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Habitual Behaviour and Ecology: Why Aesthetics Matters (Preliminary Notes)

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Abstract. This paper is mainly intended to provide some insights into the relationship between the aesthetic dimension, human practical/habitual knowledge and the environment (broadly understood); more specifically, I shall shed some light on that variety of problems, issues and questions that arise when we examine role and functioning of our human aesthetic attitude – considered as an anthropological constant result of both biological evolution and cultural evolution and which involves, in its exercise, an intimate relationship between the organism and its environment – within the context of today’s environmental crisis.

Keywords. Environmental humanities, environmental aesthetics, habits, practical knowledge, art.

1. ENVIRONMENTAL AESTHETICS

Although some developments of contemporary environmental aesthetics may be traced to the eighteenth century, to Kant and his notion of the sublime (see Brady [2003, 2013]; Pratt, Howarth, Brady [2000]), and to an unprecedented (at that time) interest in wild environments, untouched by human hand, it is however a matter of fact that what we call today environmental aesthetics formally emerged in the 70s and 80s of the past century in the Anglo-American world as a reaction against the exclusive focus on the arts within the analytically oriented tradition in aesthetics, as famously argued by Ronald Hepburn (1966) in his seminal essay *Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty*. According to Hepburn, «although some important features of art-experience are unattainable in nature, that by no means entitles the aesthete to confine his studies to art» (Hepburn [1966]: 285). In other words, there is a legitimate place in aesthetics for the appreciation of natural environments, broadly understood as «all objects that are not human artefacts» (Hepburn [1966]: 299).

Allen Carlson, who – together with Ronald Hepburn and Malcolm Budd (see Carlson [2000], Budd [2002]) – has been one of the first proponents of this new approach to aesthetics, developed in the 70s a “natural environmental model” of aesthetic appreciation that somehow extends the boundaries of Hepburn’s aesthetics of the natural world. According to Carlson, under the label *environmental aesthetics* we should understand the study of the aesthetic significance of our *total surroundings* (as opposed to that specific category of objects that are works of art), *both* natural and human-constructed:

We appreciate not only art, but also nature – broad horizons, fiery sunsets, and towering mountains. Moreover, our appreciation reaches beyond pristine nature to our more mundane surroundings: the solitude of a neighbourhood park on a rainy evening, the chaos of a bustling morning marketplace, the view from the road. Thus, there is a need for an aesthetics of the environment, for in such cases our aesthetic appreciation encompasses our surroundings: our environment. The environment may be more or less natural, large or small, mundane or exotic, but in each such case it is an environment that we appreciate. Such appreciation is the subject matter of environmental aesthetics (Carlson [2000]: XII).

Focusing on the aesthetic appreciation of any kind of environment, while stressing – like Hepburn and Budd – that aesthetics is by no means confined to art, Carlson’s environmental aesthetics explicitly extends beyond the boundaries of Hepburn’s and Budd’s aesthetics of *nature*. Almost anything that is non-art can be a legitimate object of investigation for the environmental aesthetics, in Carlson’s account: the natural world, in the first place, but also «cityscapes, neighbourhoods, market places, shopping centres, and beyond [...] every environment, natural, rural, or urban, large or small, ordinary or extraordinary, offers much to see, to hear, to feel, much to aesthetically appreciate» (Carlson [2000]: XV). As has been noted, such an all-encompassing concept of “environment” might lead to the conclusion that «the label environmental aesthetics lacks theoretical bite»

(Parsons [2012]: 235); over the decades, attempts have been made to determine more exactly reasons, scopes and functioning of the human relationship to the (natural) environments, frequently on an empirical-evolutionary basis. These attempts, however, remain controversial¹.

As ambiguous and vague as it may be, environmental aesthetics – with the richness of all its different approaches and specifications – has had over the last decades the merit to lead within the Anglo-American philosophical tradition to the recognition of a mode of aesthetic experience that differs from the aesthetic experience of “standard” art, being complex, immersive and multisensory and addressing environments rather than isolated objects. Moreover, it has allowed a critical response to the so-called “scenic model” of appreciation of nature, according to which the natural world is experienced as if it were just like a pictorial image, a two-dimensional surface well set apart from the beholder (Brady [2017]: 204).

This paper is mainly intended to provide some insights into the relationship between *aesthetics* and the *environment* (a notion the precise meaning of which, here, I will clarify in a while), to be understood more as preliminary notes for a future research programme rather than the result of a systematic and fully developed analysis. In a sense, then, it might be said that the argument I am going to sketch out here inscribes itself into the field of contemporary environmental aesthetics, although my perspective is not completely aligned neither with Hepburn’s aesthetics of nature (just to name one leading figure) nor with Carlson’s aesthetics of the total surroundings. In what follows, I move from three basic assumptions:

1. Aesthetics is always, *qua talis*, *environmental* aesthetics, since every aesthetic experience involves, per definition, the intimate perceptual

¹ Attempts to define and “measure” quantitatively the human relationship to the environment, through studies of preferential selection, have been made by psychologists, ecologists and evolutionary psychologists such as, for instance, the evolutionary ecologist G. Orians: see Orians (1980), (1986); Orians, Hervageen (1992).

interaction between an organism and its environment, be it a natural environment or a human-constructed one (or both). Inspired by Charles Darwin's biological views, American philosopher John Dewey has notoriously regarded the live creature interacting with its environment as the starting point of all his philosophical investigations and, most notably, of his aesthetic theory. As known, in his *Art as Experience* (1934), Dewey understands the emergence and unfolding of aesthetic experiences in humans as strongly "relational" processes, the "consummation" or perfection – culmination or qualitative peak – of ordinary experiences, which are always, by themselves, a matter of perceptual trade between the organism and its environment: «Experience is a matter of the interaction of organism with its environment, an environment that is human as well as physical, that includes the materials of tradition and institutions as well as local surroundings» (Dewey [1934]: 246).

2. As argued by an impressive (and steadily growing) body of inter-disciplinary studies over the last few years, *Homo sapiens* is, qua talis, *Homo aestheticus* (Dissanayake 1992): that means that that capacity to engage in aesthetic, highly significant and "consummatory" – although not necessarily pleasurable – relationships to the environment, so vividly described by Dewey, is in humans a trans-cultural attitude. Each of us, as a member of the species *Homo sapiens*, is provided with a biological disposition to engage in aesthetic experiences that unfolds epigenetically over the individual's lifetime and reaches its full development in intimate interaction with the individual's physical and socio-cultural environment (Desideri [2015]).

3. According to Dewey, as already hinted, the environment with which the organism interacts and in relation to which the aesthetic experience happens is both physical and socio-cultural, "it includes the materials of tradition and institutions as well as local surroundings" (Dewey [1934]). In other words: not only does it encompass natural but also human-constructed settings, in such an intimate blend that each of them disap-

pears as a single unit. Few today would disagree that, compared with the time at which Dewey wrote his masterpiece, the most impressive feature of our contemporary global/local environment (almost 90% of which, all over the world, has been altered or heavily modified by humans, so that the natural element and the man-made element are very difficult to distinguish today, assuming that it does still make sense to distinguish between them) is that it is facing the greatest set of challenges the humanity has ever seen in terms of climate change, loss of biodiversity, rates of extinction. That means, for the purposes of the present paper: aesthetic experience is also today, as it was at Dewey's time, a matter of interaction of an organism with its environment (both natural and socio-cultural), but *an environment at risk*.

Summing up from what I have argued so far: throughout this paper the label *environmental aesthetics* refers to that variety of problems, issues and questions that arise when we examine role and functioning of our human aesthetic attitude – considered as an anthropological constant result of both biological evolution and cultural development and which involves, in its exercise, an intimate relationship between the organism and its environment – within the context of *today's* environmental crisis.

In other words, environmental aesthetics falls here under the broader umbrella of the so-called Environmental Humanities, the recently emerged multidisciplinary matrix the main aim of which is to incorporate humanistic modes of inquiry into the discussion of current environmental change issues (Heise, Christensen, Niemann [2017]; Choné, Hajek, Hamman [2017]; Oppermann, Iovino [2017]; Adamson, Davis [2017]). Aesthetics, like the humanities in general, is uniquely positioned to integrate the responses to environmental issues given by the natural sciences, «by addressing the values which underpin environmental decision-making» and by evaluating «the consequences of what are essentially problems of human interaction (with both the human and the

non-human worlds)»². The last few years have witnessed an increasing interest in environmentally oriented humanistic research, with a rapidly growing amount of publications, also by specialists in the field of aesthetics (Emily Brady, just to name one of the leading figures); several questions and issues, however, are still in need of elaboration and clarification.

In order to start to address some of these issues, in the following paragraphs I go through two main steps: firstly, a (shorter) “diagnostic” step, which largely consists in reviewing some evidences about the apparent inability of modern science and modern scientific knowledge to mobilize intellectual and material resources for the environment; secondly, an “operative” step, asking which role might the aesthetic dimension (or the aesthetic attitude, or the human trans-cultural capacity to engage aesthetic relationships with the world/environment) and the arts have within the context of the current environmental crisis.

2. NATURAL SCIENCES CANNOT DO IT ALONE

We are confronted today – this is the main thesis of a stimulating paper published in December 2015 (Holm *et al.* [2015]) – with the paralyzing effects of (very well) knowing “the facts” about the environmental crisis (vividly and accurately described by the natural sciences), without being concretely able to deal with it and change direction. Why? Why does it seem there is no transition *from* “knowing that” environments are at risk *to* “knowing how” to change our environmental attitudes and behaviours?

The paper suggests that the reason why science has not been able so far to shift human attitudes and *really* promote pro-environmental behaviours is that «at the heart of global change in the 21st century lie human choices and actions – questions of human behaviour, habits, motivation that are

embedded in individual practices and actions, in institutional and cultural pathways, and in political strategies» (Holm *et al.* [2015]: 980; see Rose *et al.* [2012]). To put it another way, the drive behind the current global environmental change seems not to have much to do, at least *not* in the first instance, with the crystalline logic of scientific facts – i.e., the world of data, discursive analyses, statistics, reports of warning that we can appreciate through the lens provided by the “classical” Earth sciences (geology, biology, ecology, chemistry etc.). Rather, and to a greater extent, it has to do with the much more opaque logic of human practices, habits, bodies, institutions, choices – not always nor easily permeable through analytic scrutiny. Humanity, with its glorious *and* irreducible complexity, “fuels” the change: and «if humanity is indeed the force behind the changes on our planet, then the humanities are called to explore the new directions ahead of us» (Wilke [2013]: 67).

As an interdisciplinary field of research that brings together the social sciences, the humanities and the natural sciences, the Environmental Humanities (philosophy, literature, history, theory of the arts, political theory, sociology, in cooperation with biology, chemistry, physics, ecology) aim to respond to the «need to re-frame global environmental change issues fundamentally as social and human challenges, rather than just environmental issues» (Palsson *et al.* [2011]: 5). Interdisciplinary scholars working in the field stress the inextricable nexus of man-made/“cultural” *and* “natural” components in the environment, a «perceptual-cultural system that embraces person and place» (Berleant [1985]: 125), biotic and abiotic components.

Where do the aesthetics and the arts fit in this context? This paper supports the idea that not only does the aesthetic dimension play a role, but also that it plays the most crucial role in the multi-faceted interaction between our natural/cultural environment “at risk” and us.

In order to develop my argument, I firstly analyse the notion of practical knowledge (par. 3) as a fundamental requisite and resource for human life (both at the individual and at the collective lev-

² IASH, Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh Environmental Humanities Network, online presentation: <https://www.iash.ed.ac.uk/environmental-humanities>.

el) and I show in which sense and to what extent it can be said that the roots of human practical knowledge are *aesthetic*; secondly, I turn the spotlight on habitual knowledge (including what may be called “human environmental habitual behaviour”) as a component – and one of the most valuable – of human practical knowledge (par. 4); *finally*, I show how the aesthetic dimension and the arts are uniquely positioned to “grasp” the habitual/practical layer of human experience and – consequently – to pave the way for (possible) more sustainable and pro-environmental behaviours.

3. PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

In light of a vast amount of recent and less recent research in philosophy, anthropology, social psychology, cognitive sciences and sociology (Ryle [1946], Polanyi [1966]; Fodor [1968], Wulf et al. [2017]), it can be considered established that, both at the individual and at the collective-social level, what we call “practical knowledge” (tacit or latent knowledge, “know-how”, as distinguished from explicit knowledge or “know-that”) plays an important role. Processes of acquisition (mainly through mimetic behaviour) or of manifestation (through the use of a skill or ability) of such sort of embodied, pre-symbolic, procedural knowledge pervade the human life. Our everyday routine, both as individuals and as members of a community, is steeped in activities such as knowing-how to «make good jokes, conduct battles or behave at funerals [...] cook omelettes, design dresses or persuade juries» (Ryle [1946]: 228), riding a bike, playing the piano, driving a car, which are all skills not immediately (or not at all) translatable into forms of propositional knowledge. I do not wish to go more deeply into this topic here, since it would lead us straight into the middle of a still-hot debate, but let it suffice to say, for now, that a certain degree of “knowing-how” seems always to precede our “knowing-that”.

Ludwig Wittgenstein’s legacy obviously plays, in this respect, a fundamental role: *knowledge is an ability*, according to the author of the *Philo-*

sophical Investigations (1953), and meaning is ultimately grounded in usage and practice, so that our most basic certainties, which make language games possible, are non-propositional, rather enacted in our everyday practice. Among the major issues addressed in Wittgenstein’s *Investigations* there is the question as to how a human being can start to act according to rules (for instance, the rules of his/her social community). How is it possible? Rule-following cannot be formally taught (since to teach someone how to follow a particular rule R1 would require that the one we are teaching already knows how to follow the rule R2/ “When someone teach me R1, I have to follow it”, and so on and so forth); however, evidence clearly testifies to the fact that children, for instance, are able to learn social regulations and rules even without formal teaching (Baker, Hacker [2009]; Gebauer [2009]). Rule-following is a *practice*, Wittgenstein argues; to be able to follow a rule is a competence, or *practical knowledge*.

At the Interdisciplinary Centre for Historical Anthropology, Free University of Berlin, the extensive research carried out by Christoph Wulf and colleagues over more than thirty years has led to a new consideration of the role played by practical knowledge (silent or tacit knowledge) for the functioning of human social life and the dynamics of social learning (Wulf et al. [2017]). Indeed, in order to survive and reproduce within a socio-cultural community, individuals have to learn the ability to act socially and to interact with other members, both within and across social groups. This learning is not limited to (nor does it predominantly involve) acquiring the symbolic knowledge collectively shared by the group. Instead, it encompasses (and involves to a much greater extent) the assimilation of the legacy of bodily practices, behavioural patterns, rules and schemes of action that distinguishes that group (Wulf [2008]). It is, in other words, a matter of embodied competence or practical knowledge (for instance: the ability to perform correctly the rituals of the group or to exchange gifts).

According to Wulf, practical knowledge cannot, by definition, be formally taught; rather it

is acquired through mimetic learning processes. Mimetic learning (i.e., learning by imitation, although not in the sense of mere copying, rather as a productive, creative «process by which the act of relating to other persons and worlds in a mimetic way leads to an enhancement of one's own world view, action, and behaviour», Wulf [2008]: 56) makes us able to acquire cultural competence: that practical, tacit, procedural knowledge required in order for a man or a woman to fully integrate within a cultural community. It is fair to say, Wulf argues, that the roots of mimetic processes – at the heart of human social life – are essentially *aesthetic*: mostly expressed and performed in bodily arrangements, mimetic processes are sensuous, creative, inventive performances. As the German scholar remarks, without taking this aesthetic dimension into account, through the lens of which the limits of a merely functionalist view of culture easily emerge, many cultural practices could not be made intelligible.

In line with a growing amount of studies in the social sciences and anthropology that, in the last few years, have stressed the high significance and fundamental role of the aesthetic dimension and the arts for the stabilization and functioning of human socio-cultural life (see Turner [1982], Fischer-Lichte [2008]; from an evolutionary perspective: see Ellen Dissanayake [1992, 2000]), Wulf argues that the practical-*aesthetic* knowledge acquired through mimetic behaviour contribute in a decisive way to the process of individual and collective identity formation. In a nutshell, in order to be (fully developed) *Homo sapiens* we cannot but be *Homo aestheticus*.

4. HABITUAL BEHAVIOUR: A FUNDAMENTAL COMPONENT OF PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

Throughout the history of Western thought philosophers have considered “habitual behaviour” (let us provisionally use this expression, to be further specified in the following) as a fundamental component of human practical knowledge. *Habit*, *hexis*, *habitus*, *consuetudo*, *custom*, *habitual-*

ity, *habitual knowledge* are just a short selection of the wide range of terms expressed by the notion of habitual behaviour. Generally speaking, and notwithstanding the enormous richness and diversity of meanings, it may be said that all these terms refer to a kind of ability, of embodied knowledge, which is “possessed” by the individual (considered either as a single person or as a member of the social community) and acquired after a more or less extended and repeated process of interaction with its environment. *Habitus*, from the Latin *habeo*, “to have”, “to possess”, designates something (a competence) that is stably possessed; in the same vein, the Greek word *hexis*, from the verb *echo*, indicating having or possessing, designates a stable arrangement or stable disposition.

Reflections on the cluster of concepts under the umbrella “habitual behaviour” (*habit*, *hexis*, *habitus*, *consuetudo*, *custom*, *habituality*, *habitual knowledge*) span the history of Western philosophy, from ancient Greece (Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*) through to almost all schools and theoretical traditions until the present days, including Michel de Montaigne, David Hume, French spiritualism (Félix Ravaisson), American pragmatism (William James and John Dewey), Husserl's phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty, Marcel Mauss' “techniques of the body” and, in the field of sociology, Pierre Bourdieu's investigations on the notion of “*habitus*”. To address systematically such a burgeoning richness of meanings and shades of meanings would be clearly outside the scope of this paper (see Strathern [1996]; Kraus, Gebauer [2002]; Sparrow, Hutchinson [2013]; Bernacer, Lombo, Murillo [2015]); I shall therefore restrict myself to a couple of specific remarks, mostly referred to contemporary research on habitual behaviours and habits and functional to the development of my argument in the following paragraphs.

In the framework of contemporary research on the role of habitual/practical knowledge for human social life, Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is a mandatory reference. *Habitus*, which together with the notions of “field” and “capital” constitutes one of the focal points of Bourdieu's sociological

account, may be conceived of as a system for stabilizing – that is, making them *habitual* – and for transmitting practices in a society. In his book *The Logic of Practice* (1980), Bourdieu argues that *habitus* is «an acquired system of generative schemes [...], an infinite capacity for generating product – thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions» (Bourdieu [1980]: 53), result of the repeated exposure of the individual to a certain socio-cultural environment. Through the individual's habitus, social conditions get *imprinted as a second nature* and habitus becomes *a state of the body*, a bodily instantiation of a routine. According to Bourdieu, indeed, within pre-literate societies knowledge could only be passed down through this bodily, incorporated, embodied way of transmission³. It is worth stressing that the notion of “habitus” plays, in Bourdieu's account, also a crucial role in the development, stabilisation and transmission of aesthetic tastes and preferences (Bourdieu [1979]).

In his sociological theory, the French social scientist introduces what has been called the “naturalization effect”, a principle according to which, once social rules and schemes of action/interaction have turned into habitual practices, people are no more fully aware of their arbitrary nature: they are so deeply inscribed into the individual's body (habits, gestures and thinking style) that they end up with being performed unconsciously, therefore appearing innate or *natural* (Bourdieu [1980]). It is precisely because of the naturalization effect that habitus is less subjected to rational analysis and to analytical, “scientific” knowledge;

as has been noted, «the power of habit lies to a great extent in the degree to which it remains concealed» (Sparrow, Hutchinson [2013]: 157).

Along with sociology and anthropology, we have recently witnessed a growing interest in the notions of habit and habitual behaviour also in the field of cognitive sciences. But it has not always been this way. In the 20th-century cognitive sciences, dominated by the computational theory and the idea of mental representation as the key-concept to understand how the human mind works, the notion of habit has been mostly understood as a mere automatic, mechanical routine. Recently, with the increasing criticisms raised against the computational theory of the mind and with the emergence of the new paradigm of 4E cognition (*embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive*) (see Menary [2010]), there has been a re-assessment of the notion of habit, as an embedded and embodied disposition of the mind. At least in the field of contemporary cognitive sciences, habits are now understood as one of the cornerstones of a new conception of the human mind. As Alva Nöe writes: «Human beings are creatures of habit. Habits are central to human nature [...]. Only a being with habits could have a mind like ours» (Nöe [2009]: 97-98). Our daily life seems to largely rely on tacit, implicit, non-strictly rational, *habitual* knowledge (see Bargh [1997]); «during much of our waking lives, we act according to our habits, from the time we rise and go through our morning routines until we fall asleep» (Graybiel [2008]: 360).

³ Although to go more into details about this topic would be impossible within the restricted limits of this paper, let me notice that, within the field of biology, epigenetics, as a burgeoning, recently established discipline that focuses mostly on chromatin packaging modifications (induced by the environment) that allow differential access of transcriptional factors to DNA sequence, without any changes in this latter, has already started to demonstrate that memories of injustice, stratifications of power relations and conditions of mental and psychical disability penetrate into the body and may be passed down to the offspring, «telling their stories to the genetic narratives of each individual», see Armiero ([2017]: 53). See also Jablonka, Lamb (2005); Carey (2011).

The 2015 paper I have mentioned at the beginning of this essay suggests that, when analysing human environmental behaviour (i.e., the way in which, for example, humans conceive of their place in nature, consume and share common goods and environmental resources, affect natural environments either by contributing to their conservation and safeguarding or, to the contrary, by harming them) we should always bear in mind that, like the vast majority of human behaviour, also environmental behaviour is largely regulated by practical knowledge, by *habitual* schemes

and patterns, habits, habitus and routines, both at the individual and at the collective level (see, for instance, Knussen, Yule [2008]). We act according to certain dispositions or tendencies that are often acquired through repetition, through the repeated exposure to certain socio-cultural conditions (Bourdieu) or through mimetic-aesthetic learning (Wulf); decisions, actions and judgments performed over the course of an individual's lifetime keep exercising their influence (in the form of habitual tendencies) on what the individual is going to decide, do and judge in the future, although without any strictly deterministic "fate" and, what's more, without the individual being fully aware of this influence.

Although each community, each socio-cultural context, each *field* (to recall Bourdieu's fundamental notion) has admittedly its own way of understanding, making sense of and operationalizing the relationship to the environment, it is fair to say (at least in the Western world) that a common thread underlies all today's forms of habitual environmental behaviour: a tendency to think of us, humans (and our place in nature), as ontologically separated from the environment and the other living beings around us. «Fraught with nature/culture, human/nonhuman, man/woman, East/West, North/South, and ecology/economy binary opposition», this Anthropocenic *binary epistemology* «is the driving force behind economic growth, political strategies, and technological development, with all their detrimental consequences on our Earth's fragile equilibrium» (Oppermann, Iovino [2017]: 4). As I have already hinted following Bourdieu, this tendency has been so deeply incorporated into the bodies, habits, routines of Western men and women, so strongly imprinted that it is today understood as something merely natural, innate, and therefore not to be questioned, *habitual*.

Despite much excellent work carried out so far in the field of the environmental humanities, scholars examining the *human factor* involved in the current environmental crisis have not yet fully explored the role played by habitual practices or dispositions (*habits* or *habitus*) in human environmental conducts (Wilhite [2015]). Habits

still remain a challenging and somewhat blurry topic: habits may be, on the one hand, personal and corporeal or, on the other hand, social and historical (*habitus*); there may be an amelioration, or improvement, of our habits over time, although it is widely acknowledged that the habits of individuals can be obstacles to the adoption of new modes of behaviour; habits may have a non-cognitive, passive character, like mechanical or blind routines, but at the higher levels of our mental/bodily life they can be penetrated by awareness and cognition (as in the case of the Aristotelian *hexis*, which is an acquired disposition to perform certain actions with increasing ease, cognitive control and success, see Bernacer, Murillo [2014]; Barandian, Di Paolo [2014]).

A growing number of recent research publications, in the field of the Environmental Humanities, have addressed the question as to why science reports, data, and scientific statistics about the current environmental crisis have not been able yet to shift human attitudes and to *really* promote pro-environmental conducts – the 2015 paper I have briefly commented on above is an example of such publications. On the other hand, another much debated topic has been in recent years the type of *environmental narrative* we should adopt, that is «how to tell stories [about the current environmental crisis, climate change etc.] that will not easily fit together in the ways we are accustomed to?» (Bertoni [2017]: 178), thus initiating a process of defamiliarization and critical revision of "what we are accustomed to". I am persuaded that these questions are meaningful and important, but should be preceded, in my view, by another one: what is, exactly, *what we are accustomed to*? Are we really aware of *what we are accustomed to*? The main idea of this paper is that we should turn to aesthetics in order to be able to fully address these problems.

5. WHERE DO THE AESTHETIC AND THE ARTS FIT INTO THIS PICTURE?

I suggest that engaging in aesthetic/artistic experiences may be an effective strategy to "grasp" our embodied habits – the habitual layer of our

perceptual trade with the environment – and gently lead them back to awareness. As hinted above, «the power of habit lies to a great extent in the degree to which it remains concealed [...]». Leading habits back to awareness, however, «is not to be understood in intellectualist terms, for no act of cognition is going to change one’s embodiment [...] Awareness of habit has to be cultivated at the level of sensations, feelings, and involuntary thoughts [...]» (Sparrow, Hutchinson [2013]: 157). In other words, at the level of *aisthesis*, or aesthetic experience.

Now, this is not a straightforward issue and would require a much more detailed analysis in order to be fully developed, but I shall restrict myself here to making only a few points. As a body of recent research has demonstrated, at the crossroads between aesthetics, philosophy of mind, cognitive sciences and neurosciences (Desideri [2013, 2015, 2018]; Leder, Nadal [2014]; Pelowski et al. [2017]; Schaeffer [2015a,b]), when we engage in an aesthetic experience the environment with which we interact (that is, the environment to which we draw our aesthetically inflected attention) is explored in a polycentric, horizontal, divergent way (Schaeffer [2015a]); instead of trying to reduce or schematize the complexity of the environmental information, our aesthetic attention indulges in and dwell on this complexity; instead of functionalizing our cognitive and perceptual dynamics (as in standard experience), we let, through our aesthetically inflected attention, these cognitive dynamics and habitual perceptual routines come to the foreground (Desideri [2013, 2015]). The aesthetic experience is characterised by a peculiar and spontaneous synthesis of activity and passivity (although to various degrees, which differ from case to case): the “passive” layer of emotion and the “active” layer of cognition, in the form of a perceptual dynamics (exposed to a certain degree of passivity insofar as it is imbued with emotions) which nevertheless has the active power to return on itself, to reflect on itself while remaining emotionally loaded (in the terms of a *reflektierte Wahrnehmung*, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement, Introduction*;

Desideri [2011]). It is in virtue of this active/passive perceptual dynamics, I suggest, that engaging in aesthetic experiences may be an effective strategy to “grasp” (actively) our *naturalized* (Bourdieu) – therefore not completely conscious – habitual tendencies, «at the level of sensations, feelings, and involuntary thoughts» (Sparrow, Hutchinson [2013]: 157).

There is a growing awareness of the potential of the arts and aesthetic experience for the environmental issue: the number of projects, workshops and educational programs concerning the current environmental crisis, biodiversity, and climate change, organized with the cooperation of art educators, art practitioners and artists, is impressive and steadily growing. In the last few years, moreover, projects and events and, more in general, academic researchers working in the field seem to have started to pay attention to the sphere of human habitual tendencies, dispositions and take-for-granted assumptions, and to their role within an environmental education framework (Eernstman [2014]; Lane [2012]; Northcott [2012]; Brook [2012]). As Harold Wilhite argues (in a paper devoted to the idea of sustainable consumption), «there is an urgent need for a robust theory of consumption that addresses how habits form, how they change and how policy can contribute to the formation of new habits that are less environmentally intrusive» (Wilhite [2015]: 100). However, since «to acknowledge the power of habits and [...] to find ways to influence and move them» (ibi, 108) are two very different things, firstly we should address the question as to whether (and, if yes, how) people may become aware of their naturalized environmental habits. As already hinted, the aesthetic and the arts seem to have much to say (and to do) in this respect.

The question how to become aware of the habitual, embodied, mostly unconscious layer of our environmental experience seems to be even more urgent (and difficult to address) in today’s condition of technological hyper-medialization, both at the individual and at the collective level. Literally bombarded by technologically-mediated

stimuli (digital images, sounds, information, virtual environments), which seem to alienate us from our “real” body – and thus from the “real” environment within which this body is embedded – we are constantly exposed to the risk of losing our ability to judge critically, to cultivate awareness, to autonomously direct our attention towards this or that instead of being heteronomously attracted, fascinated, forced (Crary [2001]). How to “grasp” our deepest bodily habits, when the body is hyper-mediated, endowed with technological prostheses and therefore the environment with which the body is supposed to interact appears distant, opaque, untouchable?

This is, however, only half of the story. Indeed, recent research in aesthetics has persuasively spoken for a potentiation – not a reduction – of the perceptual powers of the prosthetic body, the “virtual body”, in digital/virtual environments (Diodato [2012, 2014, 2015]; Kluszczynki [2010]), where a properly relational-interactive ontology (between the body and its environment) can take place, overcoming the nature/culture, human/nonhuman, organic/inorganic divide⁴. As mentioned in the first paragraph of this paper, one of the major merits of the Environmental Aesthetics in the 70s and 80s of the past century was to lead, within the Anglo-American philosophical tradition, to the recognition of a mode of aesthetic experience that differs from the aesthetic experience of “standard” art, being complex, immersive and multi-sensory and addressing environments rather than isolated objects: today’s new digital technologies seem to be able to enact in the most effective way such an immersive, relational, complex environ-

mental experience, making the body even more aesthetically powerful in its intimate connection with the environment⁵. The implications and the potential of digital artistic devices, digital media, and virtual environments for raising awareness of environmental/ecological issues, of the current environmental crisis and of our environmental habitual behaviour constitute a fascinating topic, which has recently started to attract the attention of the scholarly world: the Digital Environmental Humanities (DEH), as a generative confluence of the environmental humanities and the digital humanities, are one of the latest fruits of today’s interdisciplinary research work for the environment (Sinclair, Posthumus [2017]).

«The fundamental argument [...] fuelling the research in the environmental humanities is that the urgent environmental problems that stretch from the geological to the biological are also essentially social and cultural issues» (Oppermann, Iovino [2017]: 3): in this sense, in order to effectively address the current environmental crisis no less than a profound rethinking of our notion of human “nature”, including a renewed consideration of the habitual layer of human experience and of the role of the arts and the aesthetic dimension for human life, is required. Aesthetics, within this complex and multi-faceted framework, matters: that’s the point from which our research should start.

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⁴ As Diodato ([2014]: 60-61) argues, «The relationship human body-virtual body does not restrain corporeity giving rise to a disembodied mind-gaze [...]. On the contrary, the virtual environments with their “heavy” bodies interrelating with “thin” bodies tend to exalt *the difference and the awareness of the difference from the usual body-environment relationships*. The user is then *conscious* of perceiving an imaginary space; he or she does not have the sensation of experiencing a dematerialized reality. *The user experiences a reality felt as “other”, as different*», my emphasis.

⁵ Indeed, as Weik von Mossner ([2017]: 337) writes: «Human technology enjoys a somewhat ambivalent reputation within the environmental humanities. It has often been framed as a hindrance to harmonious human-nature relationships, an inextricable part of cultural and economic practices that alienate us from nature and put us in a position of power and dominance [...]. However, [technology can also function] as a mediator, enabling and often defining our experience of environments near and remote, familiar and strange, actual and virtual».

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