

ON THE SENSE OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

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89

ABSTRACT

Any interest in aesthetic experience, sensible knowledge, bodily knowledge, in how it changes and expresses itself, should today preliminarily come to terms with all the esthesiological variations (i.e. in sensibility and cognition) provoked by new technologies, notably by the virtualization processes. A thorough analysis of the meaning of aesthetic experience and the philosophical assessment of new technologies figure therefore among the specific tasks of current aesthetics, as to oppose some resistance to the aestheticization of politics, according to the line of enquiry called by Benjamin 'politicization of art'.

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*A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
its loveliness increases; it will never
pass into nothingness...*

(Keats, Endymion)

Keats' verses express the sense of experience that Western philosophy has called "aesthetic experience". This is made according to an essentially Neoplatonic perspective, which is today maybe not viable as a widespread social experience any more, or, in other words, not possible as shared aesthetic common sense any more. I shall therefore ask myself what is today the main meaning of aesthetic experience, and what may still be today a possible sense of the aesthetic-artistic experience itself. The very aesthetic experience resonating in Keats' lines has been described in an exemplary way in the Twentieth century by Walter Benjamin in his famous essay of 1936, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, by means of the word 'aura'. What did Benjamin mean by that?

We know that the term 'aura' has several meanings in Benjamin's work, but it is here important to recall that 'aura' designates an experience of the world, and not primarily an experience of art. However, such an experience may be triggered by art as well in its own way. Let's recall Benjamin's famous 'illustration': «The concept of aura which was proposed above with reference to historical objects may usefully be illustrated with reference to the aura of natural ones. We define the aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch» (Benjamin 1936, p. 479). Not only the aura is potentially proper to anything – although not of any thing without distinction – but it also may be qualified as a breathing within which space is interiorized as time, and then space and time may fall into some cracking of the body and become memory, thus creating a sort of vibration in life's fragility, in our being on the verge of getting lost. The aura, Benjamin writes in the 'first draft' of his essay, is «a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance ...» (p. 440). The topic of 'uniqueness' is again to be found in reference to the aura qualities of an artwork as «inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition» (p. 480). Tradition is taken as a "living" thing, as a form of life marked by variation and, at the same time, by the rising of uniqueness. As an experience and not primarily as a thing or a being, the rising of uniqueness is an experience of contingency yet snatched just for a moment from its transition into nothingness. So to speak, it is an experience of eternal contingency, of a moment of rest in the act of being. Such an experience is certainly taken away from the precognition of will, from desire or meaning, however such a deprivation does not translate into a loss, but rather into [special] intensity as calmly paced as breathing. Benjamin's 'illustration' envisages a state of experience that I would call rest of the act, that in which life 'first and foremost' is resting.

Now we know that the technical reproducibility of artworks entails, according to Benjamin, the loss of the aura, as it transforms the attentive and expert fruition of the artwork into that 'absent-minded' fruition typical of masses. This is not, according to Benjamin, *per se* a negative phenomenon, however, it may well

become one, if what Benjamin calls 'aestheticization of politics' occurs, instead of what he presents as its opposite, i.e. the 'politicization of the aesthetic'. It is not fully clear what Benjamin means by 'politicization of the aesthetic', but it is absolutely clear that in the course of the Twentieth century, under several disguisements, the aestheticization of politics occurred, in the form of an aestheticization of social life connected to technological development, besides the common paths of the social and productive life.

First of all, technology today, compared to Benjamin's time, is something else, and in several respects. Media are clearly devices (see Foucault 1977); they are not tools through which man represents reality, but rather devices of impersonal government, control, manipulation, surveillance. We can say 'impersonal', as they are reticular, pervasive, widespread, producing processes of both objectivation and disobjectivation, and, after all they are a whole environment, a technological eco-system, air, global electronic atmosphere, the condition of possibility not only for communication but also for life. This kind of power is never interiorized within the system of collective beliefs and feelings, which possibly became individual and may be genealogically understood, as to allow forms of resistance in critical situations. No objectification is possible of the aesthetic sphere, of the media-mediated taste. That taste which is properly mine, embodied in desire and choice, is not possible. Media are a place of experience, as indicated by the term *medius*: middle place, where exchange and relations take place, from which *medium*, *media*. From the place to the tool, and back to the place.

Today, such a place is almost completely technological, however the new era of digital technologies has established an unprecedented relation between man and technique, since in relation to them «man is absolutely marginal (...). the new technologies are not extensions or prostheses any more (...), they are rather separate extroversions of basic human functions which are progressively more autonomous and self-operational» (Costa 2005, pp. 44-45). The new essentially digital technologies determine the end of that double paradigm that has until now oriented the investigation concerning the technique: 1) technique as a tool compensating for the typically human lack of adaptational skills (see Gehlen 1957) or 2) technique as 'natural' prosthesis, that is originally linked to 'human nature', essentially hybridized with the artificial (see Leroi-Gourhan 1964-65). New technologies are taken instead as *beyond* man, while man is the one who reconfigures himself through them and mainly *in* them, as he would do around a changing and plural centre of gravity. On this matter, Baudrillard (see Baudrillard 1988) has formulated the concept of 'videosphere' as the overall sense of digital, hypermedia and telematic technologies. However, after closer inspection, such a concept may be reductive and possibly misleading, as new information technologies are not only and essentially tele-visual processes, so to speak, of analysis and synthesis of appearance. Nevertheless, terminology aside, the message is clear: new technologies, instead of being instruments or explanations of the so-called 'human nature', appear as autonomous fluxes, which are maybe the expression of some previously hidden feature of the *physis*. They entail the human, in other words, they structure and de-structure the human (its perceptual modes, emotions and desires, social exchanges, and in general the connection body-mind) within their processes, the increasing autonomy of which makes the human eccentric in relation to them. Hence, technological processes are not

under the control and grasp of individual will and projectuality, as 'being-thrown' as these may be. Probably, this forces us to reconsider the synthesis *physis-techné* as the proper place of the ethos, or of the human inhabiting. Until now the *polis* has been the most articulated expression of this synthesis, however today the realm of politics seems insufficient. A new horizon is thus delineated where biopolitics and bioaesthetics (see Montani 2007) have crossed destinies, as they are actually almost completely overlapping in a fatal synthesis as far as some – only apparently economically superstructural – aspects are concerned.

That very aestheticization of politics that, according to Benjamin, legitimizes property relations through the production of cultural values, and results in war as the essential aesthetic-economical phenomenon, now has *also* other features. By politics, of course, Benjamin means the life of the *polis*, that is public affairs. It is rather easy to critically describe the main features of media imagery and of the corresponding system of desires, in relation to the our time of emotional marketing, through some already well established concepts of the present time, such as the society of the spectacle (or the show business society), the simulacra society – 'simulacra' being the deprivation of connection with any reality whatsoever, even with that reality covering up for the absence of reality (see Baudrillard 1981) –, widespread aestheticity (fashion, design, advertising, videoclips, *packaging*, landscape design, etc.). Within such frameworks, individual feelings are just a repetition of the 'already heard' (see Perniola 1990), of a realm of impersonal tastes, feelings, emotions and preferences, which do not support any critical distance, but are rather immediately given – although thanks to complex processes of mediation configured as mediacracy –, and externally felt, regardless of any process of interiorization, as well as regardless of any 'false consciousness'. This is so because, one may recall, «the spectacle in its generality is a concrete inversion of life, and, as such, the autonomous movement of non-life» (Debord 1967, §2). As a valid description of the general field of enquiry, Benjamin's metaphor of the sex appeal of the inorganic is again powerfully employed. Furthermore, one may still endorse the claim that «The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images. (...) [and] cannot be understood either as a deliberate distortion of the visual world or as a product of the technology of the mass dissemination of images. It is far better viewed as a *Weltanschauung* that has been actualized, translated into the material realm, a world view transformed into an objective force. (...) It is not something added to the real world – not a decorative element, so to speak. On the contrary, it is the very heart of society's real unreality. (...) the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life» (Debord 1967, §§ 4-6). We understand then why it is so difficult to think artistic production today according to the traditional orientation of the Twentieth century, that is, as the making of both real novelty and resistance, which should not be residual and non influential for the social practices of sense-constitution. Moreover, it is sometimes also difficult, regardless of institutional legitimization processes (among which the market-related ones), to distinguish some current artistic products from refined industrial products. Such an issue originates from hardly listed factors, as it has its roots – besides theoretical discussions – also in the contemporary complexity and hence in those complicated process of blending, incorporation, synthesis of the so-called "high" and "low" culture. This amounts to new but trivial revival, in line with the main trends of a trivial time, of

the issue of the death of art: «the “end of art” is conceivable only if men are no longer capable of distinguishing between true and false, good and evil, beautiful and ugly, present and future. This would be the state of perfect barbarism at the height of civilization – and such a state is indeed a historical possibility» (Marcuse 1972, p. 121).

Art, taken as the ultimate resource, as the ultimate form of resistance against the aestheticized experience that displaces and superficializes beauty through media and market processing, art that has abandoned every tranquillity and escapes the control of the cultural industry, – avoiding to represent the symbolic system that subsumes the form under the mechanism of the economy of fiction, and instead precisely advocating form as ethical and anesthetic tension and opening towards alterity against the pervasivity of aesthetizing processes, – that art today has no social legitimation outside market mechanisms. A further step has been taken not only in relation to Benjamin’s time, but also in relation to Adorno’s: «Adopting Benjamin’s designation of the traditional work of art by the concept of aura, the presence of that which is not present, the culture industry is defined by the fact that it does not strictly counterpose another principle to that of aura, but rather by the fact that it conserves the decaying aura as a foggy mist» (Adorno 1967, p. 62). Today, the decaying aura produced by some other and newly-technological cultural industry is the only possible aura. It is then without connotation and the smell of putrescence is already undetectable. It is aura and nothing more, featuring a single and repeatable oeuvre, authorial and for the masses. Today the auratic form par excellence is gossip, which is the multiple perception of proximity, although from very far away. What we discover is a model of augmented survival: no death of the aura, but the aura of death.

How should we reconfigure then the investigation of the *aisthesis*, i.e. that complex perception, within which the powers of body and mind act in inextricable conjunction, and which is widely scrutinised for its cognitive-constitutive value in relation to man and the world? How should we strategically re-formulate Benjamin’s ‘politicization of art’? In this regard, two points should be emphasized: 1) the aesthetic experience is structurally relational; 2) the aesthetic experience is eminently bodily. It is true, in fact that aesthetics as philosophical subject was born in the Modern age precisely as claim of the body dimension and of its peculiar cognitive and productive strength. Perception, imagination, creativity, feelings, intuition, taste, genius, after all every mode of cognition and production of the world, nature, the others, are all linked to the body and cannot be conceived without the body. These powers are shadow zones, misty places far from the light of reason, hardly grasped by the consistency of argument, and yet so relevant, that the whole human complexity seems to be described by them, even though they resist every abstract evaluation. From such a sacrifice of abstraction – which does not entail a sacrifice of rigorous reasoning – derives, in my opinion, the current formative value of the aesthetic experience. This is a rather strange value, an ‘untimely’ one, a deeply untimely one.

Experience generally amounts to complex processes of relation, exchange, attempted adaptation of an organism to the environment, which implies actions, habits, active functions ranging from doing to suffering. Therefore, the proper of experience are not first and foremost the objects presumably experienced by the subject, but rather a synthesis of material substance and action, and as such

it involves interaction. However, the term interaction implies action “among” polarities, and in this regard it should be clear that any experience fully takes place, not as a relation among previously established poles, but as the result of the organization of processes favouring the development of differentiated polarities. A great example of this is the aesthetic-artistic experience, when conceived of as the perfection or completion of the wide spread aesthetic experience, which takes place every now and then in our daily lives, provided that our relation with the environment, and accordingly with ourselves, achieves a dynamic point of balance. In fact, the aesthetic-artistic experience is neither emotional, nor practical, nor intellectual, but actually it jointly accounts for these factors. As John Dewey already claimed in *Experience and Nature* (1925) «Art (...) represents the culminating event of nature as well as the climax of experience» (p. 8). Dewey had a distinctive idea of art as experience (see Dewey 1934). The work of art is, then, a fully accomplished aesthetic experience, and a fully accomplished aesthetic experience is a work of art. This entails an idea of artworks not only and not primarily as objects, but rather as events, or even better as object-events. While incessantly fighting against any form of dualism, Dewey pointed to art as experience as to the exemplary place where polarities, such as passivity and activity, constitution and fruition, are distinctively intertwined, thus producing the existential concreteness of the work of art, which takes place beyond the differences between mind and body, senses and intellect, spiritual and material. Hence, the artistic action, in virtue of its complex deployment, comes to the fore as solid dynamic structure, which can be interpreted as something real, only by accounting for its genetic layers of experience, both concerning its constitution and its enjoyment, as an object-event conceivable only in its proper anthrop-onto-logical structure. It is thus understood the notion of *complete consummatory experience*, which defines according to Dewey the aesthetic-artistic experience. It is not simply pleasure or enjoyment felt by the subject of the experience as a sign of the completeness of the experience itself, but it is rather a perfection and thus a live understanding, both sensuous and intellectual, of the significance of the experience in general. The merely naturalistic relation between object and subject, interior and exterior, is then dissolved. The aesthetic-artistic experience is structurally relational, and it conveys the idea that the category of relation is *prior* to the category of substance. Every relation reveals even more thoroughly what the world is and what we are, therefore is most meaningful, as the ground-breaking of significance and possibility. However, every relation is made of time and space. As human beings we are first of all forms of time, but in our normal dealings with the world we are mostly jagged forms of time, partly looking at the past, with nostalgia for what has been lost, and partly looking at the future, with the anxiety of an uncertain destiny. The aesthetic experience, as it reformulates, organizes, assembles physical and psychical materials, from the ghosts floating in the ocean of memories, to the marvellous stones, sounds and colours of nature, it brings together past and future in the project-oriented and collectively sharable unity of a meaningful present. Furthermore, it implies a knowledge-related joy, where mind and body are intertwined, a kind of joy that has nothing to do with superficial satisfaction, but rather with the *pathos* of an intense experience, which may also be uncanny. An enigmatic and risky temporality thus opens up, which has the form of a research and the power of imagination. The main reference here is to a form of wandering, to the experience as a jour-

ney, hence to the temporal dimension of any place, primarily of that place that we ourselves are, but also of that space-time, or memory engraved nature, *where* we are, a journey from which we may come back as experts at least of some dimensions of existence that would be otherwise undetectable by an all-absorbing and sedative look, which pretends to translate experience into concise formulas. Several traditional metaphors depict the aesthetic experience as a form of shipwreck or pilgrimage: let's think about Shakespeare's *Tempest* or Góngora's *Solitudes*, where the shipwrecked or the "peregrino" (word that in XVII century Spanish meant both he who travels in order to reach the place of his meaning, and also "something rare and precious") not only "sees" and gets to know other worlds, but also modifies his perceptual experience, hence his ideal perception, of the world.

By educating to the form of time, by educating perception, the aesthetic-artistic experience amounts to a constitution of location: it opens up places, it makes a place being. Every place in fact is not without a body (or better: not without a mind-body) that inhabits it, to the point that this very inhabiting makes the place existent. In this regard the place is not a measurable space, but rather an ensemble of tensions, envelopments, expressivity. My looking makes a place, my gesture makes a place, so that what is spatially far may be made significantly near or the other way round. The place is neither a content-holder, nor a perceptual a-priori. It is rather an always reversible event, or, quoting Merleau-Ponty's language, it is a chiasma of visible and invisible, a tangible crossover of visible and invisible. The invisible is what transforms a place into a dwelling, in other words what makes it a world-for-us; the invisible, clearly, cannot be made visible, and yet it cannot be grasped as such, that is as invisible, without body, gesture, gaze... Arguably, it is the sense of the event, which actually takes place and it has its own peculiar concreteness, always escaping any form of grab and translation into an established meaning. The invisible is always, so to speak, just slightly shifted from the line of my gaze, and yet it is able to direct my gaze and guide my desire. In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty establishes in theory that body and world co-belong to the same communication makings, to the same «raw» sensible being, that he calls *chair du monde* (flesh of the world). Such a dimension is somehow prior to the very distinction of body and idea, besides being also their condition of possibility, as the place where perceiving and being perceived are possibly reversible. It is an opening elementary basis, that is able to produce meaningfulness as it is originally communicative. The flesh (*chair*) expresses itself as language and idea, notably bodily idea, which is as such that it cannot be conceived of without the body, a perceptive idea, although properly [just] an idea. One may here pin point the precise convergence of aesthetics and ontology, as the *chair du monde* is nothing but the expressive language of being, which acquires form in some operations thus making our experience shareable and jointly participated. The beautiful example chosen by Merleau-Ponty as to illustrate this essential point, comes from Proust's *Recherche*: the *petite phrase* of Vinteuil's sonatina, which is the place where the meaningfulness of music gets enclosed in the language of poetry. Just five notes may nevertheless represent «the essence of love which "the little phrase" not only makes present to Swann, but communicable to all who hear it, even though it is unbeknown to themselves, and even though later they do not know how to recognize it in the loves they only witness» (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 196). Moreover, «the ideas we are speak-

ing of would not be better known to us if we had not body and no sensibility; it is then that they would be inaccessible to us [...] Thus it is essential in this sort of ideas that they be “veiled with shadows”, appear “under a disguise”. They give us the assurance that the “great unpenetrated and discouraging night of our soul” is not empty, is not “nothingness”» (pp. 196-197).

Now, provided that the invisible dimension of any place is disclosed by the work of art and this kind of experience is aesthetic, then today precisely the new technologies, so often employed in the direction of the aesthetization of politics, may turn out to be a useful resource of resistance and rebound as to activate artistic operations, which could be able to free the widespread mass-influenced common feeling. The actions of virtual simulation may concern, and often do concern, the merchandizing of the recreational. However, also artistic actions may imply the same possibilities of imagery creation, always connected to a form of irreality and cracking in the existent, that are provided by digital technologies. In this regard, we are now at a turning point: is a form-of-artwork possible in which the artwork is the place of its dehiscence? Such a making-into-one of some thing and some event, in the form of a place for aesthetic, relational and interactive experience is allowed by those technologies, which make (art)works out of virtualization processes. The virtual artwork amounts indeed to a complex set of issues, at the intersection of several tendencies, which develop into some unpredictable process of actualization. Since the artwork, being interactive, is able to embody in a new way the actions of the users, it becomes the form of an irreproducible experience taking place as an event in the environment it creates. All this, forces use to think the structure body-environment as essentially relational, or as a place existing in encounter only. And, if we can agree on defining an artwork in the era of virtual devices as the *mis-en-forme* of a contingent and once-off experience, then today more than ever it is possible to say strictly speaking that art is experience, and that museums as the place where art takes place are also an experience. Such an experience is also certainly collective, since the artwork-place, by embodying sensible, emotional and cognitive traces of its users-actors, may be metaphorically reformulated as a grassroots project. The artwork, or more precisely the artistic procedure, thus became a media space, reviving the original meaning of “medium” as “public space”: middle place as a place of encounter. Such a digitally produced space is not like the ones we are already accustomed to, where the media presence coincides with the absence of physical contact, as in television, but it is rather a place-artwork which is a sensible environment, both highly bodily and inextricably mental.

This path is followed by some recent installation of the Italian group Studio Azzurro (see www.studioazzurro.com). They, for instance, reinvent the ideas of artwork and museum, by examining the interactivity potential of virtual environment. They also move towards an aesthetics of relationships, by emphasizing the collective and socializing features of the constitution of an artwork, as the building up of a grassroots public space, which is absolutely creative as far as it is relying upon structural contingency. The project of topic-oriented museums of some geographical areas revolves around the idea of an interactive space of identity and memory, where the museum is the encounter of past and future in the form of a meaningful present. All this goes in the direction defined by Benjamin’s ‘politicization of art’ and accomplishes the task, that Dewey gave to artists and philosophers of aesthetics, «to restore continuity between the refined

and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience» (Dewey 2007, p. 3). Or, in other words, to insert in the most advanced technologies the soul of our places, the memory of people and the culture expressed by inhabited spaces, as to let them speak “again”, in an unprecedented and productive way, to connect the memory and stories of the tradition with form of interactivity, which through the contamination may become rich in experience. The more the artistic experimentation shall be able to interact with a culture that takes art as the occasion for collective experience, envisaging the future as well as non standard forms and languages, destroying perceptual and cognitive clichés, possibly in open dialogue with those open-minded trends in urban and landscape design (see Decandia 2000 and 2004), who are trying today to reevaluate the dimensions of temporality and of the invisible, the more it shall be possible to work in the direction of an aesthetic ethos of some usefulness.

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