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## From the aesthetic mind to the human cultures: Towards an anthropology of aesthetics<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** This paper aims to shed light on the links between aesthetic mind and cultural dynamics. We'll begin by describing the behavioural, cognitive and phenomenological complexity of the aesthetic before examining the role of such multidimensional phenomenon in the processes of cultural transmission. This analysis will lead us to consider aesthetics as a key frame of reference indispensable for investigating the creative and freely productive character of the processes through which individuals reproduce and transform their culture.

**Keywords.** Aesthetic mind, Anthropology of aesthetics, Cultural transmission, Aesthetic niche.

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### 1. AESTHETICS AND ANTHROPOLOGY: A LONG BUT PROBLEMATIC RELATIONSHIP

The question of aesthetics is intrinsic to the anthropological project. Since the dawn of the cultural anthropology in the 1920s, the notion of aesthetics has underpinned several approaches to culture. In the long chapter dedicated to aesthetics in his *Manuel d'ethnographie*, Marcel Mauss clearly states that «les phénomènes esthétiques forment une des plus grandes parties de l'activité humaine sociale et non simplement individuelle (...), l'esthétique contribue à l'efficacité, aussi bien que les rites» (Mauss [1926]: 85); while, in those same years, Franz Boas claimed that «all human activities may assume forms that give them esthetic values» (Boas [1927]: 9). Some years later, Edmund Leach, by refusing the neutralization of the aesthetic dimension of Malinowski's functionalism, assigned to the «aesthetic frills» nothing less than the defining characteristic of a society, and therefore, the primary source of data

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for anthropological research (Leach [1954]: 12). Similarly, Clifford Geertz elegantly showed how human beings organize through aesthetic forms the unexpressed of a society (i.e. values, beliefs, rules) within an encompassing and expressive structure that makes tangible the essential nature of a cultural system opening to an immediate and meaningful understanding of it (Geertz [1972]). More recently, a minority position in the contemporary anthropological debate describes the aesthetic as the way of seeing of a society, the cultural organization of the sensory qualities of the world. According with Howard Morphy, «aesthetics is concerned with the whole process of socialization of the senses with the evaluation of the properties of things. (...) The human capacity to transform physical properties into aesthetic valuations is integral to understanding human action and choice in both contemporary and evolutionary contexts» (Morphy [1996]: 209). On this basis, the explanatory value of aesthetics as a cross-cultural category is rehabilitated and an anthropology of aesthetics is inaugurated as «the comparative study of valued perceptual experience in different societies» (Coote [1992]: 247).

Even though it is a truism that cultural phenomena are displayed, made intelligible and transmitted by a constant aesthetic manipulation and transfiguration, we will be surprised by the relative lack of interest in the aesthetic processes which are responsible for both the variation and the stability of cultural systems. Anthropological scholars have rarely focused on the close relationship between aesthetic conducts and cultural dynamics. This is mainly due to the fact that the aesthetic dimension is clouded by conceptual ambiguities that have limited its adoption and explanatory effectiveness in anthropology<sup>2</sup>. To illustrate this, let's examine philosophical views on the matter.

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<sup>2</sup> Already in 1958 the anthropologist Warren D'Azevedo identified the major problem of the anthropology of art in the absence of an adequate conception of aesthetics. He emphasized qualitative unity of the aesthetic relationship, at the same time significant and affective (D'Azevedo [1958]).

Philosophers have not arrived yet at a consensual definition of aesthetics. For those who uphold the traditional view, aesthetics should stay on its original philosophical domain, only focusing on the quality of judgments of taste, the nature of aesthetic properties, and the ontological status of artworks. According to this view, inherited from the ever authoritative tradition of romantic and idealistic Western philosophy, extending aesthetics beyond beauty, pleasure, and artwork would diminish its explanatory power. As a result, appeals to aesthetics in the social sciences are still seen as falling within a prescriptive category fully realized in the modernist theory of art. With a very few exceptions, the debate in social anthropology<sup>3</sup> has been dominated by arguments in favour of this speculative tradition that equates the aesthetic attitude with a generic feeling for forms or with artistic production, thereby miscalculating aesthetics' role, overlooking its centrality in sustaining and remodelling human cultures. As Alfred Gell has provocatively shown, approaching non-western artefacts or antiquities from this perspective will obviously lead to misunderstandings that irremediably push aesthetics into the margins of the anthropological agenda (Gell [1999]: 159-162).

The four traditional fields of anthropology, however, differ in this regard. In stark contrast with the current state of affairs among social anthropologists depicted by Gell, in recent years naturalistic approaches have been increasingly devoted to exploring the aesthetic dimension. The main reason for this disparity is that the authoritative modernist view on aesthetics is well-suited to a reductionist perspective. Rare exceptions aside, experimental and evolutionary research on aesthetic behaviours is, instead, characterized by a radical tendency toward universalism, and examines the universal psychological, perceptual, somatic, and behavioural features that shape humans' aesthetic experiences. These «aesthetic primitives» are the neural correlates or evolution-

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<sup>3</sup> For a recent revival of this debate see Weiner et al. (1996).

ary antecedents of more complex aesthetic experiences and artistic productions. The standard model of neuroaesthetics of Semir Zeki, as well as the more recent neurobiological approaches (Chatterjee [2014]; Luring [2015]; Huston, Nadal, Mora, Agnati, Cela-Conde [2015]), focus on the neuronal basis of the perception of beauty; both assume that the neural correlates are causally sufficient to produce an aesthetic experience. Likewise, the dominant model of evolutionary aesthetics (Rusch, Voland [2013]) generally follows the reductionist approach of the narrow version of Evolutionary Psychology (Buss [2005]), an adaptationist and modularist approach that conceives aesthetic preferences (sexual and environmental) as innate, universal and species-specific, a sort of universal basis, hence cultural differences are no more than superficial accidents. Therefore, even if their attitudes towards aesthetics are opposite, their conclusion is the same: these naturalistic research have in fact demonstrated only a passing interest in the interrelationship between cultural processes and aesthetic phenomena.

Here, in contrast, I present the core proposal of an anthropological aesthetic theory. The principal aim of this paper is to mark a first step in the direction of recomposing the unity of the analytical framework beyond the opposition between psycho-biological universality and cultural variability, restoring to aesthetics its full right to membership in anthropological research. In a nutshell, it is intended to be a plea for an interdisciplinary approach towards the aesthetic dimension of human cultures. I will argue that the «aesthetic» – *aesthetic behaviour, aesthetic cognition, aesthetic experience* – is a multidimensional phenomenon involved in the processes that not only creatively organize the sensorial environment, but which also transmit and transform cultural systems.

## 2. A MULTIDIMENSIONAL PHENOMENON

If we really want to understand the role of aesthetic behaviours in cultural processes, we first need a preliminary anthropological characteriza-

tion of aesthetic phenomena. To do this, we have to abandon the notion of aesthetics as a theoretical entity, sprung from the Western philosophical tradition, and instead see it as an *anthropological fact*, rooted in cognitive and behavioural dispositions that contribute to the survival of an individual and a society.

In a first, elementary sense, the aesthetic could be described as cognitive processes that are triggered upon perceiving events or objects with certain features; such processes include attention, emotional investment, energy expenditure, selective judgment and an association with pleasure. These processes produce a meaningful organization of the sensorial qualities of the world in a distinctive experience, and they are at the root of the sensuous ways through which a socio-cultural organization is perceived, understood, and transmitted by individuals. In this definition we can find all the main uses of the term «aesthetic» as found in anthropological research:

- i) a distinctive functioning of cognitive, affective and somatic processes;
- ii) a form of experience that stands out from the ordinary flow of perception;
- iii) a set of expressive elements (i.e. songs, dances, formal patterns, artifacts) triggering this form of experience;
- iv) the aesthetic preferences, according to which human beings formulate judgments, make choices and orient themselves in their environment;
- v) the objectification of aesthetic preferences in cultural styles that then become objects of transmission;
- vi) the integrating of these individual preferences into shared aesthetic values which then make up a hierarchy of qualities resulting in aesthetic judgment (i.e. *art criticism, indigenous aesthetics*).

Such multidimensional complexity of the aesthetic, which necessitates the adoption of different descriptive levels and methodologies, can be profitably described as the articulation of three specific dimensions: *ethological, cognitive, and phenomenological*.

### *Aesthetic behaviours*

Focusing on the ethological traits of the aesthetic means highlighting the operative components of the aesthetic in the context of the evolution of animal behaviour. A large, heterogeneous collection of studies has gone in this direction, focusing on human mechanisms of choice and preference (environmental and sexual). Going beyond the naïve universalism of the standard model of evolutionary aesthetics, recent studies describe aesthetic mechanisms of preference as the result both of social learning and of exposure to cultural models. By overcoming traditional dichotomies such as organism/environment, innate/acquired, recent epigenetic models point in this direction. For instance, they explain that aesthetic preferences are the fruits of a selective assemblage of neurons and synapses produced by repeated «aesthetic interactions» between the organisms and their biocultural environment. In this way, human aesthetic behaviours are neither universal, innate and genetically encoded, nor are they culturally variable and contingent, but, in contrast, shaped by the experiences of individuals within their own, particular physical, social, and cultural environments (Desideri [2015]; Portera, Mandrioli [2015]).

Based on the Darwinian assumption that many animals share the capacity for aesthetic agency with humans, recent studies have delved more deeply into the behavioural mechanisms underlying aesthetic preferences, focusing on structural homologies between autotelic processes in animals - such behavioural patterns as play, curiosity, and affective multimodal communication - and the human aesthetic attitude. From an ethological point of view, some animal activities, such as the renowned courtship ritual of the bowerbirds<sup>4</sup> are structurally homologous - though functionally different - to human aesthetic behaviours. According to Jean-Marie Schaeffer, in both cases a ritualized metarepresentation of the per-

ceived event breaks with the ordinary attentional routines (Schaeffer [2015]: 256-266). This triggers a homeodynamic process in which attention and hedonic evaluation form an interactive circuit. Therefore, aesthetic behaviour can be described as a mechanism of emotional regulation in which, similarly to the autotelic processes of animal cognition, the primary evaluation - attraction or repulsion - does not result in a behavioural reaction directed at the environment but, instead, in a reflexive delay of attention to itself.

### *Aesthetic cognition*

From a cognitive point of view, we could describe the aesthetic attention as an intensified activity of exploration modulated and directed by attractors present in the ambient perceptual field, where objects or perceived events acquire an emotionally marked yet cognitively undetermined significance. In this broad definition there are essentially three elements to keep in mind:

a) Aesthetic attention is historically and culturally situated. The portion of the world that is the object of aesthetic attention appears to be a meaningful, singular and subjectively modulated unit, generated in connection with the broader context of experiences, gestures, and language;

b) Aesthetic attention works on the basis of a specific relationship between cognitive discrimination and affective reactions. Attention is «captured» in a cognitive, self-inducing dynamic whose sole objective is to maintain itself through continuous feedback between attention and hedonic appreciation;

c) According to Schaeffer, engaging in an aesthetic experience is equivalent to adopting a particular attentional style, namely divergent style (Schaeffer [2015]: 104). The aesthetic attention is very flexible, creative, and capable of a high level of cognitive innovation. It involves both the «vertical» process of conceptual categorization and the «horizontal» exploration of contextual complexity and that is why it is able to grasp relations of affinity among heterogeneous configurations and aspects of reality.

<sup>4</sup> For the complex mechanisms of behavioural ritualization in bowerbirds, see the work by Gerald Borgia's research group: [www.life.umd.edu/biology/borgialab/](http://www.life.umd.edu/biology/borgialab/)

*Aesthetic experience*

Finally, we can also define the aesthetic as a specific way of experiencing the world. In the notion of «aesthetic experience» we find all the elements that define experience in a general sense: the character subjectively felt of a situation, the crystallisation of competences acquired during interaction with the world, the role of pre-attentional processing of stimuli and that of mediation of language.

All human cultures describe some form of affectively-marked event that is distinct from their ordinary experiencing of the world. Such qualitatively enhanced experiences emerge in instances where one's concentration is focused on the present moment, with a total psychic engagement<sup>5</sup>, resulting in: *i*) a distortion of the perception of time; *ii*) a sense of wholeness that overcomes all partiality; *iii*) a lack of awareness of the distance separating subject and object. The aesthetic is therefore a modality of experience capable of generating an existential frame whereby we become part of an «aesthetic field», that is an experiential situation involving objective, appreciative, creative and performative dimensions. Not unlike religious and mystical experiences, the aesthetic experience is immediate; it partakes of that human capacity to reveal further dimensions of reality that transcend our ordinary perception of time and space. It involves a suspending naïve realism and dissociating experience by means of objects and events as dance, music, images, drama, sculptures and poems. Due to their phenomenological peculiarity, aesthetic experiences are inextricably linked to situations in which our emotional balance and harmony with the world is at stake, as well as our relationship to transcendence, to death, and to the need to attribute meaning to existence. Therefore, from a phenomenological point of view, aesthetic experiences have traits in common with other «making special behaviours» (Dissanayake [2013]) such as ritual ceremonies, immersion in fictional

contexts, or the states of intense psychomotor concentration found in some athletic activities.

## 3. DEEP TIMES

Based on the above description, it can be noticed that the fundamental presence of the aesthetic in human cultures is evident not only in our post-industrial aestheticized societies, but also in smaller-scale, non-Western societies, as well as in the great civilizations of the past or in Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer communities. Archaeological reports provide fully-illustrated accounts of how aesthetic behaviours and expressive activities have played a crucial role in human cultural evolution. The perfect symmetry of the Acheulean amygdalae, the systematic pigment use in the middle Pleistocene (Barham [2002]), the shell beads put together to form complex ornaments (Vanhaeren, d'Errico [2011]), such fascinating creations of the European Upper Palaeolithic as the Chauvet Cave and the famous Venus of Willendorf figurine are all expressive testimonies to the existence of an aesthetic world before history. The debate around the function of these artefacts is still ongoing, and I certainly don't claim that these objects were constructed with expressly aesthetic ends in mind. My working hypothesis is much weaker. I simply affirm that an aesthetic inflection of behaviour, cognition and experience are more likely than not to have played a causal role in the production and use of these artefacts.

The Acheulean amygdalae are one of the favoured fields of investigation for both contemporary evolutionary aesthetics and studies on human cognitive evolution. The most common hypothesis about these artifacts is that their perfect symmetry goes beyond the merely utilitarian dimension of the instrument, representing instead a visual pattern stimulating to an aesthetic impulse in the minds of humans who selected the material and a form of pre-symbolic signaling (Kohn, Mithen [1999]; Spikens [2012]). The amygdalae's perfect symmetry is generally interpreted as the extended phenotype of the maker, a sort of

<sup>5</sup> This kind of experience has also been referred to as «flow». For an investigation of the aesthetic experience as a flow experience see Csikszentmihalyi, Robinson (1990).

indicator of his fitness and social status. It served as a signal of valuable personal qualities (social and sexual), and in virtue of this it conferred on its maker a reproductive advantage. In a nutshell, handaxes were deeply meaningful first off for an individual, and then for the social group, because they were *expressive* of personal qualities of the maker. According to Gregory Currie, this aesthetic signaling would have been the first stage of the process of symbolization. With the evolution of human cognitive abilities and the transition to larger-scale, hierarchically more complex social structures, this rudimentary fitness indicator became a genuinely symbolic behaviour. By postulating that aesthetic attention was an initial form of evaluation of, and sensitivity to, the visible manifestation of qualities of our conspecifics, Currie gives back to aesthetics its role in interpreting the tangible evidence of social and cognitive evolution (Currie [2016]: 241).

Despite the risks of *just-so stories* and the epistemological difficulties inherent in any evolutionary reconstruction, this hypothesis of a crucial role played by the aesthetic in the process of symbolization appears all the more credible if we consider the notion of «aesthetic» in a very fundamental and multidimensional way. A concept well expressed by the French anthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan. According to him, the field of aesthetics involves the implications of nutritional behaviours and bodily affectivity, as well as all of the products of rhythmic creation.

*Une part importante de l'esthétique se rattache à l'humanisation de comportements communs à l'homme et aux animaux, comme le sentiment de confort ou d'inconfort, le conditionnement visuel, auditif, olfactif, et à l'intellectualisation, à travers les symboles, des faits biologiques de cohésion avec le milieu naturel et social [...]. Les références de la sensibilité esthétique, chez l'homme, prennent leurs sources dans la sensibilité viscérale et musculaire profonde, dans la sensibilité dermique, dans les sens olfacto-gustatifs, auditif et visuel, enfin dans l'image intellectuelle, reflet symbolique de l'ensemble des tissus de la sensibilité.* (Leroi-Gourhan [1965]: 95)

Remarkably consonant with John Dewey's naturalistic conception of aesthetic experience, Leroi-Gourhan's description of aesthetic sensibility as a multi-level skill confirms our proposed meaningful organization of the sensorial qualities perception. An organization in which the upper levels are rooted in the elementary, pre-symbolic and antepredicative level of the aesthetic as a «physiological judgement of value» that detects and displays the quality of an affective and dynamic equilibrium between an organism and its environment. This form of physiological judgement could be described as an appraisal of the valence of perceived objects on which a first significant organization of sensory information would be produced. According to the neurobiologist Steven Brown, the neural underpinning of this elementary aesthetic judgement is «a core circuit for aesthetic processing» that involves a «comparison between subjective awareness of current homeostatic state – as mediated by the anterior insula – and exteroceptive perception of objects in the environment, as mediated by the sensory pathways leading up to the orbitofrontal cortex» (Brown, Gao, Tisdelle, Eickhoff, Liotti [2011]: 256). This circuit, whose goal is to determine whether perceived objects will satisfy or oppose our homeostatic needs, is in no way restricted to aesthetic processing, but may be related to all cognitive processes that involve viscerality. It operates across all sensory modalities and may be involved in emotional salience monitoring. Taking this further, the philosopher Fabrizio Desideri hypothesizes that this pre-symbolic aesthetic judgement is associated with «aesthetic schemes», which dispatch sensorial inputs into perceptual clusters according to their affective markings. Such structures would act as flexible schemes, objectively and conceptually indeterminate and, precisely for this reason, capable of capturing relationships of affinity between configurations and aspects of reality that are heterogeneous in themselves (Desideri [2018]: ch. 3). The result is an integrated harmonization between emotional systems and cognitive structures, which would be a new dimension of our senses. Finally, at a hierarchically superior level of treatment of sensory

information, this indeterminacy and freedom of aesthetic processes take on the divergent, «polyphonic» and distributed character of the aesthetic attention described above.

#### 4. FARAWAY PLACES

As a sensorial, affective and meaningful dimension of the human-world interface, the multidimensional phenomenon of the aesthetics is present at both the individual and social level, and may involve other forms of experience. We can observe that in every culture, the aesthetic plays a role in magical, religious and political contexts, where the tacit knowledge of a social group is internalized in the bodies and emotions of the components of the community. The ethnographic literature is rich with examples of aesthetics as a performative dimension of culture - mimetic behaviours and ritualized actions - to be used in renewing an individual's physical, emotional and mental resources, in addition to developing and conserving cultural identity.

A classic example is the body painting practices of the indigenous Australian Yolngu people during circumcision ceremonies. As shown by Morphy, these body ornaments codify the clan structure and demarcate territorial boundaries (Morphy [1991]). Fluctuations in Yolngu cultural meanings are not restricted to material expression; they can also be achieved through a mnemonic archive of tacit knowledge and virtual images of Yolngu culture that are performed through song and dance. In other words, the aesthetic effect doesn't lie in the geometrical forms and brilliant colors of the body painting themselves, but rather, it emerges as a result of their making real the interconnected social meanings in a non-propositional way, beyond any logical-temporal nexus.

Ethnographic descriptions of this kind further confirm for us how aesthetics should be viewed as a complex synthesis between physiological reactions, higher-order categorizations, emotions, social learning, and episodic and cultural memory. Indeed, such complex syntheses shat-

ter the traditional oppositions between semantic and sensorial recognition, the private *versus* the social/public dimensions, and the pragmatic *versus* disinterested orientation toward action. A cross-cultural comparative analysis of multiple ethnographic cases like this one might help us to reintroduce the image of aesthetics as an integrated and integral component of heterogeneous social practices as the interiorisation and transmission of norms and beliefs, as well as the creation and maintenance of institutions through ritual practices. Specifically, the link between ritual efficacy and aesthetic behaviours is found in nearly all cultures and is well attested to in ethnographic literature. A brief description of a few cases should clearly illustrate how the three interwoven dimensions of the human aesthetic ensure the effectiveness of ritual action. I will limit myself to three particularly exemplary cases.

The most famous case is Michel Leiris' analysis of the ritual of Zār Spirit Possession in Ethiopia (Leiris [1958]). The symbolic efficacy of the rite is determined by alternating magical-religious actions, such as healing, with such complex aesthetic-expressive behaviours as songs, dances, rhythms, body painting and various ornamentations. In this case, the fundamental aesthetic component consists in being able to captivate the attention, and to amplify the emotional impact with the effect of inducing a suspension of disbelief. By theatricalising the ritual, aesthetic mediation serves as the device which produces a shift of the ordinary relationship with the world in a different relational modality in which shared social meanings are performed in a fictional immersion preliminary to the translation of the universe represented in belief. In other words, it is precisely by disrupting the partaker's sensitivity that the rite is able to establish and transmit a set of beliefs. From this perspective, the ritual is an expressive performance in which his «emotional and aesthetic coloring» (Lewis [1980]: 146) influences participants' grasp of the shared meanings in a very fundamental way.

In a completely different cultural context, that of *dhikr* performed by the Muslim community in

Aleppo, aesthetic elements play a similarly crucial role in participants' internalizing of religious beliefs and moral precepts (Shannon [2004]). *Dhikr* is an invocation of God through prayers, music and movement; it involves a repertoire of aesthetic and kinesthetic practices aimed at inducing an ecstatic trance. Modulated melodies and accelerating rhythms, combined with specific visual, olfatic, and tactile stimuli, promote body memories, imprinting somatic markers of the shared meanings. As in the Ethiopian practices described by Leiris, the *dhikr* breaks down the distinction between semantics and aesthetics. The multimodal experience of the *dhikr* testifies once again the cognitive and not only ornamental value of the aesthetic components in the acculturation processes.

Further evidence of the role of aesthetic dimensions in ritual efficacy can be found in Monique Jeudy-Ballini's research into the *hemlout* masks of the Sulka in New Britain (Papua New Guinea). These masks are enormous, umbrella-shaped compositions which are built – at great cost – to be displayed during initiation ceremonies or weddings. A vast series of technical and magical conventions governs their making in order to guarantee the object will have the greatest aesthetic efficacy possible during the rite. In fact, in the Sulka culture, notions of effectiveness and beauty are tightly interconnected. As Jeudy-Ballini observed, for the Sulka «Le beau est spécifié d'abord par son efficacité, son caractère agissant, son aptitude à déclencher des émotions.» (Jeudy-Ballini [1999]: 12). If, outside of rituals, aesthetic effectiveness governs farming activity and self-image, in ceremonies, beauty – in the sense of the ability to attract and captivate the gaze of the rite's participants – is the hallmark of the cosmological contract between humans and spirits.

These few ethnographic case studies highlight the transculturalism of the aesthetic and its role in ensuring the very efficacy of ritual actions. In all the instances described above, the success of the ritual practices, and hence of the transmittal and cultural renewal processes on which each social

system's survival depends, hinges on the interplay of the several dimensions of the aesthetic<sup>6</sup>.

## 5. THE AESTHETIC DYNAMICS OF CULTURAL TRANSMISSION

After this recognition of the multidimensional complexity of the aesthetic, the last part of the article will be dedicated to opening up an analytical perspective on its role in cultural processes. First of all, it is necessary to see the notion of culture in a dynamic sense and to pay attention to the processes of transmission. In other words, I'm going to stress the processual dimension of cultural systems, namely, the mechanisms of transmission, diffusion and innovation. This theoretical choice is consistent with the traditional social anthropology approach. Despite an apparent lack of explicit interest in the processes of cultural transmission, it is undeniable that from Marcel Mauss, Evans-Pritchard, Alfred Kroeber to Claude Lévi-Strauss and Clifford Geertz, social facts are characterized by their transmissibility;<sup>7</sup> according to Maurice Bloch, «the ability of humans to imitate and to borrow information and then to pass it on to another by non-genetic means is (...) what makes culture possible» (Bloch [2005]: 7). Therefore, in the following remarks I will assume that that what makes something «cultural» is the mechanisms of its transmission, while the specificity of each cultural fact resides in its mode of transmission.

Anthropological scholars usually define cultural transmission as a non-genetic process by which cultural elements - in the form of knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, skills, practices, and values as mediated by brains, bodies and environmental features - are transmitted via social mechanisms, such as imitation and teaching, from one genera-

<sup>6</sup> Other ethnographic cases that are particularly eloquent concerning the close connection between aesthetics and ritual efficacy: (Desjarlais [1992]); (Laderman [1991]); (Roscoe [1995]).

<sup>7</sup> The overlapping of culture and transmission is a common theme in social anthropology. See Berliner (2010).



tion to the next, from one group to the next, and from one individual to another. In connection with what has emerged so far on the nature of the aesthetic, if we want to stress the role of this latter in cultural dynamics, we need a model that views cultural transmission as a transformative system wherein the sensorial, affective, cognitive and environmental aspects are part of an integrated developmental process. Therefore, in contrast to what neo-darwinian models of cultural evolution assert,<sup>8</sup> cultural transmission does not merely consist in spreading or copying «bits of culture» (ideas, concepts or propositions). On the contrary, cultural transmission is an historical process, subject to casuality, dispersion, and innovation and it reaches down into the sensorimotor schemas, feelings, and emotions that constitute our meaningful encounter with the world. Every culture is constituted through processes of transmission involved in a field of practice and that go without saying. Therefore, the dynamic of cultural transmission cannot be described as mere transference of shared contents. Similarly, what is commonly defined as a «cultural trait» very often cannot be considered a discreet entity of information to be transmitted; rather, it constitutes a part of a complex developmental process that modifies both the unit being transmitted and the individual.

Moreover, it should be noted that, precisely because of the distributed nature of the cultural facts, the individual mentalization is the place where shared meanings are achieved. The individuals are always the principal vector of transmission and the openness of the processes of cultural transmission depends to a large extent on the fact that each new mentalization opens up possibilities of transformation related to the life-history of a person. Therefore, cultural transmission could be described as a performance by a whole organism-person within a cultural niche<sup>9</sup>.

By composing this definition with what has been said above about aesthetics, I see cultural transmission in the aesthetic regime as a form of transmission that continually responds to perturbations within the perceived environment; it is ritualistic, highly creative and mediated through gestures, dance, music, smells, texts, images and artefacts. It is precisely in this form of performative interaction<sup>10</sup> with the cultural environment, wherein a given individual's knowledge is semantically undetermined and inextricably linked with, or bound to, a given location (theatre, ritual place, church, etc.) as well as to the individual's body and affects, that we have proof of the transformative character of aesthetic conducts.

As a result of the opened nature of the transmission processes, the symbolic body of a culture is structurally precarious and subject to dispersion and misunderstanding. Every social system is therefore engaged in an aesthetic-expressive tension that causes great energy expenditure and a huge symbolic surplus. Precisely because of its divergent, polyphonic and prospective cognitive character and the existential frame it manages to create in the flow of experience, aesthetic conducts have the effect of stabilising and renewing the network of meanings and symbols of a cultural system.

Specifically, from historical and evolutionary points of view, I argue that this aesthetic transmission plays a crucial role in the construction of the human cultural niche (Laland, O'Brien [2011]). As remarked by the previous Leroi-Gourhan's quotation, a primary aesthetic interface with the environment shapes social relations and material culture. Individuals are socialized into a world of sensation that resonates with their bodies and influences the way objects are experienced. This is supported by the contemporary research on situated cognition and on the epigenetic cerebral variabil-

<sup>8</sup> The Darwinian paradigm of cultural evolution seeks a population-level explanation and stresses only the macro-level of cultural transmission in order to elaborate statistical models for cultural change and diffusion. For a paradigmatic position see Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman (1981).

<sup>9</sup> Although I prefer to keep the reference to the notion of

«transmission», my claim is close to Ingold's notion of «education of attention» (Ingold [2001]).

<sup>10</sup> According to Christoph Wulf, a performative interaction could be defined as «the combination of cultural performance, speech as action and the (aesthetic) staging and performing of the body» (Wulf [2013]: 200).

ity described above, whereby the neuronal configurations are structured by the continuous cultural practices in which human action is immersed. Thus, the aesthetic should be considered as a sensorial, conceptual, and ideational matrix of a given culture's perceptual environment. I shall pursue this reasoning a bit further and propose that the human cultural niche is fundamentally experienced as an «aesthetic environment» (Berlean [2002]) or, stated differently, an aesthetic niche (Menary [2014]). According to this perspective, aesthetics and the cultural environment are tightly and reciprocally bound to one another in an ecological process. Human beings learn and develop inside this aesthetic niche; the exposure to specific sensory environments reorganizes neural circuitry, anchoring knowledge in memory through affective reinforcement. In this way, we simultaneously shape and are shaped by our aesthetic environment; consequently, every aesthetic niche becomes an inheritable trait that affects the practices and behaviours (aesthetic or not) of individuals.

It is within this broader ecological framework that the connection between aesthetic dimensions and the dynamics of cultural systems should be reformulated. This relationship has traditionally been conceived along a one-way causal vector that goes from social organization to artistic objectification: aesthetics is that expressive-sensorial dimension in which the social structure is displayed. I argue that it would instead be more appropriate to conceptualize the relationship between aesthetics and cultural dynamics as a two-way causal, retroactive connection, since aesthetic perception itself also impacts generatively the network of symbols, norms, beliefs, and institutions. While it is true that an aesthetic act is always projected against the backdrop of institutions, norms and habits that determine our judgment and reactions, it is likewise true that the aesthetic perception shape the incessant process of reconstituting the symbolic framework of a given culture. Aesthetic cognition restructures the cultural contents of a social context by moving analogically within the individual network of imaginative associations, memories, and cultural meanings. Such an impact is closely

related to the character of indeterminacy and the associative freedom of aesthetic attention that, as we have seen, depends on its specific cognitive and schematic operations. This developmental system of micro-adjustments with retroactive effects turns into a generative force. Particularly eloquent therefore is the claim by Bruce Kapferer and Angel Hobart, wherein «the everyday world in its structuring dynamics, in its emergent symbolic forms, is aesthetic and, most importantly, manifests or objectifies (...) the forces engaged in its composition, which are thus made available to aesthetic contemplation or reflection» (Kapferer, Hobart [2007]: 4).

To summarise, the relationship between aesthetics and human cultures should not be merely described as the objectification of a cultural content into an aesthetic form, but rather as a complex two-way mechanism whose performance depends on the articulation of the three dimensions of functioning of the aesthetic. A developmental system in which aesthetic conducts are influenced by social institutions and belief systems, while a given cultural system is continually renewed and refurbished by the specific behavioural, cognitive, and experiential features of our aesthetic relationships with the word. In this model, the multidimensionality of the aesthetic is a basic component of the symbolic processes of transformation that continuously shape and reshape the human cultural niche. Aesthetics thus becomes a key frame of reference that allows us to rethink the creative and freely productive character of the processes through which individuals reproduce and transform their culture. Revealing a two-way relationship between aesthetics and cultural dynamics changes our perspective on the more general matters of the persistence, transformation and diffusion of human cultures.

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