case of fashion accessories, the numbers and types they carry often denote symbolic features of social statuses, consistent with the concept of cultural capital, where a distinctive array of goods or symbols become signifiers for

a distinctive social class structure. As such, the traditional dress becomes a tool for socially forward movement and self-positioning.

3. *Cultural aesthetics through dance poses*

In the cultural tapestry of Lampung, dance plays a significant role in conveying and preserving cultural values. Among the revered dances of the region, the *Sigeh Penguten* dance stands out as a welcoming and opening performance. It features a distinctive prop known as "*Tepak*", symbolizing the offering of hospitality to arriving guests. The *Tepak* is laden with ceremonial items, including betel leaves, gambier, lime, and tobacco. The dance is executed by a group of female dancers, typically an odd number. The significance of the ceremonial offerings within Lampung's culture is paramount. Lampung culture encompasses the notion of "*pengutonan*", which, in a narrow sense, translates to "feast." Here, "feast" signifies an offering extended by the host to their guests. This cultural practice underscores the host's endeavor to create an atmosphere of intimacy, a crucial gesture aimed at making guests feel welcomed and valued during their visit (Ivey [2011]: 7).

The dance poses featured in public spaces in Bandar Lampung include the "*Jong Simpuh*" and "*Ngrujung*" poses. The "*Jong Simpuh*" pose within the *Sigeh Penguten* dance holds a pivotal role as it represents a transitional moment when the dancer places or retrieves the *Tepak* prop. This pose assumes a vital role within a sequence of other significant poses in the dance. Signifying its importance, the "*Jong Simpuh*" pose demands the utmost concentration and caution from the dancer to ensure the *Tepak* prop remains secure.

Jong Simpuh

This parallels the real-life scenario where an individual carries a tray of offerings for the guests. The culture of preparing offerings for guests is intricately woven into the essence of this pose. The offerings placed within the *Tepak* necessitate meticulous preparation, with a keen focus on cleanliness. This meticulousness stems from the understanding that the guests will consume the items within the *Tepak.* Hence, the dancer's preparedness involves ensuring the offerings are not only well-presented but also pristine.

Tepak

Values of caution, cleanliness, guest appreciation, and elevating the stature of guests are unequivocally embodied in this dance. The "*Jong Simpuh*" position indirectly conveys that the host humbly accepts the role of a gracious host. This position signifies the host's positioning as being lower than the guests in terms of social hierarchy (Block, Kissell [2011]: 31). However, when offering the tray, both the host and the guest stand on an equal footing, as they are both in an upright position (Murgiuanto [2018]: 76). The sequence in this dance vividly illustrates how the people of Lampung deeply value and honor their guests. Moving the "*Ngrujung*" dance pose constitutes a repetitive movement performed at varying levels and specific segments of the dance. These levels encompass low, medium, and high, while the "*Ngrujung*" movements predominantly involve the entire arm, including wrist and finger articulations. The execution of these movements alternates between the right and left sides.

Ngrujung Pose
(Dwiyana Habsary, 2023)

The term "*Ngrujung*" originates from the root word "*kejung*", which signifies elevation or raising above others. The addition of the prefix transforms it into a verb, suggesting that someone or something is raising or elevating the presence of others. In keeping with its etymological essence, the dance movements entail the dancer raising their arms as though they are higher than their head. In reality, the position is not elevated above the dancer's head. What sets this movement apart is its unique attributes. Apart from being performed thrice within the dance, it features two distinct tempos: a fast tempo and a slow tempo. The dance is executed for two eight-count sequences. The first eight-count is performed at a brisk tempo, while the second eight-count adopts a slower pace. This variation in tempo is executed alternately on both sides, right and left, by the dancers.

In Lampung culture, dance poses such as those in the *Sigeh Penguten* dance hold profound philosophical and cultural significance. These poses, particularly the *Jong Simpuh* and *Ngrujung* are not merely physical expressions but are deeply embedded with symbolic meanings and societal values, reflecting a complex interplay of aesthetics, ethics, and community ethos. The *Jong Simpuh* pose, a critical component of the *Sigeh Penguten* dance, exemplifies more than a mere dance movement. It embodies a significant cultural practice of hospitality and respect within the Lampung community. This pose, where a dancer carefully handles the *Tepak* – laden with ceremonial items – parallels the real-life ritual of offering hospitality to guests. The meticulous preparation of the *Tepak*, emphasizing cleanliness and presentation, transcends mere ritualistic preparation; it manifests the philosophical principle of respect and honor towards others. The

Jong Simpuh pose, where the host presents offerings in a manner that places them socially lower than the guests, yet ultimately standing together on equal footing, resonates with the philosophical ideas of social hierarchy and equality. This practice embodies a nuanced understanding of social relations, where respect and humility are balanced with mutual dignity and equality.

The *Ngrujung* pose, characterized by its elevating movements, represents the act of elevating or raising others literally and metaphorically. This pose, performed at different tempos and levels, symbolizes the multifaceted nature of cultural elevation – elevating cultural practices, values, and the community itself. This movement, which involves elevating arms without surpassing the height of the head, suggests a philosophical balance between self-expression and communal harmony. It reflects the Lampung community's perspective on elevating communal values while maintaining a sense of humility and collective unity. In essence, the dance poses of the *Sigeh Penguten* in Lampung culture are not merely aesthetic expressions but are imbued with rich cultural and philosophical meanings. They encapsulate a complex web of social norms, ethical values, and communal ethos, reflecting a deep understanding of hospitality, social hierarchy, communal harmony, and the balance between individual expression and collective identity. These dance poses, therefore, serve as a dynamic medium through which the Lampung community communicates and perpetuates its philosophical and cultural values, demonstrating the profound role of cultural practices in shaping and expressing communal identity and ethics.

4. *Cultural aesthetics awareness through other lampung's art*

Within the realm of visual arts, Lampung boasts a rich heritage of ornamental artistry that serves as a vibrant canvas portraying its cultural essence. These ornamental designs are not mere embellishments but profound reflections of the community's identity. Among these artistic expressions, two prominent ornamental motifs, namely "*Pucuk Rebung*" and "jung," hold a distinct place and are prominently featured in public spaces. These ornamental motifs have, at specific points in history, been mandated by local governance to be adopted by the community as symbols of identity.

The "*Pucuk Rebung*" motif is particularly renowned in Lampung. It can be deemed as the dominant motif in Lampung's ornamental repertoire, primarily adorning traditional fabrics like the Tapis. "Rebung" refers to the young shoots or bamboo sprouts. The fundamental triangular shape of these bamboo shoots serves as the foundation for this ornamental motif. "*Pucuk Rebung*" is frequently placed at the head of the fabric, along the lower edge, and at the tips of the cloth or sarong. This motif carries profound meanings, evoking a sense of strength

emerging from within (Elliott et al. [2016]: 10). This strength is evident in the resilience of bamboo trees that can withstand even the fiercest winds without breaking. Beyond symbolizing strength, it embodies the hope for a bright future as the emerging shoots grow into robust bamboo plants.

Another noteworthy ornamental motif is "*jung*" which translates to boat, ship, or vessel. This motif is often found adorning the gates of government offices in Bandar Lampung. "*Jung*" carries its philosophical significance for the communities that adopt this motif. It is frequently analogized to the dualistic cultural patterns of the people, symbolizing life's journey resembling a boat. "*Jung*" is often interpreted as a sailing vessel navigating the voyage of life.

Boats have been integral to the lives of Lampung communities across generations due to the province's extensive coastal areas. The geographical proximity of Lampung to the sea, with several prominent ports, underscores the vital role of water transport. Among these ports, Bakauheni facilitates passenger crossings, while Panjang is known for handling cargo shipments. Additionally, Teluk Semaka's port plays a crucial role in managing tankers and oil transportation.

The illustration showcases the "*jung*" motif intricately woven into the traditional Lampung fabric known as Tapis. This fabric serves as a testament to the enduring cultural legacy carried forward through these ornamental motifs. These ornamental expressions in Lampung serve not just as aesthetic adornments but as living testaments to the profound cultural roots that continue to shape the identity and consciousness of its people. Each motif carries with it a tapestry of stories, values, and aspirations that enrich the cultural heritage of this remarkable region.

Lampung, a region among several in Indonesia, boasts its script known as "*Aksara Ka Ga Nga*". The Lampung script comprises 20 consonants, called "*huruf induk*" and 12 vowels, known as "*anak huruf*". The consonants are written and read from left to right, while the vowels are placed above, below, or to the right of the consonants, serving as vowel modifiers. Despite being a cultural heritage of the Lampung people, the Lampung script still needs to be familiar to its owners. Its introduction in schools is limited to using it to write Indonesian words in Lampung script. This limited exposure has led to the underutilization of vowel modifiers, as several factors contribute to this, such as the need for more information about local scripts, the complexity of the script system, and the prevalence of the Latin alphabet as the standard for writing Indonesian (McDonald and Wilson [2017]: 12)these groups are now particularly prolific. Conventional wisdom in international relations thought is that these organizations constitute a threat to the authority of the state (its monopoly on the legitimate use of force. These factors threaten the existence of the Lampung script.

Local authorities have taken steps to introduce the Lampung script in the public spaces of Bandar Lampung. Street names, institution signage, and even explanations on public monuments often feature the Lampung script alongside Indone-

sian. This serves as a reminder to the Lampung community about how to read the script and helps them become more proficient in using both consonants and vowels. In light of the above, various symbols have been introduced to the Lampung community. The foremost symbol is the crown, represented by "*Siger*". *Siger* is a headpiece worn by Lampung brides and Lampung women during traditional ceremonies. This head ornament symbolizes the grandeur and honor of Lampung's customary culture, whether it belongs to *Pepadun* or *Saibatin* traditions. Despite some differences in the form of *Siger*, the consensus that they are all referred to as "*Siger*" is vital in promoting integration among the diverse Lampung traditions.

Siger plays a unifying role, bridging the gap between different traditions and sub-ethnicities within Lampung (Ciciria, 2015: 198). *Siger* serves as a visual representation of the integration of Lampung's various traditions. The distinctions in the forms of *Siger*, primarily related to the number of protrusions, hold significance.

Adat *Pepadun* has 9 protrusions, symbolizing the 9 Marga (clans) present in *Pepadun* tradition, also known as "*sewo megow*". Conversely, Saibatin has 7 protrusions, representing the 7 *Kepaksian* (virtues) found in the Saibatin tradition.

The placement of *Siger* can be found throughout Bandar Lampung. The directive aimed at shopping centers and government offices has been effectively implemented. During the tenure of Mayor Herman HN, there was an encouragement to utilize and prominently display the regional symbol, *Siger*. While this directive leans toward making it mandatory, it has yielded positive results. *Siger* can be seen dominating Bandar Lampung, particularly in government offices and shopping centers.

Based on the two accompanying images, several visual elements are discernible. The presence of *Siger* as a symbol of integration is dominant, whether during the day or at night. Additionally, there are two Shahada inscriptions, signifying that the majority of the Lampung population practices Islam. Furthermore, there is the presence of the Lampung script beneath the Indonesian text, welcoming visitors to the city of Bandar Lampung. These elements encompass three-dimensional aspects represented by *Siger*, Arabic script denoting the *Shahada*, Indonesian text, and Lampung script. These elements serve as stimuli to trigger perception, effectively stimulating memory and fostering cultural awareness among viewers, rendering the monument a powerful cultural symbol.

5. *Conclusion*

Cultural awareness is an essential mindset that a society must cultivate to safeguard its cultural heritage. It empowers individuals to appreciate cultural diversity and remain vigilant against the tides of cultural change. Cultural awareness also nurtures the ability to discern which cultural elements are suitable for

adoption or preservation. The local government of Lampung has embarked on a commendable journey to promote cultural awareness through the introduction of artistic symbols representing Lampung's rich cultural heritage.

These symbols are drawn from practices deeply rooted in Lampung's cultural traditions, encompassing traditional attire, including the ornate crowns worn by brides and grooms, as well as traditional dances unique to the region. Additionally, they extend to the realm of decorative art, featuring motifs like the "*Pucuk Rebung*" and "*jung*", symbolizing the resilience and unity of the Lampung people, who have a deep connection to their water-based environment. Lastly, the Lampung script, known as "*ka ga nga*", stands as a testament to the region's linguistic and cultural identity.

All these forms of artistic expression have been strategically introduced and showcased in the public spaces of Bandar Lampung, the capital of Lampung province. These symbols serve as both a reminder and an educational tool, enhancing the cultural consciousness of the Lampung community and visitors alike. Fostering cultural awareness is not merely an act of preservation but a means of reinforcing the cultural fabric of a society. Lampung's initiatives to promote cultural symbols exemplify a proactive approach towards cultural preservation, ensuring that the vibrant heritage of Lampung continues to thrive and inspire generations to come.

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Notes

1   *Pi'il Pasenggiri* is not a singular, isolated concept; instead, it comprises a constellation of principles, each contributing to a comprehensive comprehension of cultural awareness.

Aisthesis

Habits Changing Habits: Aesthetic Technologies between Discipline and Experiment in Theater and Performance Art

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Abstract. The paper gives an account of a peculiar connection between art and habits that started emerging with the historical avant-gardes. Especially in avant-garde theater, artistic practices began developing genuinely aesthetic technologies to transform social habits. By examining three case studies – the biomechanics of Vsevolod Meyerhold, the poor theater of Jerzy Grotowski, and the constructed situations of Tino Sehgal – this paper traces the development of these aesthetic technologies up to contemporary art. Unlike the avant-gardes who sought to eliminate the boundary between art and life or contemporary participatory art, aesthetic technologies maintain the character of artifice. This contribution argues that it is precisely through this artifice that these aesthetic technologies provide the experience of a form of habits different from the one installed by the disciplinary modern regime that Michel Foucault described and its continuation into new forms of self-optimization. By differentiating the functioning of aesthetic technologies from Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics, the paper outlines their aesthetic as well as critical importance within contemporary neoliberal societies.

Keywords. Technologies of the self, acting techniques, embodiment, dishabituation, receptivity.

With the advent of modern art, it has become customary to conceive of art as breaking with habits. By fabricating new objects, inventing new techniques, or creating unprecedented experiences, art suspends everyday practice and its routines. The historical avant-gardes did not fully reject this modernist understanding but partly redirected it. Their intervention is often characterized as an attempt to dissolve the boundaries between art and life, to therefore not only interrupt the everyday, but to create a new social life with artistic means. This definition, however, is inadequate to a broad spectrum of artistic practices running under the avant-garde label – more specifically, those that did not try to fully dissolve the relation between art and life, but rather sought to redefine it. These avant-gardes established a peculiar take on habits by developing what I will call *aesthetic technologies to transform habits*[1].

Drawing on Adorno's «double character» of art (Adorno [1979]: 5), we can describe these aesthetic technologies as simultaneously aesthetic and social phenomena which do not simply disturb social habits, nor try to design new ones; aesthetic technologies are aesthetic habits that work on (or rework) *the form* of social habituation but within the realm of artistic practice itself and for aesthetic purposes. By doing so, however, they provide the experience of the possibility of changing the form of habit, and they thus gesture towards a different mode of embodied practice.

In the following, I will work out what these aesthetic technologies are by analyzing three case studies starting with the avant-garde theater of Vsevolod Meyerhold, then moving on to the poor theater of Jerzy Grotowski in the postwar period, and finally to the contemporary construction of situations by Tino Sehgal. With this sequence, I suggest that aesthetic technologies continue to permeate artistic practices up until today[2]. I have chosen to focus on theater and performative practices as the basis of this characterization because it is here that we find the most striking articulations and elaborations of these technologies, although I believe this framework also has much to offer for other forms of artistic production that work on the spectator's habits in less systematic or durational ways. My choice of the case studies does not rely on art historical assumptions, but follows an interest in an aesthetics that scrutinizes the critical or subversive potential of artistic production. In my reading, the three case studies display different modalities in which aesthetic technologies can work on social habituation. I will describe these as *deconstruction*, *negation*, and *suspension*[3].

In order to understand the emergence and the very use of these aesthetic technologies, I begin by revisiting Michel Foucault's analysis of modern discipline as providing (together with Marx) a crucial insight: that the rise of modern capitalist society and of modern labour as its core practice not only introduced new social habits, but a new *form* of habituation. Against this background, I will discuss my three case studies as different attempts to react to and transform the

form of disciplinary habituation in its various historical forms. In this sense, I hold that Foucault's notion of discipline as a technology – i.e. as a regulated procedure of social habituation not only designed to train specific skills, but also to create a specific mode of having skills, which I call a "mode of embodiment" – continues to be valid in to the present, albeit with due modifications[4]. This is why the analysis of aesthetic technologies is of interest for a contemporary critical aesthetics and is all the more so in a society like the contemporary one, where changing one's habits has become an economic necessity and even an industry in its own right. I will thus close by highlighting the critical role of aesthetic technologies as I understand them within contemporary societies by contrasting them with Richard Shusterman's «somaesthetics» and its «meliorative» take on aesthetic practices.

Disciplined habits

At the beginning of *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault speaks of modern (western) societies as being characterized by a peculiar «"political economy" of bodies» (Foucault [1975]: 25). The bodies characteristic of modern and capitalist societies are «docile» and made so by a specific social technology Foucault famously names «discipline» (Foucault [1975]: 134-135). In characterizing discipline, Foucault does not use the term "habit" very often, although he does in one crucial passage:

> By the late eighteenth century, the soldier has become something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit; in short, one has "got rid of the peasant" and given him "the air of a soldier". (Foucault [1975]: 135)[5]

The quote makes it unequivocally clear that the bodily economy Foucault describes significantly concerns the level of habits. But even more importantly, it shows that modern subjects are not only characterized by specific habits (e.g. those of the soldier instead of those of the peasant), but also by a specific *form* of habits. Such habits are constructed and mastered through discipline; they become ready at all times, functioning automatically in an almost mechanical form of repetition. This, then, is what speaking of a «political economy of bodies» means: it is not only about asking what norms regulate and govern bodies, but also what internal organization of bodily resources emerges as a result of modern subjectivation.

Foucault initially uses the construction of the soldier to explain the modern form of a «docile body». However, what replaces the peasant in capitalist moder-

nity is not just military discipline, but most importantly the discipline of labour. In the course of the chapter, Foucault implicitly shifts the focus to the body of the worker, and the characterization of discipline changes accordingly. The worker's body is not simply imbued with coercion, like a military machine; it is designed to intensify its capabilities.

In his later works on biopolitics and neoliberalism, Foucault will continue the line of inquiry opened up by *Discipline and Punish* by analyzing softer, more subtle technologies of power which I nevertheless see as continuous with the economy of discipline. In these new modalities, an instrumental use of the body as the site of «the efficient gesture» (Foucault [1975]: 152, 11, 26, 30) remains in place[6], and it is still a *specific sort of mastery* that shapes the use of the body as well as the form and function of habit.[7] The modern body begins as a body without properties which is molded and formed into an efficient site of reliable capacities to be put to work, and it is further enhanced through changing techniques of self-optimization.

Disciplinary modes of embodiment thereby take advantage of what Claire Carlisle describes as the «double law of habit» (Carlisle [2014]: 27-31): the more routine and automatic an embodied practice becomes, the more its productivity can be increased. The habits created by modern labour thus have a very peculiar form: they are those identifiable activities the body can perform as automatically as possible so that the attention can be directed toward their optimization, in terms of qualitative doing and, more importantly for capitalism, of quantitative productivity. Though this may seem obvious for manual work in the factory, the same pattern can be discerned in the so called «immaterial labor» (Lazzarato [1996]) characteristic of late capitalist western societies. Universities, to give but one example, increasingly apply quantitative criteria in their internal organization and evaluation; they encourage an idea of teaching and learning as the passing on and acquiring of reliable skills that can be quantified and compared, that can be divided into "modules", and so on.

Meyerhold's gestures

Unlike Marx, from whom the concept of discipline was derived, Foucault did not see the factory as the only site of discipline. Prisons, hospitals, schools, the military – all these venues contribute to the formation of docile bodies as the specific mode of embodiment in capitalist societies. Although *Discipline and Punish* does not discuss museums or theaters, it is not hard to see these institutions as belated successors to Foucault's asylums: they are comparable sites of disciplinary habituation where individualized, controlled subjectivities and sensitivities are formed according to particular artistic genres as well as a specific (bourgeois) mode of

experience and use of pleasures (see Crary [1999], Fischer-Lichte [2004], Lepecki [2006]), which accordingly reproduce social divisions and domination.

Just as the disciplinary regimes of factories, prisons, and schools have been opposed throughout their history, museums and theaters have also been repeatedly challenged by artistic practices seeking out new exhibition and performance formats. In the context of the historical avant-gardes and their claim to transform art and society or, as I would put it, to transform the relationship between art and society, theater has played a paradigmatic role. As Erica Fischer-Lichte has shown in detail, a crucial impulse of avant-garde theater was to overcome the (bourgeois) domination of the text in favor of the material performance of the bodies on stage as well as the «co-presence» of actors and spectators in the theater space, valued as both aesthetically and politically relevant (Fischer-Lichte [2004]: 38).

In the context of this transformation, new types of acting techniques emerged: they were no longer mere exercises to master the text particularly well and to ensure the most exact possible repeatability of the performance. The new acting techniques did not put the actors' bodies at the service of the text, but searched for ways to maintain the bodies' affectability and expressivity *despite the repetition* of their performance. It is therefore not surprising that one of the first crucial and impactful contributions to this new sort of techniques came from revolutionary Russia and was formed within the general attempt to overcome the economic foundation of domination.

The theatrical practice of Vsevolod Emilyevich Meyerhold (1874-1940), which had already started in tsarist Russia, flourished in this revolutionary context. Between 1921 and 1926, he served as one of the highest theater officials in the new Soviet state, contributing to a «revolutionary theater» (Meyerhold [1920]: 168). His theatrical practice was especially revolutionary in its development of a new acting technique he called «biomechanics» (see Brown [1998]). It was a stylized, non-naturalistic, and physically demanding form of theatrical performance, for which Lyubov Popova created acrobatic stage constructions.

Precisely because of its formalism, Meyerhold's practice came into conflict with the realism that became the standard of socialist aesthetics in the 1930s, which demanded that art be as "true to reality" as possible. In 1938 Meyerhold's theater was closed, and in 1940 he fell victim to the Stalinist purges.

Meyerhold's «biomechanics», however, was not just a new acting technique, and it can be better characterized as an aesthetic technology to transform social habituation. This becomes especially clear when compared to the practice of Meyerhold's teacher Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski, who had also begun developing new acting methods. Stanislavski's method, which later caused a furor in Hollywood, remained within the framework of naturalistic theater and worked with the actors' pre-existing psychological states. By contrast, Meyerhold pushed

for a more fundamental revolution of acting as a practice: «The very craft of the actor must be completely reorganized» (Meyerhold [1922]: 197).

"To reorganize the craft of the actor" meant to train the actor in a form very different from what had been done thus far, in order to provide a very different expressivity and presence on stage. Meyerhold was concerned, in Barbara Gronau's words, with a «theater of energy» (Gronau [2007])[8] derived from materialistic premises. Unlike the acting method of his teacher, Meyerhold did not work with psychological dispositions, but by training the bodies and movements in a new way. Interestingly enough, Meyerhold did so by incorporating a social technique from the "west" into his method, namely Frederick Winslow Taylor's method of scientific management, i.e. an optimized form of disciplinary analysis and simplification of movement sequences, with which Meyerhold sought to achieve «maximum productivity» (Meyerhold [1922]: 198) in acting as well.

During Russia's early revolutionary industrialization, the procedures of American industrial society were a model advanced by Aleksei Kapitonovich Gastev and Nikolai Aleksandrovich Bernstein. Meyerhold attributed to them not only the potential for economic progress, but also for the transformation of work into a «joyful, vital necessity» (Meyerhold [1922]: 197). Attaining a «dance-like quality» (Meyerhold [1922]: 198), work should not be separated and opposed to leisure anymore. In a society where work is joyful and «borders on art», art in turn would not only serve for relaxation, but become «something organically vital to the labour pattern of the worker» (Meyerhold [1922]: 198, 197). Theater performances should therefore be part of the working day and ideally take place in the factory, performed utilizing time «as economically as possible» (Meyerhold [1922]: 198). The Taylorized theater, according to Meyerhold, «will make it possible to play as much in one hour as we can now offer in four» (Meyerhold [1922]: 198).

Analogous to social discipline, Meyerhold's theatrical biomechanics was intended to help the actor achieve technical mastery: «The actor», the same text states, «must train his material (the body), so that it is capable of executing instantaneously those tasks which are dictated externally (by the actor, the director)» and do so «as economically as possible» (Meyerhold 1922: 198). But this foreshadowing of Foucault's description of discipline as the technology of the efficient gesture in fact only ended up superficially resembling the Taylorist method (see also Braun [1969]: 183).

Meyerhold's theatrical use of Taylorist procedures in combination with Ivan Petrovitsch Pavlov's and Vladimir Mikhailovich Bekhterev's scientific studies of nerve reflexes (studies in physiological habituation, as it were) was not oriented to the greatest possible efficiency, but to train «reflex excitability» (Meyerhold [1922]: 199), i.e. the capacity to materially embody new

roles (therefore changing habits) and to give them «plastic forms» (Meyer-hold [1922]: 199). Meyerhold's conception of the actor's training and perfor-mance is crucial here. Biomechanics not only undertakes a technical analysis of movement like its scientific counterparts, but a theatrical *deconstruction* of everyday gestures. The segmented movements are brought into a new dy-namic sequence in order to make them affective (and not effective) through exaggeration and distortion.

Meyerhold's practice is aptly characterized as an aesthetic and not as a social technology because it combined and mixed Taylorism with genuinely artistic influences like the popular and improvisational Italian Commedia dell'Arte as well as stylized body techniques like Japanese Kabuki – types of popular and "non-western" influences characteristic of so many other theatrical avant-gardes. Through the influence of Kabuki and Commedia dell'Arte, Meyerhold's theater draws on the register of the grotesque and transforms Taylorist discipline into something else: not the efficient representation of a text, but the «manifesta-tion of a force» (Meyerhold [1922]: 199) through plastic gestures, which are never frozen, but integrated in a rhythmic, dynamic event. Meyerhold's actors are a «perpetuum mobile» (Meyerhold [1926]: 223): «In contrast to the pose […] [they] work on the potential transition into a new movement» (Gronau [2007]: 15; see also Pitches [2003]).

The augmented rhythms of modern industrial life resonate throughout Mey-erhold's merger of science and art into a new and peculiar performative mode, but these rhythms are reassembled into gestures that are not just an exact repro-duction or continuation. One could maybe speak here of a "counter-discipline" that uses the procedures of labour as well as theater discipline to investigate the aesthetic possibility of letting excitement and affectability emerge in the midst of discipline, to exceed habituated behavior through a habituated practice, in which habits "function" in a different way.

Meyerhold's practice is grotesque. It is characterized by exaggerated and de-formed habituated gestures, and by a rhythmic processuality very different from the regulated one of the assembly line. The actor's movements were trained to display an excess, to reach «points of excitation» (Meyerhold [1922]: 199), that should draw the spectator into their energy. Avant-garde theater became a body laboratory in which new modes of embodiment were tested using the "politi-cal economy of bodies", while also opposing it. It did so with explicit aesthetic means and purposes, and this is precisely what brought him into conflict with socialist realism.

From a distance, the difference between Meyerhold's method and social dis-cipline may seem small when considering his unbroken faith in progress and the rigorous acrobatic discipline his theater still required. But not only did it cost Meyerhold his life, his biomechanics also made a difference by opening the door

for (materialist) body work that more explicitly sought out subversive or excessive potentials in and through the habituated body.

Grotowski's poverty

Jerzy Grotowski saw himself in the tradition of Meyerhold, since he studied his practice. His theater also puts a premium on methodology and technique, but, more radically than Meyerhold, Grotowski approaches the aesthetic technologies of theater from the perspective of transforming social habits. He thus no longer applied Taylorist procedures or similar social practices, but instead worked "against" socially habituated practices in order to transform them.

Having grown up during the Second World War, Grotowski then went on to study in Poland and Moscow. Due to the situation in the People's Republic of Poland at that time, his theater was no longer involved in the utopian construction of a new society. Theater became a «place of provocation» of a peculiar kind, since for Grotowski it «is capable of challenging itself and its audience by violating accepted stereotypes of seeing, feeling, and judgment – more jarring because it is imaged in the human organism's breath, body, and inner impulses.» (Grotowski [1965]: 21-22) In Poland he repeatedly came into conflict with the ruling cultural authorities, until international success granted him some protection. In his final phase of activity, however, Grotowski left the theater and founded a «Workcenter» in Pontedera, Italy, where he engaged in self-explorative group-practices.

This development is hardly surprising given Grotowski's acting method. His bodily techniques introduce certain practices as much as they lead out of others: they aim at the «eradication of blocks» that socialization has placed between impulses and reactions, as well as «freedom from the time-lapse between inner impulse and outer reaction» (Grotowski [1968a]: 16-17). For Grotowski, social habits were first and foremost masks, fossilized forms of expression that must be made permeable again through theater – in the actor as well as in the spectator. His practice therefore embodies what one of his most renowned scholars, Eugenio Barba, would call «Theatre Anthropology» (Barba [1993]), i.e. the idea that theatrical or performative practices contribute to the very constitution of the human.

Although influenced by Russian avant-garde theater as well as Japanese and Indian theatrical practices like Noh and Kathakali, Grotowski did not see his method as a combination of these various procedures, at least not in the sense of a «box of tricks» to achieve some end (Grotowski [1968c]: 262). For him, and this is crucial, acting was no longer a «collection of skills» (Grotowski [1968a]: 17) or an ability that one acquires and masters (or better: abilities and skills were not the crucial element of acting).

His Theater Laboratory developed specific trainings for every new performance, consisting of "merely" physical exercises and exercises in embodiment. The latter were not only confined to practices with one's own role, but consisted in the imaginary (today we would say transhuman) embodiments of plants, animals, and "impossible" activities like flying. Here, an important reversal takes place: the embodiment exercises are not a prerequisite, i.e. mere training for a better mastery of the role, which in a certain sense was still the case for Meyerhold. «The important thing is to use the role as a trampoline, an instrument with which to study what is hidden behind our everyday mask». (Grotowski [1968b]: 37)

Grotowski thus relied on special procedures of embodiment, «augmented embodiments», one could say in the words of German performance artist Johannes Paul Raether (Raether [2018]: 193), not with props, but with roles. On this point, his practice is, therefore, eminently theatrical. While for Meyerhold the "artfulness" of theater consists in a deconstruction of gestures and a play with the grotesque, for Grotowski it first has to pass through a negative process. In contrast to Asian theater, which works with an «accumulation of signs» and artificial repetitions of forms, Grotowski relies on «subtraction» (Grotowski [1968a]: 18). He described his practice accordingly as a «via negativa» (Grotowski [1968a]: 17), operating through the dismantling of habituated social practices.

Grotowski's theater, however, does not aim at a supposed authenticity or immediacy. In this, it sharply differs from Antonin Artaud's impulsiveness. Grotowski admires Artaud only as a «visionary» not as a theater director (Grotowski [1968a]: 24): «Creativity, especially where acting is concerned, is boundless sincerity, yet disciplined» (Grotowski [1968c]: 261). Through the exercises of the via negativa that Grotowski also understood as a «spiritual technique» requiring «concentration, confidence, exposure, and almost disappearance into the acting craft» (Grotowski [1968a]: 17), the actor gradually goes beyond habituated behavior. They gain awareness and lay bare forces and impulses that exceed ossified habits, but in order to engage with them in a play of signs. Besides the poetic embodiments of different living beings similar to Butoh practices, Grotowski also worked with the construction of contradictions: between gesture and voice, voice and word, will and action. This play with signs is the reason why Grotowski's practice is not a mere expression of supposedly pre-social forces or impulses (like Artaud's), but a creative one. The dismantling of ossified social habits goes together with the engagement in a new form of habituated embodied practice: «[t]here is no contradiction between inner technique and artifice (articulation of a role by signs)» (Grotowski [1968a]: 17). Precisely this connection between a negative and an active side is what helps Grotowski's acting avoid returning to a form of mastery similar to the social habituation Foucault described as dis-

cipline. In contrast to Meyerhold's technology, acting here becomes a creative process of a peculiar kind. It is no longer an act of sovereign will, but a slightly paradoxical twofold act: a «passive readiness to realize an active role, a state in which one does not "want to do that" but rather "resigns from not doing it"» (Grotowski [1968a]: 17).

It is in dismantling habituated mastery through doing that acting becomes a creative «act of transgression» (Grotowski [1968a]: 19). This is also the reason why Grotowski's theater advocates «poverty». Besides the rejection of mastery and the subtractive via negativa, Grotowski eliminates even more radically than Meyerhold almost all staging elements apart from the actor's body and the use of space: no makeup, no light, no music, no set.

This transgression, however, primarily involves the actor, who is personally trained by Grotowski, and it is perhaps also the reason why in his last phase of activity he left the theater entirely. Grotowski's practice became one of those movements that subsequently began to engage in self-experience groups towards the end of the 1960s. Like many of these, the Workcenter in Pontedera was centered on Grotowski's charismatic personality and his personal knowledge[9]. It is not just an irony of history that these practices became the forerunners of new social technologies, in which social discipline softened into forms of self-care and creative flexibility within the neoliberal «social factory» of postwar political economy, as Italian operaism dubbed it. An art that – quite literally – locates itself in the fibers of the social inevitably runs the risk of blurring the boundary with social practice. Grotowski himself became actively and consciously interested in doing so. This shift, however, comes at high cost, in that it increases the risk of turning teaching into domination and providing technologies that can be easily coopted by social engineering.

That this does not hold for Grotowski's theatrical phase, shows the maybe slight, but crucial difference between aesthetic technologies and social ones. Grotowski's theater necessarily remains at a certain distance from social practices, and not only because of its negativity, but also because of its artificiality, its visionary work with roles and embodiment. The conscious and guided bodily and "spiritual" training of the actor has aesthetic qualities that the new social technologies lack. Grotowski inserts a moment of impossibility into the mastering of roles or practices. It combines habituation and creativity as current neoliberal ideology does, but it does not engage in an easy and necessarily successful creativity; failure and negativity can remain constitutive elements of Grotowski's anti-sovereign aesthetic technology precisely because they do not have to function within a social context. It is through this that they affect and transform social life, *via aesthetica*.

Sehgal's situations

Meyerhold and Grotowski both worked with discipline in order to create a new form of habituated (performative) practice. With critical awareness of capitalist social technologies, they broke down the bluntness of this political economy of the body in order to open up the actor's body to a different excitability or receptivity. Tino Sehgal works with other means. His pieces generally take place in visual art venues for the entire duration of their opening hours. Their performative frame of reference is not theater, but (postmodern) dance. Much like theater, dance started rejecting the discipline of ballet in the course of the 20th century. Modern and postmodern dancer-choreographers like Martha Graham or later Yvonne Rainer began transforming the practice of choreography and of the dancing bodies by refusing the fixed, but also exhausting grammar of classical dance. From the 1960s on, visual art, the newly emerging performance art (and its variations), and video art also joined this endeavor. These artistic practices were less characterized by explicit techniques than theater or dance, yet they also began experimenting with different uses of the body. Tino Sehgal, who rejects the terms performance and performer for his works, preferring to speak of «constructed situations» and «interpreters», engages professional dancers, some of whom he repeatedly works with, but he also significantly works with groups of amateurs often deliberately chosen from specific professional groups (curators, academics, etc.). The structure of the pieces is repetitive and at the same time modular. It consists of choreographic or discursive sequences that the interpreters can use and recombine so that the pieces never exactly repeat. Many of them involve or address the audience, which further contributes to the singularity of the created situations. Because of this combination of repetitive and unexpected moments, the pieces have the structure of a practice that is constitutively open; the modules of the pieces can be used, but always with unforseeable results.

Since Sehgal's pieces have similar structures, but not a common technique, I will focus in the following on a specific early work, *This Situation* (2007), since the discursive part of the piece explicitly deals with technologies of the self and the connection between art and life[10].

The piece works with a specific group of amateurs, preferably with an academic or at least theoretical-discursive background, who learn relatively simple choreographic and discursive sequences along with "rules" they briefly rehearse. Without going too much into the piece's inner "mechanisms", its scaffolding consists of certain poses and quotes that touch on themes of ecology, economy, and significantly also technologies of the self and the role of art. Much like with Meyerhold's biomechanics, the interpreters are constantly in motion while conversing on these topics, with the important difference that they move in slow motion and occasionally freeze in certain poses. As in Grotowski's exercises, the

normal rhythm of speech is contrasted by extremely slowed down gestures – a choreography everyone can do, but is nevertheless quite demanding.

In this way, the gestures performed while talking stop being casual automatisms and together with the topics of the conversation become increasingly part of the interpreter's and the spectator's awareness. This peculiar choreography of attention is one of the reasons why *This Situation* can be described as an aesthetic technology. Although the conversations that take place within the piece are not scripted or staged, but rather "spontaneous" reactions to the quotes, they never appear as simply real. The visitor remains suspended in uncertainty as to what exactly is scripted and what not, as well as what sort of situation they have found themselves in.

The fact that the interpreters are academics makes them particularly suited for the piece's intensive discursive work. However, talking in a museum and in front of museum visitors who are not experts effects a double decontextualization of their expertise. Displaying one's skills in a museum brings them into a peculiar state of suspension, too: they can be used, but in a slightly different, more experimental way, without ever being sure what the effects will be. The piece, in turn – and this is a further reason why it is best described as an aesthetic technology – undermines the «double law of habit» of disciplinary capacities since the habituation to it never fully reaches the stage of automatism; the piece can never be mastered. It is almost the opposite: the fact that the piece uses everyday conversational and professional skills in an art institution produces a distance, even a de-habituation from habituated embodiment and practice. By doing almost the same thing as in "real" life, but with the slight contextual difference of doing it in a museum and in front of an audience that anticipates art, the piece produces situations that exceed the interpreters' skills and the visitors' expectations. It ultimately brings the museum into a mode of suspension as well, not only because it has to host and deal with very different artistic "material", but because this very material engages in a transformative way with the tradition of visual art it acknowledges and at the same time uses that tradition in an unprecedented way.

Like the conceptual artists before him, Sehgal attempted to undermine the commodity character of art by creating immaterial works to the point of even prohibiting their technical reproduction. All the same, his «constructed situations» were still welcomed with open arms by parts of the visual art system – biennials, museums, Kunstvereine, foundations – that do not directly participate in the art market but are nonetheless key players in the economy of valorization. This is hardly surprising at a time when circulation and attention have gained an economic importance which may even surpass that of producing lasting objects. Likewise, the process of deskilling the interpreters as well as the spectators resonates with flexible societies, where one is constantly (more or less gently) being

forced to adapt to new environments. And much like neoliberal social norms, the rules of Sehgal's situations form a rather loose arrangement that can be varied and interpreted in different ways.

This ambivalent proximity, however, is precisely what characterizes Sehgal's work as an aesthetic technology. Unlike Meyerhold and Grotowski, Sehgal uses social practices, knowledges, and skills without transforming them via developed techniques. He only uses them in a slightly different way, in a slightly different context. Here, it is the institution of art, with its explicit and implicit rules, that is made to work as a de-habituation device, affecting the habituated skills of the interpreters whose actions, in turn, affect the expectations of the visitors and the functioning of the museum.

The casual modular structure of *This Situation* resembles flexible neoliberal norms, but differs from them in an interesting way. The situations created among interpreters and viewers are aesthetic in the sense that they are mediated by a specific, though very simple form that detaches conversations and movements from their normal functioning and their predictable effects. This *suspends* them: the piece almost exclusively uses tools and skills from everyday life, but by giving very simple rules and bringing them into a museum, it breaks them open from within. The "conversation" the piece initiates is a peculiar one, though not a real one; it is *This Situation*, an art piece. Both during and after participating in the piece, it provides a different sort of awareness for the topics and the mode of talking about them, for unprecedented connections between them, for the materiality of the discussion, the role of the body and the bodies in it, and so on. It shifts value and function. Seemingly banal topics become profound; allegedly serious ones become too abstract. The de-habituation the piece provides is therefore combined with the experience of a new "form" of habituation – one where skills or movements are not just automatic, not just predictably effective and plastic, not solidified, but rather are responsive to different situations in an intense way.

Tino Sehgal's piece thus makes a difference on several levels: it does not confront us with a counter-discipline, but with a counter-practice that puts one's habituated skills and knowledges on the line, and creates a new awareness for modes and topics of conversation and thought. This holds for the interpreter, but, more so than with Meyerhold and Grotowski, also for the viewer, at least for those who decide to spend some time with the piece and maybe even experience it more than once.

Although Sehgal's pieces do not escape their social and capitalist context, at least to the extent they initially sought to, they keep it suspended, providing a space of experimentation and also of different encounters, which are anything but simple or uniformly successful. This is why – and this is maybe a last difference between social practices and aesthetic technologies – there are also mo-

ments where the work "fails": the conversation does not unfold, is boring, the atmosphere in the room is unpleasant, one gets tired, etc. Imperfection and awkwardness are very much staples of reality show formats nowadays; in Sehgal's situations, however, they do not echo the format by making the work more funny or supposedly more "real". When the conversation "fails", it just fails, and people might leave or not. These moments are not recouped as entertainment; they are not functional to the piece. Although they are definitely part of it, these are the moments where the piece cracks and displays its difference from social reality by failing to keep up its artifice.

Art in life

From the revolutionary impetus to provide new modes of acting and working, via the post-war attempt to provoke and transgress ossified habits, to situations that use almost exclusively everyday skills and knowledges but in an unusual context – the three case studies differ from each other significantly. But following Foucault's discussion of discipline as a technology, I have adopted this term in order to show how these performative practices operate in a similar mode despite their differences, i.e. as regulated procedures of habituation not only oriented toward training new skills, but also creating a new mode of having skills, a different mode of embodiment. They have different effects as aesthetic technologies and in terms of their choice of techniques, yet they all function as practices of de-habituation which at the same time display the possibility of a different form of habituation, one not oriented towards a reliable and docile productivity, but imbued with excess and inoperativity.

These aesthetic technologies, as it were, show a different "form" of habituation with respect to the disciplinary mode of embodiment that is paradigmatic of workerist and capitalist societies. Precisely because of this, they stand in contrast not only to social discipline but also to contemporary technologies of the self which suggest that we are infinitely malleable and can transform ourselves as we want, while they in fact transform us into just another determinate shape of ourselves that more often than not fulfills (new) social norms.

This last difference can be highlighted by a very brief comparison with Richard Shusterman's «somaesthetics». Drawing on Foucault's technologies of the self and pragmatism, but also referring to practices like Yoga, Zen Meditation, T'ai chi, or western bodywork like the Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais[11], Shusterman defines somaesthetics as «the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning» (Shusterman [2000]: 532). Although Shusterman shares Foucault's awareness of the body as «a

malleable site for inscribing social power» (Shusterman [1999]: 303), the "critical" dimension of the use of techniques he advises remains in the background compared to the improving character he is advising.

Somaesthetics advertises alternative practices of self-care, but without reflecting on the necessity of changing the modality of habituation, its form, and its goals. In fact, Shusterman describes somaesthetics as the aim to «improve the acuity, health, and control of our senses by cultivating heightened attention and mastery of their somatic functioning while also freeing us from bodily habits and defects that impair sensory performance» (Shusterman [1999]: 302). Engaging in these practices implies a change of habits, but Shusterman leaves it open in which sense the «meliorative» purpose of somaesthetics differs from capitalist self-enhancement.

The aesthetic technologies I have discussed in this paper differ from disciplinary enhancement, but also from the somaesthetic «melioration» of habits, in that they: 1.) undertake a critical or at least transformative intervention into disciplinary modalities, and therefore actively differentiate themselves from the latter; 2.) are aesthetic in the sense of not pursuing a determinate social or individual goal (such as melioration), but also not a predefined artistic goal (as in the case of older acting techniques). Though stemming from avant-garde practices, they never fully dismantle the difference between art (artifice) and life. By doing so, they present a different connection between art and habit than the one often ascribed to modernism: habits appear not as the opponent, but as the very site and means of aesthetic transformation.

Deconstruction, negation, and suspension, the three different modalities I outlined here, provide a new form of habituation by using social practices and operating on social habits. This, I think, is how aesthetic technologies bring *art into life*: they do not directly try to change the social world, as the reception of the avant-garde commonly claims; rather, they use social patterns as a material to be formed differently for aesthetic purposes. In this, they remain artifice and it is as artifice that they provide the experience of habits as something one does not master or instrumentally use to fulfill social tasks. They display habituation as something unfinished, incorporating an «ability of inability» (Menke [2008]: 86), which allows unexpected transformation and expression. The artifice is necessary not only to provide distance from social habits, but moreover to display this distance, to make it visible and experienceable for others. This is why aesthetic technologies show the excess and inoperativity of habits, but within a sphere that is (slightly) detached from social production or prediction.

This difference is especially salient at a time when technologies of the self and, more precisely, the imperative to change our habits have become ubiquitous. Even the language-learning app Duolingo advertises its services with «habit-

building research»[12], and there is a growing social awareness of the importance of habits and their functioning. Habits are seen as the target, but also – and this is new – as the medium of self-transformation. In many cases, the increased knowledge about how to change habits and how habits underlie change proves to be little different from the disciplinary regime Foucault describes, but is rather a continuation via slightly different means. No longer bound to disciplinary asylums and updated with a vocabulary of *self*-transformation (and *self*-care), the aim of these practices nevertheless continues to be that of increased productivity and the instrumental use of the body for social approbation.

Precisely by operating on social conditioning by consciously "undoing" it, but also by not being oriented towards a direct self-enhancement, aesthetic technologies display a different use of the body than the disciplinary one. The divergence from social practices is, however, fragile. Art can no longer pretend to stand outside of society, if indeed it ever could. The avant-garde concern with transforming the relation between art and life has been absorbed by an intensely capitalized and spectacular art scene[13]. As a result, those formats that bring art too close to life by activating the spectator through participatory formats often end up affirming this capitalized art spectacle instead of rejecting it[14].

My three cases studies, in fact, display very different modalities and complexities of artifice, from specifically developed acting techniques that require rather demanding training to simple rules that only need a few rehearsals and mostly use social "material". Although aesthetic technologies seem to come closer to the spectator and become more accessible, the artifice never fully vanishes. Sehgal's works need established artistic institutions – which limits their scope of action to museums or art venues and their visitors, a rather specific segment of society. And although their choreographies are simple and in a certain sense accessible, they provide rather unfamiliar situations within supposedly familiar contexts – something not every spectator is eager to be exposed to. The slightly uncanny feeling created by the suspension of established expectations makes *This Situation* rather different from the convivial situations oriented towards encounters between visitors and their well-being of the kind described by Nicholas Bourriaud in his relational aesthetics (see Bourriaud [1998]). Whereas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics understands participatory formats as the attempt to create micro-communities and shape new social forms of neighborhood, Sehgal works with mediated aesthetic technologies. His "constructed situations" are not just new possible social practices, they are devices to experience practice and embodiment functioning in ways different than what we are used to, while using "material" we are familiar with. Instead of directly proposing a practice, the mediation through artifice reworks established habits via their suspension (or deconstruction, or negation as in the other two cases) in a way that cannot be

directly put to practice or used for social purposes. Through this, it creates space for an experience of the possibility of a practice working otherwise, not mastered, not instrumental. Aesthetic technologies exceed the realm of discipline and of self-enhancement, but by creating aesthetic not social practices. They do not propose new ways of living but give a glimpse of what and how things could be different. As art in life, aesthetic technologies open up one's sense of different modes of embodiment and thus of seeking and envisioning new ways of living as practices working otherwise.

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Notes

1   Following Foucault, I use "technology" as a general term to characterize the regulated uses of bodies oriented toward specific modes of embodiment, whereas I reserve "technique" for the specific practices and instruments used by such technologies.

2   Not only do aesthetic technologies continue to characterize contemporary art, they can also be retrospectively identified in modernist and even pre-modernist art, if we look at them not only as the production of singular extraordinary objects, but as practices in which artists as well as spectators repeatedly engage.
    Bertram (2014) has developed a strong argument in favor of a praxeological understanding of art in contrast to an object-oriented understanding. The idea of an "aesthetic education" through art articulated by Friedrich Schiller and Herbert Marcuse also advocates such a praxeological approach, but with a rather different understanding.

3   These three modalities are hardly an exhaustive list of the ways artistic practices can intervene into social ones and transform or subvert their form. Nonetheless, they show an interesting variety of modes in which this happens.

4   This is also why Foucault famously engaged with «technologies of the self» in ancient Greece as well as in early Christianity in order to detect modes of relating to and transforming the self different from the ones western modernity gave rise to, which also continue to inform neoliberal societies (Foucault [1981-1982]).

5   Another, no less crucial passage is: «The apparatus of corrective penalty acts in a quite different way. The point of application of the penalty is not the representation, but the body, time, everyday gestures and activities; the soul, too, but in so far as it is the seat of habits» (Foucault [1975]: 128).

6   In *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault describes the docile body as characterized by «an increased aptitude and an increased domination», but he also mentions a gradual transformation from a mechanistic to a more «organic» (Foucault [1975]: 138, 156) use of the dis-

ciplines, engaging more intimately with the forces of the body. This is the point of direct contact between *Discipline and Punish* and his later work on biopolitics and neoliberalism (see Foucault [1978-1979]).

7   This is something Hegel already recognized clearly in his analysis of bourgeois society in the *Philosophy of Right* (1820) and in his account of habits in the *Encyclopedia* (1830).

8   On the connection between (avant-garde) theater and energy, see also Gronau [2011].

9   After Grotowski's death, the Workcenter continued operating under the leadership of Thomas Richards, who kept on developing Grotowski's practice, but it eventually closed in 2022 due to the aftermath of the Covid-pandemic.

10   Sehgal's works *This Progress* (2006) and *This Variation* (2012) could also be discussed as aesthetic technologies of de-habituation, but lack this explicit thematization of self-transformation and the aesthetics of existence. Furthermore, I also had the chance to experience this piece "from inside" as an interpreter during its display at Martin-Gropius Bau in Summer 2015 and at Stedelijk Museum in Fall 2015, from which I derive some of the descriptions of the effects of its practice. On *This Situation* and the practice of Tino Sehgal, see also von Hantelmann [2010]; Umathum [2011].

11   Criticizing Shusterman does not eo ipso mean criticizing these practices in themselves, but rather a specific use of them.

12   https://blog.duolingo.com/how-duolingo-streak-builds-habit/

13   Here I am using Guy Debord's notion of «spectacle», but to describe tendencies of the art scene and not society at large as Debord did (see Debord [1967]).

14   For a differentiated critique of participatory formats, see Bishop (2004); Rancière (2008).

Aisthesis

Attempt at Doubt

The Abandonment of Aesthetic Automatisms Through Collective Exercises in the Performative Practice by Didymos

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Abstract. The research examines how contemporary performance art challenges aesthetic habits, which often manifest as disruptive and constraining elements within imaginative faculties. The Italian duo Didymos focuses its *oeuvre* on deconstructing routine and unintentional behaviors. The artists employ a series of performative practices involving the audience in a political experience by implementing the category of *doubt*. Together, they engage in the execution of the most mundane actions, with the overarching objective of dismantling layers of conventional knowledge. This process entails a deliberate departure from sensible automatism, ultimately facilitating an escape from arguably apolitical modes of engaging with the world. The essay explores Didymos's recent artistic practice, *A Social Gym*, confronts the category of *doubt* used by the duo with Jacques Rancière's concept of *dissensus*, and attempts at tracing the bind between aesthetic norms and artistic expressiveness from the perspective of the aesthetics-politics relationship.

Keywords. Aesthetic habits, automatism, performance, politicization of art, Jacques Rancière.

1. *Introduction*

Contemporary art, particularly within the performative tradition, often intriguingly engages with aesthetic habits. These habits arise from a lifetime of exposure to art and culture, subtly shaping our perception and interpretation – often in ways we are not fully conscious of (Sontag [1966]). The ingrained patterns, frequently operating below the level of intentional thought, influence our interactions within the aesthetic world. They direct our preferences, judgments, and reactions to various art forms we encounter. Over time, the habits become embedded in our identity, affecting what we appreciate and how we engage with the broader cultural landscape (Bourdieu [1993]). This paper examines how contemporary performative art interacts with and challenges these deep-seated habits. I propose that exploring the artistic interrogation of aesthetic normativity offers a valuable approach to transitioning *social* into *political* and to delineating the contours of collectivity by sharing the *sensible* and, ultimately, by moving it out of *trivial appearances* in the terms of Jacques Rancière (2000: 34).

The paper is structured as follows: I begin by outlining the issue of aesthetic habits within the contemporary performative tradition and briefly discuss three prominent art cases. These artists each tackle the issue in unique ways, highlighting the necessity of stripping away habitual layers of perception as a precondition for fully experiencing their work. The subsequent section delves into the work of Didymos, an Italian artistic duo who, since 2015, have made the concept of aesthetic doubt their stylistic hallmark. The collective employs the category of doubt not solely to challenge the boundaries of art and its reception, as in the examples we propose in the second section, but primarily to transform aesthetic uncertainty into a political tool against sensible poverty. By examining *A Social Gym*, a recent Didymos's endeavor, I explore how a deeper understanding of the most mundane and unintentional behaviors can prevent disruptions in imaginative functions (Montani [2017]) and help us to discard automatic responses. Additionally, I juxtapose the category of doubt utilized by the duo with Jacques Rancière's concept of *dissensus*, examining how the Italian collective's practice seeks to dissolve the boundaries between aesthetics and politics. In the essay's conclusion, I argue that while aesthetic habits are valuable and necessary for comprehension, if they are not systematically questioned or put in doubt, they can lead to an acritical engagement with the world.

2. *Aesthetic habits in performative art*

Aesthetic habits fundamentally encapsulate the routines, behaviors, and thought processes that guide our interactions with beauty, artistry, and the sen-

sory dimensions of our environment. Deeply embedded within both our individual and collective psyches, these habits are crucial in shaping our ability to perceive, interpret, and value art in its diverse forms. According to Danto (2002), they form the backdrop against which our engagement with art takes place. Acting as conduits between the artist's intentions and the audience's perceptions, aesthetic habits provide frameworks that help us navigate the complexities of artistic expression. Moreover, they facilitate shared cultural experiences and are instrumental in constructing and perpetuating cultural narratives.

In examining contemporary art history, particularly within the realm of performance art, we encounter a rich tapestry of artistic expression that seeks to challenge, redefine, and transcend the conventional norms of aesthetic experience. This strategy is not merely about presenting artworks; it is about provoking the spectators, compelling them to question and reconsider their notions of what art is and can be. For instance, Yoko Ono's interactive installation and performance *Cut Piece*, first performed in 1964, dramatically subverts audience expectations. In this work, Ono sits on stage and invites audience members to cut away pieces of her clothing using a pair of scissors (Bryan-Wilson [2003]). The act of participation not only breaks down the conventional barrier between the performer and the audience but also challenges the viewers' sense of agency and complicity, turning a passive observation into an intense and unsettling experience.

Contemporary performance art frequently incorporates interactive and participatory elements that invite the audience to become part of the process. Tania Bruguera's *Tatlin's Whisper #5* (2008), which involved police officers conducting crowd control exercises inside a gallery space, dissolved traditional boundaries by making the audience part of a politically charged environment, prompting reflection on authority and personal space (Marschall [2021]). Embedded within these artistic practices are potent cultural and social critiques. William Pope.L's performance piece *The Great White Way, 22 miles, 9 years, 1 street* (2000-2009) involves Pope.L crawling on his belly wearing a Superman costume with a skateboard strapped to his back along the entire 22 miles of Broadway in New York City (Thompson [2004]). This performance challenged the passersby's perceptions of race, vulnerability, and endurance. By physically placing himself in positions of abject humility and struggle, Pope.L disrupts everyday urban routines and confronts viewers with the harsh realities of social marginalization and personal perseverance.

Additionally, many performance artists adopt interdisciplinary approaches that incorporate elements from various fields such as technology, science, and philosophy. Laurie Anderson's *Chalkroom*, for instance, combines virtual reality with spoken and written word to create a navigable maze of stories, blending technology with traditional narrative techniques to create a new form of art that challenges perceptions of reality and virtuality (Anderson, Marranca [2018]).

Richard Schechner, in his seminal works (2003a; 2003b; 2006), discusses how artistic endeavors actively push against the established conventions. By continually exploring and stretching the limits, performance art not only advances new artistic methodologies but attempts to influence how we perceive and engage with the world around us. The evolution of performance art thus represents a vital and ongoing dialogue between artists and society, one that perpetually seeks to redefine the sphere of artistic expression and audience involvement. For the purpose of this research, I have chosen to focus on three performance art cases that target different sensory domains – vision, bodily movement, and spatial reasoning. These same domains are interrogated by Didymos in its works, albeit through critically innovative approaches. Since the following three instances are well-documented in the relevant literature, we will refrain from excessive elaboration at this stage, concentrating primarily on aspects that will inform our reflections on Didymos's practice.

An instructive example that merits consideration in the discussion of aesthetic habits is Marina Abramović's acclaimed performance piece, *The Artist Is Present*, conducted at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010 (Abramović, Biesenbach, Biesenbach [2010]; Abramović, Kaplan [2018]). Owing to the artist's and the project's renown, the work attracted a diverse audience, extending well beyond the usual confines of contemporary art enthusiasts. Over three months, Abramović sat across from museum visitors, inviting them to engage in a prolonged, silent exchange of gazes. This performance challenges traditional expectations of passive spectatorship in museum settings, compelling visitors to participate in a direct confrontation with the artist through vision – a sense traditionally prioritized in art history (Panofsky [1927]). However, Abramović reverses the typical dynamic by making the visitors themselves objects of aesthetic contemplation within this *looking game*. By disrupting routine behaviors of art consumption, Abramović demonstrates an alternative way of experiencing art that requires personal involvement and emotional presence. Yet, in this process marked by an *icon making* dimension (Brawner [2013]), the exchanged gaze itself becomes the artwork consumed.

In Tino Sehgal's 2012 work, *These Associations*, first presented at Tate Modern, performers engage directly with visitors, provoking discussions about personal experiences through a non-linear narrative. The piece unfolds without any prepared scripts, positioning the performers as aesthetic conduits, deeply attuned and responsive to the audience's presence (Hildebrandt [2015]). The performance facilitates collective bodily interactions, where the physical presence and movements of both performers and audience members become integral to this mode of sociality based on relational dynamics (Paramana [2014]). Physical interactions further emphasize the immediacy and intimacy of the shared moment. Notably, *These Associations* explicitly prohibits any form of documen-

tation. This restriction reinforces the idea that sociality is meant to be lived in the moment, challenging the impulse to document and preserve, and prompting contemplation of the politics of memory and of the transient nature of experience (Franco [2023]). The ban on recording also shifts focus from visual consumption to corporeal engagement, where both the body and the encounters it facilitates become mediums through which art is perceived and understood.

The final illustrative example is Alicja Kwade's *Out of Ousia* (2019). At first glance, the installation presents a traditional way of interacting with art exhibitions, and the project itself might appear challenging to contextualize within the performative tradition. Yet, Kwade's distinctive strategic use of mirrors, dynamic lighting, and a mix of organic and synthetic artifacts distorts the perception of space and physical presence, effectively transferring agency to the objects themselves (Friedman [2020]). The installation compels viewers to forsake typical spatial behaviors, converting them into performers (in the eyes of other visitors) who must adapt and navigate the exhibition using novel strategies. Perhaps the most profound impact of *Out of Ousia* is the disruption of self-perception which deconstructs anthropocentric spatial reasoning. The kaleidoscopic reflections morph the surrounding environment and continuously alter the viewer's image within it (Baum, Wagstaff [2019]). The experience undermines the stable sense of identity, presenting an ever-evolving, fragmented self-image and inviting the audience to reassess its preconceived notions of self inside a space and to reconsider the customary reliance on recognition.

Although vastly different in their statements, methods, styles, and receptions, three artists investigate aspects of habitual perception, behaviors, and aesthetic habits to heighten awareness of their artworks. Marina Abramović transforms vision into a piece of art; Tino Sehgal converts bodily interactions into narrative elements; Alicja Kwade reinterprets spatial reasoning into interactive artifacts. While inviting audiences to reflective and deep engagement, the artists repackage fundamental human sensibility – sight, motor skills, and spatial orientation – into distinct, consumable art forms. The apparently similar strategies, which confront and challenge ingrained patterns of perception and interpretation through gaze, collective movement, and spatial awareness, are utilized by the Didymos collective in its artistic endeavors. However, the approach of the Italian duo significantly diverges: rather than using unsettling elements to enrich understanding of their works, they employ art as a catalyst for personal and subsequently collective transformation, which resonates beyond the confines of the art world.

The disruption of speech, apprehension, and sensitivity, the process of unlearning, and *dis-habituation* – these are not viewed by Didymos merely as ends in themselves, but as steps towards broader societal change. The artists strive to «create a new fabric of common sensible life» by declaring it «a place for politics», in the terms of philosopher Jacques Rancière (2007). In the subsequent

section, I will delve into a specific project by Didymos, titled *A Social Gym*. I will explore how this project poses and addresses the query: can art facilitate a deliberate departure from routine automatism, and aid in escaping conventional, and arguably apolitical, modes of engaging with the world? The analysis aims to uncover the broader implications of Didymos's work in challenging the status quo and fostering a more engaged and politically conscious form of artistic interaction.

3. *A Social Gym. Performance practice by Didymos*

The artistic duo Didymos, formed by performers Alessia Certo and Giulia Vannucci in 2007, is based between Alessandria and Bologna. As stated in their 2022 manifesto, the artists view art as a social and political act designed to incite doubt and provoke a «positive contemplation of the given world» (Didymos [2022a]). With a rich background in visual arts, theater, and philosophy, the duo employs a diverse array of aesthetic tools in their creative process, ranging from painting and video to choreography and sound. These tools are instrumental in exploring the viewer's perception of art, the artistic figure, and others. In 2015, the artists initiated a visual and performative practice called *Tentativo di Dubbio* (*Attempt at Doubt*), which they have continued to develop since then. This collective participatory research is divided into chapters (five to date) and critically examines the Western epistemological approach, focusing on the interplay between subjectivity, perceptual intuition, and intention. It seeks to redefine creative praxis as a method to «escape from the empiricist/statistical system that engenders an imbalance between consciousness, body, and the world» (Didymos [2022a]). The current paper will closely examine the most recent chapter of this enduring performative practice, *A Social Gym*, conducted in 2022 and 2023 on three occasions: in Bologna at the TIST artist-run space and twice in Omegna at the Mastronauta Cultural Center. *A Social Gym* is structured as a training course open to all, featuring *coaches* (the artists themselves), *equipment* (artworks and everyday items), and *exercises* with written instructions designed for group activity and at-home repetition. These exercises involve routine human activities such as seeing, observing, listening, writing, movement coordination, and breathing – linked to aesthetic faculties like perception, cognition, imagination, and to political intention, which are the ultimate goals of the entire training.

Each edition of *A Social Gym* features a slightly different selection of activities, with no more than ten workouts spread over several days and engaging between two and fifteen participants, depending on the daily enrollment. The exploration begins with the sense of sight and progressively incorporates the entire body, while addressing the physical and mental constraints imposed on

individuals. This seemingly simple and direct practice is guided by precise instructions and supported by specific devices. The trainers – Didymos – lead the exercises, expecting participants to invest trust and commitment in the practice. Each exercise session – *Attempt at Doubt* – is meticulously planned within a specific location, designated time, and sequence, which all shape its individual and political impact. The list of workouts includes, among others, the following: *Cleansing the Eyes, Cleansing the Space: Workout on Intention*; *Strolling in a Tree-lined Avenue: Self-analysis of the Principles of Perception*; *Tracing the Ellipse: Synchrony Between Body and Thought*; *Watching the Other Who Is Watching: Points Stretched in the Space of Co-existence*; *Embroidering a Flag: Logical Facilitations to Make the World*.

The instructions and simple illustrative materials accompany all exercises. These are distributed to the participants in the form of a small-format publication, which serves as the first aesthetic tool that the audience encounters during the practice. The participants are referred to as *doers*, a term borrowed from theater director Jerzy Grotowski's innovative lexicon. The doers engaged in *A Social Gym* are not informed in advance about the training they will undertake or about the significance of the artistic operations. These aspects are collectively discussed only at the end of the daily sessions. The element of unpreparedness is crucial, as it exposes participants to an *extra-ordinary* action that involves the risk of departing from their habitual patterns. Considering the constraints of the essay, I will focus on a selection of three practices that, in my view, best illustrate Didymos's artistic strategy and encapsulate how the artists engage with the question of aesthetic normativity. These practices will be confronted with the performance art examples mentioned in the second section of the paper.

The exercise *Cleansing the Eyes, Cleansing the Space* begins with both physical and metaphorical cleansing, aimed at resetting sensory and perceptual clarity. Participants start by «submerging their faces in warm water, squeezing their eyes several times», followed by «trying to keep their eyes open while moving them up, down, left, right, and in circles». The act symbolizes the shedding of preconceptions and visual habits. The second part involves cleansing the physical space, where participants «soak a cloth in the water, wring it out, and use it to clean the floor in an inverted "V" position, pushing the cloth with their hands along the floor» (Didymos [2022b]). Inspired by the preparatory techniques of Kabuki theater, the ritual is designed to transform the room into a sanctified space, promoting a deeper engagement with the self and the environment.

The transition from washing faces to cleaning the room floor follows a structured collective procedure, adopting specific bodily positions. The sequence of elementary yet unusual actions evokes feelings of unease and embarrassment among the participants. These sentiments act as the elements of *rupture* in the habitual order. The absence of prior expectations leads the audience to oscil-

late continuously between recognizing the familiar and struggling to understand the unfamiliar, substituting the unknown with their imagination and effectively training new ways of engaging with the world. As Didymos (2023) emphasizes, this practice «suspends the personal and social limitations of one's own body». It also serves as a tool for gaining insight into one's automatic behaviors in everyday life, revealing our tendency to rely on familiar patterns. Becoming conscious of one's discomfort can be the first step toward setting aside preconceptions, abandoning habitual responses, and embracing the extraordinary, which always acts through the rupture of the established regime.

Similarly to Marina Abramović's piece discussed earlier, the sense of sight is central to the exercise proposed by Didymos, albeit with diverging artistic intents and impacts. Abramović draws up vision into a distinct, consumable art form that invites audiences to engage more actively than typical museum settings allow. In contrast, Didymos employs vision as a foundational element for initiating profound communal and politically charged transformations, grounded in the cultivation of phenomenological doubt. By starting with the physical act of cleansing their visual faculties, participants are prepared to perceive their environment and community through a renewed lens. This practice is not merely about enhancing the art experience but is geared towards resetting the participants' sensory apparatus as a preparatory step for more meaningful engagement with their surroundings and fellow participants. Ultimately, despite both artists employing vision to transcend traditional modes of art engagement, their methodologies and objectives highlight contrasting paradigms: Abramović cultivates an intimate, individualized encounter that draws the participant inward, whereas Didymos orchestrates a communal, outward-facing experience aimed at fostering a broadened perceptual and social consciousness.

A further exercise that makes part of *A Social Gym* practice is *Asserting That «Leaves Are Green»: Questioning Truth and Beauty*. It fosters reflections on our approach to aesthetic encounters. In this activity, participants are immersed in an environment that juxtaposes real and artificial elements in a meticulously organized spatial layout. The workspace is divided into three distinct sections: the first occupied by the performers; the second featuring two pairs of twin plants, one real and the other artificial; and the third housing four oil paintings that realistically depict the plants present in the room. Participants are encouraged to engage deeply with both the plants and their representations. The interaction begins with an observation from a distance, which then progresses to a closer inspection where participants «touch and smell the objects». The final interaction involves engaging with the paintings. Throughout this process, participants are prompted with questions such as, «Are these plants beautiful? Why?» and «Can I confidently state that "the leaves are green" or "the flowers are white"? Why?» (Didymos [2022b]). The inquiries are designed to stimulate reflection on

the perception of reality versus representation, urging participants to reconsider their understanding of truth and beauty based on what they observe.

The exercise *Asserting That «Leaves Are Green»,* like Alicja Kwade's strategy in *Out of Ousia*, employs disorientation to challenge viewers to abandon their typical spatial behaviors and the unconscious interactions with objects. However, unlike Kwade's installation, which primarily leverages confusion as an aesthetic investigation into private identities, Didymos uses the spatial arrangement as a critical tool to challenge and redefine the distribution of spaces, objects, representations, and agents in shared environments. Common reactions among the performers, such as surprise, disappointment, and a sense of betrayal upon discovering the artificiality of a plant that appeared genuine from afar – as revealed by collective discussions (Didymos [2023]) –catalyze sensory uncertainty regarding what might be perceived as a mundane relationship. By structuring interactions that evolve from distant observation to close engagement, and finally to confrontation with artistic representations – the methodical progression from visual to tactile to interpretive – Didymos challenges spatial and object reasoning while instilling a deep-seated doubt about the authenticity of perceived reality, creating thus a *void* where a new sense can appear.

One of the most challenging and compelling exercises in the program is titled *Embroidering a Flag: Logical Facilitations to Make the World*, which focuses on enhancing logical reasoning and competencies. This workout explores whether a logical principle can guide and define the boundaries for the morality of actions. The exercise starts with a prompt for participants to reflect on the irrationality of certain human behaviors, such as war, often encapsulated by the paradoxical media statement: «If we want peace, we must prepare for war». In response, Didymos introduces Aristotle's logical principle of noncontradiction as a universal maxim: «It cannot be that a thing is and is not at the same time» (Didymos [2023]). Following a philosophical debate, participants craft a motto that encapsulates their collective insights. This motto is then embroidered onto flags, which are displayed publicly, transforming the philosophical contemplation into a visible, communal statement. The instructions clearly state: «Embroider the chosen words onto your flag, symbolizing your commitment to logical and thoughtful engagement with the world» (Didymos [2022b]). The flag becomes a symbol of ongoing commitment to questioning and re-evaluating views, serving as a public artifact that continues to communicate and provoke doubt within the wider community.

Similar to Tino Sehgal's performance *These Associations*, interactions in Didymos's exercise are not only pivotal to the narrative structure of the work but also embody the narrative itself, with each encounter adding layers to the collective story. Sehgal's method emphasizes the immediacy and intimacy of shared moments, emphasizing the transience of human connections and the

ephemeral nature of the experience. His narratives are constructed and decon-
structed over the course of the performance, leaving behind no physical traces,
only memories and personal impacts. However, this approach underscores the
consumable nature not of relationships per se, but of the encounters within the
performative act, where experiences occurring within specific – distinctly ar-
tistic – circumstances, far removed from everyday life, are meant to be ab-
sorbed and reflected upon personally. In contrast, Didymos extends interactions
from the artistic impulse into the realm of tangible and potentially enduring
situations. *A Social Gym* not only challenges aesthetic expectations but also
provokes in the audience a series of doubts concerning the very nature of the
experience it undergoes. Participants are compelled to question: «How can I
classify this social operation? What is my role in this process? Who is the artist,
if any? Am I sufficiently skilled or educated to understand? How can I use this
new understanding further?» (Didymos [2023]).

The purpose of the confrontation between Didymos's practices and three no-
table contemporary art cases is certainly not to indiscriminately criticize artistic
operations for being institutionalized, categorized, or consumed within a domain
whose norms they seemingly challenge. Instead, this comparison is conducted
with a constructive aim: to explore the qualities and practices that enable art
to transcend the boundaries imposed by traditionally structured knowledge and
by the impacts of the political status quo. In doing so, it seeks to revitalize the
relationship between aesthetics and politics. The key quality that Didymos uses
to revive this connection is doubt, aimed at what Jacques Rancière defines as the
established *distribution of the sensible*. By embedding the category of doubt into
their spatial and perceptual interventions, Didymos shifts the focus from indi-
vidual psychological impact to collectively shared experience. The intentional
introduction of uncertainty serves to dissolve traditional hierarchies, encourag-
ing a re-evaluation of how reality is constructed and understood, as well as how
roles and functions are distributed.

These considerations prompt us to interpret the category of doubt in this
context as akin to Rancière's concept of *dissensus* (Rancière [1995b]). Ran-
cière uses dissensus not merely in the everyday sense of a dispute but as a
philosophical term indicating a rupture in the meaning of familiar concepts,
embodying «the presence of two worlds in one» (Rancière [2001]: 37). In his
terms, dissensus is not simply opposition or deviation but represents disobedi-
ence toward how the common space is socially constituted: «Dissensus is the
introduction of a fact into a sphere of sensible experience that is incompat-
ible with it, contradicts it» (Rancière, as cited in Raunig [2007]). Dissensus
produces a void in a social fabric, from which politics can arise. Opposed to
police, politics «counts a part of those without part»; it is based on the uncon-
ditional recognition of the other's right to exist, marking a moment of equality

of everyone to everyone and re-distributing the sensible (Rancière [2001]: 36; Rancière [2000]: 51-56). The possibility of equality in practice stands on trust, rather than suspicion: «starting from the point of view of equality, asserting equality, assuming equality as a given, working out from equality, trying to see how productive it can be and thus maximising all possible liberty and equality» (Rancière [1995a]: 51-52).

This kind of trust is precisely what the trainers – members of Didymos – both expect from and extend to participants before engaging in practice. It is not an assurance of a once-stabilized truth, but trust in the other, who, despite being acknowledged as different, is seen as radically equal, since she shares the same sensible disorientation and uncertainty. In this scenario, doubt serves as Rancière's *incompatible, contradictory fact* that catalyzes disagreement among equals, through which the political exists as an instituting force, aimed at continuously redefining the sensible regime. However, Didymos's use of doubt is not equivalent to Rancière's concept of dissensus. Didymos employs doubt primarily as a tool for individual and collective *pause*, focusing on questioning the unintentional responses rather than actively redefining broader societal structures. Rancière's dissensus carries a more explicitly political dimension: it enables the visibility of new subjects and the audibility of new discourse that were previously negated (Rancière [1995b]: 69-72). In this context, Didymos's exercises in instilling doubt can be viewed as a precursor to dissensus, as a preparation of a void for its emergence. Each instance of doubt has the potential to escalate into an act of dissensus, where the shaking of the boundaries of structured knowledge through disorientation can amplify one's perceptions and foster the need to redistribute the sensible.

In the examples of performative acts discussed in the second section, despite challenging the conventional roles and functions of art, the established regime of the sensible still provides the disoriented audience with a familiar set of social and political coordinates, rooted in separation and exclusion. Even if bewildered, visitors understand that they are part of a cultural operation and recognize the artist as a guide delineating the perimeter of the experience. In contrast, in *A Social Gym*, the artistic structures are considered ever-changing instances where the boundaries of the social are continually shifted by doubt into the political. Here, each individual who encounters the unfamiliar must strive to convert discomfort into new learning, relying on others who share the same sensible experience.

The presence of the other, presumably undergoing similar challenges, transforms individual encounters into a collective *attempt at doubt*, from which a new form of commonality can emerge. The contours of commonality are shaped through the sharing and distribution of the sensible and the disruption of fixed identities, thereby valorizing the continuous process of political subjectivation (Rancière [2000]). Didymos employs phenomenological abun-

dance as a rite of initiation, essential for constructing a political and practical «escape from the ordinary, from the automatic mode of relating to the world, and from the ongoing anthropological crisis» (Didymos [n.d.]). This process is perceived by the artists as an anti-structure that dismantles the habitual, bringing forth new, undoubtedly intentional and collective meanings: «The gym, instead of being a place for subjecting oneself to efforts aimed at caring for an alienated and stylistic exteriority, becomes a teleological space of humanity where a community can be built, ready for mutual engagement and shared responsibility» (Didymos [2023]).

4. *Conclusion*

Our daily routines necessitate a certain degree of inertia or, more precisely, automatism. Without this, even the most mundane moments in our lives would become intense and demanding, rendering the notion of the *everyday* nearly impossible. Aesthetic processes foster interaction with the environment through a given, intentional performativity. This performativity, focusing on perception and attention, aims to support human survival in the world, highlighting the domesticity that arises from one's presence and existence within it (Matteucci [2019]). However, what occurs when this inertia becomes constant? What if there are no moments when routine transcends the ordinary? If habit becomes synonymous with automatism, then habituation not only tends to diminish the political potentialities of a democratic community but also leaves us impoverished in our sensible inspection, depriving us of the capacity to maintain an active gaze at the world.

Art, as demonstrated by Didymos's performative practice, creates extraordinary instances where, by temporarily suspending our automatic modes of interaction with the world, ourselves, and others, we can act, perceive, and think consciously. This heightened awareness guides our actions and cultivates a sense of presence, thereby unlocking the potential to effect change on the outside. However, not every artistic operation possesses a transformative capacity: the continuous subversion of traditional codes in contemporary art has itself become a new norm. Instances where transgressive endeavors become merely stylistic, falling into recognizable patterns and decorative acts where content and form are intertwined, result in predictable and thus comforting outcomes. Habit, when understood as a synonym for passivity and indifference, is viewed by Didymos's members as antithetical to the sense of wonder that arises from discovering something previously unknown, and is therefore irreconcilable with exploration. According to the artists, «in research, this sense of wonder should be at the forefront, serving as the primary focus of attention» (Didymos [2023]).

In its five chapters, the project *Attempt at Doubt* has evolved from a straightforward presentation of personal reflections by the artists to increasingly open practices that foster sharing and cross-fertilization, ultimately leading to the undetermined and unpredictable developments characteristic of *A Social Gym*. Viewed as a tool for participants, this strategy can be adapted and reintroduced in various contexts. Similar to how regular physical exercise benefits our bodies by breaking the inertia of a sedentary lifestyle, *A Social Gym*'s workouts can foster «a positive habit: taking the time to explore one's sensibility and breaking free from automatic ways of acting, perceiving, and thinking» (Didymos [2023]). Doubt, akin to Rancière's concept of dissensus, is employed by the duo as a conduit for seeing afresh, questioning the status quo, and dismantling preconceived notions, while continually re-instituting the space for the political anew.

Indeed, such practice presents a challenge, as it is not straightforward for individuals to engage in activities that encourage them to disrupt, dismantle, and move away from the familiar modes they are accustomed to, for navigating the world and relating to themselves and others. Nonetheless, the attempt at de-automation is the only mechanism capable of regenerating the conditions for imaginative function and autonomous artistic activity, described as *rule-making creativity*. This term, adopted by Pietro Montani (2017), refers to the interactivity of techno-aesthetic environments, which, according to him, should embody *unpredictability*. A similar premise holds true for the instance discussed in this essay. Didymos approaches the aesthetic world as constantly under construction, being disassembled and reassembled. Art, according to the collective, is capable of connecting originality – when it literally names its own new rules – with exemplarity – if a community adopts these new rules to reorganize the parameters of the faculty of judgment, echoing the political reconfigurations sought by Rancière through dissensus. The shift in perception that the doers of *A Social Gym* experience may indeed catalyze day-to-day actions and, consequently, impact their environment. Didymos's practice confirms that art can be a powerful tool to deliberately depart from empiricist automatisms and facilitate an escape from conventional and apolitical modes of engaging with the world.

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Aisthesis

Habits in the Kitchen: On the Application of Recipes for the Good Life

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Abstract. *What does it mean to apply a recipe?* In this essay I examine how habit and improvisation contribute to the application of recipes. Application entails more than following technical instructions; it involves strategies for critically reading, understanding, and performing recipes in a manner that contributes to their transmission and transformation. Application draws upon our habits and prior knowledge to respond to the contingencies of new situations and highlights future possibilities that require adaptation and transformation. I thus argue that one should view recipes as ethical texts, which in this context of application means that they are something more than rigid technical guides for cooking, and more than mere recordings of cultural and historical knowledge to be reproduced: as an essential element of human gastronomy, the application of a recipe involves habit and improvisation working together in the pursuit of the good life.

Keywords. Habit, improvisation, application, recipe, Gadamer, hermeneutics.

1. *Introduction: how to read a recipe*

The origin and history of recipes is obscure and complex. It is difficult to imagine human existence without some form of recipe put into

daily practice or communicated to others. There are written and inscribed recipes from the ancient world – the oldest written recipe is supposedly one from China for carp salad – but also orally transmitted recipes, now lost to us, that predate and postdate these ancient culinary texts[1]. Recipes reach beyond their linguistic forms, encoding the cuisines of cultures from around the world and connecting generations through retelling, demonstration, and practice. Recipes document the day-to-day habits of food preparation, but they also prescribe the more careful preparations of food for festival meals and even ritual offerings of food to gods and to the dead.

Through their dissemination and repeated performances, recipes construct what a society knows, has, and desires. Recipes are not simply committed to memory or transferred to some other form of transmission; their performance and realization are also ingrained into the habitual practices we associate with muscle training. Any recipe embodies a set of skills and practices that are separate from but essential to the recipe: cutting and slicing, sautéing or braising, and even the careful selection of ingredients for the dish, knowing which herbs to pick in the garden, how to clean and prepare a fish, which cut of meat is right for the preparation. These are skills that in many ways form the condition of possibility for recipes, but they are ones that are rarely written down or stated specifically. More than a set of instructions, recipes are demonstrations that presuppose a litany of materials, skills, and processes already underway; the directions merely augment and flavour an ongoing history of knowledge transmission that reaches across time and space. In this way, recipes refer to a complex body of learned knowledge – good habits that are summoned and reactivated in the face of ever-changing social and material contexts.[2]

Let's take as an example a recipe for Zabaglione[2] – a dessert whose history and origins are disputed and whose simple ingredients and preparation leave a good deal of room for experimentation and error. Without getting into debates over recipes and how they relate to dishes, it suffices to note that recipes for Zabaglione vary greatly: its liquid ingredient (wine) ranges from Marsala to Vin Santo to Moscato d'Asti to dry white wine and even (gasp!) limoncello; the proportions of the ingredients vary, even though the cooking techniques are generally equivalent; and the final presentation of the dish also supports a range of temperatures and accompaniments. For the sake of this exercise, I will use a version of the recipe from *The Silver Spoon* cookbook (*il Cucchiaio d'argento*), first published in 1950 and to many the bible of Italian cooking.

Zabaglione/Zabaione
Serves 4
4 egg yolks
4 tablespoons superfine sugar
½ cup Marsala, dry white wine or sparkling wine

> Beat the egg yolks with the sugar in a heatproof bowl until pale and fluffy, then stir in the Marsala or wine, a little at a time. Place the bowl over a pan of barely simmering water and cook over low heat, stirring constantly, until the mixture starts to rise. Remove from the heat and serve hot or cold in glasses. Alternatively, zabaglione may be used as a sauce on coffee or hazelnut ice cream. (Capatti [2011]: 1039)

Depending on the reader's prior understanding of Italian cuisine and cooking in general, the recipe speaks in different ways and activates various habits – ones related to how one reads and understands texts in general, but more specifically, how such texts indicate, directly or indirectly, the mental and bodily habits required to prepare such a dish. Those familiar with the dish might immediately compare this text to their mental repository of other recipes for Zabaglione or read through the text while recalling the bodily habits they used to prepare the dish in the past. Those unfamiliar with the dish or who have never tried the dish might use their imagination to construct a mental analogue of the tastes and textures of the dish, or even call upon their good habits of planning and goal realization to experiment with a new recipe. Others, not interested in the dish at all, might just skim the recipe, considering it non-essential to their evaluation of this essay's argument. And others, perhaps once sickened by alcohol or bad eggs or even this very dish, might involuntarily wretch at the thought of its consumption.

If someone with a good deal of cooking experience were to linger upon this recipe, they might conclude that many of the gastronomical habits associated with the recipe and its preparation remain concealed and unstated: the materials and implements required (beyond the ingredients) to cook this dish, along with the various skills and techniques that aid in its completion. For example, the recipe presupposes elements of modern cookery that one might be expected to have in a kitchen: a stovetop heat source that can be regulated; pots and bowls of appropriate materials, whisks or spoons, etc. More telling are the skills that form a background of assumed knowledge that are needed for the production and/or success of the dish: how to separate yolks from eggs; techniques for whisking; assembling and using a double-boiler or *bain-marie* effectively; familiarity with egg consistency; food safety and handling; cultural knowledge about when/where to serve the dish and with which accompaniments; and we might even consider possible substitutes due to aesthetic preference, availability, or ingredient prohibitions. All these elements are, broadly speaking, normative in the very basic sense that they reveal the accepted prescriptions, behaviours, and value judgments of a society – even though they are not always explicitly stated. Attempting to perform the recipe and produce the dish thus requires the cook to possess or have access to the prior knowledge and resources that are a generally accepted element of that recipe's cultural milieu.

My focus here is not the act of cooking guided by a recipe, but the form of understanding demanded by the recipe itself. Elsewhere I have discussed

cooking under the rubric of interpretation, and specifically, how cooking en-
acts three basic principles of hermeneutics (see Valgenti [2014]). In this essay
I will delve more deeply into the structure of the hermeneutic circle to explore
how «application», as outlined in Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960), reveals
normative forces directed at the recipe's primary goal: not the production of
a dish, but the transmission of the knowledge required to achieve the ends of
gastronomy, and thus, the greater human good. This knowledge is not static,
but through its transmission establishes and transforms learned behaviours
through an openness to material and social contingencies. This process – the
application of recipes – requires both habit and improvisation to realize the
greater good of gastronomy.

2. *What is a recipe?*

Let us begin with a brief and basic definition of a recipe. A recipe is a 1) means
of transmitting 2) knowledge about the preparation of a dish 3) for the ends of
gastronomy.

Gastronomy, as Brillat-Savarin explains in *The Physiology of Taste*, «is a sci-
entific definition of all that relates to man as a feeding animal. Its [goal] is to
watch over the preservation of man by means of the best possible food» (Brillat-
Savarin [1825]: 35). For Brillat-Savarin, the goal of gastronomy is not simply
nutrition but the most complete form of human flourishing which entails, as a
necessary condition, the scientific and cultural knowledge required to lead the
good life. Gastronomy in this sense considers *how* we should eat to live well
which, as a cultural and scientific practice, constitutes something more than a
universal science or a body of knowledge that can simply be systematized and
transmitted. It is practical knowledge that, beyond technical guidelines and prac-
tices, requires a means of recording and transmission that can adapt to diverse
social and material conditions. The recipe, as a transmitter of such knowledge,
is neither the representation of technical actions nor simply a linguistic account
of a set of procedures that corresponds with the preparation of a dish; rather, the
recipe transmits gastronomical knowledge across time and space with an eye
towards difference and changing conditions. A recipe is written down, narrated,
or performed to repeat a practice with the understanding that it will be *for oth-
ers* (even if that other is the same person later in time) and *for other conditions*.
There is an implicit understanding that the recipe alone will not be enough and
may require the knowledge, habits, and interpretive behaviour of the individuals
who transmit it successfully.

Recipes have existed for as long as humans have transmitted their knowl-
edge of food preparation. However, the specific term «recipe» arises in medi-

cal writing and prescriptions in late sixteenth century Europe and only a century later denotes the set of directions used for the preparation of food (Waxman [2004]). While these etymological peculiarities do not fully represent the broader history of recipes (a task too expansive for these pages), they do indicate a certain confluence of ideas that I want to engage critically: the term «recipe» denotes a type of «practical knowledge to be reproduced by another doctor, a pharmacist, or cook» (Claflin [2013]: 110) to produce a good outcome, such as general health, recovery from an ailment, or simply the continuance of life. The imperative form of *ricipere*, «to take or receive», does not command the patient or the eater, but rather is a command that issues from the expert to the medical practitioner or cook, as in «take this and that» and «do this» to bring about a certain desired result[3]. Thus, the command is directed at the one who will *transmit* the knowledge: the messenger or delivery person who will follow the expert's directions and not the patient or recipient of said treatment.

To facilitate this aim, recipes take on forms that are recognizable and suited to the cultures and times in which they arise – whether organized as a list of ingredients and a schedule of procedures, told in a narrative, or even in its more contemporary manifestations represented through various visual media. These modes reflect the material and social conditions that shape the delivery of gastronomic knowledge. And yet, despite the variation in media, the recipe – as a human form or concept (or even a meme/cultural unit) remains constant. This persistent form – one tied to the ends of gastronomy and thus the highest good – is what interests me in this study: not to find an unchanging essence behind the multitude of recipes, but instead to consider how the recipe form operates, for lack of a better term, as a sort of transcendental whose presence is only ever confirmed through its changing manifestations and dynamic character. Transmission and transformation are, however paradoxically, built into the very form of the recipe.

A good deal of the extant literature on recipes supports the idea of a persistent form, but does so through structuralist and essentialist accounts that overlook or even reject recipes as an opportunity for invention and transformation[4]. I propose to begin with the more dynamic possibilities of the recipe and will highlight some of the approaches that delineate the horizon within which my argument unfolds. My approach to recipes is broadly constructivist in the manner proposed by Andrea Borghini (2015) and has strong affinities with Giulio Sciacca's (2020) particularist metaphysics, which considers the recipe to be an artifact or continuant[5]. My approach is also informed by positions, like Maya Hey's, that see recipes as a «medium for materially engaging with "ever more corporeal, ever more intimate" relations through food, and mediate time, place, ingredients, and people in ways that show "our relationality and our entangle-

ment" with nonhuman entities» (Hey [2021]: 79). This latter account – and others that stress the role of materiality – places recipes beyond exclusively human origins, citing the role that natural environment, material conditions, social customs, and available media play in the creative process. Recipes are thus more than simple acts of *fiat* (Borghini [2015]) and emerge out of rich contexts that require responsiveness and adaptation to conditions that resist and shape human decision. More than human tools, recipes are objects and artifacts that develop a life of their own through and beyond their human inception. While I would not go so far as to claim that the recipe is an object (in the sense of an autonomous and withdrawn object as proposed by Graham Harman's Object Oriented Ontology), I accept his general critique of theoretical approaches that tend either to «undermine» or «overmine» their subjects[6]. To properly understand the formal characteristics of a recipe, one must avoid any essentialist accounts that might grant to recipes an unchanging character, but also resist the varieties of relationism that would reduce recipes to the various forces that bring them into being.

A recipe is therefore not like a Harmanian object but instead a «form» that records and transmits knowledge about the preparation of a dish for the ends of gastronomy. I use the term «form» not to invoke the essentialist notion of form/idea/*eidos* inherited from the Platonic tradition, but to emphasize the broadly shared features of recipes that, despite their differences in media and content, retain a specific sort of relation to human ends (first and foremost, the gastronomic end). Instructive here is the concept of «*forma*» developed by Luigi Pareyson in his work *Estetica. Teoria della formatività* (1954)*. Pareyson's focus is the work of art, which is a paradigmatic example of human formativity precisely because the work of art is produced for no other end than for the sake of formativity itself. But human forms (and the acts of formativity that bring them into being) extend into all sectors of human action and can have a material or non-material result: a work of art, a law, an institution, a tool, and even a human life or society writ large. A form is thus «the result of attempts» in the act of creation or making, attempts that comprise the act of forming, which «on the one hand entails creating, that is, accomplishing, executing, producing, realizing, and on the other, entails finding the means of creating, that is, inventing, discovering, shaping, knowing-how» (Pareyson [1954]: 59-60). A form is thus always underway and responding to its situation; it is, like any other human creation, a record of its own development that arises out of particular circumstances and is produced for particular ends. Importantly, however, these human creations cannot be reduced to the effort and insight of their human creators – the creator is always a participant in something larger and creates only through a rich interaction with the social and material entities that shape and co-constitute the new form[7].

The form of a recipe is therefore more than just a linguistic or communicative structure that organizes instructions and procedures to achieve the ends of gastronomy, as it is constantly changing and interacting with human and non-human actors. As a means of transmitting a specific sort of knowledge, the diversity of its instantiations rests upon a perduring yet finite articulation that is tied to human endeavours but not completely attributable to them. Thus, even though the content, procedure, and style typical of particular recipes might vary, those instantiations reflect a form, or more precisely, a process of forming that records and transmits knowledge for the ends of gastronomy. The recipe realizes its specific purpose only through its various instantiations and media, such as individual or shared memory, the spoken word, writing, pictorial representations, moving images, and of course its most recognizable form as a written list of ingredients followed by a set of instructions.

These contingent ends, which even include the preparation of the dish, must be distinguished from its primary purpose as a transmitter and transformer of knowledge. At first this seems counter-intuitive; however, a recipe can be created and transmitted without a dish being produced. Moreover, the recording and transmission of a recipe could also *follow* the production of a dish and/or a period of experimentation, or even exist as a creative exercise or fictional moment that never had the intention of ever creating the dish. The form of the recipe and its success is therefore measured not by its fidelity to a particular dish, but through its faithful pursuit of the end of gastronomy – which requires not only transmission, but a transformation suited to the changing conditions in the pursuit of that goal. These changing conditions could be the materials at hand, the desires of a particular audience, the available means of transmission, or a host of other environmental factors.

When recipes codify and transmit the knowledge of what a society knows, possesses, and desires from a gastronomical perspective, they reflect a given culture's gastronomical *habits*. What the recipe transmits is not knowledge in a broad and universal sense – an *episteme* – but something more akin to a know-how directed towards the ends of gastronomy. This expansive goal (and not simply the list of ingredients and procedures) shapes the content of the recipe and comprises information that is present both explicitly and implicitly in the recipe. As with all habits, these finite and changeable behaviours are acquired over time but often treated (and more importantly, often feel) as if they are natural and unchanging features of human life – thus making them difficult to unlearn when the situation demands and imparting onto them a powerful normative force. These behaviours, while practically oriented towards the preparation of food, nonetheless carry with them implicit judgments about society's morals, identity, and notions of the good life. This is one indication of the recipe's ethical import as a transmitter of values and norms that reflect the broader society and its potential to flourish.

3. *The normative force of recipes*

Is it possible that the recipe form itself contains and even generates its own normative force, one that shapes its transmission and transformation? In what follows, I will consider the origin of a recipe's normative force and the extent to which that origin is suited to the particular ends of gastronomy.

Two recent essays on recipes focus on their normative capacity. Patrick Engisch argues «that certain traditional recipes and their instances (dishes), along with their consumption, can be said to represent past living conditions» (Engisch [2021]: 117) and thus carry with them a normative or ethical force. This plays out as a hypothetical: if one wishes to reproduce a certain dish accurately to achieve a goal of authenticity or genuineness, then recipes, as social and cultural artifacts, contain «a certain normative force in terms of their having a guiding, and not mere causal, role in the realization of our goals and aims» (Ibid.: 118). Engisch refers to this as a deflationary sense of normativity, given that recipes are normative only to the extent that we have goals and aims as culinary agents, and that «recipes can, *ceteris paribus*, be conducive to their realization» (Ibid.). Recipes thus demand something of us – have a normative force – but do so in a manner that is *extrinsic* to the recipe itself and located in the aspirations and judgments of those who perform, experience, and judge the recipe and its outcomes. Such normativity might also be called *representational* insofar as its goal is to produce – via an external standard – an accurate or acceptable representation of an object or practice valued by a given society or group. I would add further that the orientation of the normativity is markedly historical, in that it seeks to reproduce what has already been accomplished rather than produce what might be best suited to the end of gastronomy within a particular social or material context. Even when a recipe is transformed to suit changing conditions through the intentions and experiences of those who create, use, and benefit from it, Engisch's account suggests that the imperative to do so is external to the form of the recipe.

Alessandro Bertinetto, drawing upon his vast work on performance and improvisation in the arts, provides an extended comparison between recipes and musical scores that further explores how norms form in conversation with changing conditions and contexts: «dishes and musical performances are interestingly analogous because they do not only respectively manifest musical works and recipes but can *transform* them to the extent that they can also bring about the invention of new musical works and recipes» (Bertinetto [2021]: 118). For Bertinetto, the application of norms in the performance of a musical score or the performance of a recipe «requires "creative" adaptation to the concrete specific situation» through «practical interactions that involve transformations of their own normative bases» (Ibid.: 111). These normative bases concern the choices of the artist or cook – often rooted in training and habit – along with the content of

the musical score or the recipe. The musician is not simply directed to play *these* notes in *this* particular way, nor is the chef simply to prepare *these* ingredients using *this* method – their performances understand those prescriptions within the context of the performance, often times transforming them through in their application to a unique situation. The norm is understood and guides the performer not for the sake of the rule itself, but in order to apply the rule in a meaningful way that can be understood and appreciated by its audience. These normative changes are not retroactive in a temporal sense, but recursive in that they modify the structure of the norms, thus allowing the same content to register differently in a new situation. Musical works and recipes are «ontologically flexible» in this way because they are «(trans)formed by the performances that adapt them» to specific physical and cultural situations; they are «changing cultural artifacts» (Ibid.: 128) that reflect the ongoing interpretations that recursively shape the work, the performer, and the broader context in which they exist.

To understand the score or the recipe entails more than simply transmitting these works and the knowledge they contain; through their transmission, they are also transformed. The transformation and the eventual judgment of a work (as authentic or successful) is measured not only against the performer's aims but also according to the audience's experience and judgment – that is, the broader cultural and social context into which it is delivered. Bertinetto identifies the score and the recipe, inclusive of their experiences and transformations, with the history of their effects or *Wirkungsgeschichte* (Ibid.: 126; see also Gadamer [1960]: 300). The effects are not simply produced by the new work but reflect the forces that contribute to its formation over time in various contexts.

Both Engisch and Bertinetto illustrate the extent to which recipes shape and are shaped by their contexts. Recipes are normative because their commands guide behaviour within an environment that is also shaped recursively by the recipe itself – a normativity that is extrinsic but also open to the transformative influence of the recipe. But is it possible that the recipe form also contains an *intrinsic* normativity – one generated by the very form of the recipe itself? By intrinsic normativity I do not intend those features internal to a specific form of transmission, such as the grammar or conventions of language, or the structural components of the recipes (the order of ingredients, or units of their measure, and so on). These internal features certainly exert a force and in the case of a traditional recipe do so in the form of an imperative; but these details, as the history of recipes demonstrates, are themselves the product of extrinsic influences – the social and material conditions of their time. An intrinsic norm would be one that remains consistent despite the recipe's changing instantiations, one tied to the very purpose of recipes in general, and thus, to the ends of gastronomy. If there is a norm that is intrinsic to the recipe form itself, it would be one that requires the transmission of gastronomical knowledge in a manner that remains open to con-

tingencies, encourages its transformation to suit ever-changing social and material conditions, and nonetheless remains committed to the ends of gastronomy.

Here, once again, Pareyson's notion of «form» is helpful: the characteristic feature of any act of formativity is that it is «a type of doing that, in the course of doing, invents its way of doing» (Pareyson [1954]: 18). This type of self-generated formation displaces the typical focus on the artist (or chef) as creator of a work and instead centres it upon the work as a site of continual transformation and development that is responsive to the varying forces around it – a successful work is one that, first and foremost, is guided by its responsiveness to changing conditions, and thus, to the very fact of it always being *conditioned*. There is no essence to be captured, and no artistic vision that measures its ultimate success or failure. Instead, the work is, in a sense, always underway and evolving. Here I would argue that the recipe's transformation is not caused by the performance or the dish, but that the performance and the dish are occasions for understanding through which the internal norm is realized because the work can only ever be realized through a particular instantiation guided by the ends of gastronomy: as a prescription oriented towards a goal of nourishment whose evaluation is open-ended, a recipe demands that its realization not only answer to specific demands shaped by one particular time and place, but more generally, that it be sensitive to the varying contexts from which it emerges and within which it will be realized. This demand – one tied to the transmission of the knowledge that serves the ends of gastronomy – is open-ended and always underway, subject to conditions on the ground. The transmission of a recipe under such conditions – which could entail cooking the dish articulated by the recipe, or simply reproducing the recipe in one form or another to further the ends of gastronomy – is what will here be referred to as the «application» of the recipe.

Recipes, in this sense, are a vital indicator of a given society's habits, indicating directly how a society pursues its gastronomical purpose; but also indirectly an indicator of a capacity for improvisation in the broader human and material horizons within which such goals are realized *differently* at different times and in different places through practices that are learned and unlearned[8]. What I hope to trace in the following is a deepening of this reflection to explore how the recipe form itself contributes to these normative prescriptions through the role of habit and improvisation in the application of a recipe.

4. *Recipes require application*

«Application» is not merely the performance of the recipe – the act of preparing and cooking according to the dictates of the recipe in order to produce a dish; more importantly, application precedes any such performance and marks

a broader engagement with a form of practical wisdom in the pursuit of gastronomic ends that is sensitive to the situation: it entails an *interpretation* of the already present historical and cultural context in which the recipe exists, and a fusion of horizons (the recipe, the cook, the audience) into a new *understanding* that reflects the particularities and challenges of the current situation. These certainly can and do involve acts of cooking a new recipe successfully, but also routine preparations, failed attempts, and all the other interactions with recipes that do not involve immediate performance in the kitchen but rely on a repository of cognitive and bodily habits – planning, editing, organizing and creatively using recipes in non-cooking performances. Making a grilled cheese sandwich or brewing a moka pot of coffee might not seem worthy of the phrase «event of understanding»; however, there is nonetheless (as Heidegger's analysis of everydayness suggests) an implicit and always-present horizon of understanding that informs, shapes, and allows even the most banal experiences to reveal their normative structures and the possibilities that surround their interpretation. This event of understanding is what Gadamer refers to as *Erfahrung* – a structure of experience constituted by an inner historicity, a contingency whose truth remains «valid so long as it is not contradicted by new experience» (Gadamer [1960]: 345). All experiences carry with them the structure of their potential revision and reformulation; the hallmark of understanding is not its stability as a truth but its precarity and transience as a form that requires constant (re) formulation.

For Gadamer, the term «application» plays a very specific (and undervalued) role in the event of understanding, as it represents a «recovery of the fundamental hermeneutical problem» (Ibid.: 307): the issue of how a historically effected consciousness can bring about a fusion of horizons in a regulated way – or in terms more suited to this discussion, how the understanding of a recipe could be guided by an internal norm that allows new conditions to transform understanding while also being transformed by it. Here, «regulated» suggests the presence of a guiding principle that works like a universal (in that it is always present and carries a certain force) but also responds to the social and material realities of any particular instance. Application thus entails more than simply following guidelines; it requires that we interpret them within a new context: «this implies that the text… if it is to be understood properly – i.e. according to the claim it makes – must be understood at every moment, in every concrete situation, in a new and different way» (Ibid.: 309). The application of a text requires that the interpretation of its particular norms and prescriptions occurs within a definite set of conditions, and that those conditions be likewise interpreted in light of prior habits and knowledge. Such an «interpretation is necessary where the meaning of a text cannot be immediately understood» (Ibid.: 332) because the conditions which gave rise to the text no longer exist, in the sense that the meaning of the text is understood only when it is applied within a different historical horizon.

Application is therefore not simply a formulaic process, but an act that addresses the possibilities laid bare and made present when one interpretative horizon confronts another. The norms that structure each horizon stand forth as ways of doing or criteria for judgment – standards that now appear as possibilities and opportunities rather than as inflexible demands on the interpreter. The normative force of the recipe form can be found here: not in its imperative grammar or its discreet lists, measurements, and procedures, but rather in its confrontation with the unique social and material realities of a particular instance of performance. In the application of a recipe, the cook mediates and interprets the competing horizons of the recipe to achieve its goal of transmission in a manner that will best serve the ends of gastronomy.

Gadamer's insights on application now shed valuable light on Pareyson's notion of form and its relevance to the normative structure of recipes. There is no absolute form of the recipe – only a «forming form» (Pareyson [1954]: 75) realized through its interpretation in a new context; and application, in the case of the recipe, is not simply cooking the dish prescribed by the recipe but understanding what the recipe demands of us in this moment – a demand that is oriented, on the one hand, toward an interpretation of its past and its history of effects, and on the other hand, toward the future and its possible realisations and transformations. Only in this register can we fully appreciate the ramifications of Gadamer's claim that «Understanding…, is a special case of applying something universal» – the form of the recipe – «to a particular situation» (Gadamer [1960]: 312). It is not universal in that its dictates require one way of acting in every situation, but rather universal in that it requires from us, in every instance, an application sensitive to the possibilities opened up by the fusion of different horizons of understanding. The type of knowledge that guides human practice within changing contexts and situations is therefore not a universal in the sense of an *episteme* that can be applied to any situation; rather, it is universal in its demand to be applied, that is, in the requirement for a new understanding in a new situation.

Application reveals the recipe's intrinsic normative force as a means of transmitting the knowledge for the ends of gastronomy: while the goal does not change, we understand the recipe (and thus the task) differently and thus transform it based on the conditions or horizon in which it unfolds. So on the one hand, we find that the application of a recipe requires a certain habit – not only the habits required to perform the tasks explicitly stated or indirectly inferred by the recipe, but more importantly, a good habit of understanding in which prior knowledge is oriented toward the future and thus its constant questioning and reformulation. More than a repetition of behaviours, this habit requires us to read and perform in a manner that is sensitive to the situation and open to modification. On the other hand, application also requires a degree of improvisation

– not only a sensitivity to future contingencies, but an improvisational skill to address what is unforeseen but certainly not unforeseeable. More than an exercise in freedom, improvisation relies upon behaviours and habits already learned to recognize and address the variable conditions in which the recipe might be applied. In what follows, I will examine how the application of a recipe achieves this orientation towards its own past and its future possibilities, in the service of gastronomy, through practices of habit and improvisation.

5. *Habits in the kitchen*

In order to keep this discussion focused, I will consider the type of application most commonly associated with recipes[9] – the use of a recipe to guide a cook in the preparation of a dish. To say that habit plays a role in this application of recipes would be neither surprising nor controversial: these could include good habits cultivated over time such as the careful reading of a recipe's text, the use of safe and effective cooking techniques, a familiarity with types of recipes, dishes and cuisines, knowledge about ingredient substitutions, and the ritual of *mis en place*; but there are also bad habits, such as an inattentiveness to detail, sloppy measurement, indifference to safe and hygienic practices, not tasting through the process of cooking, and so on. There is, of course, a degree of relativity in these distinctions that depends on the type of cooking and the venue in which it takes place, along with the subjectivity of the individual cook. Whether that individual is a professional chef or a novice in the kitchen, habits emerge through one's understanding and application of the recipe: through one's familiarity with the kitchen and its instruments, with time management and the various physical and mental practices that accompany the activity of cooking a dish, an awareness of those who will be eating the dish, and so on. These habits enable certain operations and actions, but they also inhibit certain behaviours and at times run counter to the literal indication of the recipe's text or the actions needed to execute it. There are certainly cases where the individual simply lacks the required knowledge or skill to apply a recipe and produce the dish; however, even those cases are framed within habits (of reading, exploring, and learning) that encourage or inhibit the acquisition of the requisite knowledge and skills. Habits are therefore the learned behaviours that mediate and activate differences between the horizon of the recipe and the horizon of the context in which the recipe will be applied.

These habits are relevant to Gadamer's understanding of application in two ways: the first concerns my definition of recipes as transmitters of knowledge in the service of gastronomy, which as noted, aims towards the overall health and flourishing of humanity (broadly, the ethical good); the second, which is of central importance to Gadamer, regards the way that the development and learning

of moral knowledge participates in the structure of the hermeneutic circle: in the context of this analysis, how the mere repetition of good habits in the kitchen – the faithful reproduction of a recipe according to its explicit prescriptions and its implied behaviours/requirements – does not live up to the demand of application. To understand a recipe fully (to *apply* it in Gadamer's sense) requires that one expose its possibilities within a new context and thus acknowledge that its prescriptions are contingent upon an application suited to the moment. This does not mean that one always has to break away from the literal prescriptions of a recipe; rather, what is brought to the fore is the recipe's active interpretation and thus the awareness that even when codified into a recipe, the document is a record of prior decisions to pursue the ends of gastronomy in a particular way. Recipes are a record not of an outcome, but of a process to be transmitted forward.

This process enacts a particular type of practical knowledge that is neither technical knowledge (*techne* – a fixed set of rules enacted to achieve a certain end) nor a universally valid scientific knowledge (*episteme*). This knowledge is oriented towards the future and towards the development of habits that enable the realization of a perceived good. Gadamer, reading Aristotle, clarifies that «the basis of moral knowledge in man is *orexis,* striving, and its development into a fixed demeanour (*hexis*)» or habit (Gadamer [1960]: 312). This process is guided by situational knowledge that reflects an insight into the demands of a particular set of circumstances. Aristotle identifies this type of knowing as *phronesis*, which is central to the pursuit of the good and its development into good habits. This is not scientific knowledge against which one stands as an indifferent observer, but rather «something that [the human] has to do» (Ibid.: 314) – a process of formation that develops and transforms in the structure of a circle: it is recursive and cannot *not*, in its outcomes, also actively engage in the continual process of habit formation and refinement.

The cultivation of good habit in the kitchen thus includes the broader habit of remaining open to unforeseen contingencies and new situations. This type of practical knowing or *phronesis* serves as a model for a unique type of flexible norm that can be realized only through its ongoing transmission and transformation of the recipe. Unlike a technical text, the desire motivating a recipe's application is not universal applicability, but an application that can only be realized through the particulars of a recipe, its material resources, the cultural and social context, and even the individual tastes of those who prepare and experience it. So while technical knowledge and moral knowledge both «include the same task of application» (Ibid.: 315), this practical knowledge is distinct in that we do not simply possess this sort of knowledge like a tool that can be put to work to achieve a specific end in a blindly habitual manner: acquiring and cultivating this type of knowledge requires a very specific orientation towards the future best described as improvisation.

6. *Improvising recipes*

The good habit of remaining open to gastronomic possibilities that arise under variable conditions ensures that the more specific habits associated with the ends of gastronomy support rather than undermine their realization. The application of recipes therefore also demands a measure of improvisation – at times dramatically, but perhaps more commonly in implicit and understated ways that build upon the habitual experiences of a cook. This is already well-documented in Bertinetto's treatment of recipes and builds upon his rich work on the aesthetics of improvisation where he defines improvisation as «the expression of humanity acting in the face of contingency: an acting that is not guaranteed, is fragile, and exposed to the risk of failure, but also capable of creatively realizing its freedom» (Bertinetto [2022]: 31). To improvise is to grapple with a possible future in relation to an actual past, to diverge from that past rather than to believe we can construct something *ex nihilo* that was truly unforeseeable. The application of a text requires *understanding* it within a particular historical situation or context, such that its original conditions and intentions demand *interpretation* to be understood in the here and now. Application thus relies on a formative relation between habit and improvisation: «improvisation requires a capacity to act in the face of the unforeseen, such that new "behavioural patterns are made routine"» by developing a capacity to «*unlearn*» what one has learned. «The incorporated *know how* of habit makes the fluid acting of improvisation possible» (Ibid.: 21-23). The form of the recipe is one that remains open to variable conditions that challenge a strict reading of the recipe text – not only in the preparation of a dish, but in the *way* that humans pursue the gastronomic, and thus human, good.

As we just saw above, habit is oriented towards the future as the development of a practical moral knowledge which remains open to contingencies; but the application of recipes is also oriented toward the past through practices of improvisation which, paradoxically, entail the interpretation of the recipe and its historical and material conditions. The recipe demands that we understand it as a «history of effects» before we interpret it and potentially transform it through its application. We must respond to the history of the recipe to transform it and continue its history within a new context. The recipe, if understood only as a technical plan for success, would prioritize stability and reproducibility over contextual sensitivity and improvisation. Good habits in the kitchen would then become meaningless in the ethical sense: as the mere following of directions, they would aspire only to technical or immediate goods and would only contribute to the pursuit of the highest good incidentally.

Nonetheless, the technical measures employed to ensure a recipe's success (one often judged according to standards of repetition and consistency, or according to the already accepted – i.e. normative – tastes and expectations of a

given time and place) reveal how deeply improvisation relies upon «the history of effects» codified into the recipe's norms and enacted through the good habits that support their realization. The clearly stated directions and procedures of the recipe assume (and often obscure) the hours of training and history of experiences that make the recipe's directions appropriate for the preparation of a dish under particular material and social conditions: knife skills, multi-tasking, the organization of preliminary ingredients; the haptic and visual cues associated with readiness, the dexterity required to knead or form or fold, etc. These rigid dictates of the recipe do not limit the cook but provide a necessary starting point for exploration and discovery. The attentive cook, confronted with the changing conditions in which recipes appear, understands deeply that those instructions could have been written otherwise and is able to leverage her skills to cultivate its unexpected opportunities for improvisation. While this might occur due to a certain indifference by the cook in the face of the recipe's prescriptions, or due to a happy accident that befalls someone less experienced, an experienced cook who possesses good habits might read the rigid guidelines of the recipe as possibilities for learning – and even unlearning – what the recipe prescribes in new material and social conditions.

The encoded habits of the recipe's author, along with the learned habits of the cook, encounter resistance in the differences that challenge any presumed universality of the recipe's text: the fusion of horizons needs regulation (as Gadamer suggests) to overcome a mere clash of habits and norms. What is required in this moment is not simply a habit (*hexis*) for reasoning or compromise (there is no *third* that could offer reasonable terms of negotiation between the two horizons) but a good habit of engaging contingencies and cultivating difference – a good habit of improvisation. Such a habit embodies the continual striving for the good required by the ends of gastronomy and thus inevitably creates moments that demand improvisation. Improvisation in such cases can be minor, such as adjusting the recipe to compensate for ingredients that are not their usual quality or that cannot be used for health or religious reasons; but they can also quite radical when prior knowledge and current circumstances birth an entirely new dish and recipe. Transformation in such cases is not merely an aesthetic choice but reveals the *ontological flexibility* inherent to the recipe form, wherein the being of the recipe is subordinate to its broader ethical imperative.

7. *Conclusion*

The case of the recipe is in this way exemplary. As a unique cultural form, a recipe seems, in every instance, to be potentially contradicted by the very act of is application. Cooking with a recipe requires its always precarious negotiation

with the social and material conditions of the present. One cannot simply rely on past experiences to understand a recipe; nor can recipes simply be dismissed in the pursuit of the ends of gastronomy. To negotiate between the universal and the immediate, the past and the future, recipes require application. This seems true for the home cook and the gastronome, where ethical considerations are, for the most part, local concerns. However, more broadly, this reflection concerns a more general habit that reveals many of the failings of our current gastronomical practices. While the reading of a recipe might appear today as an obsession with cultural authenticity or a commitment to industrial replication, its most insidious form manifests symptomatically as denial – an unwillingness to accept the realities of a natural world in peril, an unsustainable food system, and the very precarity of our gastronomical pursuits. Recipes do more than codify a society's culinary practices: they represent our *ethos* and gastronomical health, and perhaps, as a prescription to remedy what ails us, place the demand of interpretation squarely on those who carry this knowledge forward.

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Notes

1   While a good deal of this essay focuses on the written form of the recipe, I intend the term "text" in the broadest sense, understanding that recipes can be transmitted through written text, oral speech, symbols and gestures, video demonstrations, and a host of other media.

2   I have chosen this recipe and dish for two reasons: the first is personal, as this recipe is one that I have often used in lectures, teaching demonstrations, and in my own personal cooking; the second is methodological, because it serves to illustrate some of the features common to many recipes – a basic structure (list of ingredients followed by instructions), a somewhat contested history, a culturally specific cuisine, an assumed set of techniques and practices that are not universal, and enough ambiguity to allow for variations and accidents.

3   The popularization of these scripts – such as Hieronymous Brunschwig's *Liber pestilentialis* (1500), which attempted to render the technical language of medicinal plague cures into the German vernacular – suggests that the emergence of the modern recipe addresses an epistemological problem in medical and culinary knowledge: how to disseminate such knowledge to those who are in the best position to deliver it.

4   Structuralist analyses often point to its uniqueness as a *technical text* that provides «instances of everyday operational definitions» (Norrick [1983]: 173). See also de Certeau, Giard, Mayol (1998): 215-216; Cotter (1997): 54-57; Görlach (2004). Comparative studies of recipes in particular identify the essential features of a recipe that persist despite changes in time, place, technology, and culture (see Arendholz, Biblitz, Kirner, Zimmermann [2013]: 119-137; Tomlinson [1986]: 201-216).

5   Sciacca considers the recipe a «continuant made up of the proper stages recorded in, for example, cookbooks, grandmothers' minds, on scraps of paper and so forth» (Sciacca [2020]:

237-238); however, on the subject of a recipe's transformation over time and the criteria by which such changes are distinguished, I resist his rather doctrinaire distinction between biological phenomena and social phenomena.

6   According to Harman (2014), objects are «a unified reality – physical or otherwise – that cannot be reduced either downwards to their pieces or upwards to their effects»; or, in other terms, «any entity that cannot be paraphrased in terms of either its components or its effects» (Harman [2016]: 3).

7   For more on the role of physical material in the process of formation and artistic improvisation, I point the reader to Valgenti (2021).

8   On this idea of unlearning that is central to acts of improvisation, see Bertinetto (2022): 7-12.

9   Other instances of a recipe's application could include the preparation of a cookbook, the use of recipes for teaching others how to cook, recipes as narrative or memoir, and as is common across social media today, the application of recipes as a form of entertainment or commentary. In all these instances, I maintain that the function of the recipe as a transmitter of gastronomic knowledge remains central.

Aisthesis

The Role of Habits in Documentary Filmmaking and in the Recognition of Documentary Works

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Abstract. It is generally agreed that documentary refers to reality. I argue that documentary is the cinematic form that elevates human beings' experience with reality to an artistic level, and that the documentary work may be conceived as a proxy of the perceiver's existential experience. Habitual practices related to recognizing authentic reality and its constraints underlie the filmmaker's commitment to not violating it, and behaviors exhibited accordingly inform practices. Habits, such as seeing the past through pictures and asking questions to understand other people's thought, have creatively evolved into cinematic techniques such as the use of filmic or photographic archives and interviews. The habit of deferring to experts for genre categorization determines that, due to their authority, the acceptance of challenging works facilitates genre transformation. A better understanding of processes that engage human beings with existence may help to comprehend documentary filmmaking practices, and vice versa.

Keywords. Documentary, art, existential habits, authenticity, perception.

1. *Introduction: documentary in between art and truth*

In 2010, the Guardian released an article in which the documentary was portrayed as a custodian of truth:

> In years where filmmakers are suspicious of the mainstream media […] they are increasingly turning towards documentary as a way to make sense of the world they live in […] and eager for a form that talks to them about real events in a real way. […] People are looking for bigger truths about the way we live now, truths they are not getting from Hollywood or the traditional media but from documentary works. (O'Hagan [2010])

While *post-truth* policies have poisoned the political and public debate (in 2016, the Oxford English Dictionary chose to designate *post-truth* as the Word of the Year) (Wang [2016]), documentary is experiencing its golden era, and it is interpreted as an antidote to mainstream forms of communication, which subordinate the truth to a secondary position. However, Tabitha Jackson, former director of Sundance Documentary Film Program, emphasizes that truth in documentary is «*a* truth, not *the* truth», and highlights that documentary *is* a form of art (Jackson [2022]). During the last 60 years, documentary filmmaking has established its success, leading to a proliferation of documentary film festivals that attract a vast number of viewers and facilitate the distribution of documentary works in movie theaters. Just to mention the largest venue in Europe, in 2022, the International Documentary Film Festival of Amsterdam (IDFA) welcomed more than 240.000 visitors[1]. Notably, in 2014, the documentary film *the Look of Silence* by Joshua Oppenheimer[2] was selected for the International Competition (traditionally including fiction films) at the 71st Venice International Film Festival and was awarded several prizes. Moreover, in the last two editions of Berlinale (in 2023 and 2024) the films awarded with the Golden Bear were documentary works although competing in a category generally including fiction films. Theorists and philosophers such as Bazin, Deleuze and Cavell, while not having developed a specific theory of documentary, place documentary within the broader tradition of cinematic art. They emphasize the significance of cinematic techniques not only for achieving artistic purposes but also for attaining realism, even in documentary filmmaking. Bazin, the French film critic held the view that cinema, among other arts, satisfies our obsession for realism in its very essence. The camera automatically reproduces reality without human intervention and establishes a direct relation between the filmic image and the object depicted by virtue of its indexical character. However, this alone does not suffice, as the indexicality of the filmic image, at most, allows to attain documentary value, which is not the aim of cinema, as, according to Bazin, cinema can never be separated from imagination (1958: 135). Only the mastery in *translating* the departing material – whether it be from the real world, a theatrical play, a literary novel –

into a cinematic work through proper cinematic techniques enables the attainment of realism, which, to a certain extent, can be intended as fidelity. The duration of shots, the type of cutting utilized, the rhythm established through cutting allow the filmmaker to create a world analogous to the departing material, through fidelity but not imitation. Bazin brought the example of Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922)[3], the first work recognized as a documentary. He highlighted that realism was achieved by means of the mastery in the use of cutting. In the hunting scene, the employment of a sequence shot, which for Bazin is the most effective device for achieving *fidelity* with respect to reality, allowed the author to put emphasis on the most important aspect of Nanook's relation with the animal (the seal): the wait. The truthfulness of the scene resides in Flaherty's ability to convey a specific true meaning (the wait) through a proper (artistic) technique (1958: 78). Gilles Deleuze portrayed cinema as the ultimate medium for the manifestation of reality as it is, in its continuous flux, liberated from the static impression given by the limitation of human perception, often bound to subject-object relation. The world of cinema is a construction whose relationship with the external world is not underpinned by the mimetic principle. Realism is attained through the embodiment of the dynamics of reality, constituted by a specific environment and human types inserted in that world, through cinematic techniques. This applies to documentary filmmaking, as well. According to Deleuze, in Flaherty's *Nanook of the North,* the reenactments employed and the mastery in cutting allow to capture the duel of forces between the individuated external world to which Nanook belongs and the protagonists, enabling new situations to emerge. The use of the action-image, characterized for focusing on movement and action within the frame, allows Flaherty's movie to capture the *tête-à-tête* of the protagonists with their specific environment, their fight to survive. The film embodies an existential conflict and, whether the story imitates the external world or not, its realism is the product of a cinematic construction based on narrative coherence and effective cinematic techniques which capture the conflict between forces enabling the individuation of life in potentiality. Realism can include fiction, the fantastic, and it determined both the triumph of American cinema and the origin of documentary (Deleuze [1983]: 141-142). Stanley Cavell highlighted the phenomenological component of viewing which involves the audience. As cinema is a public art, Cavell pointed out the author's responsibility regarding the meaning attached to filmic works. However, publicness is a shared responsibility, thus we are all responsible for the works we share, and the problem arises most explicitly in documentary filmmaking (Cavell [1971]: 126-127). He implicitly addresses a range of issues from the filmmaker's ethical standpoint to the assertibility of documentary filmmaking, without really offering solutions. Considering that also fictional movies can convey truths to a certain extent (Friend [2017]: 34-35), it is legit to pose questions regarding the type of truth

presented in documentary films, and their comparative character in relation to fiction. Philosophers within the analytic tradition, such as Gregory Currie, Trevor Ponech, Alvin Plantinga and Noël Carroll endeavored to define the nature of documentary from the perspective of philosophy of language. They focused on intentionality and on the propositional content of the work to justify the assertibility of documentary and draw a divide between fiction and documentary. In general, they define documentary by the author's intention that the audience entertains the work as true, where the emphasis is on the truth value of the propositional content, almost completely neglecting the artistic component of documentary filmmaking. These philosophers share the assumption that documentary is a sub-category of non-fiction, in contrast with fiction, where fiction is conceived as an invitation for imagining or make-believe, while non-fiction is understood as an invitation to believe. Some differences characterize their views. Currie endeavors to shed light on John Grierson's initial definition of documentary, created in the early '30s. The Scottish producer and film critic described documentary as a «creative treatment of actuality» (1932-1934: 19), acknowledging its clumsiness as a definition. In the attempt to *preserve* truth, Currie grounds his view on the indexicality of filming image as an essential element. He conceives a documentary film as one in which the preponderance of images has the representational function of traces (documentary units), although allowing that the whole film may contain parts which are *about* the subject of the narrative, but not traces of it (1999: 291). Noël Carroll substitutes «documentary» with a new concept, «films of presumptive assertion»*,* to provide an accurate definition for an extension of objects which coincide with what scholars have in mind when they refer to a work as documentary (1997: 173). He adopts the Gricean-type of intention-response model of communication (1997: 181) and attributes the author the responsibility for the standards of evidence applicable to the content of the work. Alvin Carl Plantinga proposes to consider the notion of «asserted veridical representation», a conception which bestows both a central, but not essential, role to assertion, and a fundamental function to images used as traces of the subject. A criterium which his account requires to be satisfied is that the relevant portion of the propositional content of a documentary is existing or has existed, since viewers expect from documentary that it is a reliable record or account of the actual world (Plantinga [2005]: 111-113). Several actual works universally recognized as documentary can function as counterexamples for these accounts. For instance, the Oscar nominated documentary film directed by Bartek Konopka, *Rabbit à la Berlin*, tells «the true story of the Berlin Wall, through the eyes of rabbits»[4]. Rabbits trapped between the Berlin Walls for 28 years represent metaphorically what occurred to Eastern Europe before and after the collapse of communism[5]. The intention of the author is to overtly interpret the story of the trapped rabbits as a metaphor of historical transformations in

Eastern Europe. Even though the audience can grasp the propositional content of the work and the metaphorical implicatures, standards of evidence cannot be applied in this case, since it departs intentionally from the factual for artistic purposes. Trevor Ponech endeavors to encompass artistic purposes and chooses a pragmatic point of view. He conceives documentary as a *cinematic assertion*, where the audio-visual components of the movie need not be fully factual, hence what it depicts needs neither to be existing, nor determined by conventions or norms related to objectivity (Ponech [1997]: 203-205). A cinematic work, according to Ponech, can be referred to as a documentary if and only if its author intends the work to be a documentary. While preserving the author's freedom, Ponech's account lacks discriminatory force, as also an accurate biographical or historical fiction film might count as a *cinematic assertion,* to a certain extent. Quoting Kendall Walton, it appears that speech act accounts suffer from the «have theory will travel» syndrome, which is the tendency of theorists to apply an old theory they love to deal with a new problem (1990: 76). Audio-visual images are rich in contents, allowing the viewer to grasp more than propositional contents, thus speech act theories may not be suitable for the task. In my view, Grierson's initial definition, which serves as a seminal point of reference for documentary practitioners, can prove highly effective in understanding the nature of documentary filmmaking, particularly when approached from a phenomenological perspective, notwithstanding its lack of analytical depth. From this standpoint, Grierson's conception seems to describe documentary as a proxy of the ordinary observer's experience with reality. This may elucidate why, despite the absence of a universally agreed-upon definition of documentary, documentary production persists, and viewers' appreciation may not be homogeneous. The widely held belief that documentary represents reality in a truthful manner leads individuals to automatically assume their phenomenal experience with reality as a point of reference. As this experience is characterized by the limitations due to an external world resistant to our control, viewers expects that documentary works do not violate reality constraints. Habitual practices and resulting behaviors that enable us to inhabit the world constitute the grounds for our phenomenal experience with reality and contribute to the aesthetic experience with documentary works. In what follows, I will endeavor to explain my argument.

2. *Documentary filmmaking and the habitual practice of* authenticating *reality*

John Grierson's definition of documentary is based on two pillars: i) in the first place, the cinematic form is conceived as art. The documentary filmmaker is not a scientist. Rather they are poets, committed to the environment which they portray with an artistic approach, making poetry by observing a

reality not easily transformable into art (slums, factories, streets, cities…); they make art out of observing reality through narrative components and commitment with observed people; ii) secondly, the filmic material is captured on the spot where the story happens, after a full immersion of years in the environment, among *originals,* and narratively organized as a drama. Documentary works are considered *truer than Hollywood films* since their narrative structures are derived from reality and not borrowed from literature or theater as it usually happens in Hollywood films, thus more apt at narrating contemporary life, albeit within an artistic framework (Grierson [1932-1934]: 21-25).

Grierson opposes the actual world of real people depicted in documentary films to the artificial, and *malleable*, world of Hollywood movies built for the sake of the camera through props and actors. Newsreels, journalistic essays, lectures, and scientific works are ruled out from the category, along with experimental movies without a narrative structure, as lacking an artistic approach. Grierson identified the embodiment of this *new and vital art form* in Flaherty's practice, while also acknowledging his attraction to exotism and romanticism. In initial times, documentary and ethnography shared their origins to a certain extent. Indeed, Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) is widely regarded as the first documentary film, as well as the first ethnographic film. As an ethnographer, Flaherty *immersed in reality* and captured *natural material of real people in real places,* which Grierson referred to as *originals*. As a documentary filmmaker, he creatively interpreted reality through reenactments and a narrative structure fulfilling subjective purposes. Notably, before Flaherty, in 1898, three years after Lumiére filmed their shorts, professor Alfred Cort Haddon, British natural scientist and ethnologist, employed a camera to film the dances of Torres Straits Islander. However, the material had only «documentary value» as it aimed at depicting reality as it was (Banks [1990]: 18). Bill Nichols, film critic and theorist, highlights a *strong impression of authenticity* for documentary films, by virtue of the indexicality of the filmic image. He describes the documentary film as a *representation*, and not a mere reproduction, of the actual world, namely the place that «we already occupy» (2001: 20). Indeed, as the representers do not coincide with the represented, the representation does not deflate into a mere reproduction. While Grierson's description provides a general outline of his conception of *documentary,* analytically, it fails to explain what justifies the assertibility of documentary. Bill Nichols contends that to a certain extent any film could be understood as a documentary, in the sense that any movie captures the cultural background from which it was created and reproduces the appearances of the people who perform within it (2001: 1). Cavell's notion of cinema may offer valuable insights for addressing the issue from a philosophical standpoint. He argues that while painting evokes our subjectivity, rather than the presence of the world in the work, cinema surpasses subjec-

tivity by bypassing the act of painting and employing an automatic tool (1971: 23). In my view, the documentary filmmaker's commitment with reality constraints, namely with reality's transcendence with respect to our mind, can be interpreted as a reassertion of our presence within the cinematic image, as our connection with the world is constitutive of the act of documentary filmmaking. Documentary filmmaking represent *reality as it is* by adopting the perspective of ordinary perceiver. While our actions and perception are bound by the constraints of reality, the documentary filmmaker regards these limitations as inviolable, and adopts subjective approaches to represent the world, whether internal or external, spanning from the maximum subjective to the maximum objective approach. Documentary filmmaking may be conceived as the art which embodies the experience of human beings in existence. In philosophy of perception, it is commonly agreed that humans are conscious and intentional being, that they have mental states and that they represent what is going on in the world. An individual might not be able to articulate *how it is like* to be *immersed in reality*, namely what it means to have this or that phenomenal experience such as seeing a red object or perceiving oneself as an individual among others, or to justify their perceptual beliefs regarding the external world. However, the recognition that we are living in an actual world whose objects have certain features, and that this implies constraints (primary physical) is a pre-condition for most of our behaviors. Typically, this recognition entails habitual practices exhibited unwarily. In general, people who are acting by mere habits are described as individuals who do something automatically, without critical thinking, vigilance, or careful consideration. Habitual practices are characterized by the repetition of identical performances (Ryle [1949]: 30). Much like the actions of walking, playing piano, standing, buttoning and unbuttoning – activities which may initially be prompted by an intention, but are later performed seemingly unconsciously (James [1950]: 5) – the recognition of actual reality is often unconscious, enabling our minds to focus on conscious activities. These habits are contingent upon sensory stimulation and the extents of *traces* left by such repetitive stimuli. In broad terms, sensory stimulation from the external world activates nerve-centers, which can either follow old pathways or forge new ones. This process determines whether a behavior becomes so ingrained to be exhibited unconsciously. This applies also to complex habits, which are essentially interconnected habits having a determined outcome (James [1950]: 107). Whatever theory of reality one might endorse, in standard conditions, a human being perceives to be an existing individual surrounded by existing objects, in a real world which cannot be controlled by our mind. In other words, we are inhabitants of a non-amendable, or mind-independent, world. We do not need to comprehend the concept of mind-independence to recognize that physical reality cannot be altered by thought alone. Think of how difficult it is to teach a child to stand and walk and how long it takes to the child to be eventually unconscious of the effort. In the meanwhile, they will

have learnt that the more the surface under their feet is solid the easier is to stand and walk, but also that the more hurtful will be to fall. Even without understanding the physical properties of solids, or knowing the concept of gravity, children instinctively learn how to interact with surfaces to minimize discomfort and soon the result will be that they will reduce conscious attention when performing the act of walking, unless some danger would catch their attention. The acknowledgment of the mind-independence of reality serves as a precondition for walking and arises as the outcome of the physical interaction between the child and the environment. This acquired habit, or complex of habits, namely *traces* on our brain of a habitually repeated state, enables us in the future to perform the same state in analogous circumstances. The earlier habits are formed, the more they seem spontaneous, innate and enduring, becoming integral part of our lifelong behavior (James [1950]: 236-237). The cooperation between organism and environment is a condition for acquiring habits: walking involves legs as well as the ground, speaking to someone implies physical air, vocal organs and some audience with a functioning hearing apparatus (Dewey [1922]: 14). Perception is involved largely. Leaving aside disagreements concerning the contents of perception – a longstanding philosophical debate about the properties of objects such as colors, tastes, and sounds, and whether to attribute them to objects themselves or to our sensations, dates back to at least to 17th century – our perceptual experience within an existing reality that transcends our mind is a pre-condition for our actions. By endorsing a Fregean representationalist perspective, some controversies can be overcome, and some phenomenal experiences can be immediately justified by perception. Chalmers, for instance, posits that some contents, such as colors, can be conceived as Fregean contents, namely as conditions on extension, different modes of presentations referring to the same concept (Hesperus and Phosphorus are different modes of presentation of the planet Venus). Therefore, a phenomenal experience corresponds to a certain mode of presentation (redness, for example) of a determined property, or of a set of properties, regardless of whether they are conceptual or nonconceptual (Chalmers [2004]: 22-23). This applies also to demonstratives, as Thompson maintains that also spatial and temporal experiences can be handled as Fregean contents (2003: 149-153). Thus, when I say, «this yellow lemon», provided that it is a genuine object-seeing experience, perception can immediately justify my phenomenal experience. Peacocke's notion of «minimal objectivity» can support this view. It maintains that there is a core class of contents, such as spatial matters of the kind of size, shape, distance, orientation, or temporal matters such as temporal order, temporal intervals, and others, which are caused by what they are *as* of, provided that the subject is embedded in the world in a proper way and that their sensory apparatus functions properly (2009: 792-793). While there is no agreement on whether these contents are conceptual or nonconceptual, some phenomenal experiences can be immediately justified and can «objectively» be

shared by other individuals. The property of being mind-independent – or *non-amendable,* or *non-malleable* – is constitutive of a physical reality about which one may say «it exists», and according to which one exhibits a certain behavior. From an ontological perspective, I intend for «non-amendability» that property of reality according to which it cannot be modified by conceptual schemes. For example, I might know, or not know, that water is referred to as H_2O, however, if I dive into water, I get wet, and thinking that hydrogen and oxygen as such are not wet does not help me not to get wet. In other words, I cannot amend what is in front of me in experience by using my conceptual schemes or mere thought (Ferraris [2012]: 48). Although one might not have a concept for it, or might not be aware of it, the subject's ability to respond automatically to the mind-independence of the external world is a pre-condition for many other habits and can determine survival. For instance, after experiencing a burn from touching fire, one will refrain from touching it again rather than hoping for a different outcome. Once acquired the habit not to touch fire, individuals will exhibit the same response each time they are near fire. These sorts of experiences reveal the external world as a physical environment which imposes limitations to different extents or presents dangers. In this sense, reality is not malleable, and since childhood we develop habitual practices to deal with these limitations and dangers to survive them. Recognizing the existence of the external world and its mind-independence corresponds to *authenticating reality.* The observer discerns whether facts occur in real life or in dreams, they ascertain the identity of people or the nature of the occurrence, and they act accordingly. *Authenticity* encodes the expectation of truth. It is a property which is bestowed to «who or «what» is «who» or «what» claims to be (Theodossopoulos [2013]: 339). The truth predicate we use for the original of which a copy, or a reproduction, can be done is *authentic.* Works of art such as paintings or sculptures must be *authentic* to have artistic and economic value. One says, if they have reason to say it: «This is an *authentic* self-portrait of Frida Kahlo». Although a copy of the painting might be a perfect copy, identical in every respect, it can't count as an original (Goodman [1976]: 113). The process of *authenticating* an object is rooted in perception, although it may also involve knowledge, as in the case with works of art or other objects that require more than mere perception. Hegel defines the authentication which occurs in the perceptual experience as the poorest form of truth; it corresponds to «it is», «it exists». Authenticity warrants the *authority* of the object and its authentication by means of the bare experience of sense-certainty (Hegel [1807]: 90). The authentication of reality is one of those habitual experiences that one accomplishes automatically and that determines other habits. For instance, in everyday experience, if we want to enter a restaurant and the door is closed, we automatically grasp the handle with a hand and open the door. However, to achieve that, one must first recognize that the door is a genuine one, that it is a physical object, a tridimensional one, that it

exists and, contextually, that physical objects cannot be penetrated by thought alone, nor can a human body attempt to phase through them without risking significant injury. A simple automatic action entails a long chain of habits developed through repetition and often exhibited unconsciously. According to Locke, when we assert that we are seeing a tri-dimensional object, whereas our seeing experience is of a two-dimensional surface with shadows, shape and color, what occurs to us is that judgement intervenes on sensations and «alters appearances into their causes». This is the result of a habitual practice that we develop as we mature once we can exercise judgement. Although it may seem that recognizing tri-dimensionality is solely a matter of sensations, in reality it is the outcome of sensations informed by judgements to some extent (Locke [1690]: 82-85). This is a settled habit as it is performed constantly. Some experimental studies on the perceptual illusion of «pop-out» dots, conducted by psychologists, have emphasized the role of unconscious inferences in certain instances of heuristic decisions-making, where heuristics refer to rules of thumbs for quick problem-solving often based on intuition, past experiences, and common sense. The same bi-dimensional image containing twelve spheres shaded from white to black can present either concave or convex dots when rotated by 180 degrees. In an environment marked with uncertainty, our brain assumes the external world to be tri-dimensional and utilizes factors such as shades, dimensions, shapes, distances to make a good bet regarding the nature and spatial relations of objects. Although these perceptual illusions may be classified as errors, some argue that they are beneficial errors. These *unconscious inferences,* which occur continuously and are learned from individual experience, have contributed to survival, and have facilitated evolutionary learning (Gigerenzer [2008]: 67-68). Once that we have *authenticated* the world surrounding us, we exhibit a certain behavior, based on our previous experiences and on current intentions. For instance, when observing a landscape, we might instinctively remove small objects obstructing our view, or reposition ourselves depending on whether the obstructing object is a tree, a building, or anything which is beyond our control. If we are attending an exhibition and we are observing a photograph of a door of natural size dimension hanging on the wall, we would not try to open the door, as we will have unconsciously inferred that what we are seeing is an image and not an *authentic* door. The habit to recognize the characteristics of the environment in which we operate is a prerequisite for every action and interaction. It is necessary to ascertain the identity of an individual before engaging in any exchange with them. Typically, when we dialogue with a person and we seek to understand their thought, or feeling, we ask them directly, instead of trying to read their though. We engage in conversations with people rather than with their photographic images since we learn in childhood that photographs do not talk to us. We are taught to ask people, and we do ask, it's a habitual practice for collecting information. However, one is rarely aware that the warrant of statements ex-

pressed in the first-person («I») form can be quite problematic, especially when it comes to feeling and beliefs. There is no agreement regarding the assessment of first-person authority. Ryle compares it to eye-witness authority, Davidson rejects it on the ground that regarding self-ascriptions the subject may not have better evidence than others, as Freud's interpretation of unconscious contents seems to support. Falvey conceives the first-person authority as an interpersonal phenomenon, thus the habit of the reader to take the speaker's avowal at a face value has a constitutive role (Falvey [2000]: 70). Asking questions to comprehend individuals' thoughts and feelings, explaining facts that we have witnessed to people who did not, watching pictures to see the features of people of the past, avoiding a tree while skiing down the mountains, and recognizing that our perspective may not always be optimal when attending events, thereby adjusting our actions accordingly, are habitual practices in our everyday life. But also driving or riding a bike while consciously thinking of events or conversations or reasoning about something are habitual practices. The documentary filmmaker can elevate these practices to an artistic level, such as conducting interviews, utilizing audio-video archive material, reconstructing past events, employing motion devices for filming, capturing observational material, and incorporating commentaries that are not purely descriptive. These techniques are rooted in experience. While in fiction films, poor lighting which determines grainy footage, unsteady camera movements, and limited access to individuals are perceived as mistakes, in documentary works they contribute to suggest that the filmmaker dealt with the constraints of authentic reality. At a perceptual level such *imperfections* implicitly say, «I, the filmmaker, was here, I am a witness, and I did not manipulate reality». Dewey maintains that although we use different terms to designate artistic production and aesthetic appreciation, they have a common root in experience, and that there is continuity between the artistic work and our experience in life (Dewey [1934]: 46). Art has the power to reconnect with the expressivity of things, eliminating the veil of familiarity which covers them (Dewey [1934]: 104). Indeed, whether on the one hand habits are the result of, or allow, significant experiences, on the other they may induce familiarity and indifference, obstructing the expressive potential of objects and experiences. Documentary films, as being representations made by an artistic subjective standpoint, and not mere reproductions, express meanings through the use of cinematic techniques, enabling the viewer to re-signify reality.

3. *From authenticating reality to recognition and appreciation of documentary works*

According to some, habits may have a determining role in defining who we are. Our ongoing relation with the environment, available technology, and oth-

er individuals modifies our subjectivity. The performance of habitual practices may be understood as available tools for achieving our aims, and their synergy with the environment can allow desire to merge with ideas and manifest into something tangible (Dewey [1922]: 25-26). Established habits automatically stimulate reflective imagination, thus strengthening thought processes, and conceptualization is facilitated as the exhibition of habitual practices enable the mind to be focused on specific intellectual activities, preventing attention from being dispersed (Dewey [1922]: 172-173). Art is one of the possible outcomes of these processes. Dewey conceives art as grounded on habitual practices, wherein the repetition of acquired skills through consistent practice may lead to achievements which should extend beyond mere mastery of technique. The artist, as a skilled and proficient technician, is driven by purpose and thought. Through the continual practice of acquired skills, the artist endeavors to accomplish significant outcomes, such as inspiring individuals to think, take action and change society to improve it. On the contrary, the mechanical performer tends to repeat the same performance as they are more interested in practicing for improving the skill itself (Dewey [1922]: 71-72). Cavell refers to Dewey while drawing a distinction between the artist and the technician (Cavell [1971]: 145). He defines the artist as someone who explores the possibilities of their art, such as cinema, but who are not necessarily devoted to its history as they aspire to create works with innovative structures that break with tradition to a certain extent. Cavell emphasized the artist's continuous questioning, which opposes endeavors of original narrative structures to the artistic tradition of cinema, as the grounds on which evolution is possible (Cavell [1971]: 72-73). The subjective innovative approaches of artists lead to the establishment of new practices and to the creation of new categories, as in the case of Flaherty. However, the artist's practice is the outcome of individual habits developed within the framework of established societal practices, as most of our activities are, as for instance, language learning, which typically occurs within the linguistic norms of a social group (Dewey [1922]: 100). Flaherty was operating within the Hollywood system when he pioneered a new cinematic art form with *Nanook of the North,* few years after cameras were already in use for scientific purposes in ethnography. Bill Nichols maintains that documentary has a historical nature and that during its evolution, six different modes of *re*presentation have come into prominence at a given time and place. The availability of new technological possibilities, the change of social context or the response to perceived limitations of previous modes contributed to the evolution. He provided a very influential classification, according to which documentary works can be classified in: Poetic, Expository, Observational, Participatory, Reflexive and Performative (2001: 99-138). However, the response to innovation in terms of aesthetic appreciation may be contentious,

as audiences may not automatically recognize and accept new categories. The Italian poet and philosopher Giacomo Leopardi attributes to habits the role of enabling generalizations (1817-1832: 209) and considers generalizations to possess a relative character. In his view, the repeated perception of something leads to habituation, thereby establishing it as a standard within its category. Consequently, anything different from the norm is perceived as going against the norm, as a contradiction. However, through repetition leading to habituation, this can potentially become another norm, and simultaneously the subject would refine their judgement and become more objective (1817-1832: 702-714). This may apply to Stacie Friend's view on genres. She conceives the documentary category as a genre embedded to a supra-genre, non-fiction. Her conception grounds on what Walton refers to as «categories of art», which are ways of classifying artworks in relation to medium, art form, style, or others, as relevant aspects for appreciation. Membership to categories is not determined by sufficient and necessary properties, but by a cluster of non-essential features which includes internal and external properties (Friend [2012]: 187), such as perceptual features of the contents, the categorial intention of the author, facts regarding the context of origin, and others. The genre functions as a contrast class against which the properties of the work stand out as standard, contra-standard or variable. Works possessing standard features with respect to the category are included, while those possessing contra-standard features are ruled out (Friend [2012]: 188). Variable features, such as for instance whether the film is in color or black and white, or its length, are irrelevant. In my perspective, individuals' phenomenal experience with reality constraints constitutes a sort of subjective contrast class which contributes to the recognition and appreciation of the work. In broad terms, when the perceptual content of the work suggests that the author has *not amended reality*, representing it without violating its constraints, viewers tend to perceive it as true and, if it aligns with their taste, appreciate it. The abundance of works sharing similar features tend to establish standards, sub-genres, movements or modes of representation. Innovative works employing highly creative solutions, emphasizing the author's subjectivity over the objectivity of the external world, potentially sacrificing the *impression of authenticity* of the work may raise audiences' perplexity. However, whereas viewers' judgement may be negatively influenced, the possible institutional acceptance and recognition of challenging works can impact audience judgement and favor the evolution of the genre. In this regard, I will provide an example. *You Have No Idea How Much I Love You* (2016) is an awarded documentary film by Paweł Łoziński, which premiered at IDFA[6]. The synopsis presents the film as such: «During a mother and daughter's intimately filmed sessions with a psychotherapist, blame, grief and anger gradually make way for reconciliation»[7]. The observational film comprises close-ups shots of

the three protagonists during the psychotherapy session which do not enable the viewer to ascertain whether sessions were conducted either collectively or individually. After the screening, during the Q&A, Łoziński explained that the filming of actual therapy sessions conducted individually was prohibited due to privacy restrictions, therefore the individuals depicted on screen were not the *real* subjects of the case, but rather actresses who shared similar experiences with the actual persons involved. On his defense, the filmmaker added that characters' teardrops were real since they strongly identified themselves with the actual persons of the case, as the analyst reprised some old familial conflicts of theirs. A portion of the audience expressed its discontent, as not everyone was convinced, whereas another segment appreciated the work. Assuming Peirce's framework, which can suit the experience of watching films appropriately, one might object that the perceptual experience with the work cannot justify the authenticity of the depicted facts and individuals. Peirce recognizes three sorts of elements: Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness. For example, the pain of the burn, which he understands as an indexical sign, is an experience of Firstness, it is on the level of sensations. Recognizing it as a «brute fact» and reacting to it is an experience of Secondness, whereas Thirdness is the comparison between multiple experiences of Secondness, allowing objectivity (Banks [1990]: 20). The Firstness of watching a film is completely different from the Firstness of shooting the film. The filmmaker meets *originals* in real places, while the viewer is sitting in a movie theatre, or at home, watching a screen. The viewer experiences a sort of second-hand Secondness. Walton maintains that the photographic image has a transparent character, in the sense that we look at the photograph and we *see* the object *through* it. However, the image does not coincide with the object. We *see* objects and the world *through* photographic and cinematic works, we don't see them directly (Walton [1984]: 246-252). Deleuze references Pasolini's idea that the filmic image is similar to the free indirect discourse, arguing that cinema is not only a direct means of communication but also a way to convey implicitly the viewpoint of someone else (1983: 73). The possible impression of authenticity conveyed by filmic images cannot justify the belief that the state of affairs depicted is authentic. Paraphrasing Roland Barthes on the "reality effect" of realistic literary works (1968: 146-148), that impression is nothing more than an *authenticity effect*. Authenticity is provided at the level of connotation, not at that of denotation. Thus, while the perceptual contents of the filmic work may or may not convey an impression of authenticity, a subsequent body of information may or may not justify our beliefs, and/or appreciation, in one way or another. In the case at hand, the revelation that protagonists were actresses has impacted a significant portion of the audience, as it may have elicited an impression of *inauthenticity*. However, another portion of the audience was not perplexed. In

general, the recognition and the acceptance of documentary works at an institutional level significantly influence viewers' recognition, as they tend to defer to institutional authority regarding the status of the work. However, subjective factors may interfere. According to Dewey, deferring to institutional authority is akin to the habit we acquire in childhood to deferring to adults. While habits tend to be self-reinforcing, when the institution is receptive with respect to novelty, innovation is possible. Indeed, whereas imitating adults' behaviors ingrains established practices in the child, the receptivity of adults to children can elicit renewal. This principle underlies the renovation of societies, institutions, and can allow avoid their stagnation (Dewey [1922]: 100). In the context of cinema, international, national and regional institutions (i.e., public and private funds) involved in the production of cinematic works by virtue of their funding activities have an active role in the accomplishment of the ontological attribution of genre (fiction or documentary or others) through official enactments which usually precede the production phase, namely filming sessions. A film which has met eligibility criteria and received funding is subject to formal and material obligations through contracts, official agreements and other types of treaties and deals, thus genre attribution is definitive. The institutional receptivity to authors' artistic aims – the higher the degree of innovation and artistic quality in the submitted work, the more favorable the evaluation of film funds and film festivals – supports the creation of works which challenge the conventions of the genre, contributing to its evolution. However, subjective factors of ethical or ontological kind, or a perceptual experience eliciting an impression of inauthenticity, may raise disagreements and impact appreciation. From a certain perspective, Łoziński's artistic choice does not violate reality constraints. The author has identified a stereotypical mother-daughter relationship, employing two actresses embodying two different human types, and has given instruction to the therapist to dig into their actual personal experiences. However, from another standpoint, one may argue that the propositional content of the work is false. Nevertheless, the work has continued its successful journey across festivals and in movie theatres, being universally recognized as documentary. Generally speaking, this challenging work may suggest that although there is a consensus that documentary represents reality truthfully, the expectation that documentary assertibility must be justified at a propositional level implies severe limitations to artistic freedom. Instead, interpreting documentary assertibility in terms of the author's commitment not to violate reality constraints, by developing a cinematic language inspired by experience, explains the expectation of truth elicited by documentary works and preserves artistic freedom. In this regard, a better understanding of processes that engage human beings with existence may help to comprehend the artistic and epistemic factors underlying documentary filmmaking and vice-

versa. This prompts reflections on whether philosophy should engage with documentary to understand its potential or to limit artistic freedom for preserving propositional truth.

Conclusion

While many aspects remain unexplained, the general framework presented documentary as the cinematic form that elevates human beings' experience with reality to an artistic level and the documentary work as a proxy of the perceiver's existential experience. The individual's habitual practice of authenticating reality underpins the filmmaker's commitment to not violate the constraints of reality. Meanwhile, strategies to transcend these limitations inspire the development of cinematic techniques employed in filmmaking. The authority of institutions that promote innovative approaches, combined with the habit to defer to experts on relevant issues, contributes to the evolution of documentary filmmaking practice, making it a promising artistic tool to better understand human nature.

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Notes

1 https://www.idfa.nl/en/news/35ste-editie-idfa-geopend-met-all-you-see-in-carr%C3%A9-en-35-theaters-in-het-land/.
2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bp1xT302VcY.
3 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkW14Lu1IBo.
4 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=miJVBpd0g8E.
5 https://letterboxd.com/film/rabbit-a-la-berlin/.
6 https://www.idfa.nl/en/.
7 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oII9-HMBjh4.

Normativity, taste and education

Aisthesis

Habits, Aesthetics and Normativity

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Abstract. This article explores the role of habits in shaping aesthetic normativity. It asserts that standards of value within aesthetic agency are not immutable, objective criteria detached from personal engagement in appreciation and creation, nor should they be reduced to mere individual subjective pleasure. The former stance fails to consider the essential expressivity and creativity at the heart of aesthetic practices, while the latter overlooks the normative framework that underpins the significance, validity, and quality of aesthetic agency. This framework is represented in the established rules of taste, the need for aesthetic education, and the dynamics of aesthetic disagreements.

Consequently, effective aesthetic normativity requires a balance: practices must be organized structurally around values that are, to a certain degree, communally shared, yet flexible enough to incorporate the expressive creativity of individual appreciation. This article contributes a nuanced explanation of aesthetic normativity by elucidating the impact of habits on aesthetic practices.

Keywords. Aesthetics, habits, normativity, aesthetic experience, philosophy of art, practices.

1. *Introduction. The dilemma of aesthetic normativity*

Aesthetic normativity concerns the manner in which one ought to act aesthetically, as well as

the rationales for aesthetic practices, including both aesthetic and artistic production and aesthetic appreciation[1]. The pivotal questions of aesthetic normativity are which norms and reasons guide aesthetic agency, perception, appreciation and judgment, both in the artistic realm and in everyday practices, as well as how they operate; what their origin is; and how they are established, enforced, and sustained.

Such issues emerge, for instance, in the face of aesthetic disagreement, when an object, like a work of art, is subject to divergent aesthetic evaluations, or when painters' styles are confronted with the criteria of a pictorial tradition, or when musicians ponder the extent to which they should comply with conventions in musical performance. These situations are also common in daily life, such as when deciding where and how to place a picture on a wall (see Wittgenstein [2007]: 1-40): when one makes aesthetic choices, such as how to decorate living space, personal preferences are contrasted with those of other people as well as with the prevailing style of decoration in a housing culture.

On the one hand, one might posit that in the aesthetic domain, unlike the cognitive realm, it is not feasible to identify universally valid principles for organizing experience and judgment: rather, «beauty lies in what pleases», suggesting that the measure of aesthetic value and the guide for aesthetic agency is the individual's pleasure. On the other hand, it seems that individual pleasure is not a reliable guide and that within aesthetic practices there must exist objective validity criteria to which one's experiences and judgments must conform. But how can the creative and expressive dimension of aesthetic behavior driven by pleasure be reconciled with the normative requirement?

It appears that we are faced with a dilemma. Considering pleasure as the source of aesthetic value seems to preclude the normativity of the aesthetic sphere; yet, regarding rule-following as the fundamental criterion for proper participation in a practice seems to neglect the role of appreciation and deprive normative practice of its aesthetic character. A solution to this dilemma could be to consider the appreciative/hedonic dimension of aesthetic experiences as a contribution to the shaping of the normativity of aesthetic practices[2]. Thus, the normative dimension of aesthetic practices should not be understood as mere conformity to established objective norms, but as the articulation of a normative order through the very exercise of aesthetic agency in artistic and everyday practices.

The point of aesthetic normativity is not just the correctness of one's behavior in relation to the norms of a practice, but also, and above all, the contribution that different types of aesthetic agency make to the (trans)formation of aesthetic normativity. In this vein, according to Gorodeisky (2021a; 2021b), the normativity of aesthetic practices relies on the aesthetic value produced by appreciative enjoyment. This can be understood as the pleasure deriving from savoring the personal engagement in an activity (Nguyen [2019]). Therefore, aesthetic agents exercise a degree of freedom concerning aesthetic norms: although individual

aesthetic behavior is organized and guided by the norms of aesthetic practices, agents may have reasons to alter them (see Kubala [2020]). In other words, those who participate in an aesthetic practice do so appreciatively: they do not blindly follow the norm as a mechanical rule that must be matched by one's behavior, actions, or works. Instead, the norm is adapted to the specific case by practitioners, thereby becoming an expression of their aesthetic agency and sensibility.

To sum up, in the aesthetic realm it seems crucial to acknowledge that aesthetic agents, who participate in a normative practice, do not merely follow the rules more or less well, but contribute, through their behavior and works, to shaping the practice itself. To illustrate with an artistic example, a painter is not an impressionist simply because they adhere to the typical characteristics of Impressionism – such as: emphasis on light and color, outdoor painting (plein air), everyday ordinary subjects (rather than historical or mythological scenes), use of pure colors, absence of sharp outlines, visible and rapid brushstrokes, focus on overall effect (not on details) –, but because they help shape and articulate these norms through their paintings. Nonetheless, a recognizable formal, technical, narrative, expressive, etc., organization guides the aesthetic agency of those participating in the practice, establishing differences with other aesthetic practices and artistic genres (for example, the differences between Impressionism and Cubism).

Aesthetic agency's standards of value are neither unchanging objective criteria detached from autonomous personal appreciative engagement and practical application, nor can they be simply equated with the subjective enjoyment of an individual. In point of fact, in the first case, the significant role that the expressive nature of aesthetic practices, and ultimately their inherent aesthetic quality, plays would be overlooked, while, in the second case, one would fail to recognize the normative aspect that is intrinsic to the relevance, validity, and quality of aesthetic agency, as it is particularly evident in the rules of taste and style characteristic of the various aesthetic and artistic practices (including ephemeral ones like fashion), in the social need for aesthetic education, and in instances of aesthetic disagreement.

My suggestion is that to understand the possibility and functioning of normativity in the aesthetic domain, which requires compatibility between the organizational structure of a practice based on (more or less) shareable values and the expressive creativity of individual appreciation, we must clarify the role that habit plays in aesthetic practices.

2. *The habitual core of aesthetic normativity*

There is an obvious way in which habits are linked to aesthetic normativity. In fact, one can have good or bad aesthetic habits, that is, habits that comply

(well), badly or do not comply at all with normative criteria of aesthetic value commonly shared by participants in an aesthetic (including artistic) practices. Accordingly, in reference to specific aesthetic practices – such as e.g. clothing fashion, avant-garde painting, cuisine, gardening, free musical improvisation, techno music, ceramics, and urban furnishings – those with good aesthetic habits tend to respect the aesthetic normativity of the relevant practices: they have good taste and/or style; those who do not have good aesthetic habits have bad taste/ style (or have no taste/style at all) and violate the normative aesthetic norms of the practice.

A person might be considered to have poor taste in cooking if they indiscriminately mix flavors that clash or use ingredients of low quality, resulting in meals that are unpalatable or poorly presented. A gardener may reflect poor taste if they allow the garden to become overgrown, cluttered with ornaments that do not harmonize, or feature plant combinations that do not complement each other in color, form, or function. However, in a community accustomed to the English garden, a formal garden organization that is very geometrically precise – like in the French garden – would be out of place, possibly resulting in an unpleasant appearance. In painting, poor taste might be displayed by an artist who uses garish, conflicting hues without purpose, or whose subjects and motifs are trite or devoid of technical proficiency. Sartorial choices characterized by ill-fitting garments, incongruous patterns and colors, or adherence to unflattering trends might similarly be indicative of deficient taste in fashion. A film or video might show poor taste through clumsy special effects, overacting, or a plot that is riddled with holes or relies on stereotypes.

In all these exemplary cases, what is aesthetically right (or acceptable) or wrong (and unacceptable) seems ultimately to depend on the habits of the aesthetic practices in question. Thus, performing recognizable melodies would be acceptable in a practice of singing popular songs together, while within the context of an atonal and noise-based free improvisation performance it could be interpreted as a transgression of the customs defining the artistic practice. And yet, in certain cases, what goes against common taste can manifest an original style, i.e. characteristic individual aesthetic habits that may be appealing for its extravagance or its capacity to innovate a practice based on aesthetic habits perceived as stifling or outdated. Indeed, as Adorno (1955) elucidates, even *Neue Musik* (new music) can rapidly age: excessive replication of novelty swiftly renders it clichéd. Going beyond or against the cliché, by habitually adopting different aesthetic attitudes, can result in a virtuous contribution to the articulation of a felicitous normativity of an aesthetic practice.

Thus habits shape shared aesthetic practices, regulating the goodness or badness of individuals' taste in reference to the normative aesthetic profile of an aesthetic practice. Yet, habits may also sculpt the unique aesthetic style of a

participant in an aesthetic practice – possibly manifesting as mere eccentricity or inappropriateness, or alternatively as creative originality and innovation – and can establish aesthetic models, which may either be revered as sacrosanct or perceived as stagnant, frayed, and suffocating.

Therefore, the thesis that I aim to defend in this article is that habits play a constitutive role in the articulation of aesthetic normativity. Habits are (embodied) patterns of behavior that shape, organize and norm aesthetic practices. Furthermore, since habits are enacted through contextual interactions between the organism and its environment, and evolve through these situated interactions, the aesthetic normativity constituted and regulated by aesthetic habits is situated as well: it is negotiated through the situations in which aesthetic practices are carried out.

Hence, as I contend, habits organize and structure the aesthetic experience of individuals; yet, this organization has, from the outset, a social character and entails a normative dimension that enables the creative dimension of the aesthetic experience, rather than necessarily excluding it. In this sense, the notion of the habit plays a crucial role for understanding the specific dimension of the normativity of aesthetic practices.

Against this view, it may be objected that habit, far from fostering aesthetic experience, hinders it. However, I have already addressed this potential objection (Bertinetto [2024]) by arguing that, while mechanical habits may hinder aesthetic experience, virtues and intelligent aesthetic habits – those shaping aesthetic styles of perception, appreciation, and aesthetic agency and capable of adapting to situational specifics – are essential for aesthetic experience. Furthermore, the (meta)habit of improvisationally transforming habits, which is at the core of habit formation, is inherently aesthetic. Yet, one may raise the further objection that habit, far from normatively organizing the experience, is incompatible with normativity. Therefore, to argue that habit can resolve the problem of aesthetic normativity, it is not sufficient to clarify that the aesthetic experience is not hindered by habit. It must also be explained that even in the aesthetic domain, habitual behavior is not in conflict with acting according to norms and values. This is the philosophical work I aim to undertake in this article.

3. *Aesthetic habits, niches and situated normativity*

Habits are essential to human life, and this holds true for aesthetic experiences as well. As I have discussed in Bertinetto (2024), aesthetic practices are shaped by plastic patterns of perception, imagination, emotion, cognition, and action – what can be termed as «aesthetic habits». These habits are cultivated through frequent engagement with a wide range of aesthetic activities, not just art, and

are crucial in organizing and facilitating these endeavors. They nurture aesthetic sensibility/sensitivity[3] and attentiveness and this, in turn, affects stylistic expressiveness as well as aesthetic enjoyment, appreciation, and creativity. As these habits are activated, they undergo refinement and transformation, influencing not only artistic and performance skills but also shaping aesthetic preferences and expectations in daily life, such as in fashion, cuisine, decoration, and travel.

Accordingly, aesthetic habits play a foundational role in structuring – or scaffolding – the aesthetic lives of individuals and societies, enabling and regulating aesthetic experiences. These habits, which are integral to aesthetic practices across varied cultures, shape «aesthetic niches»[4] – the cultural-natural contexts or habitats where individuals enact their aesthetic behaviors, form their preferences, and hone their abilities and sensitivities in the diverse areas of aesthetic agency (Portera [2020; 2021]). The specific and situated practice of aesthetic agency, in turn, contributes to the ongoing formation and transformation of these habits.

Arguably, this organization of aesthetic experience and agency through the formation of aesthetic habits that structure specific aesthetic environments (niches) carries normative weight. This is because habitual patterns are appreciated as values – whether positive or negative – that regulate the dynamic system of historical-cultural expectations and preferences known as taste.

Therefore, the aesthetic norms governing various practices, including the concepts that denote aesthetic or artistic properties and criteria for agency, appreciation, and evaluation – such as elegant, sentimental, graceful, delicate, robust, dainty, garish, brilliant[5] – can be comprehended in terms of habits: individual and social habits organizing and guiding aesthetic perception, appreciation, and production and providing standards for aesthetic judgment and art criticism. As such, they do not ground aesthetic practices from the outside but are themselves integral parts of their dynamics. They regulate aesthetic behavior, but aesthetic agency in concrete situations reshapes them.

In this context, aesthetic habits may be regarded as embodied norms that guide aesthetic agency, manifesting in individual tendencies and dispositions. These habits sculpt the distinctive qualities of behavior, values, and preferences that characterize personal expressive styles and tastes. Furthermore, these habits play a critical role in the social coordination of aesthetic practices, influencing styles, genres, aesthetic concepts and shaping collective preferences. Both individually and socially, the practice of aesthetic agency impacts and feeds back on these habits, influencing their normative significance. Thus, the normative value of aesthetic behavior, directed by the habits that define aesthetic niches, is in a constant process of negotiation through the performance of aesthetic practices. Such practices contribute to continuously reshaping aesthetic habits, in response to specific situations and environmental affordances (Chemero [2003]).

The fact that aesthetic habits unite social groups in the pursuit and articulation of specific aesthetic values explains the normative constraints of aesthetic practices. However, since habits evolve and can change over time based on their enactment in specific situations, this also accounts for the historical shifts in taste and aesthetic practices. Furthermore, the existence of different habits among various social groups, and the potential divergence between social and individual habits, elucidates the conflicts that arise in judgments of taste.

Individual and social aesthetic habits interact and shape one another. People are influenced by their personal aesthetic habits and the collective habits associated with the practices they engage in. Over time, these practices evolve through the aesthetic actions of individuals. For instance, the decision to adhere to an aesthetic norm – like ending a musical piece in a minor key with a Picardy mayor third (as discussed by Kubala [2020]) – is actively negotiated within musical practice. Modern listening habits may favor ending with a minor third, breaking from the traditional norm, while a musician might choose to honor the historical convention, challenging contemporary stylistic trends.

Therefore, aesthetic habits or norms are directed by what is valued as aesthetically superior in each particular situation. Such choices can create divergences between individual and social habits or norms, influencing their (trans)formation. They also highlight variances among different social norms that underpin aesthetic appreciation and guide decisions in aesthetic creation and evaluation. Moreover, these choices also reveal the reasons and motivations for selecting one aesthetic direction over another.

Thus, my argument regarding the role of habits in aesthetic normativity can be summarized as follows. Firstly, the pleasure derived from aesthetic appreciation is inherently connected to the situated and appreciative enactment of aesthetic habits, which are normative within the framework of aesthetic practices. Such pleasure is pivotal in establishing and reinforcing an aesthetic habit (Bertinetto [2023; 2024]). Secondly, the value and significance of aesthetic practices are rooted in the context of aesthetic niches that habitually structure and guide the choices and preferences of individuals, social collectives, and cultural entities. Engagement in these practices is justified by this inherent value: when coupled with the pleasure derived from associated aesthetic experiences, this value provides a strong reason to pursue excellence within those practices. Consequently, aesthetic values are concretely negotiated through the situated activation of appreciative behavior within a specific context, guided by one's ingrained aesthetic habits and sensitivities. This dynamic explains the motivations behind individual engagement in aesthetic practices – both within and beyond the realm of art – and captures the fluid, dynamic, evolving, and permeable nature of these practices. As I contend, this interplay is the root and the backbone of aesthetic normativity[6].

4. *Habits and normativity: a problematic relation*

As mentioned at the end of Section 2, the argument just presented regarding the role of habits in aesthetic normativity can, however, be subject to a rather strong objection. Indeed, it seems that habits cannot be considered as normative reasons for acting.

To make a long story short, it can be surely argued, first, that habits are embodied norms of action (Peirce [1931]; Massecar [2016]: 54, 59; Menary [2020]), i.e., dispositions to act that can be followed better or worse, and, second, that –as defended by philosophers such as Aristotle, Montaigne, and William James, among others (Piazza [2018]; Sparrow, Hutchinson [2013]) – habits organize and preserve society, because they anchor individuals in the context of a shared common sense with respect to the values that govern forms of social life. Hence, arguably, norms can be effective when they are embodied in habits.

Nonetheless, it seems that habits, as such, are not normative for two reasons:

(1) it is the practice that is normative (i.e.: good or bad), not the habit that conveys it;

(2) habitual action is not voluntary, thus it is not free and therefore it is normatively irrelevant (Hartmann [2003]: 154).

Accordingly, one would simply engage in behaviors deemed as customs and habits, adhering to them on the grounds that «it is done this way» (Delacroix [2022]). Habits would elude any rational articulation and its normativity would merely be the «normality» of behavior (Salaverría [2007]: 235)[7].

Under such circumstances, habits would passively mirror the banality of conventional wisdom inherent in socially and culturally governed everyday behaviors, including those underlying aesthetic and artistic experiences. Although education can preform habits to the exercise of virtuous practices (e.g., it can educate against contracting habits of racism or homophobia, or bad aesthetic taste), the normative value seems extrinsic to the habit. Habits seem to constrain freedom and to involve both a compulsion to mechanical repetition of patterns of action and thought absorbed as taken for granted and an escape from rational deliberation. Thusly conceived, habits seem to be obstacles to the exercise of normative practices: they do not organise behavior as rationally processed norms, but rather as physical-mechanic constraints. This seems to contradict the idea that it is precisely the habitual nature of practice which holds aesthetic normative value.

Yet, the issue does not seem to be so clearly resolvable. First, understanding habits exclusively as social customs/consuetudes or unreflective individual abilities, as such opposed to (reflexive) virtues, does not seem to be entirely appropriate. Individuals inherit habits from the social contexts in which they are embedded from birth and their self-identity gradually emerges from those

inherited habits (Dreon [2022]: 123). In this sense, habits scaffold the cultural environments (niches) in which individuals develop. However, habits are then transformed by those who activate them in their situation, thereby impacting and possibly transforming their niches. Habit, according to a Deweyan conception, ensues from the mutual shaping of organisms and their environments (Dreon [2022]: 110). Accordingly, it is also inappropriate to claim that habit is only individual and as such contrasts with the social dimension of rules and conventions.

Moreover, the acquisition of habits is not necessarily normatively neutral (Hartmann [2003]: 150): as I have argued elsewhere (Bertinetto [2024]), habit is not necessarily (only) a mechanism that, as such, blocks and prevents attention to the relevant aspects of a situation, thereby constituting a problem for normativity. Habits cannot be reduced to mechanical routines and skills. Habits organize our experience by responding to what is happening in the environment. And, as such, precisely their organizing power can be evaluated as normative, in the sense of fostering a good life (Di Paolo et al. [2017]; Ramírez-Vizcaya, Froese [2019]).

However, this general attribution of normativity to habits has the defect of being too general. If one were to follow it all the way, it would lead to the exclusion of bad habits and unrighteous customs, while on the contrary, bad habits and corrupt customs exist. This is also true in the area of aesthetics, where one can certainly speak, e.g., of corrupt taste and pompous or mediocre style: customs, habits, styles are not in themselves good or beautiful. The relationship between habits and normativity is therefore much more complex, and also much more interesting. Resorting to Hartmann ([2003]: 193 ff.) and Delacroix (2022), we can identify six ways to articulate the normativity of habits, assuming that what applies in general also applies to aesthetic habits:

(1) acquired habits preform decision-making attitudes and behaviors: by contracting habits not only reactively, but also proactively, individuals build their character positively or negatively;

(2) the habituation process of practices and behaviors also involves the absorption of norms, which involves the adaptation of the norm to the individual and his or her situation;

(3) habits of good practice are good: the normative value of the practice in question is transmitted to the corresponding habit;

(4) although habits are not (abstract) norms on the ontological level, neither are they mere natural instincts; rather, even in their repetitive regularity, they have a practical-cultural dimension (and are a *second nature*, as defended by a venerable philosophical tradition; see Rath (1996): therefore, habits can acquire normative significance when they constitute a substantial part of the projects – intentional and grounded in reasons (always put to the test of the situation) – that organize practices and actions (Cavell [1979])[8].

According to 1-4, habits are normative with respect to the actions that rely on them: they link, organize, and direct actions in ways that are compatible with and functional for human projects and practices (Levine [2012]: 248-272).

(5) Moreover, the very distinction, between mechanized (rigid) routines and intelligent (plastic) habits (Dewey [1922]: 70 ff.), already implies a normative evaluation: intelligent habits, in fact, are normatively better than merely mechanical ones, because they can modify themselves to be more effective in their organization of existence;

(6) finally, and importantly, normativity functions effectively when the relevance of norms, recognizable and appreciable through the practice of a (meta)habit of responsiveness and attentiveness to the concrete demands of the situation (Magrì [2019]) – a (meta)habit which is crucial for the virtuous functioning of every habit –, is experienced in relation to specific contexts.

This last point deserves to be briefly discussed, not least because it is highly relevant with regard to the relationship between habits, on the one hand, and aesthetic experiences and practices, on the other hand.

5. *Habits' Role For Situated Aesthetic Normativity*

Although norms can become objectified in institutions, designed to regulate individual behavior from the outside, or in mandates, to which one is expected to comply, the reasons why human practices are normative is arguably as follows. Actions and perceptions are interventions in the socio-natural/material environment that are sensible/sensitive to normative corrections and demand approval/disapproval regarding one's own and others' conduct. Successful social interaction requires gauging others' reactions against shared values, which depends on the implicit duty to comply with expectations. Hence, social interaction inherently possesses a normative character, founded on shared behavioral customs, i.e. on habits as «normative patterned practices [that] spread out over a group and […] are acquired by learning from others» (Menary [2020]: 314). Yet, criteria for the appropriateness/inappropriateness of behavior cannot be taken as universally valid, but are negotiated relative to the needs of the situation. Individuals do not act according to pre-determined norms received as external obligations, but are inclined to tailor their normative orientation to their perception of what the situation demands (see Frega [2015]; Boncompagni [2020]). It is mutual engagement, depending on the ability to interpret others' reactions with respect to the regularity of a shared system of values and on feedback effects that the functioning of a normative order produces upon the order itself, prompting continuous change and adjustment according to the action's requirements, that generates the normativity of practice (also facilitated by the reparation of actions deemed wrong).

This underpins the argument for the situatedness of the normativity of human practices (Van den Herik, Rietveld [2021]): norms do not merely underlie behavior, but are accessible to agents for the regulation of individual and social conduct in concrete situations, that is, they are internal to the practices themselves. Thus, institutional normativity is concretely realized through the fluidity of practices in which participants negotiate the normative values of their aesthetic agency in the course of their own creative and appreciative actions (see Bertinetto, Bertram [2020]). Normative behavior is not merely about complying (to varying degrees, more or less effectively) with the norms of a practice as foundational rules. Rather, it entails the articulation of practice norms through appreciative response and a commitment to sensible/sensitive attentiveness to the situation. This commitment nurtures an attunement with the social-natural environment, fostering active and creative engagement in the normativity of practices. Norms are learned, absorbed as habits, and collectively articulated by individuals according to the opportunities/appropriateness of concrete situations. Norms are negotiated within the practices they help to structure. They function effectively and smoothly when they are embodied in social customs and ingrained in habitual behaviors, becoming action dispositions that can flexibly evolve and adapt through interaction with the environment (see Zhok [2014]). Certainly, even in the aesthetic and artistic realm, the norms that regulate human practices are objectified in institutions acquiring a certain rigidity; however, their application requires the capacity to accommodate the unpredictable concreteness of the specific situation to which they must be adapted.

Therefore, the normative felicitousness of a habit hinges on the careful perception and appreciation of its relevance and suitability to the specific situation in which it is enacted. Should a norm (and its corresponding habitual behavior) prove unsuitable for a particular context, it ought to be altered or abandoned: habits of attention enable us to discern the (in)appropriateness of «normal» habitual actions, and this awareness prompts the alteration of the normative status quo[9]. Importantly, just as the (trans)formation of habits is an aspect of their functioning as habits, in many cases reflection on the validity of practical norms[10] does not take place outside of practice, but is part of these practices themselves: it is an engaged contribution to these practices, which (re)negotiates the norm through an appreciation of the (appropriateness of the) norm within the specific situation, possibly reorganizing the practice accordingly.

Therefore, the normative suitability of habits requires rejuvenating our practices and behaviors by developing the aforementioned (meta)habit of attention and sensibility to the situational context of one's actions. That is, ensuring that this (meta)habit of attentiveness – which, as can be argued (Bertinetto [2023]), is also at the root of the formation of the habit itself – is integrated into all habits. Habitual behavior expresses normativity through the exercise of habits as a dis-

cernment of appropriateness regarding the activation of an attitude in a specific circumstance. If the action to which one is accustomed does not suit the particular moment or situation, it is prudent to adapt the behavior accordingly. Hence, the normative validity of habits cannot be comprehended in the abstract; it must be attuned to the context (see Landweer [2012]). It follows that as intelligent dispositions to act, habits enable transformations to adequately respond to specific environmental affordances.

These reflections on the habitual character of norms, the normative aspect of habits, and the relationship between habitual normative validity and respect for/responsiveness to/resonance with the specificity of the situation apply, a fortiori, to aesthetic experience as well.

On the one hand, the ability to savor and taste the normative goodness of a behavioral pattern or a custom in the concrete case and to transform it creatively, if needed, by plastically adapting it to the (more or less expected) situational affordance, is per se an aesthetic type of sensitvity. It is a kind of style (of life: see Shusterman et al. [2012]), consisting in the cultivated disposition to respond to unexpected novelty, (trans)forming itself appropriately. Which suggests that normative practices inherently demand the cultivation of aesthetic taste. In other words, the effective functioning of a virtuous normative practice, shaped and sustained by good habits, carries an aesthetic quality. By fostering a resonant engagement with the environment and others, it yields satisfaction and self-esteem, as well as garnering the approval of others; thus, the dynamics of normative practices engage agents in a communal consensus, the aesthetic aspect of which echoes Kant's notion of taste as «common sense»: a sensibility or a sentiment for the shareability of the own' appreciative experience (Kant [1790]: 68-71, 123-125; Bertinetto [2022]: 147-157).

On the other hand, the fact that the norms governing aesthetic practices should be understood as (constituted and nurtured by) behavioral habits (perceptual, affective, cognitive, etc.) concretely negotiated by the participants, implies that they are not abstract and merely mechanical routines, but – according to the Deweyan conception of intelligent, sensitive, artistic, flexible, i.e. virtuous habits (Dewey [1922]: 28, 71-77) – forms of organizing experience guided by the (meta)habit of situational attentiveness and, therefore, potentially (trans)formed by the way they are activated in concrete situations. Accordingly, the way in which habits organize different aesthetic niches thus constitutes the basis of aesthetic normativity. This explains, firstly, both the need for sharing claimed by the individual's aesthetic experiences and judgments (i.e., the claim to general validity of the judgment of taste, crucial to the Kantian theory of the *sensus communis*) and the need to engage personally in matters of aesthetics (in fact, the point is not to attain information about a phenomenon or object, but rather to be involved in and "resonate with" it), and, secondly, both the aesthetic agreement

within communities of taste and the aesthetic disagreement between different communities of taste and even within the same community (in fact, everyone activates aesthetic habits individually).

Of course, aesthetic normativity is generated also by the cognitive and pedagogical technologies we absorb in our involvement within particular artistic and, more generally, aesthetic niches. For example, we learn the concept of «ballet» by learning (thanks to epistemic and pedagogical technologies) sets of subsidiary concepts – piruetta, jeté, tendu… – that regulate particular actions within ballet (Richards [2022]: 118 ff); and we incorporate those concepts as behavioral habits also thanks to the collective acceptance of aesthetic habits as rules of the relevant aesthetic practice, endowed with «deontic powers» (which establish what is allowed, what is obligatory and what is forbidden: see Searle [2010]), perhaps supported by institutions (in the specific case for example ballet schools and academies) that legitimize the habitual activities at issues by structuring their normativity. Nonetheless, the concrete normativity of aesthetic practices functions thanks to habitual attitudes of participants, including appreciators and critics. Moreover, it is sensible/sensitive adaptation to specific situations that shapes the way aesthetic habits configure their normative value for aesthetic practices: through the approval and disapproval of teachers, appreciators, critics and other participants, as well as through our own affective response, we not only learn, but also develop, the normative character of an aesthetic practice.

The normativity of aesthetic practices is complicate and fluid. Each individual usually participates in different aesthetic niches, and these are porous, being able to influence each other. Moreover, the normativity of practices is also influenced by the individual preferences of individuals within the same niche, which, in turn, may depend on reasons of various kinds: pleasure, emotions, knowledge, politics, money… Contrary to what Richards ([2022]: 127) claims, individual preferences do not articulate a normativity independent of the normativity operating withing their aesthetic niches: our preferences and taste, in fact, are not independent of the habits, conventions, and aesthetic norms that govern the aesthetic niches in which we operate. Rather, individual preferences activate the normativity of niches situatively, that is, by adapting the normative habit to the specific situation in which the individual operates, and this contributes to (trans)forming the normative habit itself.

In the realm of aesthetics, the normative aspect of a practice must be reconcilable with its potential for creative development. The possibility of this reconciliation is provided by resorting to the notion of habit (or custom): in fact, habit is capable of harmonizing normative regularity with adaptiveness, plasticity and creativity of behavior. Not only does this support the notion that acquiring a habit activates an aesthetic sensibility/sensitivity, but it also suggests that aesthetic normativity is produced within the actual processes of aesthetic (and artistic)

creation and appreciation that are regulated by habits that can flexibly adapt and respond to specific situations. In essence, habits provide an explanation for the normative dimensions of aesthetics and, conversely, the aesthetic dimensions of normativity as such.

6. *Conclusion*

In this article, I have argued that the dilemma of aesthetic normativity can be grasped and resolved through the concept of habit, a cornerstone of human behavior. In another article (Bertinetto [2024]), I contended that habit does not conflict with the dimensions of creative and hedonic freedom intrinsic to aesthetic experience. Here I have endeavored to demonstrate that habit also aligns with the normative dimensions of human practices, a connection that is especially noteworthy within the aesthetic realm. Habits – both social and individual – scaffold aesthetic niches, shaping our aesthetic capacities and preferences into aesthetic habits. Furthermore, the concept of habit provides insight into critical aspects of normatively regulated action and underscores the situatedness of normativity, which itself bears an aesthetic dimension. Indeed, a good (intelligent, virtuous) habit includes an aesthetic sensibility/sensitivity, embodied in the (meta)habit of attentiveness and responsiveness to context. This sensibility/sensitivity, a function of the habit's attunement to situational contingencies and demands, allows the normative goodness of our behavior to be appreciatively assessed in terms of appropriateness. This is particularly true in the realm of aesthetic practices and experiences, which are not only organized by networks of aesthetic habits but also require a nuanced sensibility/sensitivity to the specifics of each case and situation – what is traditionally known as (good) taste. Cultivating this aesthetic sensibility/sensitivity as a habit, one that involves wisely improvising behavior to meet the demands of the moment is crucial (Portera [2023]; Bertinetto [2024]). This ability to adapt and respond, which lies at the heart of aesthetic normativity, plays an essential role in our aesthetic engagement with art and beyond[11].

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Notes

1   An aesthetic practice can be defined as a kind of social practice that is concerned with aesthetic experiences and values. In turn a social practice can be defined as «a shared form of activity partially constituted by norms that govern roles, actions, and attitudes» (Kubala [2021]: 411).

2   This can be considered a Kantian/Wittgensteinian proposal: see Feloj (2020) and Appelqvist (2023) for detailed discussions of, respectively, Kant's and Wittgenstein's takes on aesthetic normativity.

3   I use this composite expression to indicate that a good habit involves an awareness and responsiveness to aesthetic details and nuances (and is thus aesthetically sensitive), but this is also a practical capacity to respond judiciously to the aesthetic context (sensibility).

4   According to the Niche Construction Theory – developed by John Odling-Smee, Marc Feldman, and Kevin Laland – organisms are not passive entities in the face of natural selection. On the contrary, they modify their ecological niche, influencing the selection process. Organisms co-direct their evolution by modifying their environment. This modified ecological niche is never static, but always *becoming* with the species that inhabit it, and it is inherited. In the case of more complex species like Homo sapiens, the modified environment is never only natural, but also social and cultural (see Pertile [2020]). The aesthetic niche, then, is a specific dimension of human beings' culturally modified environment: it provides individuals

aesthetic habits, while then individuals, through the activation and plastic adaptation of these habits, contribute to re-shaping their aesthetic niche.

5   On aesthetic concepts see Sibley (1959).

6   This argumentative strategy circumvents the difficulties encountered by both *hedonism* (for which variants, see Van der Berg [2020]) and Dom Lopes's *Network Theory* (Lopes [2018]). Hedonism regards pleasure as the source and/or justification for aesthetic value, underpinning aesthetic appreciation and judgment. Conversely, Network Theory proposes that the criterion for aesthetic agency should be located in acting in accordance with the norms of aesthetic practices. The primary criticism against Hedonism is that taking pleasure as the sole source of aesthetic value undermines the rational basis for of aesthetic normativity: it is impractical to establish aesthetic standards if the ultimate criterion is purely individual preference. A significant objection to Network Theory is that grounding aesthetic normativity on the accomplishments participants can achieve within specific practices does not relate to the aesthetic aspect of these practices: the value of the practices, and their normative force, is external to the aesthetic experience and appreciation of those participating in the practice. For a criticism to Lopes' Network Theory see Matravers (2021) (who, however, endorses hedonism for ethical reasons).

7   More radically Crossley (2014) argues that habit should be distinguished from both rule and convention. According to him, a habit cannot be applied correctly or incorrectly, which is instead a characteristic of a rule. A habit, on the other hand, can be good or bad, but in relation to a rule or criterion external to the habit. Moreover, a rule is social, while a habit is individual. Furthermore, Crossley thinks that even though a convention can take on a habitual character, there can be a discrepancy between the existence of a (social) convention and making it a part of an individual's behavioral habits. As I will clarify in what follows, this view can be challenged, in particular by defending the inherent social and cultural aspect of habits and their entanglement within normative practices.

8   As a growing body of research is clarifying, habits *per se* are not necessarily unintentional. They are compatible with the intentionality of action, provided that this is understood in non-intellectualistic terms. See Kalis, Ometto (2019), Hutto, Robertson (2020), Steiner (2020), Bertinetto, Grüneberg (2023a; 2023b).

9   For instance, the norm of saving patients' lives, to which physicians are, rightly and obviously, accustomed, may conflict with the conditions of a terminally ill person, in whose regard attempts to avoid death amount to therapeutic overkill and should be avoided in the name of another norm, which should be based on habitual respect for personal dignity (Delacroix [2022]).

10   E.g., on the validity of the habitual norm of keeping a patient alive in the case of a terminally ill patient.

Aisthesis

A Taste for Habits:
On Preference Self-Construction

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Abstract. This paper explores the tensions and potential contradictions in the "self-construction" of habits and preferences, arguing that preferences and tastes not only arise from habit formation but also contribute to the development of new habits. Changing tastes necessitates self-reflection on our current preferences and habits, which then become subjects of evaluation, transformation, and alteration from a higher-order perspective. It will be argued that modifying the structure of one's habits and preferences requires various forms of (self-)distancing: these include the impossibility of immediate transformation, recognizing the gradual nature of change, and acknowledging the limits of direct intentionality and control in the transformative process. These points ultimately reveal the inherent indeterminacy and openness of any self-cultivation endeavor involving preference-based habits, highlighting its balance between controllability and the potential for its loss.

1. *The relationship between habit and taste*

The central goal of this paper is to investigate some key aspects of what it means to modify habits (and thus certain types of inclinations),

as well as the self-transformative processes involved. A premise of this issue concerns the relationship between *habits* and *preferences*. It will be argued that preferences (and, from a more specific aesthetic viewpoint, "taste") might be considered forms of habits, since habits involve inclinations, a propensity to act in a certain way, and therefore a desire to do so. Changes in habits and preferences are closely interrelated; however, self-modification also involves adopting new preferences to change the structure of our existing habits. Furthermore, it may be useful to differentiate between two types of habits. The first type includes habits that are essentially based on preferences and likings, such as our taste in music or other personal inclinations. The second type encompasses habits not directly linked to personal preferences, including skills related to learning specific behaviors, like driving a car or mastering a sport [1]. In these instances, one acquires a motor skill. In the other case, the goal is to acquire or refine an "appreciative" skill, which involves cultivating a new set of preferences or altering existing ones. The subject is constituted by its system of inclinations and preferences: therefore, the issue of self-induced taste modification and cultivation in the aesthetic domain is crucial, as tastes and preferences are essential components of our identities. Hence, self-transformation in these contexts is always characterized by a process in which the transforming subject becomes an object of transformation, altering and modifying its attitudes, perceptions, and inclinations. This process is marked by unpredictability and inherent uncertainty.

Under the term "preferences" we include an individual's inclinations toward specific experiences, his commitment to certain behaviors, and search for determinate environments. From this perspective, the notion of preference is linked, on one hand, to the broader concept of *desire* – which, unlike preferences, can be vague and undefined in its object. On the other hand, it encompasses the more specific notion of *taste* (understood as aesthetic liking and appreciation). "Taste" is also related to a person's aesthetic orientation and sensibility, and her way of carrying herself in the world, which thus forms an "ethos", bringing us again closer to the notion of habit. Michel Foucault described the possession of an *ēthos* as a «mode of being for the subject, along with a certain way of acting, a way visible to others […] in his clothing, appearance, gait, in the calm with which he responded to every event, and so on» (Foucault [1997]: 281). From this standpoint, preferences, taste and habits, although distinct concepts, appear similar as they are manifestations of what we might call *inclinations*: inclinations to choose, to behave, to seek certain sensorial experiences[2]. Therefore, the relationship between habits and preferences/desires can be seen to be partially circular in its nature. More precisely:

(a) Habits determine behavioral inclinations and consequently shape the *preferences* for certain actions and experiences. In aesthetics, habitual familiarization often leads to increased appreciation, habits and cultural preference are built

through repetition and experience. If I have learned to follow the intricacies of nineteenth-century Russian novels, their appreciation over time will cost me less and less effort compared to the first readings, allowing me to enjoy (and prefer) reading more and more intellectually demanding texts. Every habit, even the negative ones (like addictions), is accompanied by desires to do something, even in the case we would also prefer *not* to have those desires, as I will discuss later.

One point to note is that those desires or preferences are not necessarily the object of conscious awareness. There is, rather, a gradualism in which actions, through habits, become less and less conscious and less and less object of direct will and control, and more and more involuntary and automatic. If we follow the classical thinking on habits by Félix Ravaisson (Ravaisson [1838]), once formed, habits are causes of actions without the intervention of will, but still entail the (unconscious) desire to bring about the action[3].

We often have a preference, or even a "taste", for the actions we repeatedly perform. This preference can manifest as a sense of comfort when acting in accordance with our habits, and discomfort when acting differently. Essentially, an inclination to do something equates to a desire or impulse to do that thing.

(b) Conversely, inclinations and preferences may contribute to the formation of habits. A subject inclined to do something will develop a habit through repetition of this action. Inclination and attitudes could be considered deep preferences that guide the basic *orientation* of a subject in the world. Rather than being entities passively existing in the environment, our bodies inherently possess specific ways of engaging with the world on the basis of basic impulses and instincts that are ingrained in our nature and genetic make-up, and are woven into our identity as living organisms and physical bodies. This includes innate inclinations, desires, and ways of orienting oneself and navigating in the environment. This view is not far from the idea of the body as a set of acquired aptitudes expressed in the phenomenological perspective of Merleau-Ponty, as it will be made more explicit later.

2. *Higher-order preferences and habit change*

Our capacity for self-reflection can interrupt the circular relationship between habits and preferences, enabling us to critically assess them and cultivate a desire for change. In other words, habits can themselves become objects of reflection and intervention. As highlighted by various philosophical traditions, both animals and humans are "habit-based" organisms; both undergo habit transformation, but humans uniquely have the capacity for self-reflective change of habits, or at least to envision the possibility or opportunity for such change. We have habits, but we sometimes *desire* or want to change them. Therefore, the transfor-

mation of habits is guided by specific preferences, which we might describe as "preferences over preferences", if we consider habits as behavioral inclinations toward preferred acts and states. This critical self-reflection can be conscious, but it can also manifest as what Lakoff and Johnson (Lakoff, Johnson [1999]) termed an additional "layer of the mind" – a form of practical intelligence inherent where reflexivity becomes an automated component of one's way of existence. This implies that habit-induced inclinations and desires can be the object of higher-order transformative desires. A typical example is our awareness of being victims of bad habits or even addictions and the consequent desire to change the structure of the desires determined by those habits.

One problematic aspect in this context was insightfully articulated by Arthur Schopenhauer. He posited that a person might do whatever they want, but they cannot choose what they want. This conundrum becomes salient in scenarios where we seek to alter our desires, perhaps cultivating an appreciation for certain artwork, acquiring a novel taste for food, adopting a fashion trend, or embracing a lifestyle. These are instances where we aim to voluntarily modify our tastes, but the issue is, as highlighted by Schopenhauer, whether such a transformation is feasible at all. Conversely, a philosophical tradition extending at least from Aristotle suggests that a person attains autonomy and freedom by reflecting on and, if deemed necessary, altering their preferences. Consequently, the essence of human freedom and autonomy shifts from merely "doing what one wishes to do" to "deciding what to prefer and wish for". In other words, our aspiration extends beyond liberation from *external* constraints to include emancipation from *internal* ones as well.

2.1 *The avant-garde imperative*

A specific and interesting instance of the drive for preference self-change is the case of contemporary art practices. The assertions of notable figures from the artistic history of the 20th century illuminate this point effectively. Marcel Duchamp once challenged conventional notions of artistic taste with his declaration, «I have forced myself to contradict myself in order to avoid conforming to my own taste» (Janis & Janis [1945]: 18[4]). In a similar vein, Andy Warhol later remarked, «There are so many people here to compete with that changing your tastes to what other people don't want is your only hope of getting anything» (Warhol [1975]: 93). These statements epitomize a fundamental characteristic of the artistic avant-garde of the previous century. Clement Greenberg reflected on this transformation, observing how «It may have been the first time when artists themselves took entire charge of taste» (Greenberg [1999]: 119), and compelling the public to engage more deeply and rigorously to comprehend the new artistic language. This marked a paradigm shift in the avant-garde era, reversing

the traditional dynamics between art and personal preference. Under this new framework, an individual's taste does not serve as the yardstick for assessing art; rather, it becomes imperative for one's taste to adapt and align with the artwork, especially when confronted with the unfamiliar or the conceptually challenging.

This paradigm shift significantly influenced both the training of art students and the perceptions of art audiences. Students immersed in contemporary, experimental art are not just refining skills grounded in traditional aesthetic standards. Rather, they engage in a process of developing a new aesthetic awareness, aiming to surpass the limitations of their existing preferences. In a parallel manner, individuals attending contemporary art exhibitions are encouraged to adopt an open and adaptable attitude. This approach enables them to recalibrate their tastes, thereby unlocking new dimensions of understanding and appreciation for artworks that may initially appear alien or perplexing.

Engaging with one's own tastes, purposefully molding them to accommodate the unfamiliar, can be interpreted as a manifestation of the *avant-garde imperative* (Bohn [2013]). This imperative manifests a relentless pursuit of innovation, a commitment to being at the forefront, and a willingness to take charge and reshape the public's aesthetic taste. Contemporary art, through its continuous self-questioning, merges artistic practice with theories about itself and is the symptom of a modern tendency to self-reflexivity. In this scenario, culture turns its gaze inward, perpetually undermining and challenging its own norms. Echoing this sentiment, Alain Badiou noted, «the art of the twentieth century is a reflective art, an art that wants to exhibit its own process» (Badiou [2007]: 49-50), and, we may add, an art that wants to redefine each time our appreciative habits.

However, the effort in changing and adapting tastes, preferences and habits is not exclusively related to art and avant-garde, but on the contrary is a pervasive everyday practice. The act of "coming to like something" extends far beyond the sphere of artistic and aesthetic appreciation. It encompasses every effort directed towards the self-guided manipulation of preferences. Anyone attempting to alter their habits, whether it's quitting smoking, choosing healthier food options, or reducing internet usage, is engaging in a similar process of preference transformation. The roots of this reflexive behavior can be traced to the high value placed on individual autonomy and self-determination.

2.2 *Horizontal and vertical dynamics in habits and preferences*

A subject may also undergo *internal* transformations of preferences and habits, as well as *external* influences from the community of other people. This dynamic creates a web of interactions where individuals both influence and are influenced by the broader society and culture. Changes in taste can stem from discussions and debates that lead to new understandings and viewpoints: for example, a per-

suasive argument might convince me to see the artistic value in a certain piece of music. A change in perspective can persuade me of the aesthetic value or innovation of an art style according to certain normative standards. An important question here is whether simply being convinced is enough to actually change what we like and accordingly modify our behavior and habits. In other words, it is debatable if our preferences could be shaped by merely deciding to like something based on others' opinions, no matter how intellectually compelling. Truly appreciating an art form in a new way, especially one that initially goes against our preferences, requires more than just being convinced. It involves an *internal* self-transformative process of changing how we perceive and appreciate things, a change in preference and consumption habits. Let's take atonal music as an example. A well-argued case about its aesthetic and musical value might intellectually convince me of its significance. But to genuinely start enjoying atonal music, more is needed than just intellectual agreement. This is where self-driven practices come into play, such as trying to adopt a new perspective in listening, cultivating habits through repetition and familiarity. It's about enabling appreciation not just intellectually but also on an affective level by means of new habits. The cultivation of taste is not merely a passive change resulting from exposure but is actively brought about by self-transformative practices.

This brings us to the general question of whether and to what extent habits and taste could be molded in some desired direction. For individuals to successfully modify their preferences, they must first possess the capacity to critically examine their own predilections and then discern which of these they deem worthy of alteration. Bertrand Russell eloquently touches on this concept: «We do not even always consider our own tastes the best: we may prefer bridge to poetry, but think it is better to prefer poetry to bridge» (Russell [1994]: 21). From Russell's perspective, the adage *de gustibus non est disputandum* loses its applicability when applied to oneself: it's entirely feasible not to endorse one's own preferences. As a result, situations arise where our desires do not align with our likes, and vice versa. This discrepancy underscores our capability to adopt a more objective stance towards our own preferences, leading to the formation of *second-order preferences*, or "meta-preferences" ("preferences about preferences", as we previously said), tastes concerning tastes. Harry Frankfurt articulates this distinction, stating, «the ability to reflect on my desires is what distinguishes me from an animal that may desire to do things but cannot lay its desires out and pick among the ones that conflict» (Frankfurt [1971]: 5). Russell's observation illuminates the potential disconnect between our immediate, or first-order, preferences and those of a higher, second-order level. This hierarchy implies that one's immediate tastes might not necessarily align with their more considered, reflective preferences. The ability to evaluate and potentially alter these preferences underscores a significant aspect of human cognition and autonomy. It is

this evaluative capacity that allows for an understanding and reshaping of one's tastes and desires, thereby enabling a deeper engagement with one's preferences and, by extension, with the world. But it is also necessary here to distinguish two entirely different types of dynamics between inclinations and preferences, which also result in two different types of relationship between habits:

(1) The first is a situation of "horizontal" tension between conflicting inclinations. This is the case where two or more currently acting wants are in conflict with each other, such as the desire to keep fit by going running, but also the desire to stay longer in bed. In such a situation, both impulses (and the related habits) are present and coexisting. In psychological terms, this is similar to what is described in Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance [1957], where simultaneous conflicting beliefs or attitudes cause discomfort, leading to an alteration in one or more attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors to reduce the dissonance and restore balance. Philosophically, this scenario brings us back to David Hume's view on the clash of passions, where he suggests that human behavior is the outcome of conflicting impulses. In such scenarios, the interaction between competing desires (and their associated habits) is dynamic, since one habit might overshadow another, or they might evolve to a point where the conflict is resolved, possibly through the dominance of one habit or a transformative adaptation of the conflicting inclinations. One habit may be neutralized by the consistent presence of a stronger habit opposed to it or be transformed to the point of ceasing to be in conflict with it.

(2) The second type is a "vertical" tension between present inclinations and desires to modify, neutralize or expand those inclinations, as in all cases where we want to cultivate a taste, modify a behavioral trait, build or lessen a habit. In this context, an individual experiences a present, actual inclination alongside a second-order desire *not* to have that inclination or to have a different one, which is however not yet actual. For example, one might aspire to develop a habit of reading a few pages of a novel or exercising daily, without having yet established this habit. This reflects Harry Frankfurt's concept of second-order volitions, where an individual reflects upon and evaluates their first-order desires, determining which desires they wish to act upon. The psychological process involved here is akin to those described by theories on self-regulation, which posit that individuals exert control over their own behavior through the process of monitoring, evaluating, and modifying their emotional and behavioral responses to meet their goals.

As an additional observation, the concept of "preferring to prefer something" or "wanting to want something" can be seen as the aspiration to cultivate inclinations that we perceive as beneficial. For instance, this might manifest in a wish to develop an affinity for activities like meditation or healthy cooking. In some instances, these second-order preferences represent broader evaluations of what we consider

a "better self," without a strong commitment to actualizing these preferences. Thus, it's possible to hold seemingly contradictory views without inconsistency. For example, one might acknowledge, «jazz music is artistically profound and should be appreciated, yet I enjoy pop music more»; or «award-winning documentaries represent the zenith of filmmaking, but I find myself watching action movies». In this context, meta-preferences can be understood as normative ideals we hold in high regard, contrasting with our current practices. They act somewhat like a super-ego, highlighting the gap between our actual behaviors and our ideal standards, thereby making us conscious of our shortcomings.

The reasons to induce a change in preferences and habits may be related to our feeling of discrepancy or inadequacy between the perception of our personal identity and our desired public identity. There may also be reasons related to our desire for conformity, or our desire to construct a certain image of ourselves that allows us to feel part of a certain social category. These are issues related for instance to the sociology of taste in the tradition of Bourdieu, but also have been extensively dealt in the history of philosophy, from Aristotele's ethics, to the tension toward self-improvement discussed in classical Stoicism, and in contemporary time, for instance, by Foucault's meditations on the "technologies of the self". More recently, Peter Sloterdijk's imperative «you must change your life» (Sloterdijk [2009], [2013]) suggests that humanity has always been engaged with "anthropotechnics", namely methods and practices through which we have historically attempted to improve ourselves, both physically and mentally. From this perspective, humanity is not a fixed state but a constantly evolving project shaped by our own efforts to self-transformation.

3. *Varieties of distancing*

One crucial aspect in the issue of preference and habit change is the potential for immediate transformation inherent in the layering of subjective states. Take, for instance, the concept of a "meta-emotion", an emotion about another emotion. An example of this could be experiencing guilt for not feeling joyful about a gift received on one's birthday. Even our passions can undergo change through self-reflection: one might feel embarrassed about their own surge of jealousy, or perhaps frustrated with themselves for feeling embarrassed, or even angered by their own anger. This emotional layering can lead to a transformation in the original mental state. For instance, a mother might initially feel anger towards her crying newborn, only to later experience shame over this anger, which in turn dissipates the initial feeling of anger (Elster [1999]). However, it is crucial to distinguish between phenomena like "emotion upon emotion" and "preferring a preference". A preference is not an emotional reaction; it is more accurately

an inclination, a taste, and ultimately, a habit. The cultivation of tastes is not an unreflective process as could be the case of emotions. Moreover, unlike a meta-emotion that reacts to an existing internal state (such as shame in response to anger), a meta-preference is built upon an inclination or habit *that is not yet present*. Moreover, while the case of "meta-emotions" can catalyze immediate change, on the contrary altering preferences and habits require a gradual process and a sustained effort over time. Preferences, tastes, and habits do not shift instantaneously and are inherently more challenging to mold. They echo Aristotle's concept of *hexis*, a state or disposition of character that is cultivated over time, suggesting a gradual process of habituation, contrary to the immediacy and sometimes uncontrollable nature of *pathos*, of emotional responses. Similarly, Kant's differentiation between inclinations (*Neigungen*), described as "habitual desires" and affects and passions (*Leidenschaften*) points to the fact that while affects might be sudden surges of emotions, inclination and habits are more stable and require a deliberate and often prolonged effort, guided by reason, in order for the individual "to cultivate himself, civilize himself, and moralize himself" (Kant [1797]: 324)[5].

Aristotle, in a notable section of his *Nicomachean Ethics* (2:1, 1103a15–b25), asserts that virtues and character traits do not emerge spontaneously but require consistent practice and cultivation: «we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts». Aristotle underscores the notion that virtues are not innate but are instead cultivated through consistent actions and thoughtful reflections. This principle implies that to become virtuous, one must act as though they already possess virtue. While there is no certainty of success, this approach allows us to indirectly influence our preferences by acting as though they have already been altered, thus bypassing our existing inclinations. This concept, while seemingly paradoxical, aligns with Michel Foucault's idea of the "practice of freedom" as the effort of taking a critical distance from one's own limitations and constraints, a process of self-examination and liberation from internal barriers.

The Aristotelian example highlights the point that changing preferences and changing habits requires working on oneself by means of a kind of self-distancing: since the system of my habits, preferences and tastes partly constitute what I am, changing them means to envisage something different and other from myself. Furthermore, precisely because these elements are so deeply ingrained in our identity, any transformative process necessitates a prolonged, sustained effort. It is illogical to assume that one could simply decide to adopt a new habit or preference and instantly experience this change through a mere act of will. If such immediacy were possible, it would imply that the desired change was not genuinely needed, suggesting that the sought-after habit or preference was, in some form, already present. Therefore, self-imposed interventions are not with-

out their challenges or guarantees. Firstly, certain inclinations are deeply rooted in our nature and biology, making them resistant to change. Secondly, these interventions represent deliberate efforts to modify attitudes that otherwise mostly originate from unreflective processes. The act of "deciding to like" something is therefore fraught with ambiguity and complexity. In Arielli [2016], for example, I suggested a typology of the ways habits and preference could be transformed. These include behavioral strategies like repeating an aesthetic experience in order to build familiarity, acting as if the ability to aesthetically appreciate is already given, engaging with individuals who already have the desired taste, adopting their habits, manners, and viewpoints. Additionally, cognitive strategies such as rethinking and altering one's perspective on what to appreciate, drawing comparisons and analogies between what is liked and unliked, and emphasizing the positive aspects of what one is learning to appreciate are also part of these practices (see also Arielli [2017]).

Beside the "staging" of behavioral habits or preferences that are not yet there, or the forcing of one's own inclination through effort of self-transformation, all these practices are characterized by the fact that they cannot be *direct* actions to induce a preference or habit change, but rather they *might* contribute to this change by engaging and exposing the subject to experience and environments, to thoughts and imaginative content, that could indirectly have as a consequence a self-transformative effect. While a detailed exploration of these "techniques of self-cultivation" is beyond the scope of this paper, it is crucial to emphasize its central point and core argument: practices of self-transformation are actions marked by varying degrees of *distancing* from one's actual attitudes and habits, and the outcomes of these processes are inherently indeterminate. Taking into account what has been discussed above, and focusing on the separation between transformative second-order preference and its realization, we can outline the following *varieties of distancing* from oneself:

(a) *Self-distancing*. As we said, higher-order evaluations entail a desired perspective on oneself or even a normative stance on how one *should* be. We may have preferences *not to have* a specific preference or habit we do have, or we may have the desire to have a specific preference we still don't have. In these circumstances, we introduce multiple self-constructs in which we distance ourselves from the idea of the authentic preferences of an alleged "true self". In this context, the desire to distance oneself from the authentic self and acquire different tastes or habitual behaviors becomes the presupposition for the possibility of conscious self-evolution. The fluidity of our self-perception allows for the emergence of new preferences and dispositions, which may previously have been alien or even antithetical to the individual's perceived identity. The concept of self-distancing can be extended to the realm of moral and ethical development as well. Here, self-distancing becomes a mechanism for moral

self-reflexivity, enabling individuals to reassess their ethical beliefs in light of new experiences and understandings, in an ongoing process that does not cease at the end of the growth phase, but rather represents a permanent state of becoming.

(b) *Temporal* distance. When we set a goal in self-cultivation, we cannot predict if and *when* the achievement of this goal might happen. There is an irreducible distance between the initial stage in which a subject engages in self-transformation and the actual point in the future in which that transformation could be said to have been reached. No matter how strongly desired, habit transformation necessarily requires a temporal duration that is *incompressible*. The inherent requirement of effort and duration to acquire different habits and tastes is not a contingent aspect of self-transformation, but an essential one. We could even say that temporal duration and effort are *conditions of possibility* for the emergence of new habits and preferences. The "journey" a subject must endure is not avoidable, otherwise we would not be able to speak of an actual change. From a more speculative perspective, the potentiality of change and the very act of "becoming" are intimately linked to the idea of duration, as Deleuze pointed out in his analyses of Bergsonian philosophy («Being is alteration, alteration is substance. And that is what Bergson calls duration»; Deleuze [2004]: 25). Deleuze's philosophy notoriously focuses on the role of difference as a creative and generative power, where difference involves not only divergence and evolution but also a distinctive kind of repetition, which in turn is closely linked to temporality. Repetition, far from mere duplication, takes on various forms, including habit: «for Deleuze, habit is thus the condition for the emergence of time itself» (Grosz [2013]: 231).

(c) Distance from direct will and intentional plans. While one might aim for a specific change, such transformation often occurs as an *indirect* effect of engaging with various situations, environments, and behaviors that might consequently lead to the desired change. This is particularly true for habits involving deep preferences and inclinations, like aesthetic taste. It is not feasible to formulate a plan where, solely through an act of direct will, one can determine a change in oneself just by implementing this plan step by step. The goal of self-transformation must be achieved by "bypassing" oneself, circumnavigating one's current dispositions through exercises, efforts, and exposure to experiences and environments that can induce such transformation. This concept is analogous to Jon Elster's notion of phenomena that are "essentially by-products" of actions undertaken for other ends and cannot be the direct and willful effects of those actions [6]. For example, I cannot decide to develop a habit of appreciating a specific musical genre, such as atonal music, by means of a pre-established plan, but I can engage in acts and expose myself to environments that may eventually result in this change of taste.

(d) Distance from (full) control or "indeterminate self-construction". In the moment we give ourselves to a transformative experience, through contact and engagement with the world, with other people, and experiences that have the potential to change our attitudes, we open up to something whose outcome is essentially indeterminate. Open possibilities and indeterminacy are linked to the subject's encounter with the contingency of experiences and with the dynamic and unpredictable nature of being in the world. As such, any project related to self-cultivation may start as a conscious commitment, but it generates an element of *excess*, it could deviate and distance itself from the initial goals, leading to indefinite and open-ended outcomes.

This is particularly true for changes in aesthetic habits and preferences. The processes of self-transformation in this domain are not entirely plannable since the individual is intimately involved in the transformative processes. Aesthetic habits, taste and preferences deeply shape a person's identity, making it challenging to predict the transformative effects of preferences that one does not yet possess on the person itself. Furthermore, self-transformative processes of aesthetic habits cannot be equated with linear self-planning, which usually involves a clear start and end, along with a rationally predetermined sequence of steps, akin to acquiring a specific manual skill, like in driving, or in language learning. The endeavor to change one's taste does not come with a certainty of success; it is susceptible to the possibility of failure.

4. *Conclusion: self-cultivation between control and loss of control*

Aesthetic habits are more than just a specific type of habit, as mentioned at the beginning. Upon closer examination, however, all habits, in a broader sense, also possess an aesthetic aspect. Habits involve our physical self and are not solely based on intellectual processes. They are based on bodily and sensory ways through which we interact with and perceive the world. In this regard, Merleau-Ponty's influential insights, which are central to the debate on habits, suggest using the concept of *style* to describe the ways of conducting oneself in the world, the «certain manner of dealing with situations» (Merleau-Ponty [1945]: 382) that identifies an individual and differentiates it from others. Style articulates the ways an individual encounters, experiences and responds to his environment. From this viewpoint, Merleau-Ponty draws a comparison between artistic style, which encompasses ways of perceiving and depicting the world, and individual behavioral style, namely habits. Just as an artist develops a unique style through repeated practice and engagement with their medium, individuals also develop unique perceptual and behavioral styles in response to their experiences and interactions with the world. In this context, the creation and transfor-

mation of habits can be likened to an act of *stylization*. Through style an artist produces what Merleau-Ponty, citing Malraux, termed a «coherent deformation»: the style describe how an artist filters and interprets the world in his works, and so the "style" of an individual consists in how he deals with the situations he encounters in everyday life, how he acts and perceives, which essentially forms the structure of his habits.

Habit formation is thus a form of stylization, a (self-)transformative molding of one's own ways of being and perceiving. The management of the self is a dynamic and never-ending effort that lies at the core of every attempt, imperfect at it is, to transform one's own preferences and tastes. It consists in strategies with which we attempt to question and (coherently) "deform" the system of our actual inclinations in new forms. Merleau-Ponty describes "the acquisition of habit as a rearrangement and renewal of the corporeal schema" (Merleau-Ponty [1945]: 164), as the result of the encounter between the individual, their body, and the world with which they interact. The outcome of these encounters is not predetermined, nor is it identical across all subjects[7]. This is analogous to Paul Ricoeur's remarks in his *Freedom and Nature* [1950, 1966], where he states that a habit cannot be reduced «to a simple addition of invariable elementary movements among which repetition introduced or reinforced an associative bond». Rather, a «habit is a new structuring in which the meaning of elements changes radically» (Ricoeur [1950, 1966]: 287-288). In other words, habits oscillate between intentional cultivation and radical restructuring with outcomes that are not predetermined [8]. Self-cultivation goes beyond the idea of a defined or pre-determined process and gives rise to changes that might produce something beyond or other than what could be articulated in advance, such that its results will be indefinite and cannot be predicted. If our identity is on one hand the product of fluid and complex processes, determined by factors beyond our control, on the other hand individual autonomy and control manifest as the constant effort to observe, reflect and act upon those processes.

The essential idea here revolves around the balance between control and its absence, between deliberate intention and the unpredictability of the process. This unpredictability is due to the contingent nature of what we encounter, which can lead us on various unexpected paths of personal evolution. In this context, Catherine Malabou [2004] offered interesting theoretical implications around the concept of habit and *plasticity*, drawing from Hegel but applying it to the contemporary discourse of neuroscience. She questions the philosophical dichotomy that oscillates between strict determinism and the complete randomness in the journey of self-development. According to Malabou, transformative plasticity is a synthesis between deliberate acts of self-control and moments of uncontrolled "explosions" within the transformative process[9].

The process of (self-)cultivation is inherently open-ended, and while one can successfully incorporate certain ways of being into their habitual behaviors, the

actual implementation in daily life often turns out to be unpredictable and beyond what was initially intended. Committing to the acquisition of new habits and preferences involves several stages, as we have seen. In this process, an individual engages in what can be described as a partially "controlled loss of control" committing himself to new contexts and experiences that subtly but inexorably will lead to a transformation.

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Notes

1   Although it cannot be ignored that the development of skills and competences is often ac-
     companied by the emergence of a preference and pleasure in exercising such skills.
2   As David Hume (2.3.5.1) stated: «Custom has two *original* effects upon the mind, in bestow-
     ing a *facility* in the performance of any action or the conception of any object; and afterward
     a *tendency or inclination* toward it».
3   «As effort fades away in movement and as action becomes freer and swifter, the action itself
     becomes more of a tendency, an inclination that no longer awaits the commandments of the
     will but rather anticipates them, and which even escapes entirely and irremediably both will
     and consciousness» (Ravaisson [1838]: 51; making reference to Maine de Biran). See also
     Sinclair [2019]).
4   As cited in Janis & Janis (1945, p. 18).
5   In Wilson (2016).
6   Elster (1981): «Some positively defined states that similarly elude the mind that reaches out
     for them are the following: belief, courage, dignity, sincerity, spontaneity, pleasure, happi-
     ness, anger, love. […] none of them can be brought about simply by the will's saying so».
7   «The situations may differ widely from case to case, and the response movements may be
     entrusted sometimes to one operative organ, sometimes to another, both situations and re-
     sponses in the various cases having in common not so much a partial identity of elements as
     a shared meaning» (Merleau-Ponty [1945, 2005]: 164-165).
8   «Habit, thus described, could take on a human meaning if its plasticity permitted it to become
     subordinated to unceasingly new intentions» (Ricoeur [1950, 1966]: 288).
9   «It is as though we had before our eyes a sort of caricature of the philosophical problem of
     self-constitution, between dissolution and impression of form. […] refuse to be flexible in-
     dividuals who combine a permanent control of the self with a capacity to self-modify at the
     whim of fluxes, transfers, and exchanges, for fear of explosion. To cancel the fluxes, to lower
     our self-controlling guard, to accept exploding from time to time: this is what we should do
     with our brain» (Malabou [2004, 2008]: 78-79).

Aisthesis

The Aesthetic Value in Social Education
Eric R. Kandel and the Habit of Looking

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Abstract. This paper intends to deepen Eric R. Kandel's thought on the theme of the aesthetic gaze and the artistic habit. Through neurology Kandel demonstrates that the brain is enriched thanks to the aesthetic habit and can create new logical connectors. The implication is also social because this habit of looking aesthetically can produce new and supportive forms of coexistence. Aesthetics can influence everyone's ethical practices, and this is why, according to Kandel, the possibility of using them should be widened.

Keywords. Art, social community, neurosciences, habit, looking.

The object of my analysis is expressed in an immediate question: is it possible to educate to sociality through art? The theme is of central importance since it intertwines numerous disciplines such as philosophy, pedagogy, and the artistic and historical-artistic dimension; thanks to the work of Eric R. Kandel the focus has extended to neuroscience. The process that the latest neuroscientific studies attribute to the brain in relation to the gaze in front of a work of art is a fact of social interest. What we assert as "world"

is given by that constructive and significant relationship that the brain activates. The image of the world is the principle of aesthetics in search of a construction of meaning that links past, present and future.

1. *Art and social community*

Art has always found a strong and cogent interweaving with leading out, from the etymology *ex-duco*; this is its main goal. Herbert Read explains: «The thesis is: that art should be the basis of education» (Read [1963]: 1). The role of art certainly cannot be limited to its educational role. In fact, the concept of "community" also implies the individual history of the artist and the subject he creates. In every era the artist has dialogued first and foremost with himself to seek clarity and philosophical and expressive coherence; Greek civilization had already interpreted the power of art in a double sense by stating that, on the one hand, the community function, on the other the exclusivity of art compared to other social occupations. Jean-Pierre Vernant explains that the aesthetic dimension, since ancient times, is an «art with its own ends and means, a profession that needs its own specialists at every level» (Vernant [1974]: 41).

In the specific focus on the aesthetics-neurology relationship (the recent science defined as neuroaesthetics) does not neglect the centrality of artistic subjectivity; for this reason, this science studies the "existential spark" that moves towards artistic creation by attributing various components: the action of the artist in the abstract phase of elaboration (a performative synthesis), the transformative realization of the artistic material (from words to sounds, from materials to gestures) and also the relationship between the artist and his personality which is decisive in subsequent relationship with the rest of the community. The Indian neuroscientist Vilayanur S. Ramachandran spoke of the psychophysics of vision studying the relationship between the brain and vision as a fundamental interaction for the artist's individuality and for his personal point of view on the world (Ramachandran [2004]). It is necessary to understand that the relationship between art and society is productive starting from the individual historicity of the artist and his experience (in the phenomenological sense of *Erlebnis*). This data enters into connection with the reality of human communication in a prospective and profound sense (Maffei, Fiorentini [2008]). Arthur C. Danto explains:

> Somewhere along the line it dawned on me that the entirety of philosophy is somehow connected with the concept of representation – that human beings are *ens representans* – beings that represent the world; that our individual histories are the histories of our representations, and how they change in the course of our lives; that representations form

systems which constitute our picture of the world; that human history is the story of how this system of representations changes over time; that the world and our system of representations are interdependent in that sometimes we change the world to fit our representations, and sometimes change our representations to fit the world. (Danto [2022]: 399)

The work of Kandel *Art and Brain Science. Bridging the Two Cultures* (2016) offers us the guidelines to explain our focus: in the field of aesthetics, with its multiple manifestations, the influence of the brain can modify the performances of habit? Is it possible to objectively show the performative quality of aesthetics in the social context?

Kandel reflects on this: «Can any aspect of art, which is a creative and subjective experience, be studied objectively?» (Kandel [2016]: 17). According to Kandel, aesthetics can have important ethical implications. Neurosciences explain that the sense of beauty and taste develops from the functions of the hippocampus and this relationship is linked to the whole of existence; in fact, the aesthetic experience influences social practices because they are our "usual place", the territory where the community is formed and where we meet "the Other". The conception of the *mirror-world* binds the brain of each of us to the community (since childhood); for the individual's subjective experience, the world represents the mirror with which to interact. Aesthetics is a decisive dimension for this action because it develops observation, shows the link between rationality and emotion, forms the habit of listening (Goleman [1995]). In other words, Aesthetics can have, for Kandel, a function of social sharing and mutual respect between individuals.

It is not a superficial reading that affirms art as a social source of peace but intends to clarify how the habit of an aesthetic evaluation of the facts that happen (personal and collective) can change the habits of social coexistence. Kandel wants to show that these changes are for the better (cf. Kandel [2018]; Cappelletto [2009]; Damasio [2001]).

2. *Aesthetics towards ethics*

The approach to abstract art, according to Kandel, is reductionist but this attribute has no negative value; conversely, the nucleus of the aesthetic message takes the essentials of the image, thus leaving great freedom to sentiment and interpretation:

Although the reductionist approaches of scientists and artists are not identical in their aims – scientists use reductionism to solve a complex problem, and artists use it to elicit a new perceptual and emotional response in the be holder – they are analogous. (Kandel [2016]: 6)

The cerebral reception offered by abstract art to the viewer hides specific neural dynamic actions showing how an undefined, aleatory image refers to an inclusive horizon in a social sense (Hauser [1951]).

The legitimacy of this neuronal action has obvious foundations in the scientific field, evidence that current neuroscientists are investigating carefully. The historical-artistic traces identified by Kandel concern the analysis of some contemporary authors and currents to signal the concreteness of the art-neuroscience nexus: above all the New York School with Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock. The event on the canvas is not a representation or a painting, but a real event. Both neuroscience and abstract art, Kandel argues, ask the same questions and objectives about human existence, and surprisingly also share the same methodologies. Just as for the neurosciences the study of the cellular and molecular bases of memory has represented a step forward in the understanding of learning and memory, or of the fundamental mental processes of our knowledge of the world and of our sense of personal identity, in the same way painters like Piet Mondrian and the protagonists of the New York School, de Kooning, Pollock, Rothko as well as Morris Louis have developed a similar experimental and investigative approach in their passage, reducing images to their essential elements of shape, line, colour or light (Zeki [2007], [2011]). Developing an aesthetic habit through reflection and observation of abstract and geometric art (such as American Expressionism) makes the subject capable both of dealing with and resolving complexity, and of maintaining an openness to diversity and difference. In a philosophical era marked by the debate on minority theories (gender, identity, blackness) the social practice of aesthetics formed and educated on abstractionism can provide a vehicle for social inclusiveness[1]. Reductionism, a term that derives from the Latin *reducere* ("to reduce", "to bring back"), in the scientific field is practiced when one tries to explain a complex phenomenon through the study of its components at a more elementary mechanistic level according to Kandel.

Creative growth, according to Kandel, is greatest through the analysis of abstract art because there are more combinatorial possibilities. This work is not only aesthetic but, if it becomes a solid habit, it is useful for developing a socio-aesthetic philosophy of coexistence in the plurality of ideas. It can become a *theory of equality in difference*.

Kandel explains: «By reducing to form, line, colour, or light, abstract art relies more heavily on top-down processing – and therefore our emotions, our imaginations, and our creativity» (Kandel [2016]: 58).

It is also necessary to reflect on the social context in which the aesthetic habit moves. Today marketing and advertising have a great influence on individual habits but, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, media and social networks

have not guaranteed a social construction; in the contemporary hyper-fast horizon we are witnessing an atomization and a fictitious, virtual sociality (Virilio [1977], 2005).

For art to flourish in a society, it needs a support system. Art is produced and disseminated through institutions and bodies which constitute its support system. Among these are the academe, community organizations, the museums, the galleries, cultural organizations, religious entities, mass media, and the art market. Of these, institutions which have to do with educating and raising public consciousness and knowledge of art are the academe and the museum network. All aspects of art are learned from the academe and the museum in its thematic exhibits: art theory and practice, art history, aesthetics, and criticism. Community organizations, cultural organizations, religious entities, and the mass media serve to broaden the base of art appreciation in society. Galleries, and art dealers, along with the recent entry in Asia of the big auction houses Christie's and Sotheby's, make up the art market. (Guillermo [2017]: 3)

The potential of the gaze is the incipit of the creative process. But beyond this tension, whoever receives the image, the addressee, has the same productive possibility of modifying himself through the image. Without theorizing a rigid determinism, the philosophical goal is to highlight the opportunity, through art and the related activities of the brain and behaviour, to educate to an altruistic, supportive, kind feeling.

According to Kandel, *the aesthetic habit of plurality* has its neurological phases. The cortical areas responsible for vision make use of two complementary processes: the *bottom-up* process and the *top-down* one. The first refers to the computations implemented by biological evolution in the circuits of the brain and governed by universal rules that allow us to extract key information from the outside world, such as contours, shape, figure-ground and light-shadow contrast, orientation, the colour and texture of the surfaces. In practice, this innate process, which involves the low and intermediate levels of vision, guarantees that the visual system of each subject can extract the same essential information from the environment. The top-down process, on the other hand, is based on higher order mental and cognitive functions such as memory, attention and learned visual associations and therefore mainly refers to the subjective psychological context, by virtue of which every man attributes the itself I perceive a share of very personal additional meanings (Schapiro [1994]). This is a very creative task that our visual brain performs continuously to integrate and complete the information that comes to us from the physical world in an ambiguous or incomplete way. The "looking" transforms the brain into a *visual brain*.

Vision is the core of discovery. If vision becomes an aesthetic habit, one can imagine a process of civilization and socialization whose purpose is research and not domination, dialogue and not the constraint of silence. At this point there are three key determinations:

1) Perception is essential for thinking;
2) Art is one of the most powerful means to activate the perceptive component;
3) The relationship between aesthetic habit and ethical action is evident

There is a kind of *transfert* in the aesthetic experience. It applies to painting, but also to music (listening is a fundamental condition for the development of the aesthetic habit), to poetry and literature in general (especially on the link between words and the world). Kandel says:

> Each work is highly ambiguous, as great poetry is, and each focuses our attention on the work itself, without reference to people or objects in the external environment. As a result, we project our own impressions, memories, aspirations, and feelings onto the canvas. It is like a perfect psychoanalytical transference, where the patient imposes upon the therapist a replay of experiences with parents and other important individuals, or like the repetition of a word or a tone in Buddhist meditation. (Kandel [2016]: 178)

Many art critics, art historians and aesthetics scholars have noted the power of the artistic message and its ability to overturn both sentiment and individual reason. We need to make a difference. While the world of virtual media always seeks to make a model of seriality homogeneous (for example the absence of a critical profile among people), the world of art always opens universes of critical, creative references, in (even solitary) relationships with the world and with others (Gombrich [1960], [1999]; Kris [1952]). If, thanks to Kandel's analysis, we have understood how abstract painters intended to free shapes and colours from the slavery of representation, thus, through them, the spectator is placed before a freed image and can be led to a need new performative and behavioural.

3. *Aesthetic habit and social practice*

For Kandel, an isolated component actively stimulates our imagination and possesses an evocative capacity greater than that which a complex image could arouse: the former forces the observer to a more creative perception, because it urges the observer's imagination to produce unexpected relationships and new connections between the work of art and the personal perception of the world, but also because the most essential and most powerful component evokes in the viewer a high sense of *immateriality of art*. This behaviour demonstrates that,

just as for the artist, every creative process necessarily also implies an interpretative process and in the same way, also the interpretative process that the observer of the work of art puts in place during fruition, in fact constitutes a creative process. If the image is reduced to its essential elements, the level of contribution required of the viewer is greater. The reductionist approach of neuroscience has demonstrated that learning produces considerable changes in the neuronal connections that underlie top-down processing, whose prevalent associations take place in the inferior temporal cortex, where continuous exchanges of information take place between the hippocampus, the part of the brain responsible for the conscious recall of memories and the amygdala, where emotions originate (Kandel [2007], [2012]). The simplicity of the abstract painting leaves more room for working on emotions and affective-emotional intelligence rather than a painting full of figures, defined lines, representations. This is the potential of the aesthetic habit since the abstract image allows a better self-on-self approach.

The symbolic vehicle is the main element for founding a meaningful relationship through art and the artistic object. The possibility that we have clarified in this itinerary between philosophy, art and neuroscience is defined in terms of *constructivism* (Regni, Fogassi [2019]). Why? Construction and reception are the two gestures that shape the growth of the human being, on the one hand receiving the data of the world from the outside, on the other, starting from these elements, subsequently building a life.

Art can lead to a transformation of ethical coexistence because it educates to plurality and difference. This theme is shown by Kandel in two decisive approaches: the artistic gaze and the connected neurological processes of the mind. Biologism and physiologism are the foundation for developing the educational process through abstract art, a sort of sentimental education canvas after canvas, look after look, until arriving at psychological determinations (a certain socio-emotional disposition and the acquisition of a habit of goodness, of kindness, of significant relationships since they are interrelated with mind and heart). Kandel tries to explain to us how brain cells can process the perceptions and sensations that each of us feels in front of a work of art, identifying in the science of the mind the only territory to discover the relationships to perceive a work of art. For the neuroscientist, Nobel Prize winner in 2000, the end of traditional psychologism was decided by the reductionism and deconstructivism that generated Abstract Expressionism in figurative art (Hauser [1979]); the reason is to interpret the creative act as something that modifies the perceptive and emotional involvement of the viewer. Kandel describes deconstructive processes by saying that philosophers and researchers of neuroaesthetics «[…] rather than depicting an object or image in all its richness, they often deconstructed it, focusing on one or, at most, a few components and finding richness by exploring those components in a new way» (Kandel [2016]: 9).

It is a question of a virtuous seriality, an assemblage that produces an ethicality in which the other is considered, appreciated, included, in a prospective and multilinear sense. The human brain is a practical and theoretical "modelling machine" (Regni, Fogassi [2019]). The aesthetic gaze is one of these powerful and creative tools. The aesthetic habit can increase the construction of a self-capable of contributing to one's own and others' well-being and happiness (Aristotle already spoke of it as the goal of every living being in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. He used the category of *philia*).

The symbolic vehicle is the main element for founding a meaningful relationship through art and the artistic object. The analogy is an immediate response because it creates intuitions and invents worlds. For example, Mondrian reduces his palette to the three primary colours but this is not reductionism; on the contrary, this opens up new possibilities for understanding and connection. Thus, an image is formed which is therefore able to capture our attention in a particular way and thus to imprint itself in the long-term memory. With this we go further in the process that from sensation goes to recognition and continues to abstraction. The symbolic value contained in the object, added to the purely visual value of the image, varies culturally, and defines further levels of vision/reading that call producer and user into play. Aesthetic habit as a "concrete doing in a context of material and technical elements" (Eco [1978]). Aesthetic enjoyment is not given only by visual apperception, but also by the process of understanding, a fundamental element for fomenting a pleasure, that of learning precisely, so important for education. The aesthetic cognitive process keeps *problematicism* open and always makes theory-practice and practice-theoretical dynamic. Kandel explains:

> I learned from Popper what for me is the essence of scientific investigation – how to be speculative and imaginative in the creation of hypotheses, and then challenge them with the utmost rigor, both by utilizing all existing knowledge and by mounting the most searching experimental attacks. I learned from him even to rejoice in the refutation of a cherished hypothesis, because that, too, is a scientific achievement and because much has been learned by refutation. (Kandel [2006]: 97)

An education to a socio-emotionality where the self and the other are a source of training and moral and social improvement, also passes through the concept of the Other as an environment and, following the latest neuroscientific studies, the synaptic solicitation is stimulated by new contaminations positive, from new modular scenarios, from differentiated solicitations. The environmental real represents a wide possibility of formation of prospective personalities, as well as. According to Kandel, abstract art with its reductionist tension fuels all of this. Abstract art does not minimize but stimulates the imagination beyond the threshold of the visible. This is a neuronal invitation of excellent purpose and on which

to leverage to create a concrete relationship with others, with a sense of care for the other understood as a person, world, environment.

Building a reality through empathic reciprocity means tending towards an ideal of beauty, an experience characterized and oriented towards an edifying and well-formed teleologism (in a sense close to Kant). The fallout of these stimulations on the cerebral cortex shows the potential that can be activated, how high and performative it is if triggered. The mechanism is evolutionary: the body, to keep itself adequately alive, must build a brain that is capable of representing its every state and a mind that is capable, not only of representing the signed modifications of the internal or external environment, but which can also alter them to his advantage. It is as if thinking were a bit like representing a model within oneself to be able to intervene on reality (Damasio [2001]). Kandel finds an incisive example of this approach in the work of Jackson Pollock; action painting and "the sunset of easel painting" does not simply weave the question of decomposition, irregularity, desired imprecision, of chance on the canvas but, conversely, contributes to a radical question on a new thinkable order, out of the established schemes. The same historicity of art with its multiple forms, as well as the fruition of the work of art, as Gillo Dorfles recalls, have contributed to the decisive passage from the meaning, linked to ancient forms of expression (at least up to the 19th century) to reach to the experience of the avant-gardes onwards, to the choices. There is no longer a dense canvas of meaning in all its clarity, the terrain of the gaze is no longer filled with meaning; the spectator must choose, he is actively led to balance and interpret what is placed before him (Dorfles [1973]).

Finally, Kandel's work has linked the study of neuroscience to the aesthetic experience. In this work Kandel has shown how art and, in general, the habit of aesthetic gaze is very useful for opening possibilities for new actions on the world. Getting used to art means creating practices of civil coexistence beyond personal taste, in a sharing of the aesthetic value of civilization.

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Notes

1   Neuroaesthetics, a recently established field of studies, brings together a series of investigations from the neuroscientific field aimed at investigating the methods of creating and using the artistic object. Multiple disciplines contribute to the construction of a research activity relating to the mind-brain relationship, which is truly in its infancy, not due to the quality of the studies, but due to the complexity of the subject matter.

Varia

Aisthesis

Drammatica della voce[1]

Voice drama

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Abstract. The aim is to show that the "dramatic" character of the voice is not merely about its expressive quality but is intrinsic to its very nature. The voice is "dramatic" because it inherently takes the form of action: it manifests an action. As an expression of an original "theatrum," the voice is inherently plural, containing "multitudes" (to quote Bob Dylan).
On this basis, we will analyze the tension-filled autonomy of the voice with respect to language, and of the vox with respect to the verbum (as per Augustine). Finally, by discussing Derrida, we will address the crucial issue of the relationship between "voice" and "consciousness."

Keywords. Voice, Drama, Consciousness, S. Augustinus, J. Derrida, U. Eco, E. Sanguineti, A. Zanzotto.

"Drammatica" la voce non lo è soltanto per una sua qualità espressiva in opposizione a un'altra (ad esempio, quando si dice che una voce è gioiosa – esprime gioia – piuttosto che accorata o supplichevole). "Drammatica" la voce lo è per la sua stessa natura e dunque nel suo nascere, nella sua origine (stante che la natura di ogni cosa si manifesta nel suo nascimento). La

voce è dunque drammatica – espressione di un dramma – anzitutto in quanto essa ha la forma dell'agire: con il suo accadere, con il suo darsi, compie e manifesta un'azione.

Con la voce, attraverso di essa, si fanno molte cose, al punto che si potrebbe applicare alla sua complessa fenomenologia quanto Wittgenstein sostiene del linguaggio per confutare l'idea che apprenderlo "consista nel denominare oggetti" e che la sua funzione fondamentale stia nell'asserire-descrivere stati di cose. Con le proposizioni, osserva Wittgenstein nel § 27 delle *Ricerche filosofiche*, "facciamo le cose più diverse" (Wittgenstein [1999]: 23), basti pensare alle esclamazioni, "con le loro funzioni diversissime". Un esempio, quello delle esclamazioni, evocato da Wittgenstein per attestare l'irriducibile pluralità di giochi in cui il linguaggio consiste, non certo neutro. Nell'esclamare, la sinergia tra vocalità e linguisticità parrebbe definire l'unità drammatica di voce e parola nei termini risolutivi di un'identità. Si tratterebbe, però, di una frettolosa semplificazione. Il nostro rimando a Wittgenstein non intendeva affatto stabilire un'equazione tra l'originaria drammatica della voce e il linguaggio verbale. Come vedremo, il co-appartenersi di voce e parola si dà soltanto in virtù della costitutiva tensione che definisce dall'origine il loro rapporto, nel presupposto di un'ontologica distinzione. Con questa precisazione, possiamo ritornare al punto di partenza: al fatto che una voce dialoga, comanda, invoca aiuto, invita, deride e così via. Fa tutte queste cose prendendo corpo, il corpo del suono: un corpo impalpabile che nessuna mano può afferrare, mentre la può accogliere l'orecchio o, comunque, il dispositivo cui è destinata.

In questa originaria e originante relazione tra la voce come corpo, emissione sonora e qualcuno o qualcosa che può sentirla (anche nel caso del dispositivo che la registra, è pur sempre destinata a un ascolto) la pura voce, per natura, non è mai sola. Un'insopprimibile dualità, sempre sul punto di aprirsi alla pluralità, ne costituisce la proto-forma, la strutturazione spaziale oltre che temporale del suo dramma come intreccio di attori che interagiscono in una scena necessariamente condivisa: una scena che li trascende in quanto spazio di un *theatrum* dove le voci intrecciandosi risuonano.

Agire, manifestare un'azione o l'intenzione di essa non esaurisce certo la natura della voce. Non si può trascurare, infatti, che il suo agire si configuri come un agire comunicativo (per citare un'espressione di Habermas). D'altra parte, questo non ci autorizza a risolverne la complessità nel comunicare. Certamente la voce si dà in un contesto comunicativo, ma sarebbe un'indebita semplificazione l'identificarla in mero strumento o mezzo del comunicare. Mentre comunica, mentre *si* comunica offrendosi o imponendosi all'ascolto, la voce – ogni voce – si fa espressione, rivelando un interno, la grana di un sentire, gremito da stati e impulsi emozionali e affettivi. Lo fa, però, non come un mero mezzo indifferente a quanto esprime, ma in intima fusione con esso: in un gioco osmotico tra con-

tenuto espressivo e forma dell'agire che ne definisce la costitutiva medialità. In quanto costitutivamente mediale la voce presenta così il carattere di una sintesi attiva che si offre con un peculiare timbro. Quel timbro in virtù del quale la voce si presenta come un indice di riconoscibilità per il portatore delle emozioni o degli affetti, degli stati interni qualitativi che essa di volta in volta esprime.

Mediante la voce è un Io che parla. La vocalità in atto manifesta la prima persona, facendosi segno della sua identità, traducendola in atto nello spazio-tempo in cui essa prende corpo. E proprio il fatto che la voce si presti ad essere oggetto di imitazione, fino alla contraffazione e alla falsificazione, attesta e rafforza questo tratto costitutivo della sua natura, vale a dire quel carattere originariamente duplice in forza del quale ogni voce si presta ad essere recitata, rivelando un'affinità insopprimibile tra vocalità e teatralità.

Appunto perciò il timbro identificante, l'indice di riconoscibilità che distingue una voce nella sua singolarità, non si rivela mai come qualcosa di semplice. Così come, dal punto di vista fisiologico, la voce in quanto emissione sonora viene prodotta portando a convibrare le corde vocali, analogamente essa rivela l'identità personale, l'identità di colui che parla, come espressione di un vincolo irresolubile in cui il Sé identitario sta in originaria connessione con Altri (con *Autrui*, nel senso di Lévinas). Il rivelare proprio della voce ha così il carattere attivo di una *vis* unificante, di un gesto al confine dell'intenzionalità che produce un'identità mentre la presuppone. In altri termini, è un molteplice, una molteplicità di stati, di pensieri, di emozioni, di accenti, di rammemorazioni che si raccolgono in una e medesima voce: nella voce che mi identifica e mi fa riconoscere.

Per citare Bob Dylan, la voce al pari dell'Io (non solo quello del poeta) contiene moltitudini. Le contiene, accordandole nel suo inconfondibile timbro. La *Stimmung* di cui ogni voce è espressione si rivela qui effetto della *Stimme*, del suo agire ovvero del suo *theatrum*: del dramma originario che la porta ad essere. Un dramma, una drammatica, in cui l'accordare della voce è tanto internamente riflessivo quanto consegnato all'alterità del fuori. In quanto agire accordante, espressione di una *Stimmung* identitaria, la *vox* si presenta, allora, tanto *reflexa* (*echo* di sé) quanto *àltera* (sempre sulla soglia dell'altro) ed è solo nel circolo tra queste due dimensioni che si produce il timbro peculiare che l'identifica.

Ci si potrebbe chiedere, a questo punto, se proprio in virtù della sua capacità di stringere una viva connessione tra l'unità dell'Io (quel soggetto in prima persona che ognuno di noi è) e la moltitudine di aspetti, maschere, stati, pensieri, affetti che ne scandiscono la vita non solo interiore, se proprio in virtù di ciò la voce non venga a dimostrare "in re" (nella sua sensibile consistenza) quell'intimo legame tra coscienza di sé e linguaggio che ci distingue come umani.

Non è stato, del resto, lo stesso Socrate nel *Fedro* platonico a parlare di quella voce – stavolta interna: la voce del proprio Demone – come dell'istanza che lo costringe a tornare sui propri passi e a non attraversare l'Illisso? E, molto più

di recente, non è stato forse uno dei protagonisti della filosofia contemporanea, Jacques Derrida, ad affermare nel suo fondamentale libro del 1962, *La voce e il fenomeno*, che la voce "è la coscienza" (Derrida [1968]: 116)? Lo è – sostiene Derrida – in quanto auto-affezione, differenza-ferita nella rotondità dell'Io. Alla voce del Demone come espressione di un'alterità irriducibile che pur abita e inquieta l'anima, nella prospettiva postcartesiana di Derrida la voce in quanto coscienza aggiunge il carattere dell'autoriflessione: è *vox reflexa* senza dismettere quello di *vox àltera*. Con una conseguenza decisiva.

Mentre per il Socrate del Fedro la voce risuona soltanto all'interno con la forza di un comando che vieta un'azione senza poter indicare in positivo quale sia quella giusta, nell'analisi di Derrida essa si presenta in quanto unità del suono e della *phonè*, fenomeno acustico come sintesi trascendentale *quasi* (come se fosse) a priori del rapporto tra interiorità ed esteriorità: istanza che stringe in un unico nodo la comunicazione e l'espressione. Questo nodo è quello della cum-scientia[2]: "nessuna coscienza – scrive Derrida – è possibile senza la voce" (Derrida [1968]: 116). Un'affermazione con la quale è difficile non consentire. Senza, però, dover condividere la conseguenza che lo stesso Derrida ne trae ossia che "la voce è la coscienza". Una tesi che potrebbe anche risolversi con l'identificare la voce con la parola, la sonorità spaziale della voce in rapporto con il dispiegar-si del linguaggio nel tempo. Tener fermo a tale proposito il necessario legame (l'intima coappartenenza) di voce e parola esige, però, che se ne pensi, fino alle ultime conseguenze, l'altrettanto necessaria differenza.

È quanto ci invita a fare Sant'Agostino in due *Sermones*, il n. 288 e il n. 293 tenuti a Cartagine in anni diversi [rispettivamente nel 401 e nel 413] per la natività di Giovanni Battista (il 24 giugno). In entrambi i Discorsi il commento del passo evangelico (Gv, 1, 23) "Io sono la voce di uno che grida nel deserto" diviene l'occasione per affrontare la differenza tra la voce e la parola, tra la *Vox* e il *Verbum*. Fino al punto che il Battista, nell'annunciare Colui che lo precede, si fa figura della Voce in quanto tale: voce che ricapitola in sé moltitudini di voci prima di lui.

La Voce annuncia il Verbo, ma il Verbo viene prima della Voce: il Verbo è "in Principio". Cristo è il Verbo, "non certo – scrive Agostino – la parola che risuona negli orecchi e passa, poiché quel che risuona e passa è il suono della voce, non la parola". Ma questa precedenza del Verbo (della parola come articolazione significativa) rispetto alla Voce – osserva ancora Agostino – vale anche per l'uomo (almeno in molti casi): non solo per Cristo. Il verbo, la parola è ciò che concepiamo nella mente ("in corde") prima di proferirla con la voce: "conceptum est ergo verbum ante vocem". Quel che intendo dire, osserva Agostino, devo concepirlo e saperlo prima, anche se poi non lo dico. Paradigmatico al riguardo è il caso del Maestro: per colui che insegna il verbo precede la voce, mentre per il discepolo vale l'inverso: "vox praecedit et verbum sequitur" (Augustinus, Sermo 293/A augm.: NBA XXXV/1)).

Preminente, ontologicamente (e non solo gerarchicamente) preminente, per Agostino resta il Verbo che mantiene il suo valore anche senza voce, mentre la voce senza la parola è "inanis". Così – osserva ancora – se dici "uomo" o qualsiasi altra cosa è verbum, se gridi è solo voce: "si clamas, vox est" (Augustinus, Sermo n. 288: NBA XXXIII) Ma il clamare definisce appunto il Battista, "vox clamantis in eremo". E questo fatto, oltre la parola agostiniana, oltre l'intenzionalismo o il mentalismo che separa il verbo dal suo declinarsi nella pluralità di voci proprie delle differenti lingue (il greco, l'ebraico, il latino…) ci invita a pensare la voce nella sua pur instabile, mobile eppur viva autonomia e dignità. Non solo, dunque (e qui segniamo una distanza dalle tesi agostiniane), in quanto "ministerium", servizio che il verbo cerca per raggiungere l'altro, ma in quanto *vox in se ipsa*, in quel che resta della voce – potremmo dire – quando fa festa, libera da ogni *ministerium*. In questa libertà, in questo dispiegarsi in sé della voce (nel quale pure si attesta come unità di *vox reflexa* et *àltera*) che solo il canto può testimoniare, noi possiamo finalmente ascoltare e intendere l'alterità della voce, il suo attestarsi come *altra* perfino rispetto alla parola, e questo proprio nel momento della sua massima congiunzione con essa.

Credo sia proprio a tale riguardo ossia al tema di un'autonomia tanto estetica quanto ontologica della voce (in una sorte di circolarità coimplicativa tra i due termini: l'estetico e l'ontologico) e della sua alterità, della sua differenza pur colma di tensione, rispetto alla parola, che la costellazione Eco, Berio, Berberian, da cui questo Seminario ha tratto origine e ispirazione, acquisisca un significato non contingente, capace di gettare una filosofica luce su intrecci biografici e una straordinaria amicizia. Questo, sempre nel presupposto che è l'opera nella forza del suo sorgivo significare a gettare luce sulla vita degli autori. Non viceversa. Si tratta, infatti, nel caso evocato di un'amicizia che si definisce paradigmaticamente nell'intreccio felice tra le istanze di tre voci diverse e pur reciprocamente coessenziali. A partire da quel rapporto tra "forma e indeterminazione" che nelle intenzioni di Eco doveva essere il titolo del libro che sarebbe divenuto ben presto *Opera aperta* (cfr. Paolucci [2016]: 68).

Nell'indeterminazione come carattere essenziale della voce che la definisce nella sua natura drammatica prima ancora di dividersi tra "articolata" e "confusa", secondo la distinzione evocata da Isidoro di Siviglia nelle sue *Etimologie* assegnando la prima all'uomo la seconda agli animali, nel suo continuare ad attraversare e inquietare le articolazioni semantiche dei *verba*, vedrei appunto la premessa per quel liberarsi della voce dall'essere al servizio del senso. Il senso, proprio in forza della voce, della sua intima fenomenologia espressiva e, dunque, della sua qualità drammatica (del suo costituire un *theatrum* originario), può farsi lieve al punto che la parola aderisce alla voce come un giogo leggero. Kantianamente, può innestarsi qui un libero gioco tra il suono e il senso che prefigura un'inedita drammatica della voce. Una "drammatica" che già a partire

dall'*Omaggio a Joyce* di Berio mette in tensione musica e linguaggio verbale, fino a rendere mobile e fluida la relazione tra prosa e poesia. Una costellazione che coinvolgerà ben presto nella concertazione di voci amiche prima evocata, quella di Edoardo Sanguineti (vedi Marzà [2023]: 151-249). Proprio Sanguineti, infatti, coglierà a proposito delle composizioni di Berio nate in stretto dialogo con i suoi testi, ad esempio *A-Ronne*, il darsi di un doppio processo "di innalzamento del suono al senso e di abbassamento del senso al suono, attraverso un perpetuo gioco" (Sanguineti [1995]: 75). Il gioco – direi – di una dialettica inesausta, senza esito, che può presentarsi tanto come accordo felice (armonizzazione di suono e senso, pur nella differenza tra *vox* e *verbum*) quanto poi negarsi trapassando in divaricazione e aspra dissonanza tra i due poli. Oppure assumere la figura di quella esitazione tra il suono e il senso nel quale la voce si trattiene per offrirsi come vibrante bellezza all'ascolto. È il momento, questo, – ad esempio, ascoltando Cathy Berberian – in cui la nostra percezione acustica indugia nel sentimento della sola voce, *in se ipsa*: della voce che riflette unicamente sé stessa. In questo sentimento che nasce dall'ascolto, la sensibilità della voce eccede i limiti estetici della sua dimensione acustica, invitando a ripensare la stessa definizione della voce contenuta nelle già citate *Etimologie* di Isidoro di Siviglia: "Vox est aer ictus sensibilis auditus, quantum in ipso est (la voce è aria percossa, percettibile attraverso l'udito entro i limiti della possibilità di quest'ultimo)" (Isidoro di Siviglia, *Etimologie* [2014]: I, XV – 94-95).

Questi limiti, qui, sono in qualche modo oltrepassati, senza per questo doverli abbandonare. Nel riflettersi in se stessa della pura voce, di cui il canto di Cathy Berberian è paradigma esemplare, noi possiamo cogliere il farsi e il disfarsi del linguaggio, per citare in uno sia il Roman Jakobson di un celebre saggio sia lo Zanzotto che, negli straordinari Appunti intitolati *Tra ombre di percezioni «fondanti»*, definisce il polo "infero" e il polo "supero" della poesia del Novecento (da un lato la linea Artaud dall'altro quella Mallarmé), fino a cogliere come proprio Joyce con l'esperienza compiuta in *Finnegans Wake* sia riuscito "a fondere e a far entrare in collisione principio e fine, coatto borbottio e parola inauditamente libera" (Zanzotto [1990]: 1345). "Fusione" e "collisione" tra una voce riflessa in se stessa e una voce *in statu alteritatis*, tra la confusione "borborigmatica" e la cristallina limpidezza del puro significante (per citare ancora Zanzotto) possono essere anche ascoltati, prima ancora che letti, nel suono che taglia l'aria che respiriamo come una ferita, nel colpo che la percuote. Qui, anzitutto nel canto, possiamo cogliere l'unità drammatica della voce in quanto tale, nella sua ostinata irriducibilità: nella tensione tra i primi balbettamenti che ne costituiscono il preludio, laddove l'indeterminazione della voce si fa anticipazione potente, e il confinare di quest'ultima con un commosso silenzio. Una tensione dove, per concludere, la voce si fa Eco: "resonabilis echo", allorché – seguendo i versi di Ovidio – "vox tantum atque ossa supersunt" fino a che è soltanto la voce a restare

risuonando nell'aria (Ovidio, Metam., III, 398-399): "vox manet", in essa (nella sua ferita) si è ritirata la vita, figura di un primo-ultimo *dramma*, quello che divide la *vox sola*, l'eco della Ninfa, dal doloroso rispecchiarsi di Narciso come una ferita in essa. Ritorniamo così al punto da cui siamo partiti: alla figura del *theatrum* della coscienza dove il dramma della voce si dà "nella più terrificante e inebriante consapevolezza".

Riferimenti

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Notes

1   Il presente testo deriva dalla "Lectio" pronunciata il 3 marzo 2023 presso l'Aula absidale di Santa Lucia – Bologna in apertura del Ciclo sulla voce organizzato dal Centro Internazionale di Studi Umanistici "Umberto Eco" e dall'Università di Bologna. Ringrazio qui l'amico Claudio Paoloucci per l'invito. Sullo stesso argomento ho tenuto il Seminario conclusivo del Ciclo il 25 gennaio 2024.

2   Sul tema del rapporto quasi trascendentale tra Voce e coscienza rimando alla nuova edizione del mio libro, *L'ascolto della coscienza* [Desideri[2023]).

Aisthesis

Wölfflin and Wiesing: Style as a Principle of Anthropological Thinking

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Abstract. The question of this paper is: Does the concept of style represent a principle of anthropological thinking? The first step is to establish a typology of traditional theories of style that assert a connection between man and style. The purpose is to identify a common paradigm to stand out from it in a second step. The thesis is namely that in the traditional approaches, no primary interest is taken in the question *What is man?* but rather the question *What is style?* Instead, following Heinrich Wölfflin and Lambert Wiesing, a formal aesthetic concept of style will be discussed. In his work, Wiesing adapts the stylistic concepts of *Painterly* and *Linear* (Wölfflin) to be able to phenomenologically describe the plurality of human-world relations. This approach should be made explicit as a systematic contribution to the discussions at the crossroads of aesthetic and anthropological questions.

Keywords. Phenomenology, philosophical anthropology, style, formal aesthetics, Heinrich Wölfflin.

Introduction

«Le Style est l'homme même / The Style is the man himself»[1]. No other aphorism will be found more often in publications on the subject of style than this one. The phrase goes back to the French naturalist, enlightener, and

philosopher Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon. In 1753, he delivered his inaugural address *Discours sur le style* at the Académie Française, where he developed his important theory of style. Numerous writers and philosophers repeatedly referred to the quotation, worked it into their works or placed their artistic identity in Buffon's tradition. The history of Buffon's reception has been studied above all by Wolfgang G. Müller in his elaborate study, titled: *Topik des Stilbegriffs. Zur Geschichte des Stilverständnisses von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* (1981). In addition to a comprehensive history of the various interpretations of Buffon's dictate however, he also pointed out that similar formulations can be found in 19th and 20th-century authors as well as in antiquity, the Renaissance and the Baroque. For Müller, Buffon's speech represents a «specifically modern manifestation of an old *topos*» (Müller [1981]: 42), the recurring concept of an «equation of man and style» (Ibid.: 9).

The term "style" is also widely used in everyday life to describe human behaviour: Zlatan Ibrahimovic has a different style of play than Lionel Messi, Angela Merkel has a different style of government than Donald Trump, and actor Charlie Sheen's public appearance has long been regarded as lacking style, while Sean Connery was said to have style. But all these examples will not tell us anything about the strict meaning of the concept of style: what can we learn about the human condition by using this term?

The following paper is therefore dedicated to the question of the value added by the concept of style within anthropological discussions. The main question this paper addresses is: is there an anthropological phenomenon, i.e. a characteristic of being human, whose sufficient clarification requires a turn to the concept of style? Or, to put it another way: does "style" represent a principle of philosophical anthropology? To answer this question, the first step is to draw up a typology of already traditional theories of style. To this end, I refer primarily to a body of research that has become canonical, which I would like to organise in the first part. My thesis, however, is that these traditional style theories have limited anthropological significance.

In contrast to traditional theories of style, I would then like to discuss Heinrich Wölfflin's formal aesthetic concept of style and its adaptation in Lambert Wiesing's phenomenology. According to this understanding "style" describes the human relationship to the world. On the one hand, this understanding is intended to systematically expand the traditional typology of anthropological concepts of style and, at the same time, it is intended to elaborate the thesis on the question raised above: namely, the formal-aesthetic concept of style used by Wölfflin and Wiesing represents a principle of anthropological thinking, since it succeeds in adequately describing a specific characteristic of being human: the plurality of being-in-the-world.

1. *The traditional paradigm – style as a relata*

Within the field of style research, one specific differentiation on the relation between man and style has established itself, which is a kind of commonplace within every treatise on the theory of style: the distinction between an *individual* and a *collective style*. Regarding the dictate «the style is the man himself» (Buffon), «man» means either the single, individual human being or the human being as a plural, as a collective, as a genus. This distinction can be found in specialized lexicons (Rosenberg [2003]), in discourse-shaping publications (Müller [1981]) and also in recent treatises, like the anthology *Style/Stil* from 2014 (Brevern, Imorde [2014]). One of the main focuses in these researches is the historical question: whether if style was understood as a product of individual artists or collective movements or even historic epochs. «Was style an expression of material circumstances or of idealistic concepts of the world? Did it emerge from the work of a collective or was it created by singular individuals? Was style determined locally, nationally or even internationally? Was it time-bound or timeless?» (Ibid.: 3). The questions that arise from this distinction usually involve a clearer delimitation of what is to be understood by the term individual or collective: the psychophysical identity of a person, the emotional world or thoughts of a concrete consciousness, or a community that is characterized by its historical, social or national circumstances, and so on.

Although the focus of classical research on the distinction between individual and collective style leads to a stronger differentiation within these two traditions, it also leads to a reduction in scope. I believe that, in view of the current state of research, it is useful to make a further distinction: the equation of *«style»* and «man» can analytically be read in two different ways: the proposition «style = man», when read as an identity proposition, is only true if «style → man» and «man → style» are both given. So, there are two propositions in the sentence «style, that is the man himself»: either that man is a result of the style, (style → man) or that the style is a result of man (man → style). This distinction has rarely, if ever, been made in works on style.

Conceptually, I would like to extend the common differentiation between individual and collective styles by adding the distinction between *expressive* and *constructive*. The thesis is that the relationship between man and style can be conceptualised in four different ways. The topos «the style is the man himself» can have the following meanings: either style can be understood as something by which an individual is expressed or constructed, or style can be understood as something by which something collective is expressed or constructed. The common theoretical arguments about the relation between the human being and style can thus be divided into the following four ideal types:

a) Style is an expression of individuality.
b) Style is a construction of individuality.
c) Style is an expression of collectivity.
d) Style is a construction of collectivity.

a) *Style is an expression of individuality:* the most common and well-known reading of the topos «the style is the man himself» consists in referring the formulation «man» to the concrete individual behind the activity or work: this means that the style reveals the particularity, the characteristic of the respective person. The terms «individualstil» (Rosenberg [2003]: 641) or «personal style» (Riggle [2015]: 711) have become established in the field of research. Within style research, the historical peak of this understanding of style is particularly associated with romantic literature's theories of art[2].

For a rough insight into the state of research on the Romantic period about the concept of style, the following can be stated: The Romantic view of humankind was characterised by individualism, and the idea of individual style was its theoretical correlate in terms of style. The associated cult of genius – art was the expression of a unique spirit and thus not learnable – grew more and more in the Romantic period into a quest for originality and authenticity. The individual style was understood as a kind of handprint of the artist's uniqueness. By now, not only in Romantic studies but also within stylistic studies, a long canon of Romantic authors, such as Karl Philipp Moritz, Johann Gottfried Herder, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Germaine de Staël, Victor Hugo or even Friedrich Schleiermacher and Friedrich Willhelm Joseph Schelling, has emerged in whom a theory of individual style has been identified. Gumbrecht has very appropriately called this reading of individual style theory an «aesthetics of expressivity» (Gumbrecht [1986]: 754), which again makes clear that this approach assumes an intrinsic, authentic core of the human being that becomes visible in style. With consideration to the typology of the parable of man and style proposed here, it therefore makes sense to speak of an expressive-individualistic reading of the sentence «the style, that is the man himself», or also of a *romanticist* understanding of style, in this tradition.

b) *Style is a construction of individuality:* this understanding of style developed primarily in the late 19th century, during aestheticist style traditions. Oscar Wilde and his teacher Walter Pater can be named as representatives of this concept of style. In the works of these two writers, style is not understood as the product of the artist's inner soul, but as a moment that constructs the artist's individuality in the first place. Pater even explicitly refers to Buffon's famous phrase: «if the style be the man, in all the colour and intensity of a veritable apprehension, it will be in a real sense "impersonal"» (Pater [1889]: 35). Central here is the phrase «impersonal»: in contrast to the romanticistic understanding, Pater

here completely abandons the category of expression: for Pater, style is «impersonal» because nothing personal, inner-soul – one could also say *real being* – is expressed. In the aestheticist concept of style, there is no longer any adherence to romanticistic authenticity. This does not mean, however, that Paters' concept of style suddenly stops describing a phenomenon of subjectivity; on the contrary: with the omission of inner personality, only an idea of authenticity falls away, i.e. a form of truthful expression, but not individuality as such. Only through masks, through art, that is style, can a person be an individual. In this sense, Wilde's credo «the first duty of life is to be as artificial as possible» and «one should either be a work of art or wear a work of art» (Wilde [1894]: 362, 366) should be understood: individuality is always «impersonal» for aestheticism; anything else would revert to expressive thinking: individuality only exists through art, that is, style, but entirely without an authentic personality. Style constructs the individuality of man in the first place. That is why I want to call this understanding of style *aesthetisistic*[3].

c) *Style is an expression of collectivity:* the third type, which I call collectivistic-expressionistic, is probably the most researched understanding of style, besides the romanticistic type. Within the research on the concept of style, the powerful influence of the archaeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann and his classicist theory of art is mentioned across all disciplines. Jan von Brevern and Joseph Imorde even go so far as to speak of a «historical line, beginning with Winckelmann […] which does not want style to be understood as an expression of individuality, but on the contrary of community» (Brevern, Imorde [2014]: 6).

In this tradition of thought, style is interpreted as the expression of a national spirit, but at the same time this understanding of style can also be found in sociological theories of the late 19th and early 20th centuries: style is there interpreted as the expression of a social class or the habitus of a milieu. Ernst. H. Gombrich already noted this in 1965 with a derogatory view of the sociologist Karl Mannheim. The «poverty of historicism» (Gombrich [1965]: 60), as Gombrich suspects in Karl Mannheim's studies on the sociology of art and style, consists in interpreting «all manifestations of style as the expression of the innermost essence of the "age" – ours, or another» (Ibid.: 62). Following Gombrich, I would therefore like to call this understanding *historicist*: this type of style assumes that a «collectively unconscious» (Mannheim [1929]: 36) is expressed in style – which is then no longer explicitly only art, but also, for example, the style of everyday behaviour, taste or fashion[4].

d) *Style is a construction of collectivity*: the early sociologist Georg Simmel's theory of fashion can serve as an example of the final understanding of style. In his essays on fashion style, Simmel distinguishes between art (*Kunst*) and decorative art (*Kunstgewerbe*) – the latter can also be translated as design objects. Fashion also falls into this category, whose central aesthetic criteria is not

individuality but style: «instead of the character of individuality, applied art is supposed to have the character of style, of broad generality […] and thus it represents in the aesthetic sphere a different principle of life than actual art, but not an inferior one» (Simmel [1908]: 67). Style can thus be learned and reproduced, style is decidedly not an individual but a collective phenomenon.

Through his reflections on style and fashion, however, Simmel does not want to describe an exclusively aesthetic phenomenon, but a much more general, human disposition. Simmel's thesis is that in the modern society of the late 19th and early 20th century, a stylisation of everyday life is taking place: common objects of daily use, first and foremost the furnishings of one's home and one's clothes, are not only supposed to fulfil a function but also to have style. The carpet matches the curtains, the wall colour stands out against the cupboards and the shape of the table creates a final overall picture with the chairs. According to Simmel, the «stylisation of this environment» creates an «organic and harmonious overall feeling» (Ibid.: 68) that can allow people to participate in something general: style has an *unburdening function*. Simmel's aesthetic description leads here to a social-psychological thesis: «what drives modern man so strongly to style is the unburdening and concealment of the personal, which is the essence of style» (Ibid.: 69). Style – paradigmatic in fashion and interiors – unburdens man of the responsibility of his individuality and creates a sense of belonging to a group, to something general. Due to this unburdening social function, style fulfils, I want to call this type a *functionalistic* style theory[5].

This typology is first of all of systematic importance. Based on the presentation, one might think that a historical progression in the understanding of style can be identified, moving from a Romanticist to a functionalist one. However, it can be quickly demonstrated that, for example, the individualistic-expressive understanding of the Romanticist concept of style was also still concise in the 20th century, especially in style theories that stand close to mysticism and existentialism (see Müller [1981]: 171 f.) It would therefore be wrong to speak of a historical progression – rather, these four types represent archetypical readings of the *topos* «the style is the man himself». To summarize: if we look at the traditional theories of style and their reception over the last 40 years, the conventional thinking on the relation between man and style can be assigned to one of these four types. But what does this mean for the role of the concept of style in an anthropological sense?

2. *Plea for a paradigm shift – from relata to relation*

As different as these four approaches may be at first glance, I believe that there is a common characteristic that can be identified in all these four types:

they are bound to a common paradigm that excludes an anthropological interest in the narrow, philosophical sense. Before I go into this, however, let me add the following: my aim with the approaches I have just outlined (romanticism, aestheticism, historicism, functionalism) is not to offer a complete list of all existing theories of style, but to create a typology of ideal types; of course, there are also theories of style that overlap and cannot be assigned exclusively to one of the four types. However, this does not contradict the thesis, but rather shows that there is a commonality of thinking about style that takes place within the four coordinates of expression-construction-individuality-collectivity.

As I wanted to show, the concept of style is used in very different ways; it is either about individual and group psychological phenomena of expression (*romanticism* and *historicism*) or about questions of the formation and construction of an individual or group identity (*aestheticism* and *functionalism*). That the concept of style has different meanings in different theories is hardly surprising; however, depending on the theory, it not only fulfils different functions but is also not aimed at describing – in old-fashioned terms – the essence of man itself. None of the man-style-theories claims to be able to capture the characteristics of being human through the concept of style, but only to be able to identify different functions of style. The so-called «parable of man and style» (Müller) is an anthropological bluff: in the exemplary positions shown, *man* is understood as an empirical category that corresponds to sociological or ethnological questions. The question of whether there is something genuine about being human for which one should necessarily resort to the concept of style makes little sense about the traditions of style developed here. In none of the presented approaches is an explicit interest in the question *what is the human being?* but rather a focus on the question *what is style?* Style, depending on the approach, is understood as something that constructs the individual human being or a particular group, or in which the individual human being or a group expresses itself. To summarise the common paradigm and of the four different style traditions: style and person are thought of as *two separate relata of a relation*. Thus, through the classical approaches, one learns something about the different functions of the concept of style, but little or nothing about the man itself – this remains unaddressed.

I would like to take this situation as an opportunity to argue for a kind of paradigm shift: if the question of the relation between man and style is to be linked to a primary interest in the human being, i.e. if it is a question of whether there is a genuine characteristic of being human, the concept of style must have a clear and distinct intention, which is to be able to describe this characteristic sufficiently and to distinguish it from other phenomena. It must not be assumed that there is a plurality of different concepts of style that stand side by side on an equal footing and describe different aspects of human life; rather, it is necessary to introduce a very specific concept of style as a principle of anthropological thinking. What

can this particular concept of style do for the question *what is man?* that other concepts cannot? In short, is there a phenomenon of being human for whose sufficient clarification one should necessarily refer back to the concept of style, and if so, what anthropological phenomenon does it describe? The paradigm shifts in thinking about the relation between man and style, according to my thesis, which I would like to defend, consists of the following: style must not be thought of as a single relata but as the relation of two relata itself.

Regarding an understanding of style not as a relata, but as the relation itself, Andrea Pinotti has already made an important discovery in his entry on «Style» in the *Handbook for Phenomenological Aesthetics* (Pinotti [2010]: 326 f.) While the concept of style is often used in many art-historical discourses simply as a synonym for ways, forms or types, the term is used as a *terminus technicus* by the representatives of the so-called formal aesthetics (Alois Riegl, Heinrich Wölfflin) as well as in phenomenology (Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty): by the former to describe the relation between individual parts of a picture, by the latter to describe the relation between man and the world. I would like to follow Pinotti's insight by discussing a contemporary phenomenological position that explicitly adapts a formal-aesthetic concept of style, or to be more precise: Heinrich Wölfflin's concept of style from *Principles of Art History* (1915) and Lambert Wiesing's phenomenological adoption of it from *I for Me. Phenomenology of Self-Consciousness* (*Ich für Mich. Phänomenologie des Selbstbewusstseins*, 2020). Starting from a phenomenology of self-consciousness, Wiesing wants to describe the conceivably possible ways of being in the world without distinguishing anything like a proper mode of being from an improper one. His systematic thesis: there is no genuine, original world-relationship of the human being, but plural, equal «styles of being-in-the-world» (Wiesing [2020]: 102). The a priori conceivable variants of the human-world-relation, Wiesing argues, can be systematically determined by Wölfflin's formalist concept of style.

In contrast to the traditional approaches I have already presented and concerning Wiesing's adaption of Wölfflin, I defend the following thesis: style is a fundamental anthropological concept precisely when style is not a relata of a relation, but when style describes the quality of the relation itself. To put it even more clearly: the relation of human beings to the world.

3. *Style as the experienced relation between man and world*

Wiesing's interest is not in the question *what is style?* but in the question *what is it like to be a human being?* – to answer this question, however, he refers to Wölfflin's concept of style. Before introducing this concept of style, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of Wiesing's anthropological position, which he

develops in the context of his phenomenology of the body. Wiesing's argument begins as follows: «to answer the question, *what is it like to be a human being?* it is necessary to go into the consequence of the reality of my *Leibkörper:* what impositions cannot be avoided when one is in the world with a *Leibkörper*. How does my *Leibkörper* allow me to be in the world?» (Wiesing [2020]: 123). With the formulation «Leibkörper», he refers to the body-philosophical distinction between *having a body* (*Körper*) and *being a body* (*Leib*). Due to translation difficulties, in the following, I will speak of the *Körper* as body and of the *Leib* as lived-body. Wiesing's thesis is: «to be in the world with a body (*Körper*) is a different kind of imposition than with a lived-body (*Leib*)» (Wiesing [2020]: 122). In the traditional philosophy of the body, having a body (*Körper*) stands for the objective and thing-like observer perspective and being a body (*Leib*) stands for the subjective experience perspective. The body (*Körper*) is that which can be objectively grasped, that which can be recognised from the outside, that which the doctor examines when an injured person comes to them. The lived-body (*Leib*), on the other hand, is what the injured person experiences when he goes to the doctor. The lived-body (*Leib*) is the subjective, experienced perspective of the sick person, which the doctor's perspective cannot perceive.

In a certain sense, however, Wiesing turns away from this traditional view: it would be wrong to think that, for Wiesing, lived-body (*Leib*) and body (*Körper*) simply represent the first-and third-personal interpretation of the same thing. For Wiesing, lived-body (*Leib*) and body (*Körper*) are both first-personal, i.e. phenomenally experienceable ways of experiencing one's own *Leibkörperlichkeit* – but they are different. So, I can also experience my own body (*Körper*) in the same way as the doctor does when she examines me for wounds: as a recognisable object, a foreign object or also as an instrument that I use. When I look at the dirt under my fingernails or when I use my fingers to read Braille, *I have a body* (*Körper*). However, when I suddenly scrape over a sharp edge while groping Braille and suffer pain, when one enjoys the warmth of a bathtub or is seized by a chill – *I am my lived-body* (*Leib*). According to Wiesing, these two different states of *Leibkörperlichkeit* also correlate with different forms of being in the world:

> Being-in-the-world receives regular qualia through the *Leibkörper*; my *Leibkörper* inevitably gives a specific quality of imposition to what is in my being-in-the-world. But a lived-body (*Leib*) colours the pre-reflexive self-consciousness of in-being phenomenally differently from a body (*Körper*). […] The imposition that my *Leibkörper* is for me is not always the same. My *Leibkörper* is an imposition for me that varies between the extreme form of being a lived-body (*Leiblichkeit*) and the extreme form of having a body (*Körperlichkeit*). (Wiesing [2020]: 123-124)

Or to put it in other words, a person feels differently when he is lived-bodily (*leiblich*) in the world than when he is bodily (*körperlich*) in the world. To not only claim this plurality of being-in-the-world, but to be able to describe it

systematically as phenomenally experienceable «plurality of styles of *Dasein*» (Ibid.: 148), Wiesing now introduces the concept of style.

The anthropological phenomenon that Wiesing turns to from here is the human world relation, or more precisely world relations: Wiesing argues for an ontological plurality of human world relations, which he calls «styles of being-in-the-world». He refers to the style theory of the Swiss art historian and philosopher Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945), who introduced the style categories *painterly* and *linear* in his work, which was particularly influential for art history. In analogy to Wölfflin, Wiesing now wants to think of «body (*Körper*) and lived-body (*Leib*) as principles of the history of *Dasein*» (Wiesing [2020]: 124): if one is lived-bodily (*leiblich*) in the world, according to Wiesing, one leads a «painterly form of existence»; if one is bodily (*körperlich*) in the world, then this corresponds to a «linear form of existence» (Ibid.: 134, 131). In the conceptual pair *painterly-linear,* Wiesing sees the potential to phenomenologically justify the thesis of a plurality of styles of existence: Wölfflin's aesthetic stylistic categories should represent the conceptual tool to be able to adequately describe the qualitatively experienceable structures of human being-in-the-world.

4. *«Painterly» and «linear» as style principles of* dasein

Wölfflin's methodological approach in *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (1915) is, as Andrea Pinotti accurately describes it in his essay *Formalism and the History of Style*, «inspired by the formalistic paradigm of the so-called pure-visibility (*reine Sichtbarkeit*)» (Pinotti [2012]: 96). We speak of pure visibility here because Wölfflin – and formal aesthetics in general – is not interested in examining art for representational content or psychological background phenomena – that is, something that can only be revealed through interpretation; rather, style is understood as a phenomenon that becomes evident in perception itself and that obeys its laws, which for Wölfflin, as well as for the other representatives of this tradition, need to be described in more detail. With this approach, Wölfflin has already implicitly criticized the traditional paradigm of style theory, especially with regard to the types that I have tried to describe with the titles *romanticism* and *historicism*: «one tends to interpret a style primarily in terms of expression. In the formal systems that we call styles, people and times are expressed for us. […] And likewise the strong individual artist has his own style, in which his personal essence comes to light» (Wöllflin [1912]: 572). Wölfflin does not believe that these approaches are entirely wrong, but that they only address a surface phenomenon, i.e. not the phenomenon of style itself, but something behind it, such as the mind of an individual or a collective zeitgeist. He opposes this with his formal-aesthetic understanding of style as a principle: «the founda-

tion of vision must first be established before one can begin to speak about the expressive values of an era» (Ibid.: 578).

When describing pictures, the formal aesthetic paradigm is thus interested exclusively in the visible form. Whether it is an imposing church painting with angels and saints or an expressionist depiction of the war events of the First World War is irrelevant to a formal aesthetic approach. The separation of form and content as the core of this aesthetic theory has been traced back several times in research to the formalism of Johan Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841) with one central note: strictly separating form and content is not an invention of formal aesthetics[6]. However, with Herbart – and also with Wölfflin – form is understood in a very specific sense. Wiesing writes about this in *The Visibility of the Image. History and Perspectives of Formal Aesthetics*: «these visible forms on the surface of the image are the exclusive theme of formal aesthetics» (Wiesing [1997]: 6). How has this been understood?

Form does not mean the entire shape of the object, i.e. not the holistic figure of Michelangelo's *David*, but rather the relation of the individual parts within an object to each other. Form is thus a relational phenomenon, or to put it more precisely: an object-internal relational phenomenon in the realm of the visible. If, for example, the bathing season is approaching and, after a calorie-rich Christmas season, one talks about wanting to get one's beach body back into shape, one would miss the concept of form in *Formal aesthetics*. Phrases such as *well-formed* or *out of shape* are aimed at phenomena of shape and harmonious proportions, but not at internal relations. If one had to describe the concern of formal aesthetics in one sentence: it is about describing the visible relations of the individual parts of a picture to each other. In short: the transitions between the parts of the picture.

Wölfflin distinguishes between a painterly and a linear style by comparing Renaissance and Baroque paintings. For him, painterly and linear represent extremes of pictorial representation that lie apart:

> [T]he graphic style sees in lines, the painterly in masses. […] So the difference between these styles can be further defined by saying that linear seeing makes a clear distinction between one form and the other, whereas the painterly eye sets its sights upon the sort of movement that encompasses the entirety of things. On the one band, consistently clear lines serve to divide things; on the other, unstressed borders favour fusion. (Wölfflin [1915]: 100-101)

If one wants to illustrate this distinction using examples, breaking away from Wölfflin's Renaissance-Baroque comparison, one could cite the famous woodblock print *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* (1831) by the Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai. Here the style has a very linear effect, as the water in particular, which is usually depicted as something very indifferent and as a large mass,

is completely differentiated and broken down into visible individual parts. The spume of the upper layer of water is separated from the lower layer of waves by strict lines and even the individual drops stand out clearly without merging with the rest of the sea.

In a painterly style, exactly the opposite takes place; movement is at the centre. This means that there are precisely no clear demarcations between the individual parts of the picture, the elements visibly blur into one another, and the individual relations are unclearly recognisable as self-contained areas. The watercolour and oil paintings of William Turner are a particularly vivid example of this. In *Waves Breaking against the Wind* (1840), we find a counter-design to Hokusai's depiction of the sea. The sea is depicted as one large entity, neither can one see where one wave separates from the other, nor can one see where the other wave is. Even a clear place where the horizon begins, and the sea ends is hardly discernible. The individual parts of the picture blur into one another and merge fluidly, which leads to the fact that, as Wölfflin says, the eye «encompasses the entirety of things» (Wölfflin [1915]: 101). While one could cut out individual parts of the picture in Hokusai's work to use them sensibly for a collage, this would not be possible in Turner's work. One would then only have a cut-out patch of colour at hand.

Wölfflin describes these two styles as possibilities for the artist to relate the individual parts of the picture to each other. The relation itself, i.e. whether these parts merge into one another or appear strictly separated from one another, is what Wölfflin calls the phenomenon of style: «the great opposition between the linear and painterly styles corresponds to a fundamentally different interest in the world. In the former it is the fixed shape, in the latter the changing appearance; here it is the permanent form, measurable and bounded, there it is movement, form in action; here things in themselves, there things in context» (Ibid.: 109). The artist can therefore depict the same subject in completely different ways, depending on how, for example, the sea is to be seen. What becomes particularly clear in this quotation is, on the one hand, the idea of a painterly whole in which things are seen as a unity and, on the other, the idea of linearly separated individual aspects in which the parts of the picture are seen in their multiplicity.

At this point it should already be clear why Wölfflin's principles of art history are applied by Wiesing as the «principles of the history of *Dasein*»: Wiesing transfers the categories of the painterly and the linear to his descriptions of being-in-the-world. Wiesing, however, is explicitly not interested in a reception or interpretation of Wölfflin, but rather in adopting the categories of style for his own phenomenological descriptions. Nevertheless, this undertaking in no way conflicts with Wölfflin's project. It is not at all surprising to apply Wölfflin's terms for anthropological research concerning the relation of man and world;

after all, Wölfflin himself speaks of a «fundamentally different interest in the world» depending on whether the style is linear or painterly. Wölfflin even goes so far as to describe the two styles as opposing world views: «the linear style developed values that the painterly style no longer has and no longer wants. They are two world views, differently oriented in their tastes and interests, yet both quite capable of producing a comprehensive picture of the visible» (Wölfflin [1915]: 100). Whereas Wölfflin relates these concepts of style to perception and thus to the realm of the visible, Wiesing's understanding of style is phenomenological: to have a body is to be linear in the world; to be a body is to be painterly in the world:

> Phenomenologically speaking, body (*Körper*) is a stylistic category, an existential that determines the basic possibilities of being – not for images, however, but for *Dasein*. The concept of the body (*Körper*) determines […] experiential properties of internal relations, only in this case not the relation between visible parts in a work, but the properties of the relation of *Dasein* in the world or better: to the world. […] The linear being-in-the-world is given when, as a consequence of the reality of self-consciousness, a differentiation imposition occurs for me: the world in which I am is imposed on me as the Other, as something that – ontically speaking – is not me and – ontologically speaking – I am not. […] Being-in-a-world is a phenomenal property, an imposition. (Wiesing [2020]: 131)

For Wiesing, experiencing one's own body (*Körper*) is synonymous with a linear way of being. I experience myself as a subject facing the object of the world. My body (*Körper*) puts me at a distance from the world and I experience a clear separation from what is not me. For Wiesing, Descartes' philosophy of consciousness represents the outline of a linear mode of being in which the human being (*res cogitans*) faces the world (*res extensa*) and is separated from it. The world is the foreign, the other, and my body (*Körper*) is the boundary to this other. Anyone who inadvertently reaches their hand into a disgusting, slimy mass knows only too well what Wiesing means by having a linear bodily (*körperlich*) experience. My skin is the border to the slimy mass and the experience of disgust is involuntarily accompanied by an awareness to withdraw as far as possible from this slimy objectivity.

In contrast to the bodily (*körperlich*) linear being-in-the-world, the experience of one's own lived-body (*Leib*) corresponds to the painterly being-in-the-world:

> Phenomenally, the imposition of being a lived-body (*Leib*) leads me to a painterly being-in-the-world. My lived-body (*Leib*) lets me be a part of the world, analogous to a baroque painting. The transition of the subject to the world blurs into a unity with the whole through the lived-body (*Leib*). The boundary where I end and where I begin is for me, through the imposition of my lived-body (*Leib*), painterly, fluid and ambiguous. […] This is the meaning of the concept of the lived-body (*Leib*): it does not designate something that exists in the world but is a stylistic category of being-in-the-world. It designates the associative, dispersed, analogous style of being. (Ibid.: 134-135)

Wiesing describes the experience of the lived-body (*Leib*) as painterly because here the boundaries of one's lived-body (*Leib*) are extended to the environment. I no longer experience myself as a body as an alien part of my environment, but as a component that is integrated into the world and belongs to it. The experience of the body is accompanied by an ecological consciousness, that is, by the experience that the ontological boundaries between me and the world become blurred and one. Wiesing cites Maurice Merleau-Ponty's body phenomenology and also Martin Heidegger as examples that describe the human being as a painterly being-in-the-world. Merleau-Ponty's talk of the «body (*Leib*) that "reaches to the stars"» (Ibid.: 138) is a vivid example for Wiesing of what it means to assert a painterly style of being-in-the-world. Particularly ecstatic experiences can make all too clear what it means to experience oneself dispersed and thus painterly as part of the world.

Wölfflin's originality becomes even clearer when Wiesing's central thesis is brought into focus: «it is contingent whether the relation between man and the world is linear or painterly. But it is existentially necessary, for there to be any being-in-the-world at all, that the relation is experienced for me either as painterly or linear or something in between» (Ibid.: 145). Wiesing's main thesis is thus: human being-in-the-world is fundamentally plural, i.e. not fixable to a world-relation, but to be thought of as a spectrum; the a priori conceivably possible limits of this spectrum of styles, however, are supposed to be describable with Wölfflin. This includes overcoming dualistic thinking that only allows for a binary understanding.

According to Wiesing, the «phenomenal *conditio humana*» (Ibid.: 122) cannot be reduced to a single style. Rather, the «imposition of being a human being in the world», i.e. the experience that every human being is condemned to make, consists in a «fluctuating, situational In-between» (Ibid.: 123) of painterly body-being and linear body-having. Human beings, because they can be physically and bodily in the world, are differently disposed. This is explicitly not meant ontically or individually: «there are not only different people in the world in the ontic sense, but people can also be ontologically different in the world» (Ibid.: 124). Wiesing thus represents an anthropological pluralism in a certain sense: human beings do not have a predetermined essence in that they do not have a fixed and rigid way of being in the world, but rather there are plural ways of being in the world – but precisely on an ontological level. At the same time, however, it is not completely arbitrary, as Wiesing points out, but he is concerned with determining the «necessary, a priori limits of the possible» (Ibid.: 124): The styles of painterly and linear being-in-the-world describe a «broad spectrum of imposition or a space of possibility: between the imposition of having to be a body in the world and the imposition of having to have a body in the world, the condition of being of my being-in-the-world plays itself out» (Ibid.: 128).

Conclusion

My reflections aimed to identify two different paradigms of the «equation of man and style»: the traditional paradigm determines style as a relata of the relation between man and style and has a stronger interest in the question *what is style?* Even if four types are to be distinguished here, it is difficult to speak of an anthropological interest here; these approaches are only partially suitable for learning something about human beings. The formalistic paradigm of Wölfflin and Wiesing is different: style is not understood here as a relata, but as the relation itself; in Wölfflin's case as the visible relation between parts of the picture, in Wiesing's as the experienceable relation between human beings and the world. Wölfflin's concept of style serves Wiesing as a meta-theoretical tool to do justice to the phenomenal plurality of human world relations. This surplus potential of Wölfflin's categories must be taken into account: painterly and linear are not mutually exclusive poles of binarity, but a spectrum within which human being-in-the-world oscillates. In this sense, Wiesing's project also stands in the tradition of *Formal aesthetics*: the conceivable forms, the styles of being-in-the-world, are systematically described by him through the conceptual pairing of painterly-linear. This is why we can rightly speak of an anthropological appropriation of the concept of style, or, as Wiesing calls it, of «principles of the history of *Dasein*». To speak of painterly and linear as world relations is therefore not a metaphor, rather painterly and linear describe the conceivably necessary limits of phenomenal being-in-the-world as the basic structure of human existence. Wiesing's reception of Wölfflin can therefore also be described as a contribution to the logic of world relations, or more modernly formulated: as a prelude to a phenomenological anthropology.

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Notes

1   In the following, I will stick to the old meaning and translate «man» as «human being». The terms will be used synonymously.

2   For this romanticistic approach in detail see Müller (1981): 85-98, Gumbrecht (1986): 746-752, and Breuer (2009): 1233 f.

3   For this aesthetisistic approach in detail see Müller (2009) and Baldini (2018).

4   For this historicistic approach in detail see Por, Radnóti (1990).

5   Further variations of this functionalistic type can be found in the so-called *Lebensstil-Forschung*, the sociological research on lifestyle; see f.e. Berger, Hradil (1990).

6   In addition to Wölfflin, Alois Riegl and Konrad Fiedler are named as one of the main representatives of *Formal aesthetics*. See Pinotti (2012) and Wiesing (1997).

Aisthesis

Three Distances in *Linquan Gaozhi*

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Abstract. *Linquan Gaozhi* (《林泉高致》) was completed during the North Song period, a period of full development in Chinese landscape painting. As a comprehensive work, this book encompasses various aspects of painting techniques, appreciation criteria, and artistic concepts. The concept of the "Three Distances" proposed in this book not only became an important resource in the history of painting and art criticism but also continues to play a significant role in reshaping theoretical interpretation and inspiring artistic creation among contemporary scholars and artists. By historically tracing and reconstructing the spatial arrangement of the "Three Distances (三远)," the interconnections and operational environment of these distances are revealed. In the visual language of landscape painting, we seek to understand the motivation of Guo Xi as a painter and his self-recognition as a literatus. Guo Xi's dual identity brings out the complex personality of Song literati, which maintains a balance between responsibility within the world and the pursuit of essential Dao in a typical articulation.

Keywords. Three Distances, *Linquan Gaozhi*, Guo Xi, Chinese landscape painting.

Introduction

In the course of the development of Chinese landscape painting, the achievements of the

North Song period are remarkable, both in terms of artistic practice and theo-
retical reflection. The painters of this period inherited the painting styles of Jing
Hao (荆浩), Guan Tong (关仝), Li Cheng (李成), and Fan Kuan (范宽), and
explored new possibilities in landscape representation through the practice of
imitating and emulating ancient works. The painting academies established dur-
ing this time provided them with abundant learning resources and systematic
training. Equally noteworthy is the widespread interest and active participation
in painting by the literati class represented by Ouyang Xiu (欧阳修), Su Shi (
苏轼), and Mi Fu (米芾). These phenomena together demonstrate the vigorous
development of the painting profession in North Song society and have had pro-
found influences on subsequent generations. *Linquan Gaozhi* (《林泉高致》),
completed in the mid-North Song period, embodies the aesthetic judgment and
spiritual personality of literati in this era. In particular, the concept of the "Three
Distances," including "high-distance" (高远), "deep-distance" (深远), and "flat-
distance" (平远)

proposed in the painting, has garnered attention and found application in dif-
ferent periods and from different perspectives. The discussion of its connotations
allows us to gain insight into both the superficial and profound aspects of literati
painting, shedding light on the psychological constructs within the vision of lit-
erati. We will proceed by analyzing the paintings, exploring the identity of the
painters, and examining the historical background of these texts. Subsequently,
we will uncover the stratum consisting of the perception of the "Three Distanc-
es" and the ripple effect that gradually spread from the vision of the landscape to
the imagination of ancient times.

"Three distances" in the composition

"Three Distances" is proposed by Guo Xi when discussing the arrangement
and form of landscape in the painting.

There are three distances in the mountains: looking up from the foot of the
mountain to its peak is called high-distance; peering through the front of the
mountain to the back is called deep-distance; looking from near mountains to
distant mountains is called flat-distance. (山有三远：自山下而仰山颠，谓之
高远；自山前而窥山后，谓之深远；自近山而望远山，谓之平远。高远
之色清明，深远之色重晦，平远之色有明有晦。高远之势突兀，深远之
意重叠，平远之意冲融而缥缈). (Guo [2010]: 69)

If we consider Guo Xi as an art theorist, then his definition of three dis-
tances leaves us with a strong impression that knowledge of mountains lays
a theoretical foundation for producing a landscape. This "Three Distances"

serves as a pre-given idea for the formative process by which the different elements come into a world of mountains and water. It is not difficult for us to address the forms of three distances in Guo Xi's painting. If this idea is taken as a lens to examine the Chinese landscape paintings, then it will not be difficult to recognize different forms of three distances. In this sense, we understand Fong Wen's argument about the fundamental grammar of Chinese landscape paintings.

These three compositional schemas have been basic to Chinese landscape paintings ever since; the picture-plane dominated by vertical elements, the picture-plane filled by a series of horizontal elements, and the picture-plane divided vertically between these two alternatives. (Fong [1969]: 393)

To demonstrate his perspective, Fong Wen provides direct evidence through three pieces of 8th-century paintings on biwas in the Shōsōin (*ibid*). In early landscape paintings, various elements were arranged vertically, and the "Three Distances" were separated as individual scenes from top to bottom. Along with the maturation of compositional techniques, the isolated application of the "Three Distances" was better and better combined, creating more and more complex layers in landscape painting. Fong Wen uses the dissection and integration of the "Three Distances" as a tool to analyze landscape paintings and thus finds an intuitive explanation to spell the evolution of landscape painting.

As we can see in another research by Fong Wen, he lists *Hawk and Ducks* (《隼鸭图》) from the 8th century, a partial section of *Dream Journey through the Xiao Xiang River*（《潇湘卧游图》）from the 12th century, and a partial section of *Autumn Colors on the Que and Hua Mountains* (《鹊华秋色图》) from the 13th century (Fong [2003]: 273). He dissects a landscape painting into parallelogram slices, with each slice presenting the rock formations from a specific viewpoint. The more slices are extracted, the more visual perspectives are included in the composition. The arrangement of mountains progresses from vertically parallel sections to gradually merging into a unified horizontal plane, and the forms of plants, streams, and mist contribute to visual unity. In the final stage, the entire composition becomes closer to the viewer's perspective and mental projection. As Fong points out, different painting styles emerge within specific cultural and intellectual contexts. In correspondence with various practices of painting, we discover the following theoretical principles regarding the arrangement of forms. i) «Too many would create chaos, too few would lack grace, the right balance lies in distinguishing near and far» (多则乱，少则慢，不多不少，要分远近) (Jing [2015]: 160) The principle proposed by Jing Hao, emphasizing the need for spatial order and separation rather than the connection between near and far elements, provides an explanation for the

style represented in *Hawk and Ducks*. ii) «The ancients had a broad mind. They arranged the scenery according to the law of nature to express their inner mind. This is the pinnacle of the painting method». (古人作画，胸次宽阔，布景自然，合古人意趣，画法尽矣) (Huang [2017]: 3) Huang Gongwang (黄公望), in his explanation of antiquity, reveals his requirements for the composition, which should be sufficiently expansive, allowing the viewer's gaze to wander and experience the extension and changes of the scenery. This is precisely the effect that *Autumn Colors on the Que and Hua Mountains* seeks to achieve. iii) Positioned between high-distance and flat-distance, *Dream Journey through the Xiao Xiang Rivers* has a more open composition and a more refined and gentle landscape. With the combination of theoretical insight and practical skill, we are ready to accept the "Three Distances" as a basic rule to construct the totality of Chinese landscape paintings.

In particular, this rule is also applicable to measure Guo Xi's works. With the dissection method, Guo Xi's paintings can be divided into three layers: the foreground representing deep-distance, the middle ground representing high-distance, and the background representing flat-distance. Within each layer, the influence of different traditions on Guo's brushwork can be identified. Guo Xi complained that his contemporaries only knew how to imitate Li Cheng and Fan Kuan, stating: «Nowadays students from Qi and Lu (齐鲁) copy only Yingqiu(营丘，namely李成), while students from Guan and Shan（关陕）only copy Fan Kuan» (Guo [2010]: 23) Similarly, Liu Daochun (刘道醇), a painting critic in Guo's time, regarded Li and Fan as exemplary masters in his writing. These assessments from various perspectives demonstrate the widespread influence of Li and Fan. According to *Xuanhe Catalogue of Paintings* (宣和画谱), Guo's early style was excessively intricate, but later he adopted Li's approach and excelled in compositional arrangements (McNair [2019]: 254). Unfortunately, very few of Li's works have survived, with the exception of *Reading Tablet and Pit Stone Picture*, (《读碑窠石图》) believed to be a collaborative work by Li Cheng and Wang Xiao (王晓). Comparing this work with Guo's, one can observe the influence of Li's ink technique on the old trees' branches resembling crab claws and the needle-like pine leaves. In addition to trees, Guo also incorporated Li's method of using large individual rocks to block out the fragmented background stones, creating a sense of layered recession. While borrowing this sense of recession, Guo employed complex and subtle variations to enhance the visual effect of fine, deep, and illusory spaces. In high-distance, Guo's pursuit of lofty and majestic mountain peaks reflects the influence of Fan Kuan:

> Mountains are immense things. They have a towering form, a robust and lofty form, an open and expansive form, a haughty and proud form, a vast and boundless form (山，大物也。其形欲耸拔，欲偃蹇，欲轩豁，欲箕踞，欲磅礴). (Guo [2010]: 62)

The mountains in Guo's paintings are all of a kind that highlights the sense of "immense things" – majestic and heavy. Fan's masterpiece, *Travelers by Streams and Mountains* (《溪山行旅图》) composed of towering cliffs, evokes a strong sense of grandeur and power. As Wang Shen

stated, «It appears as if one is standing in front of the real scene, with majestic and robust peaks, exuding a powerful and vigorous aura» (如面前真列，峰峦浑厚，气壮雄逸) (Han [2016]: 94). Although Guo's main peaks may not be as rigid and straight as Fan's, they gradually reach their highest point through the construction of stacked mountain ranges. Lastly, for the figuration of flat distance in Guo's paintings, although there is no clear model of influence, it can be seen as inheriting the entire tradition of landscape painting. The fusion of elements in the flat distance, characterized by a sense of blending and ethereality, has always been a pursuit in landscape painting. Wang Wei's (王维) paintings has already expressed a strong inclination toward flat distance in the depiction of «distant mountains and waters» that «gradually blur and merge into the horizon (or dissolve into the primal origins of nature)» (山水平远，绝迹天机). This attempt is repeatedly visible in the paintings after Wang, like what we can see in Dong Yuan's (董源) works, such as *Summer Scenery at Shanmen Ferry* (《夏景山口待渡图》) and *Cold Forest on the Riverbank* (attributed) (《寒林重汀图》（传）), which is also shared by Guo Xi. In this way, Guo Xi inherited the rich skills of pictorial practices and created his own way of organizing these skills together by embracing the "Three Distances" in composition.

Whether considering the "Three Distances" as the inherent structure of Guo's works or using it to grasp the evolution of landscape painting during the Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties, the analysis of the composition through the "Three Distances" provides a solid theoretical anchor for art historians and offers visual evidence to construct a coherent narrative of landscape painting styles. Summarizing the basic grammar of painting from numerous works, the achievements of art historians enable us to understand the historical styles of landscape painting from a chronological perspective. Moreover, the exploration of formal language in art history can further reveal the differences in aesthetic perception between cultures. For example, by juxtaposing Chinese landscape painting with Western pieces, the comparisons are often carried out in terms of principles of themes, forms, materials, and mediums, as well as aesthetic enjoyment. As more painting styles are absorbed through comparative methods, these works eventually converge and give rise to a universal phenomenon of painting and even of art as a whole.

This prompts James Elkins to critique Fong's methodology, particularly the spatial constructions applied by Fong in the context of Chinese painting. Elkins argues that Fong's ideas are influenced by modern painting practices yet the spatial arrangement in Chinese painting remains culturally distant.

(Elkins [2010]: 40-42) Elkins holds a deep suspicion of the concept of art history, stating that «(f)rom this farthest viewpoint, all of art history is a Western project, one with no place in China before the twentieth century» (Elkins [2010]: 140). In alignment with Elkins' concerns, we become more attuned to the realization that the analysis of pictorial forms or spatial arrangement has not fully delved into the intricacies of brushwork. In other words, the comparative gaze presupposes purity and equality among all artworks, abstracting landscape painting from its historical existence and social practice. As a research method, this way of seeing has originated from the development of museums in recent decades. The idea of museums is intricately linked with modern episteme, serving as a mean to specialize and organize knowledge by categorizing it into different fields, thus breaking the existence of an object into pieces. With these considerations, we aim to return to the historical reality of Guo Xi and his brushwork, seeking to elucidate the "Three Distances" from its most original position.

The "three distances" in guo xi's world

We have currently few extant works attributed to Guo Xi, reportedly around 20, most of which were undertaken in his later years and composed as large-scale scrolls. For example, the painting *Mountains and Spring Snow* (《关山春雪图》) measures approximately 180 centimeters in height and 50 centimeters in width, while *Valley in Solitude* (《幽谷图》) is 168 centimeters high and little less than 60 centimeters wide. The *Early Spring* (《早春图》) painting, drawn on two pieces of silk, is nearly 160 centimeters tall and over 100 centimeters wide. These hanging scrolls all depict towering rocks, deep valleys, and a sense of grandeur and vastness. Even *Flat Distant View of Rocks* (《窠石平远图》), even composed relatively simply, is still a large-scale work measuring 120 centimeters in height and 167 centimeters in width, created on two pieces of silk. The immense size of the paintings naturally demands stronger control of brush, richer details, and more inclusive composition. Huang Tingjian (黄庭坚) praised Guo Xi, saying: «Although Guo Xi is old, his eyes are still bright enough to capture the essence of rivers and mountains». Naturally, Guo's robust brushwork is attributed to nothing but his continuous dedication to the practice and study of painting.

Meanwhile, displaying such large-sized paintings requires a proper open area. Literati are more used to place handscrolls on tables and appreciate them piece by piece in the solitude of their "small chambers" or "study pavilions." Wu Hong describes the material characteristics of handscrolls, stating: «handscroll is the extreme form of what I call the 'private medium' of visual art

because only a single spectator can manipulate the painting's movement and control the pace of reading» (Wu [1996]: 61). By contrast, big pictures allow for simultaneous appreciation by groups of individuals. The manner of individual appreciation versus group appreciation differs, resulting in reactionary attitudes, including visual enjoyment and personal judgment. Handscrolls unfolded in private spaces evoke the viewer's personal interest and active engagement, while big pictures, observed by a group of people, aim to transcend individual preferences and pursue a less self-affected visual enjoyment and a more reflective aesthetic judgment.

According to Guo Si's (son of Guo Xi) note, after Guo Xi entered the capital of Dongjing (present-day Kaifeng/开封), he was appointed to create murals, screens, and other brushwork for places such as the Three Bureaus (三司使), the Kaifeng Prefectural Hall, the Xiangguo Temple, and Remonstrance Bureau (谏院). He once created the painting *Snow in the Northern Wind* (《朔风飘雪》) to decorate Emperor Shenzong's (宋神宗) felt tent. In fact, Guo Xi made countless screens of various kinds: palace screens for the cool pavilions on lotus ponds and carriage screens for the imperial procession. Almost every important palace exhibits Guo Xi's grand handiwork. It was mainly out of the emperor's favor and recognition that Guo Xi received an unparalleled reputation. However, this favoritism, relying on the emperor's personal preferences, also raised suspicions and caused interpretations that emphasized their political value over their aesthetic value.

As one among them, Alfreda Murck viewed the painting *Early Spring* as a political metaphor praising imperial favor. Mountains become symbols of imperial authority, and a person's position on mountains implies their position within the hierarchy of power: «*Early Spring* is an elegant metaphor for the success of the New Policies. It depicts a dynamic, harmonious society and an ideal socio-political hierarchy» (Murck [2000]: 34-36) If the peaks in the painting correspond to political power in reality, then Guo's understanding of the high-distance, «looking up from the foot of the mountain to its peak», will become a gaze of admiration toward authority. In this view, all the peaks in landscape paintings are suspected of embodying political power. Yet, standing in front of Fan Kuan's *Travelers by Streams and Mountains*, if the monumental rocks are seen solely as a figuration of the absoluteness of power, then where does the freedom of wandering through streams and mountains come from? Where can we find the spiritual enjoyment of literati? Consider this method; does this political perspective only apply to Guo Xi and the academy painters he represents, or does it apply to all literati painters? This question prompts us to examine the extent to which a political interpretation is effective in explaining literati paintings, particularly in reassessing the importance of the painter's self-recognition.

Fig.1 – Guo Xi(ca. 1010-ca.1090), *Early Spring*, 1072. Taipei, National Palace Museum

Guo Xi was appointed to the Hanlin Academy (翰林院) and «served as a Scholar of Arts in the Imperial Painting Academy» (McNair [2019]: 253). The emperor provides him with abundant learning resources and an esteemed status. In return, the painter consistently excelled in completing the tasks assigned by the emperor. *Linquan Gaozhi* records that Guo Xi was commissioned multiple times to undertake brushwork. In one account of a screen placed in "Small Hall of the Inner East Gate"(内东门小殿), the arrangement is described as follows:

> Eight screens, with two at the front. On the left screen, there is a painting of pine and rocks by Fu Daoyin from Chang'an. On the right, there is another painting of pine and rocks by Li Zongcheng from Fuzhou. The six screens in the middle were painted by Guo Xi under the command of the emperor, depicting autumn scenery (屏八幅，面有两掩扇，其左扇长安符道隐画松石，右扇鄜州李宗成画松石，当面六幅，某奉旨画秋景山水). (Guo [2010]: 148)

Considering the layout of traditional Chinese palaces, the person seated in front of these "six screens in the middle" should be Emperor Shenzong himself. According to Guo Xi's way of handling season scenery, autumn would be «clear and pure, with falling leaves evoking solemnity».

The screen, imbued with a sense of autumnal desolation, perfectly complemented the imperial majesty of the emperor seated before it. Such a screen is not only an object for aesthetic appreciation but also an essential part of the palace architecture. Wu Hong explains the political function of screens in the palace: «To the emperor, the screen is both an exterior object and an extension of his body […] facing the other participants, the emperor and the screen merge into each other, appearing in unison to confront and control the other participants» (Wu [1996]: 12) Let us take Wu Hong's idea and return to the *History of Song* (《宋史》) and we will find that "Small Hall of the Inner East Gate" was a significant place:

> After the evening timekeeping starts, the emperor would go to the Small Hall of the Inner East Gate to summon officials, issue imperial orders, and handle official documents, for all matters involving the appointment of prime ministers or important affairs. (Ni [2004]: 3153)

During the day, Emperor Shenzong would conduct discussions with ministers in big palaces like the Purple Palace Hall (紫宸殿) and the Chonggong Hall (垂拱殿), but in the evening, he would make important decisions in this small hall. In such a small and informal palace, the screen serves to enhance the emperor's dignity and better uphold the hierarchical distinctions between ruler and subjects. Wu 's interpretation reconstructs the general characteristics of screens in the imperial era. When this conceptual idea encounters specific circumstances, it inevitably undergoes distortion or even reversal at the experiential level, especially considering the principle of joint decision-making between the emperor and ministers during the North Song dynasty. Therefore, if one judges Guo Xi's works purely as a mean to please imperial power, it will be difficult to grasp the spiritual freedom subtly implied in the landscape painting and understand the admiration of literati like Huang Tingjian and Su Shi for Guo's works. In particular, it will be impossible to comprehend the intention of Guo himself, «one can fully enjoy the fun of a retreat to forest and spring yet without leaving the banquet» (不下堂筵，坐穷泉壑) (Guo [2010]: 11). Now, we will attempt to respond to the interpretation of Guo Xi's paintings as an expression of reverence for power from three perspectives.

First, in direct conflict with this political interpretation is the fact that along with "high-distance," Guo Xi proposed "deep-distance": "peering through the front of the mountain to the back." The perspective set in deep distance is a downward view, but with some sideways instead of a straight bird's-eye view.

The eyes wander itself among top of hills, standing trees, edges of stones, flows of water. This relaxed viewing experience is continuously mitigating the oppressive feeling of high distance. Additionally, the details presented in deep distance provides a supplement to the simply brushed peaks in the far height. For example, in the deep-distance of *Early Spring*, there are upward-pointing tall pines, downward-hanging ancient pagodas, and dead branches with new leaves on trees. As the mountains recede into the distance, the depiction of the scenery within them becomes increasingly simplified. However, since the distant landscape echoes the nearby surroundings, although we may not discern the distant details clearly, we can still envision the forms it should possess. In this sense, the scenery in the deep-distance visually supplements the blurred details in the high-distance. This also depicts the skill Guo Xi used to maintain a balance between different perspectives.

Second, as Guo's particular principle of composition, huge mountain always takes the main surface of painting, to which everything else is secondary. However, whether this distinction inevitably falls into the metaphor of political power requires specific textual analysis. Guo has explained how to arrange mountains in his painting. The main peak is described as «the Son of Heaven, who was in the Yang position, receiving pilgrimages from all the lords, without the slightest momentum of being trapped or being rebelled against» (其象若大君，赫然当阳，而百辟奔走朝会，无偃塞背却之势也。) (Guo [2010]: 39). On the surface, the relationship between the subordinate peaks and the main peak resembles a symbol of political power. Yet, Guo's expression here is not straightforward; instead, he borrows from the popular textual allusions of his time. As Zhu Liangzhi (朱良志) points out: «this passage actually comes from the 'Shi' hexagram (师卦) in the *Book of Changes*. The 'Shi' hexagram consists of five Yin and one Yang, with the Yang representing the ruler among the Yins, occupying the position of the sovereign. This is what is meant by "in the Yang position"» (Zhu [2006]: 112). Following these clues, let us take a closer examination of the "Shi" hexagram.

The "Shi" hexagram in the *Book of Changes* discusses the art of warfare, and its divinatory text states: «if the noble one maintains his perseverance, good fortune will come without blame» (Yang & Zhang [2011]: 80) Song literati commonly studied the *Book of Changes*. Zhou Dunyi (周敦颐), Shao Yong (邵雍), Zhang Zai (张载), and the Cheng brothers (程颐、程颢) were well-known exemplars. Their purpose in interpreting the *Book of Changes* was to extract keywords and clues relevant to reality from the divinatory texts and hexagram images, giving these abstract scriptures practical significance. This pragmatic spirit is most evident in the interpretation by Wang Anshi (王安石), the leading advocate of reforms. In his interpretation of the "Shi" hexagram, solidarity is the key to success in conquest:

Six at the beginning means: the army departs in regulation (律) […] The "regulations" (律) are like "listening to the military signal with the same rhythm". To take regulations only as the law is never seen in the early dynasties of three kings […] (It starts at that) when King Wu (武王) attacked Zhou (纣), he blew the flutes, and the soldiers listened to the sound (初六，师出以律……荆公曰：'律'如'同律听军声'之'律'，法律之律，三代未有……武王伐纣，吹律听声。). (Wang [2017]: 29)

Wang's interpretation is linked to his own circumstances. As a reformer, he is aware that support from the emperor is necessary to promote new policies. Nevertheless, with the example of the righteousness of King Wu, he strongly expressed the aspiration of the literati to take responsibility for the world and lead the people on a righteous path. Wang Anshi hides himself behind the status of the emperor. Compared with his prudence, Cheng Yi (程颐) suggests that leading the troops as long as it is in accordance with the righteous way, the commander can have full control over all matters:

The second line (of Shi hexagram) is the master of this hexagram as well as the leader of the army, who has exclusive control over the army. Although the leader occupies a lower position in the imperial court, he gains exclusive control over the army. Since ancient times, when a general was appointed, he was able to order the army completely independently on the outside. In the army, he who has exclusive control follows the middle way; thus, it is auspicious and without blame (二乃师之主，专制其事者也。居下而专制其事，唯在师则可。自古命将，阃外之事得专制之。在师专制而得中道，故吉而无咎). (Cheng [2011]: 42)

Being away from the court, the generals were not bound by the emperor's decrees. This was because the emperor, being distant from the battlefield, lacked real-time information. In essence, due to the emperor's limited capabilities, the generals leading troops in the field could make independent decisions. From the interpretations of Wang and Cheng, it can be seen that the "Shi" hexagram contains the ideal aspirations that literati seek to achieve. Later, when Fan Zuyu lectured Emperor Zhezong (宋哲宗), he repeatedly advised the emperor to seek the guidance of virtuous literati. (Fan [2015]) Reflecting on Guo's theory of painting, since he chose to quote the text of the "Shi" hexagram, the principle of arranging elements may not necessarily derive from political hierarchy but rather from the basic doctrines of cosmic order, human nature, or *Dao* of the world. Under the operation of *Dao*, the power dynamics of the human world are merely temporary manifestations of the former.

Finally, if we consider the proportions of "Three distances" in Guo's works, we can see that the majority of his paintings are subject to "flat-distance." In summer, he likes to draw *Summer Mountain in Flat-Distance* (《平远夏山》) and *Rain Clears, Flat-Distance* (《雨过平远》). In autumn, he likes to draw *Clear Autumn After the Rain* (《平远秋霁》), *Autumn Scene in Flat-distance* (《平远秋景》), and *Clear Autumn on Distant Waters* (《远水澄秋》). In

winter, there are *Snowy Stream in Flat-distance* (《雪溪平远》) and Wind and Snow in Flat-distance (《风雪平远》). Although Guo does not discuss how to address flat distance in a spring scenery, we can find his practice on the left side of *Early Spring*, in which the space gradually recedes with the gentle retreat of the water's edge, and the ink dissipates into the infinite void. As a skill of composition, the figure of streams and riverbanks is more conducive to creating a sense of levelness and vastness. As we have already mentioned, flat distance has remained a popular theme over time, especially in the later South Song and Yuan dynasties. People prefer solace in the tranquility and serenity conveyed by the flat-distance landscapes, as they reveal a lifestyle imbued with a sense of seclusion. To cater to this aesthetic preference, many landscape paintings consciously pursue expansive space with scattered brushes. In comparison to these works, Guo's works reveal the particular tendency of North Song landscapes. He does not simply pursue the impression of tranquility and relaxation but absorbs the grandeur and profundity at the same time. That is why we can find open spaces of dilution and simplicity as well as filled spaces of magnitude with details. Following the meandering trails or streams, the eyes travel in the abundant scenery. As the eyes arrive at open spaces, the gaze comes to rest, and spirits find expansion and release in the openness, almost as if settling down within the painting. In Guo Xi's understanding, he emphasizes the quality of landscape as both a place to travel and a place to settle in his paintings. In practice, he adopts the realism method and achieves the authenticity of the mountains and forests to evoke a spiritual projection and lead the viewers to seek their inner utopias.

No matter how inventive and skillful the painter is, we should not forget the essence of the painting, which is fundamentally an object of observation. Song literati had a particular penchant for engaging in observational activities. They believed that the ultimate truth contained in things could be grasped through observation and contemplation. Under the influence of the literati, Song emperors, from Taizong (太宗) and Zhenzong (真宗) to Zhezong (哲宗) and Gaozong (高宗), enjoyed inviting their subjects into the palace to observe various objects together. Considering Guo Xi's large-scale screens standing nearby, we may imagine that when the emperor and literati were viewing things together, these screens opened-up a world of mountains and waters from the closed space of power. The idealized scenery conveyed a sense of spiritual projection, diluting the pressure from the political hierarchy. With the landscape on the screens alleviating the sense of political tension, the emperor and the literati would have found it easier to interact and collectively savor the moment. As a result, Guo Xi's works facilitated literati' smoother integration into political activities.

Before Guo Xi, most painters like Zong Bing (宗炳) used painting for an individual to dispel distractions from the mind for contemplating *Dao*. Even while

lying in bed, one can wander spiritually through the process of seeing painting. This is exactly the private enjoyment of the literati. Meanwhile, Guo Xi perceived painting as having a deliberate significance in the interaction between the emperor and literati:

> In the era of peace and prosperity, under a good emperor and kind parents, it would be wrong to go off alone and merely cling to one's own purity. For there is duty and responsibility which should not be ignored […]. One can fully enjoy the fun of retreat to forest and spring yet without leaving the banquet (直以太平盛日，君亲之心两隆，苟洁一身，出处节义斯系……今得妙手，郁然出之，不下堂筵，坐穷泉壑). (Guo [2010]: 11)

Compared to Guo Xi, Zong Bing's joy of painting reflects a passive attitude, as spiritual wandering becomes a necessary choice for him due to his physical disability caused by aging. By contrast, Guo Xi believed that the pleasure of painting is not meant to compensate for the regret of being unable to travel due to aging. The reason literati cannot linger among landscapes is that they bear an inescapable responsibility to the mundane world. They must undertake the duty of caring the country. The more literati immerse themselves in the secular world, the more they need the air of liberation that the landscape world provides. In this sense, landscape paintings offer moments of brief contemplation, temporarily alleviating political pressures for literati. One could say that the significance of painting lies in aiding literati to engage more actively in worldly affairs. The understanding of the enjoyment of painting shifted from previous passive reclusion to achieving self-fulfillment in court.

Three distances in linqua gaozhi

Guo Xi was already 60 years old when he was summoned to the Imperial Painting Academy, which held a collection of masterpieces and provided Guo Xi with ample inspiration and assisted him in developing his techniques. While continuously refining his skills, Guo Xi also gradually developed his understanding of painting by extensively studying the theories of his predecessors. In *Linquan Gaozhi*, the section on *Mountain and Water Instruction* (山水训), *Painting Intention* (画意), *Painting Techniques* (画诀), and *Painting Subjects* (画题) are believed to be written by Guo Xi. Among these four sections, the weight of *Mountain and Water Instruction* is the heaviest. The title suggests that this section is in the lineage with Zong Bing's P*reface on Mountain and Water Painting* (画山水序), Wang Wei's *On Mountain and Water Painting* (山水论), and Jing Hao's "Prose on Mountain and Water Painting" (山水赋). Guo Xi draws inspiration from the previous theories, which he merges with the ways of aesthetic appreciation and practical living of literati. If we place "Three-distance" within the

context of the framework of classical discourse, this approach will allow us to find the continuity of literati painters' heritage as well as the distinctive aspects of Guo Xi's theories.

In the above discussions, the concept of "Three distances" is emphasized on the arrangement of "height" (高), "depth" (深), and "flatness" (平) perspectives within the composition while overlooking the significance of "distance" (远). However, with the rise of landscape painting from the Six Dynasties, the pursuit of "distance" has been a central intention of painters, and their writings have consistently revolved around the imaginative power of "distance." For example, although Gu Kaizhi's (顾恺之) painting of Mount Yuntai (云台山) is lost, his *Record of Painting Mount Yuntai* (画云台山记) is regarded as one of the earliest texts about the formation of landscape painting. In this rather intricate essay, Mount Yuntai is identified as the place where Master Zhang (张天师) cultivated and tested his disciples. By following Gu's narration, one can almost see his unparalleled brush skill to shape clouds among rocks, position pine trees to create pathways and delineate the master's calm composure in contrast to the disciple's nervous apprehension. With his fantastical creatures, we are even more strongly transported from the real Mount Yuntai into the realm of the imaginary Mount Yuntai. Everyone standing before the painting wants to experience the fairyland, where the «mountain is high and people are distant» (山高而人远). (Gu [2015]: 38). It is precisely because of the "distance" that people see in the aura of the mountain. The distance maintained between landscape paintings and mundane reality aptly reflects the independence and freedom of one's spirit. In this sense, we understand Xu Fuguan's point that: «"distance" means the spiritual realm achieved by Daoism as well as the goal pursued by Daoism in their time» (Xu [2014]: 327).

In the Six Dynasties era, the painters had already mastered the skills of conveying distance through the use of size proportions. For example, Zong Bing created «a vertical stroke of three inches represents a height of a thousand *ren* (仞); a horizontal brushstroke of several feet depicts a distance of a hundred *li* (里)» (Zong [2008]: 45). Compared with the earlier doctrines, like «Water does not allow for turbulence, and people stand larger than mountains» (水不容泛、人大于山) (Zong [2008]), Zong Bing's utilization of proportions reveals a rational analysis and a realism approach, that is to take the enjoyment of landscape painting away from the secular function as «accomplishing cultivation, enhancing moral regulation» (成教化、助人伦). During the Tang dynasty, the awareness of distance is manifested in the varied treatment of details. Complexity in the distance could be simplified and the non-existent could be portrayed: «distant figures have no eyes, distant trees have no branches. Distant mountains have no stones, faintly resembling eyebrows. Distant water has no ripples, rising high to meet the clouds. This is the doctrine» (远人

无目，远树无枝。远山无石，隐隐如眉。远水无波，高与云齐，此是诀也。)(Wang [2015]:155). With only a few light strokes, the pictorial space opens up the vastness of the entire universe, directing the imagination of the absolute distance. After Guo Xi, Han Zhuo (韩拙) quickly put forth his new version of Three Distances:

> There are mountain roots and shores, and the water waves stretch far away, which is called broad-distance. There are wild clouds and deserts, and those who seem to be invisible across wild waters are called misty-distance. When the scenery is reaching the horizon, faint and ethereal, it is called remote-distance (有山根边岸，水波亘望而遥，谓之阔远。有野霞暝漠，野水隔而仿佛不见者，谓之迷远。景物至绝而微茫缥缈者，谓之幽远). (Han [2016]: 68-69)

Compared with Guo Xi, this new version highlights the poetic sentiments conveyed in the misty and vague atmosphere of the painting. People are more inclined to emphasize the suggestive quality than visual fidelity; as we can see in this new "Three Distances", and the simplification of techniques and the abstraction of figures ultimately converge toward the infinite extension of distance. Thus, in stark contrast to the trajectory of Western perspective methods, in landscape paintings, the rational visual aspect that was once manifested in proportional considerations gradually became faded into the poetic imagery of painting. *Linqaun Gaozhi* documents Guo Xi's preparations before painting:

> Every time when he was going to paint, he sat under the clear windows, in front of the tidy desk. Incense was burning on both sides, and the brushes and ink were of excellent quality. He washed his hands and cleaned the inkstone as if he were receiving an esteemed guest. Only when his spirit is calm, and his mind is focused, he would proceed with the painting (凡落笔之日，必明窗净几，焚香左右，精笔妙墨，盥手涤砚，如迓大宾，必神闲意定，然后为之，岂非所谓不敢以轻心掉之乎？). (Guo [2010]: 31)

The old painter's careful preparation imbues his workspace with a spiritual quality, filled with a sense of reverence and a dedicated attitude, all of which determine the success of the painting:

> In any painting, regardless of its size or quantity, one must devote oneself wholeheartedly to it. Without diligence, the spirit will not be focused. The spirit must be present alongside the work; if the spirit is absent, the essence will not be evident. One must approach it with seriousness and solemnity; without seriousness, one's thoughts will not be profound (凡一景之画，不以大小多少，必须注精以一之，不精则神不专。必神与俱成，神不与俱成，则精不明。必严重以肃之，不严则思不深。). (Guo [2010]: 28-30)

Scholars such as Xu Fuguan and Zhu Liangzhi associate Guo Xi's pre-painting preparations with the spirit of "respect" (敬) in Confucianism. Xu Fuguan suggests that «respect allows the spirit to gather and penetrate into the object of creation, enabling a deep and complete understanding of the object» (Xu

[2014]: 333) Zhu Liangzhi also agrees with the emphasis on «concentrating the spirit, gathering one's thoughts, and observing in tranquility» (Zhu [2006]: 145). Influenced by Neo-Confucianism, they consciously linked Guo's attitude with the principle of "investigating things to attain knowledge," believing that concentration leads to the acquisition of cognition. However, within their interpretation, there emerges a modern epistemological pursuit of overcoming the distance between the gaze and the object as well as keeping the object under cognitive practice. This unaware pursuit conflicts with Guo's concern of "Three Distances." "High-distance," "deep-distance," and "flat distance" all require a distance between the object and the viewer so that eyes and minds may wander themselves in the gap. Zong Baihua (宗白华) describes visual enjoyment as the eyes engaging in a rhythmic movement amidst mountains and water and ultimately coming to rest in contemplation of Dao (Zong [????] 437). This interpretation perhaps aligns more with Guo's intention of painting, as «mountains and waters offer places for viewers to walk in, gaze on, wander through, and dwell within» (山水有可行者，有可望者，有可游者，有可居者) (Guo [2010]: 19). In his proposal, what is noteworthy is that painting possesses the quality of being habitable. Guo Xi believed that since there are few landscapes in reality suitable for both habitation and enjoyment, paintings should compensate and provide us with an ideal dwelling place with perfect landscapes. Guo's proposition of habitation sounds unusual, considering that painted landscapes cannot physically bear the weight of a person. So, how can we understand the concept of "habitation" in this context? The idea of habitation goes beyond the physical act of residing within a painting. It is more about immersing oneself mentally and emotionally in the painting, finding a sense of belonging, tranquility, and engagement, as Guo Xi always carries a desire for the distant world: «The noise and shackles of dust are what people often detest; the misty realms of immortals and sages are what people often yearn for but cannot see» (尘嚣缰锁，此人情所常厌也；烟霞仙圣，此人情所常愿而不得见也) (Guo [2010]: 11) Despite his longing for the realm of the legendary landscape, Guo Xi never advocated withdrawal from the world; instead, he adhered to engagement with the world. In this context, the world within the painting acts as a companion to the mundane world, always maintaining a sense of distance and parallelism with reality.

Guo Xi's idea of distance reflects the spiritual pursuit of Song literati, who used to praise and reference ancient times, while criticizing and disparaging the contemporary time. For example, a new policy is justified by referencing the earliest historical texts, which emphasize the ideal of an "inner sage and outer king"(内圣外王). They prefer to take the moral heritage from Yao-Shun (尧舜) rather than the Han-Tang dynasties. Fan Zuyu requested Zhezong (宋哲宗) to learn from Renzong and «take Yao and Shun as models, treating Confucian lit-

erati as guests and friends» (Fan [2015]: 131). The most typical example is the dialogue between Wang Anshi and Shenzong when the emperor inquired about the principles of ruling. He asked:

> "What about imitating the art of emperor Tang Taizong?" Wang's reply was, "Your Majesty should follow Yao and Shun. Why concern Taizong? The way of Yao and Shun is exceedingly simple and straightforward, essential but not roundabout, easy but not difficult. It is just that the people of this era cannot comprehend it and consider it unattainable (帝问为治所先，对曰："择术为先"。帝曰："唐太宗何如？"曰："陛下当法尧、舜，何以太宗为哉？尧、舜之道，至简不烦，至要而不迁，至易而不难。但末世学者不能通知，以为高不可及尔。"). (Ni [2004]: 7313)

Han-Tang dynasties have always been regarded as the most prosperous eras, and Tang Taizong has been seen as an exemplary ruler. However, according to Wang Anshi, given that Han and Tang were seeking political power, they already forgot the importance of virtue in the state and deviated from the teaching of the ancient sages. So, it becomes a duty and a mission for Song literati to elaborate on the ancient virtues in the context of the present reality. Yu Yingshi particularly points out that the ancient world is so distant that Song literati hardly hold sufficient knowledge. Nevertheless, the lack of knowledge allowed them to reconstruct the ancient world based on their own interpretations. In this way, the meticulously constructed ancient world serves as a mirror, reflecting the aspects of the real world that need improvement. On the other side, the idealized imagination of the ancient world strongly encourages them in all practical endeavors.

During this historical time, Guo Xi was appointed to the Imperial Painting Academy. His paintings soonly adorned almost every major palace. Besides the screen in the "Inner East Gate Small Hall," Guo Xi created another significant work, namely the "Jade Hall Folding Screen." After the emperor systematically renovated crucial palaces, he specifically commissioned Guo Xi to create a folding screen painting for *Jade Hall* by saying: «the Imperial Academy is a place where literati gather. Since you have a son who is a student, you should pay special attention to painting here» (翰苑摛藻之地，卿有子读书，宜与着意画) (Guo [2010]: 153). According to the record of the *History of Song*, "Jade Hall" is another name of the Imperial Academy. This name was given by Song Taizong. In the second year of the Chunhua era (淳化), Song Taizong wrote in an artistic font, "Jade Hall, the official bureau" (玉堂之署) on a plaque, and sent this to the Imperial Academy (Ni [2004]: 71). The Imperial Academy was the official bureau for literati to «compose imperial edicts, decrees, orders, and other similar documents» (Ni [2004]: 3153). This is to say that it is in Jade Hall that literati carried out the task of drafting edicts in response to the emperor's command from the "Inner East Gate Small Hall." What made this palace even more distinctive was that the emperor would also listen to literati giving lectures there and

read books together with them. Considering these various functions, Jade Hall is believed to be the place where the literati could fulfill their lifelong ambitions.

It was for this palace that Guo Xi was commissioned to create a screen. Shenzong specifically reminds Guo Xi of his boy, who is still a student but would one day serve the country in this palace. Guo Xi fasted and lived in seclusion for several days and finished it all in one go. What he made is a spring mountain scene. Although we cannot personally appreciate the magnificence of this great brushwork today, as a consolation, we can refer to the preserved *Early Spring* painting and the poem composed by Su Shi for this screen:

> Jade Hall closes its windows during the day and opens the leisure of spring, since there is Guo Xi's painting of the spring mountains. The cooing of doves and the chirping of swallows awaken from their slumber; white waves and green peaks, truly not of this world   (玉堂昼掩春日闲，中有郭熙画春山。鸣鸠乳燕初睡起，白波青嶂非人间). (Guo [2010]: 153)

To deal with so many pictorial figures, Guo Xi would adhere to his principle of composition and let all life conform to their natural order. Through this, he aimed to reveal the existence of *Dao* through his paintings. Compared to the screen in the "Inner East Gate Small Hall," which aims to maintain the political hierarchy, the purpose of the "Jade Hall Screen" is to awaken the awareness of *Dao* through the tranquil mountains and forests. That is to say, the natural vitality of forests and streams evokes the memory of the ancient epochs, which provides a transcending point for the literati to reflect on their current situation. The painting makes visible the solidness of heaven and earth to the literati and releases them from the political tension so that they join in the harmony between heaven and earth, as well as between the emperor and his subjects.

Therefore, the concept of "distance" has a dual nature: it is taken from the emperor as well as from the literati. Guo's landscape paintings were used by the emperor to maintain the power relationship between the emperor and his subjects while also being taken by the literati as a manifestation of *Dao*, allowing them to shift away from the threat of power. In this sense, Guo Xi distinguishes "distance" into different forms, encompassing both oppressive high-distance and ambitious deep-distance and unifying their tension within the realm of flat-distance. Alfreda Murck's interpretation concerns the symbolic role of mountains in the political context, yet misses the fact that in the North Song dynasty, the relationship between the emperor and literati was not simply of command and obedience but rather a shared responsibility for governing the country together. The emperor promised a policy of "shared determination for the country," which efficiently attracted selfless dedication from the literati. This spirit is expressed clearly by Fan Zhongyan: «When the people of the country have something to worry about, I am the first to worry about it; when

the people of the country have something to enjoy, I am the last to enjoy it» (先天下之忧而忧，后天下之乐而乐) (Fan [2015]). Song literati's passion for devotion to the country makes the need of self-preservation or self-edifying minute. Guo Xi, as one of them, expects that his brushwork could provide not only the awareness of *Dao*, including the mundane responsibility, but also the spiritual liberation found in the forests and streams. In this sense, Guo Xi's passion for painting was not solely motivated by his position in the painting academy but also by his concern and care for the well-being of the literati. While Guo Xi gained skills through imitating painting tradition, his recognition of painting extended beyond the traditional view. His intention is to balance active engagement and negative escapism, just as his skills manifested a conscious balance between complex details and clear composition, between the oppressive high-distance and aggressive deep-distance. After Guo Xi, literati painting gradually moved away from high-distance and deep-distance and leaned more toward flat-distance. These changes also reveal the external shift in the status of literati and the internal changes in their mindset. Therefore, when looking at the development of landscape painting in its entirety, Guo Xi fully recognized how brushwork could express the spiritual pursuits of literati most completely. In this sense, his idea of "Three Distances" is taken as the most comprehensive interpretation of his practice of painting.

The significance of "Three Distances" goes beyond the framework of composition as it expresses the spiritual movement of self between reality and the ideal, that is, between the transcendence of worldly matters and the aspirations of worldly ambitions. Guo Xi, on the one hand, occupies a prominent position in the painting academy, and this compelled him to continuously refine his technique to better serve the emperor. On the other hand, from the standpoint of literati, he also aimed to liberate himself from the repetition of techniques and pursue the forest-spring spirit that the literati aspired to. The asymmetry between Guo Xi's public identity and his self-recognition causes difficulty in categorizing his paintings by academic or literati painters. Similar difficulties arise in distinguishing the orientation of "Three Distances" between Daoism and Confucianism. Whether it be Guo Xi's painting practice or his idea of the painter's mission, Daoist and Confucian thoughts blend and permeate each other with ease, jointly cultivating the spiritual power that enriches the lives of Song literati. The multiplicity of "Three Distances" reminds us of the abundant intellectual resources behind literati paintings. We have examined different elements involved in landscape painting: brush skills, composition principles, political implications, and the self-recognition of Song literati. The operative ways in which these elements are interconnected provide an aesthetic intuition of the theoretical historical facts – the interplay of ideology and power, as well as the duality of cultural and political subjects embodied in Song literati.

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Notes

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2   Yuan/"远" has been translated as "perspective" by Lin Yutang (林语堂). This translation focuses on the ways of viewing in Chinese landscape paintings, but it loses the basic meaning of Yuan, which refers to the distance in space. Subsequently, instead of adopting Lin's translation, I choose Fong Wen's(方闻). See: Lin and Fong (1969).

3   王诜, a renowned contemporary painter of Guo Xi.

Aisthesis

Il fenomenologo e il *Guardador de Rebanhos*
Husserl eteronimo di Pessoa[1*]

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Abstract. There has been no shortage of attempts to bring Fernando Pessoa and Edmund Husserl together by interpreting the poetics of the one in the light of the philosophy of the other, albeit with due caution given the total lack of contact between the two and the obvious diversity of intentions. However, the results have been mostly negative, and the interpreters have essentially opted to highlight the limits of Husserlian phenomenology in comparison with the «absolute objectivism» of the verses of Alberto Caeiro, the «neo-pagan» poet whom Fernando Pessoa calls the «master» of his heteronyms. However, we believe that a different reading is possible, without denying the unbridgeable gap that separates Edmund Husserl and Fernando Pessoa alias Alberto Caeiro, because of the principle that underlies both the poetic and the phenomenological attitude: «pure vision».

Keywords. Husserl, Pessoa, intuition, dogma, heteronymism.

Introduzione

Tra i versi di uno dei più celebri poemi di Fernando Pessoa, *O Guardador de Rebanhos*, si profila in filigrana una tesi che ci permette di

pensare, non senza paradossalità, il rapporto tra l'essere umano e la natura. Si tratta di una tesi di carattere filosofico o, sarebbe più corretto dire, anti-filosofi-co, che funge da pista di riflessione e, al contempo, da provocazione se messa a confronto con l'impianto trascendentale della fenomenologia husserliana. Sotto l'eteronimo di Alberto Caeiro, il poeta immagina d'identificarsi, in un continuo gioco di spersonalizzazione e di simulazione, con il «guardador de rebanhos», il custode dei greggi, l'anima semplice capace di guardare le cose per quello che sono (un albero, un fiore, una collina); capace di guardare le cose per come le cose stesse ci chiedono d'essere guardate – *guardate e non pensate* – nella pie-nezza di una presenza che solo una visione immediata, priva d'artifici, sarebbe in grado di cogliere: «O meu olhar azul como o céu / É calmo como a água ao sol. / É assim, azul e calmo, / porque não interroga nem se espanta» (Pessoa [2001]: XXIII, 45)[2].

Contro ogni poetica della meraviglia posta alle origini della filosofia e, di con-seguenza, della fenomenologia – che, nella sua veste husserliana, ambisce a es-sere il rinnovamento della filosofia – Alberto Caeiro, il maestro degli eteronimi, ci invita a non meravigliarci di nulla per restare il più possibile fedeli a ciò cui apparteniamo senza scarto, alla natura; per vivere «à ras de nature» come sug-gerisce J. Gil (2000), uno degli interpreti filosoficamente più originali di Pessoa; al fine di non allontanarci da ciò che semplicemente siamo: animali umani che esistono in un mondo senza perché, dove le cose non sono né più né meno di quello che sono e dove non c'è essere oltre l'apparenza. Tutta la difficoltà, per l'eteronimo del poeta pensato all'immagine di un «argonauta das sensações ver-dadeiras», sta nel resistere alla tentazione di voler essere altro, di immaginare altro, di credere che le cose abbiamo un senso quando, invece, semplicemente sono. Per l'uomo che aspira a essere naturale come un bambino nella sua eterna innocenza e, ugualmente, per il poeta che vive in osmosi con il mondo, come una ninfa ai tempi del paganesimo, la difficoltà sta nel non pensare e vivere senza riflettere – «existimos antes de o sabermos» – come colui che ama, senza sapere d'amare, accettando che «tudo é como é e assim é que é» e che «o Tejo não é mais belo que o rio que corre pela minha aldeia», semplicemente perché «o Tejo não é o rio que corre pela minha aldeia» (Pessoa [2001]: XX, 42)[3].

La gloria del visibile – «não ver senão o visível» (Pessoa [2001]: XXVI, 48)[4], afferma Caeiro – decreta l'inesorabile rovina di ogni ermeneutica filosofica, con-dannando senz'appello ogni forma riflessiva di pensiero e, potremmo aggiunge-re, la stessa filosofia, incapace di colmare la distanza che separa il pensiero dalla vita; incapace d'attenersi all'immediatezza di quel legame tra l'uomo e la vita che fa dell'uomo un essere di natura. «Pensar é estar doente dos olhos» (Pessoa [2001]: II, 16)[5]. E i filosofi, non a caso, aggiunge Caeiro con tagliente serenità, sono «homens doidos»[6] che trasformano l'immediatezza del dato in qualcosa d'indiretto, d'irrimediabilmente artificiale. Alla stregua di un monito, la stessa

condanna si applica a ogni tentativo filosofico d'interrogazione del legame tra l'uomo e la natura, laddove il mondo «não se fez para pensarmos nele», «mas para olharmos para ele e estarmos de acordo» (Pessoa [2001]: II, 16)[7]. Ancor prima di ogni possibile decisione o azione individuale, collettiva o politica – foss'anche in ragione della tanto conclamata crisi ecologica – non ci accorgiamo che il problema, di fronte alla natura, siamo noi stessi nel preciso momento in cui cominciamo a pensare, noi, esseri tristi, «que trazemos a alma vestida» (Pessoa [2001]: 46, XXIV)[8].

Una domanda sorge, allora, spontanea nonché, per così dire, disperata se volessimo drammatizzare l'impasse di fronte a cui il monito caeiriano ci pone: cosa resta della filosofia e dei filosofi, condannati a portare il peso, se non altro emblematicamente, dell'eccezione antropologica? Cosa resta alla filosofia se non il compito di un continuo auto-superamento del pensiero per retrocedere, piuttosto che avanzare, al di qua del pensiero stesso? Buona parte della filosofia del Novecento si è, del resto, confrontata con le esigenze di quest'ingiunzione ricon-ducibile, da Nietzsche in poi, alla più generale crisi della modernità i cui motivi letterari e artistici, oltre che filosofici, hanno veicolato l'espressione di un «male di vivere» accompagnato, a vario titolo, dal sentimento di una perdita d'apparte-nenza al mondo in cui viviamo – pensiamo, a titolo esemplificativo, a Hofmann-stahl, a Rilke, a Blanchot, alle avanguardie del primo Novecento, da Munch a Schiele, a Camus e a Sartre. Heidegger, a partire dagli anni Quaranta, nei corsi su *Nietzsche* e, in particolare, negli *Entwürfe zur Geschichte des Seins als Me-taphysik*, pone a tema le ragioni di questa crisi che getterebbe radici più profonde di quanto non si possa di primo acchito immaginare. Sulla scia del gesto inaugu-rale di Descartes, il fondamento metafisico dell'età moderna risiederebbe in una volontà di potenza che colloca l'uomo, l'unico autentico soggetto, al centro del mondo (Heidegger [2021]). La domanda sull'ente si trasformerebbe nella ricerca di un metodo teso ad assicurare il fondamento assoluto e incontrovertibile della verità che coinciderebbe con l'auto-evidenza di un'egologia elevata a misura di ogni cosa (*cogito ergo sum*). L'uomo, certo di sé e della sua presunta unicità, fini-rebbe col proclamarsi signore di un mondo ridotto a *res extensa*, dove l'ente non sarebbe altro che l'oggetto di una possibile rappresentazione, il correlato di una relazione asimmetrica stabilita a vantaggio dell'uomo stesso, il soggetto, che, non assoggettandosi più all'idea di un creatore, rivendicherebbe i pieni poteri su ciò che resta del creato (Heidegger [2021]: 881-887).

Merleau-Ponty, per citare un altro esempio, condivide la stessa diagnosi, pur partendo da altri presupposti, invocando l'opportunità di un nuovo sguardo sul mondo, volto a rendere giustizia alla dimensione sensibile delle cose, in alter-nativa ai limiti, se non all'insensibilità, di cui la tradizione cartesiana avrebbe fatto prova. A tale proposito sono celebri le conferenze radiofoniche del 1948, le *Causeries*, in cui Merleau-Ponty non esita ad affermare:

C'est donc une tendance assez générale de notre temps de reconnaître entre l'homme et les choses non plus ce rapport de distance et de domination qui existe entre l'esprit souverain et le morceu de cire dans la célèbre analyse de Descartes, mais un rapport moins clair, une proximité vertigineuse qui nous empêche de nous saisir comme pur esprit à part des choses ou de définir les choses comme purs objets[9]. (Merleau-Ponty [2002]: «Exploration du monde sensible: les choses perçues», § 7)

Non siamo teste d'angelo alate e le cose che ci stanno di fronte non sono gli oggetti neutri di una contemplazione disinteressata. Descartes, secondo una vulgata altrettanto celebre, è tacciato come il principale imputato di quest'errore che ci spinge a crederci padroni di un mondo privo di consistenza ontologica. Una constatazione, questa, all'apparenza banale, su cui viene a cristallizzarsi un consenso largamente condiviso da buona parte della tradizione filosofica contemporanea, nonché fenomenologica: per uscire dall'impasse della modernità, la filosofia sarebbe costretta ad abbandonare una volta per tutte la grande stagione del razionalismo cartesiano. E, nella fattispecie, la fenomenologia, per recuperare un rapporto diretto con il mondo, dovrebbe procedere oltre Husserl che identifica la fenomenologia stessa con una forma di «neo-cartesianesimo» (Husserl [1991]: 44). Procedere oltre Husserl per correggere l'errore di Descartes, per riscoprire la dimensione corporea del nostro essere al mondo e restituire al mondo la concretezza che gli spetta, come ci insegna a sua volta Fernando Pessoa che, immedesimandosi nella semplicità disarmante di Alberto Caeiro, supera «dal basso» le filosofie del *cogito*, della coscienza e dell'intenzionalità – «sou místico», afferma il custode dei greggi, «mas só com o corpo»[10] (Pessoa [2001]: XXX, 53).

Il metodo fenomenologico dell'ἐποχή, la sospensione della credenza nella tesi dell'esistenza del mondo, le riduzioni eidetiche e trascendentali che trasformano il mondo nel correlato di una coscienza assoluta, altro non sarebbero che gli esiti di una malattia intellettuale portata al suo parossismo. Husserl, se posto a confronto con la figura del custode dei greggi, non sfuggirebbe alla triste schiera degli «homens doidos», i filosofi fatalmente moderni che preferiscono pensare il mondo invece di guardarlo e viverlo. Tra il poeta e il fenomenologo la distanza sarebbe incolmabile, nonostante i punti di contatto che gli interpreti hanno tentato di mettere in risalto nelle letture incrociate di Husserl e di Pessoa – due illustri contemporanei, l'uno all'altro sconosciuti. Non sono, d'altronde, mancati i tentativi di comprensione dell'opera di Pessoa e finanche di valutazione dal punto di vista del metodo fenomenologico (Braz [2008]; Carneiro [2011]; Pinheiro Borba, de Souza [2014]). Si è cercato di esplicitare i presupposti *sui generis* dell'insegnamento di Pessoa alias Alberto Caeiro in una prospettiva fenomenologicamente compatibile (De Grammont [2011]); si è interrogata la fenomenologia alla luce delle possibilità del pensiero che Pessoa affida al maestro degli eteronomi (Frias [2012], Ganeri [2020]). Un dato pare, tuttavia, imporsi fin dall'articolo pioniere di B. Linnartz (1966), a prescindere dagli orientamenti

della critica, più o meno fenomenologicamente attenta: il programma husserliano di un «vedere puro», scevro da ogni presupposto, se letto alla luce dell'oggettivismo assoluto di cui Caeiro si fa il portavoce, non perverrebbe a onorare la radicalità delle promesse fatte dalla fenomenologia. Smarrita la via del ritorno, la variante husserliana errerebbe alla ricerca di un accesso alle cose, incapace in ultima istanza, per un eccesso di riflessione, di dimorare presso le cose stesse. E la realtà, ricoperta dal velo di un idealismo trascendentale in cui Husserl forzerebbe la sua fenomenologia, si ridurrebbe a un insieme di *cogitata*, agli oggetti intenzionali di un flusso di coscienza che finisce per inghiottire dentro di sé tutto ciò che è là fuori, nel mondo. Dai versi di Caeiro emergerebbero, tutt'al più, i lineamenti di una fenomenologia «post-husserliana», come A. Frias, tra gli altri, suggerisce (Frias [2012]: 62) – ammesso, e non concesso, che la fenomenologia e, in termini ancor più generali, la filosofia sia in grado o addirittura all'altezza, come altri hanno sostenuto, di dialogare con Pessoa (Badiou [2000]).

Crediamo, nondimeno, che ci sia un'altra via per accostare, con le dovute precauzioni, la fenomenologia di Husserl al manifesto antifilosofico di Alberto Caeiro, al fine di rilevare una comunione d'intenti, sottile e non deliberata, tra i due, senza per questo negare la differenza che li separa irriducibilmente. Comparare, come leggiamo nei *Poemas inconjuntos*, altro non significherebbe che ostinarsi a non vedere ciò che c'è da vedere – «comparar uma coisa com outra», afferma Caeiro, parlando di sé e di un fiore, «é esquecer essa coisa» (Pessoa [2001]: 130). Ci concentreremo pertanto sul senso, se non poetico, in un certo modo antifilosofico, e apertamente dichiarato, della fenomenologia husserliana, piuttosto che enucleare le tesi filosofiche dell'anti-filosofia del maestro degli eteronimi – tesi che, se sviluppate in termini espliciti, non procedono in una direzione necessariamente fenomenologica, com'è stato confermato dalla lettura di J. Gil, che vede in Caeiro una poetica della «differenza assoluta», più affine al pensiero di Deleuze che di Husserl. Ci concentreremo sul senso antifilosofico e dogmatico della fenomenologia, rivendicato da Husserl a fronte di una molteplicità irriducibile dell'essere che esige d'esser vista e riconosciuta – come leggiamo in incipit dell'opera del 1913, le *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie* (Sez. I, Cap. I e II), prima che la dottrina trascendentale dell'esperienza si dispieghi in funzione di una soggettività costituente, eideticamente intesa, il più delle volte disapprovata dai seguaci di Husserl e, non da ultimo (senza che un riferimento a Husserl compaia esplicitamente) da António Mora, il discepolo più apertamente «metafisico» di Caeiro[11]. Opteremo, in altri termini, per una lettura caeiriana di Husserl che acquisterebbe, a nostro avviso, tanto più credito nel momento in cui la fenomenologia, facendosi trascendentale, pare contraddire le promesse di un ritorno alle cose stesse. Opteremo, cioè, per un Husserl eteronimo di Pessoa, alla ricerca di un'affinità sotterranea tra l'atteggiamento poetico e l'atteggiamento fenomenologico; tra chi, senza più riflettere,

non vuole altro che vedere e vivere poeticamente e chi, invece, interrogandosi riflessivamente su cosa sia il vedere, ambisce a cogliere tutto ciò che si dà e che altrimenti, senza fenomenologia, rimarrebbe invisibile.

1. *Filosofia senza filosofia*

Partiamo dal *principio di tutti i principi*, l'intuizione, che per Husserl altro non è se non un vedere immediato, un portare alla presenza, in carne e ossa, ciò che ci sta di fronte:

> Am Prinzip aller Prinzipien: daß jede originär gebende Anschauung eine Rechtsquelle der Erkenntnis sei, daß alles, was sich uns in der *«Intuition»* originär, (sozusagen in seiner leibhaften Wirklichkeit) darbietet, einfach hinzunehmen sei, als was es sich gibt, aber auch nur in den Schranken, in denen es sich da gibt[12]. (Husserl [1976]: 44)

Il «principio di tutti i principi» – spiega Husserl al § 24 delle *Ideen I* – è tale perché viene *prima* di ogni teoria, stabilendo il fondamento pre-teorico e, in tal senso, prefilosofico, su cui si costituisce ogni tipo di relazione con il mondo in cui viviamo. Il «principio di tutti i principi» indica il cominciamento – che Husserl definisce «assoluto» (Husserl [1976]: 43) – da cui si dipana la teoria stessa e, di conseguenza, la scienza volta a spiegare i dati che l'intuizione ci offre a seconda del dominio in cui operiamo. Che si tratti di cose materiali o d'esseri viventi, della realtà spazio-temporale delle scienze naturali, del mondo sociale, dell'immaginario o, perfino, dell'irreale in quanto campo della pura possibilità, la conoscenza si realizza sempre e necessariamente in funzione di un ambito oggettuale inerente a una «regione dell'essere», da cui deriva un determinato tipo di esperienza. È questo, del resto, uno dei sensi possibili della correlazione che l'intenzionalità ci permette di descrivere in tutta la sua portata: l'esperienza, generalmente intesa, si fonda sulle datità che ne costituiscono la fonte di legittimazione, qualsiasi sia l'ambito di riferimento. Una teoria scientifica che voglia risultare legittima non può, allora, fare altro che elaborare in forma mediata, predicativamente, ciò che è direttamente offerto da un'intuizione preliminare, in virtù di cui si attesta il dominio che s'intende indagare.

Il «principio di tutti principi» funge, imprescindibilmente, da punto di partenza e al contempo – potremmo aggiungere – da principio di fedeltà a ciò che ci è dato e che siamo chiamati a esprimere per quello che è e per come si dà; fissa il punto d'ancoraggio che protegge l'immediatezza della visione dalle derive della teoria, la quale, se svincolata da un appiglio concreto, ci spingerebbe a vedere erroneamente ciò che non c'è o a non apprezzare pienamente tutto ciò che si dà a vedere. Per il fenomenologo che ambisce ad aderire senza scarto alle cose stesse, prima ancora d'interpretarle, come per il custode dei greggi o, se vogliamo, per il

custode dell'essere – in un senso del tutto husserliano – la difficoltà sta nell'imparare a «vedere, a distinguere e a descrivere ciò che sta dinnanzi agli occhi» (Husserl [1976]: 2), liberandosi dalle ristrettezze dell'abitudine, della tradizione e, non da ultimo, della filosofia, negativamente intesa se vincolata all'autorità di un *ipse dixit* o irretita in pregiudizi acriticamente assunti. Pregiudizi che condurrebbero, in linea di massima, a due conseguenze estreme, ugualmente fallaci, l'una all'altra opposta: privare di ogni forma d'intuizione i concetti liberamente creati dal nostro pensiero, spacciandoli, senz'alcuna verifica, per cose effettivamente date; velarci gli occhi di fronte alla ricchezza dell'essere, limitando la nostra visione all'immediatezza di un dato che verrebbe considerato valido solo se di natura empirica. «Überall ist die Gegebenheit» afferma Husserl nel 1907 (Husserl [1973]: 72) – *la datità è ovunque*, e poco importa che ciò che si dà sia reale o fittizio, percepito o immaginato come nel caso di colui che, fantasticando, sogna d'essere un pastore pur senza aver mai custodito un gregge – «O rebanho é os meus pensamentos» – afferma Caeiro – per subito aggiungere: «E os meus pensamentos são todos sensações»[13] (Pessoa [2001]: IX, 31). La trascendenza dell'oggetto s'imprime nel vissuto, come insegna il principio fenomenologico dell'intenzionalità che Caeiro pare quasi voler radicalizzare. Cos'altro sarebbe, del resto, l'essenza di un fiore se non il suo essere sentito? Il significato di un frutto sta in primo luogo nei sensi che lo colgono e, una volta colto, il frutto o, meglio, la sua forma, come avrebbe detto Aristotele, risiede nell'anima, *intenzionalmente*, che è in potenza tutti gli esseri (De An. 431b). «Pensar uma flor è vê-la e cheirá-la / E comer um fruto é saber-lhe o sentido»[14] (Pessoa [2001]: IX, 31) – passando all'atto, l'anima si appropria della cosa stessa in virtù di un'intuizione che garantisce all'intelletto una base su cui potersi erigere. Ecco il motivo per cui Husserl ci invita a compiere il gesto di un'«ἐποχή filosofica» (Husserl [1976]: § 18) ancor prima che la fenomenologia abbia inizio – un'ἐποχή che non va confusa con l'ἐποχή propriamente fenomenologica, in quanto momento successivo del metodo il quale, sospendendo la credenza nella tesi dell'esistenza del mondo, permetterebbe di trasformare in «fenomeno» tutto ciò che è. Si tratta di un'ἐποχή *sui generis* che si rivolge alla filosofia *tout court*, a cui i commentatori hanno per lo più consacrato un'attenzione marginale nelle letture dell'opera del 1913 e che, per Husserl, consisterebbe in una sospensione programmatica del giudizio sulla possibilità stessa della filosofia[15]. Potremmo in tal senso affermare, per amor di paradosso, che la filosofia, semmai è fenomenologicamente possibile, deve cominciare senza filosofia, perlomeno se seguiamo alla lettera la trama dell'argomentazione che Husserl sviluppa nella prima sezione delle *Ideen I*:

> Die philosophische ἐποχή, die wir uns vornehmen, soll, ausdrücklich formuliert, darin besten, daß wir uns hinsichtlich des Lehrgehaltes aller vorgegebenen Philosophie vollkommen des Urteils enthalten und alle unsere Nachweisungen im Rahmen dieser Enthaltung vollziehen[16]. (Husserl [1976]: 33)

Anche la formulazione del «principio di tutti i principi» – vale la pena sottolinearlo – rientra nell'ambito prefilosofico di questa peculiare ἐποχή che comporta un'ulteriore ingiunzione, formulata poco più avanti, al § 19 delle *Ideen I*,
l'«assenza di presupposti», a complemento del celebre motto del «ritorno alle
cose stesse». Contro ogni metodologia che procede dall'alto, accontentandosi di
meri concetti, di «pure e semplici parole» che non trovano un effettivo riscontro sul piano delle evidenze, la via fenomenologica procede rigorosamente *dal
basso*, escludendo dal suo raggio d'azione ogni enunciato che non sia intuitivamente giustificabile (Husserl [1984]: § 2). La stessa prescrizione concerne, di
conseguenza, le dottrine filosofiche intese come fatti storicamente attestati che,
una volta posti tra parentesi, si riducono a niente di più che semplici convinzioni
d'ordine concettuale, condivise da uomini in una data epoca e risultanti da una
determinata visione del mondo. Sarebbe, tuttavia, avventato interpretare la funzione di quest'ἐποχή, per come Husserl l'intende, come la semplice applicazione
in chiave storica di un'assenza, foss'anche totale, di presupposti. Oltre al senso,
per così dire, critico del principio che ci impone di non ricorrere a enunciati privi
d'evidenza al fine d'assicurare le fondamenta di un sapere autentico, l'ἐποχή filosofica si fa carico di un senso dogmatico che Husserl rivendica *apertis verbis.*
Spirito critico e dogma, per quanto paradossale possa sembrare, si implicano
vicendevolmente nella misura in cui l'esame che il fenomenologo impone a ogni
tipo di conoscenza è reso possibile dal ricorso al dato intuitivo, antecedente ogni
pensare teorizzante e, quindi, ogni teoria, ogni scienza e ogni filosofia (Husserl
[1976]: § 20). Prima ancora d'interrogare le cose che si offrono alla nostra visione, dobbiamo lasciare che le cose appaiano e si diano per quello che sono, in
base a un atteggiamento d'apertura radicale. «Não basta abrir a janela para ver
os campos e o rio», direbbe Alberto Caeiro per subito aggiungere: «è preciso
também não ter filosofia nenhuma»[17] (Pessoa [2001]: 158). L'ἐποχή filosofica
esige, *mutatis mutandis*, un'analoga disposizione: la possibilità della filosofia
che Husserl, nonostante tutto, continua a difendere contrariamente al maestro
degli eteronimi pessoani, dipende da ciò che precede il pensiero, dall'*altro* del
pensiero che ci dà a pensare. Al § 20 delle *Ideen I* ritroviamo, a mo' di conclusione, la seguente affermazione dal sapore apertamente programmatico:

> nehmen wir unseren Ausgang von dem, was vor allen Standpunkten liegt: von dem
> Gesamtbereich des anschaulich und noch vor allem theoretisierenden Denken selbst, von
> alle dem, was man unmittelbar sehen und erfassen kann[18]. (Husserl [1976]: 38)

Il dogma dell'intuizionismo è, in quanto tale, assoluto non perché escluda
ogni relativismo prospettico – come se un'intuizione pura potesse offrirsi indipendentemente da qualsiasi contesto – ma perché contempla, nella sua formalità,
tutti i punti di vista possibili, racchiudendo in sé la «sfera complessiva del dato».
Basta, d'altronde, considerare la formulazione tramite cui Husserl enuncia, solo

qualche pagina più avanti, il «principio di tutti i principi» che si riferisce a *ogni* intuizione originalmente offerente – e non all'intuizione *tout court*. L'intuizione, sebbene formalmente unica in quanto principio, è contestualmente molteplice ed è molteplice perché originaria, fungendo da *origine* per una data esperienza e, di conseguenza, per un determinato tipo di conoscenze che varia in funzione dell'ambito in cui si costituisce il nostro rapporto al mondo.

Come Husserl dichiara sempre al § 24, esemplificando la funzione gnoseologicamente direttiva di cui l'intuizione si fa carico, per le scienze della natura è l'esperienza intesa empiricamente e, in ultima istanza, la percezione a offrire le datità originarie in virtù di cui costruiamo gli enunciati di una teoria che mira a spiegare, sulla base di una legge causale, i dati fattualmente osservati. Lo stesso vale per le cosiddette «scienze delle essenze» che si occupano delle proprietà specifiche di qualcosa d'individuale, il *quid*, che può essere «posto in idea» e colto intuitivamente nei termini di una generalità di carattere necessario, non più fattualmente contingente, ossia – per utilizzare la dicitura husserliana – l'*eidos* in quanto «oggetto di nuova specie», inerente a un contesto di relazioni che si articola in generalità d'ordine superiore (Husserl [1976]: § 3). Chi, invece, si occupa di scienze sociali, ricercherà i nessi non più causali, bensì motivazionali, attestabili in un tutt'altro contesto di senso, dove la natura si compone, oltre che di cose, di corpi animati e d'oggetti a cui noi, uomini di questo mondo, attribuiamo un valore e un uso in vista di scopi, agendo sulla spinta di desideri e aspirazioni, interagendo gli uni con gli altri, creando rapporti di comunità che, a partire da uno spazio condiviso, trasformano le cose in beni di vario tipo e la natura in un mondo culturalmente strutturato in cui vengono a sedimentarsi un insieme d'abitudini, una tradizione e, infine, una storia.

Avremo, allora, tanti tipi d'intuizione originalmente offerente e di datità, e altrettante regioni dell'essere. Regioni che possiamo intendere materialmente come nel caso del mondo naturale, del vivente o del mondo sociale, i cui contenuti si specificano in funzione di un determinato ambito d'oggettualità o formalmente, se consideriamo le connessioni tra i contenuti a prescindere dai contenuti stessi – le connessioni che vengono a definire le categorie dell'ontologia formale, al cui interno ritroviamo la forma di tutte le possibili ontologie. L'oggetto in generale, universalmente inteso, si realizza o, meglio, per dirlo con le parole di Husserl, si de-formalizza negli oggetti dell'esperienza, tramite una saturazione che si applica alla specificità dei domini a partire da cui si costituiscono le rispettive regioni dell'essere. Sarebbe, tuttavia, un errore – come del resto Husserl si affretta a esplicitare – considerare il «vuoto qualcosa» dell'ontologia formalmente intesa come il genere supremo a cui ricondurre tutti gli oggetti possibili. La nozione di «oggetto» altro non è che «un titolo per una varietà di formazioni connesse le une con le altre» (Husserl [1976]: 21); designa tutto ciò di cui possiamo fare l'esperienza e, al contempo, l'essenza formale della stessa esperienza

irriducibile, per principio, a un solo ambito d'indagine o a un'unica fonte di le-
gittimazione. Il concetto d'oggetto non potrebbe, d'altronde, assurgere a un ruo-
lo indiscriminatamente privilegiato contrariamente a quanto è stato suggerito da
più di un interprete di Husserl, se accettiamo il primato dell'intuizione che opera
in virtù di una razionalità a sua volta diversificata a seconda dei contesti in cui si
realizza[19]. «Io non ho certo inventato il concetto d'oggetto» (Husserl [1976]: 40)
ammette apertamente Husserl, difendendosi dall'accusa di «realismo platonico»
nel momento in cui le idee e le essenze, al pari delle realtà naturali, si raccolgono
sotto il titolo d'«oggetto» in base al senso del «discorso scientifico in generale»
(Husserl [1976]: 40).

2. *Io vedo*

In termini equivalenti, potremmo ugualmente affermare: tanti ambiti d'og-
getti e regioni dell'essere quante intuizioni originalmente offerenti. Si tratta di
nozioni strettamente correlate («intuizione», «datità», «oggetto», «regione» ed
«essere») come attestato fin dalla prima sezione dell'opera del 1913, consacrata
a un'esposizione del legame d'inseparabilità tra il «dato di fatto» e l'«essenza»,
da cui Husserl enuclea le strutture che regolano le ontologie, rigorosamente al
plurale, soggiacenti a ogni ambito regionale. Tutto ciò che si dà *hic et nunc*, fat-
tualmente, può presentarsi in un altro luogo o tempo e, a certe condizioni, non
esisterebbe. Il «poter essere altrimenti» che caratterizza la contingenza dei fatti
coincide con il loro specifico modo d'essere; ne denota le proprietà fondamentali
che possiamo generalizzare fino a cogliere i nessi che regolano i rapporti tra i
fatti stessi. La contingenza rimanda, allora, a una necessità che ne stabilisce il
limite e l'oggetto, inteso individualmente, per quanto mutevole, non potrà as-
similarsi a una mera ecceità priva di predicati. L'«individuo», per utilizzare la
dicitura husserliana, in quanto singolarità concreta, porta in sé «un'essenza, un
eidos» che possiamo cogliere nella sua purezza (Husserl [1976]: 9). E «tutto ciò
che appartiene all'essenza di un individuo potrà *eo ipso* appartenere anche a un
altro individuo» (Husserl [1976]: 9).

Consideriamo, a titolo d'esempio, una cosa che si manifesta tramite determi-
nate proprietà quali la durata temporale, la forma e l'estensione – proprietà che
possiamo afferrare intuitivamente oppure fissare alla stregua d'elementi comuni,
qualora ponessimo la cosa, singolarmente, a confronto con altre. Possiamo in
tal modo far emergere, per generalizzazione, i predicati e le relazioni in virtù
di cui si configura una data regione ontologica, quale la natura fisica compo-
sta di cose materiali oppure il mondo sociale, i cui individui di riferimento non
sono più cose *tout court*, bensì persone che riconosciamo tramite uno specifico
registro dell'intenzionalità, l'empatia, grazie a cui ne comprendiamo il compor-

tamento, le azioni e le interazioni. Ogni regione si determina sulla scorta degli individui che la compongono; è, per dirlo altrimenti, una regione *di* individui eideticamente intesi. Come Husserl non manca di puntualizzare, l'«individuo» funge da «oggetto originario» in vista di cui si formano, per variazione, tutte le altre possibili oggettualità; è il nucleo sorgivo da cui si diramano i legami che conferiscono unità alla regione corrispettiva. Se esaminiamo una cosa alla luce delle sue proprietà materiali, avremo a che fare con stati di cose, caratteristiche e predicati d'ordine materiale e la regione in questione si determinerà attraverso rapporti di causalità che permettono d'interpretare ciò che si manifesta come l'oggettualità di un mondo materialmente inteso; la struttura del mondo sociale si articola, invece, sulla base di proprietà, caratteristiche e relazioni d'ordine personale, interpersonale o comunitario, nel momento in cui è la persona a fungere da oggettualità di riferimento. A ciascuna regione, dunque, il suo proprio oggetto in quanto termine ultimo non ulteriormente divisibile, a partire da cui poter istituire un ordine di relazioni e rilevare un'essenza secondo il senso di una legalità intrinseca all'ambito in esame. «Ogni essenza», afferma Husserl, «si inserisce in una gerarchia di essenze» (Husserl [1976]: 25) e, di riflesso, «nell'essenza del particolare è contenuta quella più generale» (Husserl [1976]: 26). Nel rosso cogliamo la qualità che ci permette di generalizzare una forma sensibilmente determinata, passando dal rosso singolarmente inteso – il «questo-qui» per riprendere il lessico husserliano – al «rosso» come genere che rientra nel genere più ampio della «qualità visiva». Lo stesso vale per il genere dell'estensione a cui possiamo risalire a partire da una qualsiasi figura spaziale. Qualità sensibile ed estensione vengono, a loro volta, a costituire due momenti astratti, Husserl direbbe «non-indipendenti», di un «concreto», la cosa che ci appare fenomenicamente, in quanto «individuo» di un «genere supremo» o, il che è lo stesso, di una regione dell'essere (Hua III/1: §§ 14-15).

Emerge, così, una trama di nessi eideticamente rilevanti a fondamento di ogni ontologia, che preordina le modalità tramite cui si compone un ambito qualsiasi d'oggettualità. Husserl parla a tale proposito di una «struttura formale» che racchiude nella sua generalità l'intero spettro delle distinzioni inerenti ai concetti d'oggetto e di regione (Husserl [1976]: 21). Si tratterebbe di una struttura dell'essere – potremmo aggiungere – che si profila all'immagine di una scala percorribile per gradi, dal basso verso l'alto e, viceversa, dall'alto verso il basso: dalle singolarità ai generi supremi, passando per le specie e i generi intermedi. Non sarebbe peraltro azzardato ricorrere alla celebre espressione kantiana di un'«architettonica» organizzata in funzione di un'oggetto contestualmente preferenziale, l'individuo, il cui privilegio sta nell'essere il riferimento direttivo per la costituzione di uno specifico ambito d'appartenenza. «Accertamenti compiuti in questo modo», afferma Husserl a conclusione di questa prima sezione delle *Ideen I*, si elevano a una «generalità che comprende ogni regione dell'essere» e

appartengono alla filosofia se concepita nei termini di una possibilità ideale, a prescindere dal corpus delle dottrine filosofiche storicamente stabilite (Husserl [1976]: 33). Per dirlo altrimenti, e senza mezzi termini, l'idea della filosofia si radicherebbe nelle cose che possiamo afferrare e vedere – a patto d'intendere le cose stesse alla luce della «struttura fondamentale» che le innerva eideticamente. Da dove potremmo cominciare a riflettere filosoficamente, del resto, se non da ciò che cade direttamente sotto il nostro sguardo, che si tratti di una cosa qualsiasi, oppure di una sensazione, di un'emozione o, più in generale, di un vissuto, e lo stesso vale per una persona, un amico o un estraneo che incontriamo nel mondo in cui viviamo? Un compito d'ampia portata s'impone di conseguenza, inaugurando l'inizio della filosofia propriamente intesa, imbastita su basi fenomenologiche:

> Im Umkreise unserer individuellen Anschauungen die obersten Gattungen von Konkretionen zu bestimmen, und auf diese Weise eine Austeilung alles anschaulichen individuellen Seins nach Seinsregionen zu vollziehen, deren jede eine […] Wissenschaft (bzw. Wissenschaftsgruppe) bezeichnet[20]. (Husserl [1976]: 32)

Risulterebbe, allora, possibile ricavare da un nucleo di positività originalmente afferrabile le specie, i generi e i generi supremi che tracciano il perimetro dell'indagine scientifica. E l'intuizione, conformandosi alle categorie logiche poste a fondamento di ogni possibile ontologia, si differenzierebbe in una molteplicità di figure inerenti all'essenza degli oggetti raggruppati in domini d'appartenenza. Avremo, perciò, tanti tipi regionali d'intuizioni originalmente offerenti quante regioni fondamentali dell'essere e, alla base di ogni scienza, giudizi immediatamente evidenti che aderiscono a quanto si offre all'intuizione (cfr. Husserl [1976]: § 19). «L'immediato vedere», aggiunge Husserl a tale riguardo, «non soltanto il vedere sensibile, empirico, ma il *vedere in generale, come coscienza originalmente offerente di qualunque specie*, è la sorgente ultima di legittimità di tutte le affermazioni razionali» (Husserl [1976]: 36). Sarebbe d'altronde «assurdo» – leggiamo qualche riga più avanti – «non attribuire nessun valore all'"io lo vedo" [*Ich sehe es*]» nel tentativo di giustificare il senso di una qualsiasi asserzione (Husserl [1976]: 36). «Io vedo»: ecco, in sintesi, il motivo tanto semplice quanto radicale che fa del «principio di tutti i principi» un «patrimonio» (*Bestand*) inalienabile della filosofia al suo stato nascente, «chiamato a servire da fondazione nel senso autentico della parola» (Husserl [1976]: 44). Negarlo, significherebbe contraddirsi, come succede all'empirista che, riflettendo sulla possibilità del conoscere, circoscrive la portata dell'intuizione al senso di un'esperienza costituita naturalisticamente. Se il reale si limitasse a ciò che è dato fattualmente, saremmo d'altra parte costretti ad accettare che l'esigenza di un ritorno alle cose stesse coincida con l'esigenza di una riduzione a basi sperimentali di ogni conoscenza; la scienza in generale e la scienza empirica farebbe-

ro tutt'uno (Husserl [1976]: § 19). Basta, tuttavia, chiedersi quale sia il principio di una tale sovrapposizione per cogliere il fraintendimento a cui l'empirista si espone nel momento in cui avanza una tesi che travalica l'ambito dei fatti, con la pretesa che sia incondizionatamente valida. Contro l'empirismo – che, per Husserl, è da considerarsi come una variante dello scetticismo – l'antidoto sta in una riflessione che sappia rendere conto dell'incedere positivo delle scienze, accogliendo «le oggettualità della conoscenza dove veramente si trovano» (Husserl [1976]: 46); nel lasciarsi guidare dalle cose per non cadere nell'impasse di una «teoria della conoscenza» incapace «di distinguere i tipi fondamentali di datità e di descriverli secondo la loro intrinseca essenza» (Husserl [1976]: 41). Qui risiede il compito della filosofia che ne determina, al contempo, la natura: riflettere, al fine di saper apprezzare la legittimità originaria di tutte le datità, assicurando la portata e l'estensione del conoscere per, poi, fissare il valore dei risultati a cui le scienze pervengono – sulla base di un atteggiamento diametralmente opposto allo scetticismo il quale, in termini ancora più generali, prima che una dottrina filosofica, rappresenta un atteggiamento del pensiero rivolto contro la possibilità stessa della filosofia (Husserl [1976]: § 26). La fenomenologia s'incarica, allora, di una precisa missione per non smarrire il contatto con ciò che, per così dire, ci dà a pensare: il ritorno all'origine, lungo il corso di una riflessione in cui il pensiero è chiamato a ripiegarsi su di sé. Tramite una serie d'operazioni che Husserl fa cominciare solo a partire dalla seconda sezione delle *Ideen I* (l'ἐποχή fenomenologica, la sospensione della tesi dell'esistenza del mondo, le riduzioni eidetica e trascendentale), l'analisi si consuma in un'interrogazione che non consiste in altro se non nel *voler vedere il vedere*, in modo da rendere chiaro ciò che altrimenti rimarrebbe latente: le prestazioni intenzionali di una soggettività riconfigurata trascendentalmente ed eideticamente, in virtù di cui si costituisce il senso di tutto ciò che viviamo – il senso che possiamo cogliere solo interrogando e, di conseguenza, problematizzando il dogma delle cose stesse, da cui procedono il pensiero, la conoscenza e ogni riflessione filosofica sulla conoscenza.

3. *Vedersi oppure vedere?*

Sarebbe, dunque, questa la differenza tra il fenomenologo e il poeta? La filosofia, fenomenologicamente rifondata, ambirebbe a poter afferrare riflessivamente tutto ciò che è, mentre la semplicità disarmante del custode dei greggi resterebbe irriflessivamente protesa verso il *Grand Dehors*, dove il soggetto non è altro che la vibrazione di una natura priva d'unità in cui si disperde la molteplicità brulicante delle sue parti. Per il «neopaganesimo moderno» che si esprime nei versi di Alberto Caeiro conterebbe solo il vedere, a fronte di una riduzione del senso all'esistenza che trasforma il gesto poetico in una sorta di

tautologia, in un atteggiamento di fronte al mondo senza più meraviglia: «O que nós vemos das coisas são as coisas»[21] (Pessoa [2001]: XXIV, 46). Il dialogo tra il regresso a un'interiorità fenomenologicamente ridefinita e lo slancio di una poetica dell'esteriorizzazione risulterebbe, tuttavia, irrimediabilmente parziale se ci fermassimo alla lettera di *O Guardador de Rebanhos*, per quanto Fernando Pessoa alias Alberto Caeiro vieti apertamente la ricerca di una profondità del linguaggio oltre l'immediatezza del detto – «Caeiro tem uma disciplina: as coisas devem ser sentidas tal como são»[22], leggiamo in un testo del 1915 in merito al «sensacionismo» in quanto stile poetico, oltre che di vita, di chi elegge la «simplicidade» a regola aurea, sostituendo al pensiero i dati immediati di una sensazione pura e diretta (Pessoa [2012]: 308). Non va, del resto, dimenticato che l'oggettivismo assoluto in chiave caeiriana s'inscrive nel prisma dell'eteronimismo in cui viene a rifrangersi una costellazione di personalità tipica della scrittura di Pessoa, che dà luogo a un «insieme drammatico» – come si attesta nella *Tábua Bibliográfica* del 1928 – composto non di atti, bensì «di persone» («é um drama em gente, em vez de em atos»). L'eteronimismo situa l'opera dell'autore «al di fuori della sua stessa persona»: Alberto Caeiro, insieme ai suoi discepoli, Ricardo Reis e Álvaro de Campos, non sono semplici *alter ego*, ma altrettante individualità che fanno di Pessoa l'ortonimo dei suoi eteronimi, contribuendo, ciascuno con il suo stile, a dissimulare e diversificare la figura autoriale fino a renderla inscindibile dalle voci che la animano – contrariamente all'artificio dello pseudonimo che, eccezion fatta per il nome, coinciderebbe con l'«autore in persona» (Pessoa [1928]: 250).

In forza di un principio d'attribuzione – l'«effetto-eteronimo», per dirlo con F. Cabral Martins ([2012]: 22-23) – in virtù di cui il soggetto dell'enunciazione si dissolve nell'enunciato, risulta inevitabile, per leggere l'opera pessoana, vincolare un nome al testo nella misura in cui la funzione autoriale s'intende come un effetto del testo stesso. L'eteronimismo – continua F. Cabral Martins – costituisce un vastissimo repertorio di forme in cui si esprimono le fluttuazioni, le avventure e le disavventure, della soggettività, ideate tramite un processo di proliferazione dello «spazio interiore» che assegna pressoché a ogni pagina la costruzione di un soggetto singolare (Cabral Martins [2012]: 31); un soggetto che non può manifestarsi se non a intermittenza, nell'intervallo tra i differenti soggetti che la scrittura eteronimica allestisce (cfr. Gil [1993]) – alla luce di quanto Pessoa pare suggerire nella strofa di una poesia ortonima del 1933: «Temos, todos que vivemos, / Uma vida que é vivida / E outra vida que é pensada, / E a única vida que temos / É essa que é vivida entre a verdadeira e a errada»[23].

L'esito di quest'oscillazione, tra simulazione e intensificazione, della soggettività non sta solamente nel mettere in scena «personaggi-poeti», come O. Paz sottolineava a suo tempo (Paz [1965]: 19), bensì nel creare «opere-di-poeti», secondo il senso della «poesia drammatica» che rappresenta, per Pessoa, il compi-

mento dell'arte *tout court* – come dichiarato in una lettera a João Gaspar Simões dell'11 dicembre del 1931. «O ponto central da minha personalidade como artista é que sou um poeta dramático»[24], confessa Pessoa, descrivendo le ragioni del suo operare alla luce di una sovrapposizione tra l'«intima esaltazione del poeta» e la «spersonalizzazione del drammaturgo», in vista di un fine di natura estetica: poter sentire dissociandosi da sé, costruendo sulla base di stati d'animo diversi l'espressione di un'altra personalità, di un io inesistente – ma non per questo insincero – che sente e scrive in modo estraneo o, al limite, antitetico all'io originario del poeta. Scrivere «drammaticamente» significa sentire «na pessoa de outro»[25], confida Pessoa nel 1915 ad Armando Cortês-Rodrigues, ricorrendo all'esempio di Shakespeare (Pessoa [2012]: 138); un esempio significativamente ripreso in un testo ulteriore, probabilmente del 1932, in cui Shakespeare viene definito nei termini di un «supremo despersonalizado»[26] e Amleto si trasforma da personaggio di un dramma in un dramma a sé stante, o, per dirlo con le parole di Pessoa, in un «simples personagem, sem drama»[27], non più parte di un tutto, con un suo stile e una sua visione attraverso cui si esprime ciò che il poeta in persona non sente (Pessoa [2012]: 269). Sarebbe allora illegittimo, aggiunge Pessoa, ricercare nelle finzioni di Amleto una definizione dei sentimenti o dei pensieri di Shakespeare, a meno di non voler declassare Shakespeare al rango di «cattivo drammaturgo» – poiché il cattivo drammaturgo si lascia smascherare fin troppo facilmente, proiettando se stesso, come un'ombra, sui propri personaggi fittizi (Pessoa [2012]: 270).

«Immaginazione» e «spersonalizzazione»: sono questi, in sintesi, i binari del «viaggio eteronimico», tramite cui l'io si rifrange in una varietà di figure non più ricomponibili in un'unica singolarità, sebbene – è importante notarlo – la critica non sia sempre stata concorde nell'interpretare il senso di questo fenomeno letterario. Nonostante i moniti di Pessoa a non confondere «arte» e «vita», non è mancata un'esegesi in chiave psico-patologica, complice lo stesso Pessoa che, seppure *en passant*, ha indicato nell'isteria e nella nevrastenia le possibili eziologie del processo eteronimico (Gaspar Simões [1950]). Ricorrendo alle contraddizioni di un tempo di crisi, si è tentata un'interpretazione sociologica che ha equiparato la proliferazione degli eteronimi a una fuga dal mondo (Sacramento [1958]). Si è, inoltre, cercato di garantire un'unità tematica e stilistica alla poetica pessoana attraverso un approccio di carattere storico-letterario che ne ha ricercato gli antecedenti e le influenze (do Prado Coelho [1963]). Dagli anni Settanta in avanti, si è infine optato per un paradigma ermeneutico alternativo che riconosce nella scrittura eteronimica un'espressione poetica a pieno titolo, non più accomunata a un espediente letterario esterno al testo (Lourenço [1973]). «Pessoa è l'eteronimia», statuisce, tra gli altri, A. Tabucchi in linea con le tendenze pressoché unanimi della critica più recente (Tabucchi [1990]: 24). E l'eteronimia, lungi dall'essere una creazione dal nulla, corrisponderebbe all'evento

che rende possibile la proliferazione della soggettività in virtù di cui l'io, per attestarsi, è paradossalmente costretto a diventare plurale; a vivere più vite per poter vivere veramente, al fine di liberare, tramite l'arte, il potenziale della vita medesima, strappandola all'anonimato del vivere che affievolisce la nostra capacità di sentire, altrimenti insufficiente a cogliere il mistero dell'esistenza umana.

4. *Metafisica senza metafisica*

Ai fini della nostra analisi, un'interpretazione particolarmente significativa ci è offerta dalla lettura filosofica di J. Gil che concepisce l'eteronimismo nei termini di una «metafisica delle sensazioni» basata su un meccanismo letterario di produzione sensoriale; un procedimento che Pessoa, fin dal 1912, ancor prima di vestire pubblicamente i panni del poeta, avrebbe designato come l'aspetto più rilevante della «nuova poesia portoghese». «Encontrar em tudo um além»[28]: una distanza d'ordine metafisico innerverebbe la trama del reale, fungendo da origine per un «sentimento poetico» tramite cui, nel cogliere una cosa, *hic et nunc,* cogliamo, al contempo, il suo *plus ultra* (Gil [1987]). Di fronte al fatto nudo dell'esistenza, percepiamo il mistero abissale dell'esistenza stessa; l'invocazione di senso del nostro esserci s'intreccerebbe con l'indifferenza dell'essere di fronte ai nostri interrogativi come riporta, tra l'altro, una poesia ortonima (*Trila na noite uma flauta*) in cui il mistero della vita è paragonato all'aria di un flauto senza inizio né fine «[…] tão cheia de não ser nada!»[29]. L'estetica pessoana permetterebbe, allora, di procedere a una riformulazione dell'interrogativo metafisico – *perché esiste qualcosa piuttosto che nulla?* – a partire dalla gratuità di un'esistenza *senza perché*, trasformando la metafisica in poesia. E la metafisica, come esplicitato in un testo del 1924, verrebbe a ridefinirsi in un duplice senso: come un'«attività scientifica» e come un'«attività artistica», almeno secondo le tesi dell'eteronimo Álvaro de Campos che, argomentando contro, e in parte rettificando lo stesso Pessoa, assegna alla metafisica esteticamente intesa il compito di sentire, e non più di conoscere; di fare dell'astratto e dell'assoluto l'oggetto di un sentimento capace di contenere in sé una cosa e il suo contrario – poiché «tudo pode ser, e é, sentido»[30] (Pessoa [1986]: vol. I, 11).

Alberto Caeiro rappresenterebbe, al contempo, una variazione e il compimento di questa visione che trova nel «sentir tudo de todas as maneiras»[31] il proprio motto, non senza paradossalità se consideriamo la presa di posizione antimetafisica dei suoi versi. «Eu não tenho filosofia: tenho sentidos» e, in modo non meno equivocabile, in *O Guardador de Rebanhos* leggiamo: «Que metafísica têm aquelas árvores?»[32] (Pessoa [2001]: IV, 20). Eppure, i discepoli di Caeiro, incluso Pessoa, non esitano a segnalare un temperamento apertamente metafisico del maestro, ritraendolo come un «místico puro»[33] (Pessoa [2012]: 309). L'apo-

ria – risulta facile dimostrarlo – è, tuttavia, solo apparente. Basta chiedersi come possa il gioco poetico continuare a prodursi, qualora ci attenessimo ai principi di una visione che, rifiutando ogni ricorso ai tropi, appiattisce il dire in tautologia. Se gli alberi sono alberi, il vento è vento e le cose della natura non sono che le cose della natura, cosa altro ci resterebbe da dire? E soprattutto perché ostinarsi a dire, foss'anche poeticamente, un'esistenza che basta a se stessa? La positività assoluta, a cui la visione di Caeiro ci invita, non sarebbe in alcun modo esprimibile senza il rinvio al suo contrario: la semplicità di chi non vede altro che il visibile si afferma sullo sfondo di un meta-discorso che insiste sulle derive di chi, invece, si ostina a vedere solo con la mente.

Il «saber ver sem estar a pensar»[34] va di pari passo con una «metafisica negativa» o, se vogliamo, con una «metafisica senza metafisica» – come suggerisce J. Gil – in funzione di cui ciò che è, in tutta la sua immediatezza, rinvia a ciò che non è: «o luar através dos altos ramos, é não ser mais que o luar através dos altos ramos»[35] (Pessoa [2001]: XXXV, 59). Il principio d'individuazione va ricercato in ciò che una cosa non è, potremmo a nostra volta chiosare per evidenziare come la positività del discorso caeiriano non sia che l'effetto di una negazione – una negazione che, a ben guardare, non sorge da un'opposizione frontale alla metafisica, quanto piuttosto da una tensione tra il rifiuto della metafisica e la metafisica stessa. Positivo e negativo si relazionano l'uno all'altro come le due facce di una stessa medaglia: «o único sentido oculto das coisas é elas não terem sentido oculto nenhum»[36] (Pessoa [2001]: XXXIX, 63). Su questa tensione viene, in ultima istanza, a fondarsi il principio di trasparenza tra l'essere e l'apparire che orienta il vivere poetico del custode dei greggi: «É mais estranho do que todas as estranhezas / E do que os sonhos de todos os poetas / E os pensamentos de todos os filósofos, / Que as coisas sejam realmente o que parecem ser» (Pessoa [2001]: XXXIX, 63)[37].

Il dogma caeiriano della visione discende direttamente da questo principio di cui non è difficile cogliere la sfumatura fenomenologica: *esse* e *percipi* si corrispondono senza scarto. Sarebbe pertanto fuorviante, oltre che riduttivo, pensare l'apparire come un modo della nostra soggettività, distinto e distante dall'essere di ciò che appare. Se, al contrario, l'apparire è il modo in cui l'essere si dà, dovremmo poter affermare in termini rigorosamente fenomenologici: *Soviel Schein, soviel Sein* – «tanta apparenza, tanta realtà» (Husserl [1991]: § 46). Facendo dell'apparire la via d'accesso all'essere, l'interrogazione dell'essere eccede i limiti di qualsiasi interpretazione del reale; l'essere, potremmo chiosare, è più reale del reale per chi ambisce ad abbracciare tutto ciò che si dà. Come, del resto, Husserl scrive nel 1907 in una lettera a Hugo von Hoffmansthal, tutto diventa «fenomeno» tramite lo sguardo del poeta capace, tanto quanto il fenomenologo, d'indifferenza di fronte al senso delle cose, per poter cogliere il mistero dell'esistenza che si afferma come semplicissima e indicibile, presente ed inac-

cessibile, finita e sempre aperta; un mistero che fa del «vedere» un atto costitu-
tivamente anfibio, sensibile e concettuale, naturale e, al contempo, metafisico,
nel tentativo – forse impossibile – di adeguarsi a ciò che si attesta prima di ogni
istituzione di senso (cfr. Cabral Martins [2001]: 259). «Perante cada coisa o que
o sonhador deve procurar sentir è a nítida indiferença que ela, no que coisa, lhe
causa»[38], scrive Pessoa in un testo databile intorno al 1914 (Pessoa [2012]: 129).
La «metafisica delle sensazioni» si compone, non a caso, di concetti all'apparen-
za incongrui come segnala J. Garneri, quali «sogno», «immaginazione», «simu-
lazione» e «spersonalizzazione», a riprova che il sentire pessoano non s'intende
riduttivamente; non mira a limitare, bensì a estendere i confini dell'esperienza
tramite l'esercizio di un'«immaginazione performativa» che consente al sogget-
to di percepire l'effetto di un'esperienza virtuale; per sognarsi altrimenti fino a
sentirsi altro da sé (Ganeri [2020]: 44). Lo sguardo può, allora, diventare «azul
como o céu» o «calmo como a água ao sol» per chi sa vedere finanche le pro-
prie idee, come un pastore senza gregge che *gioca*, nel senso ludico del termine
invocato da più di un commentatore, con l'essere e con l'apparire, ricorrendo a
espressioni che non vanno intese metaforicamente. *Siamo perché vediamo*, e nel
momento in cui, pensando, smettiamo di vedere, ci allontaniamo drasticamente,
oltre che tristemente, dai noi stessi.

Conclusioni

   «Eu nem sequer sou poeta: vejo»[39] (Pessoa [2001]: 90) – questa è la tesi,
semplicissima per quanto gravida di conseguenze, che ci consente di cogliere il
punto filosoficamente più rilevante ai fini della nostra lettura: la purezza della vi-
sione caeiriana corrisponde, né più né meno, al modo in cui Caeiro vede e un tale
vedere, per mostrarsi, deve poter esser visto. Caeiro, per dirlo più precisamente,
si vede nell'atto stesso di vedere; si vede vedendo e vedendo esibisce, consape-
volmente, il suo vedere, distinguendo se stesso dagli altri – gli «homens doidos»
che si lasciano infastidire dalla vacuità dei loro pensieri, come chi va camminan-
do sotto la pioggia, «quando o vento cresce e parece que chove mais»[40] (Pessoa
[2001]: I, 13). La «metafisica senza metafisica» del maestro degli eteronimi si
realizza in una riflessione sul vedere dove il soggetto, esteriorizzandosi, diventa
l'oggetto della sua stessa visione. Il vedersi è una conseguenza anzi, potremmo
dire in termini fenomenologici, un momento intrinseco all'atto del vedere, un'in-
tenzionalità obliqua che rende il vedere intuitivamente accessibile. L'ingenuità
apparente di *O Guardador de Rebanhos* si erge su una visione riflessa che non
ambisce a incidere sulle cose, ma sull'esperienza delle cose stesse; ne definisce
le condizioni fenomenologiche di possibilità, permettendoci di cogliere in ciò
che vediamo il modo in cui vediamo – il «che cosa» nel «come» della visione.

Rileviamo, pertanto, un chiasma tra il custode dei greggi e il custode dell'essere, inteso fenomenologicamente, in virtù di una reciproca assonanza che rende possibile l'apprezzamento dello slancio, per così dire, caeiriano della fenomenologia husserliana. Pur rifuggendo esplicitamente ogni forma di mediazione, Caeiro ricorre, quasi segretamente, all'ausilio della riflessione per mostrarci l'immediatezza irriflessa del vedere, laddove il gesto fenomenologico, che nasce da un'attitudine riflessiva, ambisce a vedere il vedere al fine di poter descrivere tutto ciò che si dà a chi sa vedere veramente. Per il poeta come per il fenomenologo, l'origine è comune: l'intenzione dello sguardo, se libero da pregiudizi, proviene d'*altrove*, e non da chi guarda. Il dogma della visione discende direttamente dalle cose nella misura in cui sono le cose stesse a rendere la visione possibile, in un mondo che si rifratta attraverso un'eterogeneità irriducibile d'apparizioni. Di fronte all'autorità imperturbabile di ciò che è («basta existir para se ser completo»)[41], si tratta per l'essenziale di vedere e non dir niente di più di quanto vediamo – questa è l'ingiunzione del poeta che il fenomenologo, annuendo, si affretterebbe a completare: vedere per non tralasciare niente di tutto ciò che vediamo. «A nossa única riqueza é ver» – confessa, d'altronde, il custode dei greggi per concludere: «mas isso exige um estudo profundo, uma aprendizagem de desaprender»[42] (Pessoa [2001]: XXIV, 46). Non vale forse lo stesso per la fenomenologia nella sua veste husserliana? L'ἐποχή, la sospensione della tesi dell'esistenza del mondo, la riduzione eidetica e, poi, trascendentale cos'altro sarebbero se non le operazioni di un metodo che esige, a sua volta, uno «studio profondo» per permetterci di togliere i paraocchi dell'abitudine, dei pregiudizi e delle teorie filosoficamente preconcette che ci impediscono di apprezzare il senso di una «visione pura» in grado di cogliere riflessivamente tutto ciò che si dà così come si dà prima ancora che la riflessione abbia inizio? Alla «metafisica senza metafisica» di Caeiro che si affida alla «trascendenza immanente» delle sensazioni fa da contrappunto la «filosofia senza filosofia» di Husserl che segna l'abbrivio di una fenomenologia trascendentalmente riconfigurata, imbastita sul dogma dell'intuizione in virtù di cui il dato precede e orienta il pensiero teorizzante.

Il fenomenologo e il poeta non condividono, tuttavia, gli stessi obiettivi. Ed è qui che i percorsi divergono irreversibilmente: la filosofia per Husserl continua, nonostante tutto, a essere animata da un desiderio di sapere in sintonia con le sue origini greche ed è al titolo di «scienza» che aspira tramite una rifondazione su basi fenomenologiche; l'arte, invece, per Pessoa, non ambisce ad altro che a sentire e se, per sentire più intensamente, è richiesto l'ausilio della filosofia, si tratterà pur sempre di una filosofia esteticamente riplasmata che non ricerca il senso delle cose – «as coisas não têm significação: têm existência»[43]. Potremmo allora concludere, per amor di paradosso, con le parole che lo stesso Husserl proferisce nel 1916, in occasione della sua nomina all'Università di

Friburgo – parole che avrebbero probabilmente spinto Caeiro, morto appena un anno prima se ci atteniamo alla biografia di Pessoa, a cogliere una risonanza tra i suoi versi e i motivi apparentemente così distanti della fenomenologia husserliana. Posto il problema della conoscenza, Husserl procede alla ricerca di una certezza che fondi, oltre ogni possibile dubbio, il rapporto tra l'immanenza dei vissuti e la trascendenza delle cose, formulando un'interrogazione dal tono sorprendentemente caeiriano: *«che importa all'essere del nostro conoscere?»* (Husserl [1987]: 138). La domanda trascendentale sulla possibilità della conoscenza sorge a fronte dell'indifferenza dell'essere al nostro stesso domandare, a riprova che da una visione comune tanto al fenomenologo quanto al poeta possono conseguire effettivi diversi, se non tra loro opposti, come del resto ci insegna l'eteronimismo di Pessoa che, continuando a essere se stesso nell'altro, ci offre, virtualmente, il pretesto per una lettura eteronimica della fenomenologia, in nome della differenza radicale che separa Husserl da Fernando Pessoa alias Alberto Caeiro.

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Notes

1   I poemi che compongono *O Guardador de Rebanhos* sono qui indicati con numerazione romana seguita dalla relativa paginazione. Per un confronto testuale tra le varianti manoscritte, rinviamo all'edizione on-line dell'Archivio «Fernando Pessoa»: https://purl.pt/1000/1/alberto-caeiro/guardador.html. La traduzione dei versi citati nel testo è riportata in nota ed è nostra.

2   «Il mio sguardo è azzurro come il cielo / È calmo come l'acqua al sole / È così, azzurro e calmo, / perché non si interroga e non si meraviglia».

3   «Esistiamo prima di saperlo» […]; «tutto è come è ed è così che è»; «il Tago non è più bello del fiume che attraversa il mio villaggio»; «Il Tago non è il fiume che attraversa il mio villaggio».

4   «Non vedere altro che il visibile».

5   «Pensare è essere malati agli occhi».

6   «Uomini folli».

7   «Il mondo non è stato creato perché ci pensassimo»; «ma perché potessimo guardarlo e andarci d'accordo».

8   «Che ce ne andiamo in giro com l'anima vestita».

9   «È, dunque, una tendenza piuttosto generale del nostro tempo riconoscere tra l'uomo e le cose non più quel rapporto di distanza e di dominio che esisteva tra lo spirito sovrano e il pezzo di cera nella famosa analisi di Descartes, bensì un rapporto meno chiaro, una vicinanza vertiginosa che ci impedisce di cogliere noi stessi come puro spirito a prescindere dalle cose o di definire le cose come puri oggetti» (tr. nostra).

10   «Sono mistico, ma solo con il corpo».

11 Cfr. a tale riguardo il commento di Frias ([2012]: 63).
12 «Al principio di tutti i principi: *cioè che ogni intuizione originalmente offerente è una sorgente legittima di conoscenza, che tutto ciò che si dà originalmente nell'intuizione'* (per così dire in carne e ossa) *è da assumere come si dà, ma anche soltanto nei limiti in cui si dà*» (Husserl [1976]: tr. it. 52-53).
13 «Il gregge è i miei pensieri»; «e i miei pensieri sono tutti sensazioni».
14 «Pensare un fiore è vederlo e annusarlo / E mangiare un frutto è conoscerne il significato».
15 A titolo esemplificativo, citiamo il volume *Commentary on Husserl's Ideas I* (Staiti [2015]), tra i più articolati ed esaustivi, dove, tuttavia, non figura un singolo riferimento al senso di questa specifica ἐποχή.
16 «La *filosofica ἐποχή*, che ci proponiamo, deve consistere in questo: che *sospendiamo interamente il giudizio nei riguardi del contenuto dottrinale di tutte le filosofie precedentemente date e compiamo tutte le nostre dimostrazioni nell'ambito di questa sospensione» (*Husserl [1976]: tr. it. 42).
17 «Non basta aprire la finestra per vedere i campi e il fiume»; «è anche necessario non avere alcuna filosofia».
18 «Noi partiamo da ciò che sta *prima* di tutti i punti di vista: dalla sfera complessiva del dato intuitivo che precede ogni pensare teorizzante, da tutto ciò che si può immediatamente vedere e afferrare» (Husserl [1976]: tr. it. 46).
19 A titolo esemplificativo rinviamo alla critica della fenomenologia husserliana elaborata da J.-L. Marion a favore di una fenomenologia della donazione che libererebbe il concetto di *Gegebenheit* dal suo indebito appiattimento sul concetto d'oggetto (*Objekt/Gegenstand*). Tra i vari possibili riferimenti all'interno dell'opera di Marion, ci basti *Reprise du donné* (Marion [2016]).
20 «Determinare, cioè, nell'ambito delle nostre intuizioni di qualcosa di individuale i *generi supremi* che regolano le concrezioni e compiere così una *ripartizione di tutti gli esseri individuali intuibili secondo regioni dell'essere, ciascuna delle quali circoscrive una scienza* (o un gruppo di scienze) […]» (Husserl [1976]: tr. it. 40).
21 «Ciò che vediamo delle cose sono le cose».
22 «Caeiro ha una disciplina: le cose devono essere sentite così come sono».
23 «Abbiamo, tutti noi che viviamo, / Una vita che è vissuta / E un'altra vita che è pensata, / E l'unica vita che abbiamo / È la vita che è vissuta in mezzo a quella vera e a quella falsa».
24 «Il fulcro della mia personalità d'artista è che sono un poeta drammatico».
25 «In altrui persona».
26 «Supremo spersonalizzato».
27 «Semplice personaggio, senza dramma».
28 «Trovare un aldilà in ogni cosa».
29 «Così piena d'essere nulla».
30 «Tutto può essere, e viene, sentito».
31 «Sentir tutto in ogni modo».
32 «Non ho una filosofia: ho dei sensi»; «che metafisica hanno questi alberi?».
33 «Mistico puro».
34 «Saper vedere senza pensare».
35 «La luce della luna attraverso i rami alti non è altro che la luce della luna attraverso i rami alti».
36 «L'unico significato nascosto delle cose è che non hanno alcun significato nascosto».
37 «È più strano di tutte le stranezze / E di tutti i sogni dei poeti / E di tutti i pensieri dei filosofi, / Che le cose siano davvero ciò che sembrano essere».
38 «Ciò che il sognatore deve cercare di sentire di fronte a ogni cosa è la chiara indifferenza che essa, in ciò che è, gli provoca».
39 «Non sono nemmeno un poeta: vedo».
40 «Quando il vento si alza a sembra che piova di più».
41 «Basta esistere per essere completi».
42 «La nostra unica ricchezza è vedere; ma ciò richiede uno studio profondo, imparare a disimparare».
43 «Le cose non hanno un significato: hanno un'esistenza».