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The “Aesthetic” between Experience and Social Critique

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1. Introduction

- 1 One of the main challenges for the field of aesthetics is the multiplicity of ways in which it is possible to experience, comprehend, define, interpret, decipher, and understand the aesthetic. To put it in a simplistic way, “the aesthetic” increasingly demands to be considered in a broad and heterogeneous dimension, neither reducible to the mere object of a *gnoseologia inferior* à la Baumgarten, nor, at the same time, confineable to the world of art.
- 2 If, on the one hand, plurality and broadening of perspectives can mean enrichment, on the other hand, it can bring fragmentation, compartmentalisation, dispersion, and loss of meaning. The experience of contemporaneity, after all, seems precisely – and at every turn – always entangled in this dialectic: too many possibilities of meaning are the very same thing as no meaning at all.
- 3 Starting from these general considerations, which, trivial as they might seem, recur insistently and on many different levels to the individual (and no less to the philosopher or the aesthetician), the aim of this paper is to focus on two vital points that address this problematic entanglement. First, I will focus on the aesthetic in its experiential dimension, that is, the aesthetic not – or at least not only – as an interpretative paradigm of works of art or more generic artistic facts or phenomena. Second, once I have explained in what sense the aesthetic can be outlined as experience, I will discuss how such experience could – and perhaps should – configure itself as a particular kind of operativity, namely an aesthetic “comportment” with a precise critical task that lies in social critique.
- 4 More specifically, the aesthetic as experience and the aesthetic as social critique will emerge from my attempt to juxtapose and compare two contemporary and distinct

philosophical perspectives. Using John Dewey's conception of pragmatism from *Art as Experience*, and Theodor W. Adorno's dialectical thought from *Aesthetic Theory*, I will demonstrate how these two perspectives can intersect and give rise to a common understanding of aesthetics as a fertile ground for social critique and dialogue. In addition, it appears significant that *Art as Experience* and *Aesthetic Theory*, rightly considered two "classical" texts of twentieth-century aesthetics, both deviate – albeit differently, not seldom in an equally radical way – from other traditions of thought, such as analytic philosophy and phenomenology.

- 5 Furthermore, the points of contact and conceptual connection of the two aesthetic perspectives of Dewey and Adorno have not been thoroughly investigated by scholars.¹ Previous analyses have primarily emphasised their points of contrast and have rarely questioned their possible intersections.² This may be due to mutual antagonisms and misunderstandings between American pragmatism and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, resulting in the absence of analysis at a systematic level.³ While an in-depth study of these antagonisms goes beyond the scope of this paper, my aim is to instead trace some possible paths of access to this history, by highlighting the affinities in aesthetic matters at the expense of the theoretical differences that undoubtedly exist between the two traditions. This kind of dialogue *a posteriori* is, in my opinion, not only possible, but also philosophically fruitful, so that, however "missed" – or, rather, precisely because it was missed – deserves to be at least attempted.⁴
- 6 Moreover, it should not be overlooked that in the autumn of 1934 many leading members of the Frankfurt Institut für Sozialforschung migrated to the United States and established the International Institute for Social Research at Columbia University, in New York City. It is here that Professor Emeritus John Dewey, who retired in 1929, was already recognised as one of the most important thinkers of American pragmatism. As such, it is not difficult to imagine that some kind of contact could have occurred⁵ between Dewey and Adorno. And, although he never says it explicitly, it is also quite probable that, during his years of forced exile, Adorno had read Dewey or, at any rate, had come into contact (for example through the mediation of Max Horkheimer or Meyer Schapiro) with his thought. Examples of this are some sporadic but significant mentions of the American pragmatist in the two major Adornian works, *Negative Dialectics*⁶ and *Aesthetic Theory*.⁷
- 7 In addition, Dewey's *Art as Experience* is a text which several scholars of aesthetics today have interpreted – and still are interpreting – as a key resource for an open and plural discussion on the aesthetic at different levels. This discussion is about how philosophy takes the aesthetic as its object or method; about the interaction of different theoretical conceptions with each other and with practical dimensions of experience; about the relationship that the aesthetic in its various senses entertains with political praxis and social critique.⁸
- 8 Lastly, I hope that my analysis can contribute to philosophical dialogue around the meanings and functions that the aesthetic – as well as aesthetics as a field of research – can assume in relation to how (and if) we have or make experience today and how (and if) we ponder the possibilities of an effective social critique in our present, according to new forms of theory and praxis.

2. The Aesthetic and Experience

- 9 An analysis of the aesthetic experience must include an examination of the plurality of the aesthetic, which corresponds to a certain degree of vagueness. Aesthetic experience could be traced back to the most disparate circumstances, take place according to an infinite series of modalities, provide interpretative paradigms of reality completely opposed to each other, or assume the most heterogeneous meanings, values, theoretical and practical functions. Aesthetic experience can be sensible, spiritual, hedonistic, epistemological, interactive, evaluative, semantic, and so on. It can take the form of something assimilated, unitary, and coherent, with which one has acquired familiarity, but also, on the contrary, something sudden that bursts in an instant, that vibrates in the emotional dimension in which one is momentarily immersed, that produces some sort of shock. Aesthetic can be both experience as a journey in the sense of the German *Erfahrung* and lived experience in the sense of the German *Erlebnis* (see Iannilli 2020: 36-8, and Iannilli & Matteucci 2021).
- 10 Therefore, it is no coincidence that, in the last century, the academic and cultural debate has centered around the notion of aesthetic experience, repeatedly emphasised or dismissed and gradually articulated in a vast array of meanings. For this reason, it is necessary to clarify what Dewey and Adorno mean when they refer to the aesthetic as something experiential, and how experience necessarily contains an aesthetic character.
- 11 What is defined as aesthetic has most often to do with feeling, emotion, perception, or sensibility, rather than with cognition, denotation, abstract knowledge, or reason. The "mimetic" – in the sense of *mimesis* as opposed to *ratio* – character of the aesthetic is a theme that can be found throughout the history of aesthetics, even before it became a separate philosophical discipline. Aesthetic, in other words, is usually and primarily something we experience, rather than something we know.⁹ This aesthetic "something" may eventually also assume a cognitive character, as it can inform us, give us a precise message, or even express a certain concept through alternative forms to logical or identifying thought. Yet, this hardly ever seems to be the specific nature or foremost task of the aesthetic "something."
- 12 Perhaps a little less trivial – but today more and more explored – is the fact that aesthetic experience constitutes something broader, something further, if not even something radically different, compared to the experiential space in which artistic phenomena are situated. In other words, less taken for granted (and for this very reason to be inquired in depth) is the substantial irreducibility of aesthetic experience to art, even where one understands the latter in the most extended and unconventional sense. Taking these preliminary considerations into account, let us now see how Dewey and Adorno's perspectives address this set of issues, before trying to put them into dialogue.

2.1. Dewey: The Aesthetic as Intensified Experience

- 13 The pragmatic perspective of Dewey is explicit in clarifying the intrinsic connection between the aesthetic and experience. As very well known, "experience" is the key word of Dewey's philosophy as a whole. Because of this, it seems almost improper to consider *Art as Experience* as a specific work of aesthetics or philosophy of art, because

the reflection on the aesthetic actually arises from research on human experience in general.

- 14 The starting point of Dewey's work is to go back to the root of what we are calling the aesthetic *inside* of ordinary experience to show that the aesthetic is *always* potentially enclosed in *every* experience we can make (see LW.10: 25). The main outcome of such retrospective analysis is the fact that, once this potentiality is disclosed, the aesthetic proves to be not just an aspect of every interaction between us and what surrounds us, but the most meaningful and perspicuous one – it is what makes that interaction full-fledged experience. Thus, for Dewey, the aesthetic is the way in which we experience the most, and that experience, when it is true experience, that is, integral and fulfilling, is essentially aesthetic (see LW.10: 42).
- 15 For Dewey, experience is the constant interaction between the live creature, an organism in search of balance and enrichment, and its environment, in this relational process of mutual adaption and expansion (see LW.10: 19-20), which excludes – or at least precedes – any dualism. Therefore, the aesthetic and experience do not work as two separated entities. Rather, they belong to the same dimension and they operate on the same field, which is dense, meaningful and emotionally connoted.¹⁰
- 16 It then becomes clear in what sense the aesthetic, understood in its experiential form, is not only something that refers to art. This is especially the case if we think of art as an artifact – as an artwork in its reified and ontologically independent aspect, materially (and socially) isolated from the density of the environment in which experience unfolds. From Dewey's perspective, what we call art is rather just a *possible* configuration¹¹ through which we can express a particular way of having or making experience. Artworks are more than just physical objects, they are "adverbial" aesthetic objects. They are not things, but devices (see Iannilli 2020: 21, 76-7) that form a bundle of relations through which experience as modality finds adequate expression and becomes communicable (see LW.10: 110).
- 17 Art, in short, is something that brings together, incorporates, and embodies those energies that constantly enrich our whole experience. But the aesthetic, regardless of its artistic configuration and/or the cultural practices that are involved in it, is an operational mode of experience (see Matteucci 2022: 131). The *aisthesis* that gives the aesthetic its name is indeed that kind of sensation experienced in the act of perception – not a categorial recognition, but a dynamic process, in which we are immersed, involved, and eventually engaged. Because of its relational character, it is always open to new configurations and can never be hypostatized once and forever.
- 18 One of the key points of Dewey's argument is that art, when considered only as a set of separated objects called artworks, paradoxically leads to an inadequate understanding of the aesthetic, insofar as it becomes perceived as fundamentally distinct from ordinary experience (see LW.10: 9). This is particularly evident in the present world, which is permeated in every aspect by alienating tendencies and lacerating fractures. Therefore, our task – this the impulse of the pragmatist's aesthetic reflection – is to restore the continuity between aesthetic experience and ordinary experience (see LW. 10: 14-8). The subsisting chasm between the aesthetic and the experiential, however, precludes the possibility of fulfilling this task starting from the aesthetic. Furthermore, it requires us to start again from experience in its more rudimentary sense, "to have recourse to animal life below the human scale" (LW.10: 24).

- 19 Dewey thus argues that the aesthetic dwells in that experience in which life "is truly life" (LW.10: 24). Here the present – enhanced, rather than perturbed, by past and future – is experienced as meaningful and complete, as intensified vitality, as a stability that is not stagnation, but evolution. Any experience, in this sense, is aesthetic experience *in potentia*, that is, the aesthetic is virtually prefigured in the course of any experience of our lives because it is intrinsic to the very process of living. Our ongoing pursuit of satisfaction ultimately responds, even in everydayness, to an aesthetic need, namely the need for an ideal situation of order in which we are in harmony with the world around us.
- 20 In contrast, the experience that does not know such cohesion, that does not place itself in an enriching continuity with past and future, the experience in which, instead of "being fully alive" (LW.10: 24), we passively and mechanically abandon ourselves to mere randomness, is *an-aesthetic* (see LW.10: 46-7). For Dewey, the "enemies" of the aesthetic are neither the theoretical nor the practical (LW.10: 47), but rather the anaesthetic, meaning that kind of experience in which "we drift" (LW.10: 46). In the anaesthetic experience, we just let things happen so that we are not truly having *an* experience (on this see in general chapter 3 of *Art as Experience*, LW.10: 42-63) and we are not fully living, but simply indulge in a life that "does not live" (see Adorno 2005: 19). Therefore, the aesthetic belongs as much to theory as to praxis because every cognitive achievement, every completed action, every emotionally dense and unified experience, of whatever kind, possesses its own aesthetic trait. As Dewey concludes, this is "the only secure basis upon which aesthetic theory can build" (LW.10: 53).
- 21 Meaningful aesthetically qualified experience differs from that which specifically has to do with art in just one aspect. The former usually ends when, for instance, a theoretical conclusion is found or a practical aim is achieved. For the latter, instead, the "consummation" is neither guided by a predetermined end, nor, keeping its experiential process open to ever-new configurations and interpretations and welcoming into its own framework a potentially infinite series of meanings and dynamic relationships, does in fact ever end. A poem does not end when one reads its last line, a piece of music does not end when the last note is played (see LW.10: 61-3). In science, intellectual research, and practical life, elements of resistance are treated as obstacles to be overcome. In art, resistance is incorporated and put to good use in the artwork, where the vital active ferments, which are immanent to it, always remain operative – literally, at work –, rather than resolving themselves in a moment of complete and conclusive satisfaction.
- 22 In conclusion, for Dewey, the aesthetic is what, from time to time, intensifies and qualifies certain traits of the all-pervasive dimension of experience. The aesthetic emerges when our sensible-perceptual immersion in a field of forces and tensions emerges in a contingent configuration of the relationship between us and our environment (i.e. in a precise experiential moment, fully significant). Aesthetic experience is thus always strictly relational, while any attempt of hypostasis actually *prescinds* from experience, nullifies its dynamism, and quells its energies. All *Art as Experience* moves against the reduction of this relationality to substantiality.

2.2. Adorno: The Aesthetic as Shuddering Experience

- 23 Adorno is less explicit than Dewey in clarifying the connection between the aesthetic and experience. Nevertheless, the idea that the aesthetic relates primarily to the experiential dimension is already contained, as we shall see, in the title of his posthumous work *Aesthetic Theory* (see Bubner 1980; Desideri & Matteucci 2009: xii; Matteucci 2012a: 100-5; Marino 2019: 139). In fact, even though Adorno repeatedly refers to art and/or to specific artistic phenomena, his work clearly shows that he understands the aesthetic mainly as the experience of the *aisthesis* in its etymological sense. For Adorno, the aesthetic has to do with the sensible-perceptual aspect of experience, which gives significance to the contact of the subject with the other – an otherness that always manifests itself in sensibility.
- 24 The experience of this contact is specifically aesthetic insofar as the other that we are experiencing always bears a trace of its material appearance as it enters into our field of perception. That is, a trace of something sensual which is impossible to reduce to the cognitive categories of the experiencing subject. In other words, this trace is what Adorno calls the “nonidentical.” It is only in the experience of this aesthetic contact that our reason “lights up,” as if the aesthetic aspect of experience sparkles. Further, it is only through this aesthetic experience that the other resists its purely rational assimilation, thereby creating the tension that recreates the very same dialectical process, by which all of our experience and reasoning is informed and regulated.
- 25 Therefore, even in theory, which reasons in terms of concepts and continually performs rationalising operations, an inescapable aesthetic element is present. In this regard, Adorno by no means intends aesthetics to be a specific philosophical discipline or a traditional philosophy of art. Rather, he attempts to elaborate an “aesthetic theory” that accounts for the fact that in our rational operativity, there exists an inherent and vital aesthetic moment in the experiential sense. This, in short, is the meaning of the title *Ästhetische Theorie*: even theory needs to somehow be aesthetic.
- 26 Like Dewey, experience for Adorno is constantly animated by the relational process intrinsic to our contact and interaction with things. By bringing an element of ulteriority, of plurality, of nonidentity, into our perceptual dimension, the encounter with the surrounding world is profoundly enriched and most importantly, is never definitively concluded or fixed in a hypostasis. While this latter calcifies and freezes reality, the trace of irreducibility, the permanent residual surplus of what is other than itself, enlivens it. This trace, for Adorno, is concealed in the aesthetic nature of the sensible and emerges in the nonconceptual approach to things, that is to say, it manifests in aesthetic experience.
- 27 Therefore, in Adornian dialectical thought, we might say that the aesthetic, in its most general but perhaps also most meaningful sense, is precisely what makes truth itself an experience rather than mere knowledge. All this can be grasped in certain recurring themes throughout the fragmentary development of *Aesthetic Theory*, such as: the experience of the “shudder,” the subsistence in the aesthetic of a “mimetic impulse,” the consideration of natural beauty, the necessity of an “aesthetic compartment” in the midst of the total rationalisation and reification of existence. “[T]he act of being touched by the other” consists of the “shudder in which subjectivity stirs without yet being subjectivity” (Adorno 1997: 331). The shudder generated by the contact with things as they occur, their sensible appearing and our perceiving of them in the

aisthesis lie precisely here, in an aesthetic operativity, which might not even be completely configurable in an artistic form. Adorno concludes "aesthetic comportment assimilates itself to that other rather than subordinating it. Such a constitutive relation of the subject to objectivity in aesthetic comportment joins eros and knowledge" (*ibid.*).

- 28 Unlike the other ways in which we can engage with the nonidentical other – such as, that of identifying *ratio* operating by concepts – the operativity of aesthetic experience not only preserves, but also maintains in all its significance and intensity, a mimetic character. This mimesis is an impulse that is (imperfectly) assimilable to those archaic forms of contact with nature that, at the dawn of reason, were typical of magic. Therefore, the aesthetic aspect of experience, or the experiential aspect of the aesthetic (which is to some extent the same), corresponds to an impulse of relation to things that, precisely as *aisthesis*, is structured as devoid of the distorting force that is characteristic of rational knowledge.
- 29 In fact, it is exactly from the experience of the primordial shudder at the contact with nature that art learns how to operate aesthetically. By introducing a cultural and, at least to some degree, distorting mediation into the subject-object relationship, art is at the origin of the separation of the human from the immediacy of nature. Yet, unlike *ratio*, it safeguards in all its historically determined configurations its own primordial legacy: the aesthetic-experiential impulse of *mimesis*, a "mimetic comportment," that is "an attitude toward reality distinct from the fixated antithesis of subject and object" (*ibid.*: 110).
- 30 The aesthetic, something that cannot be restricted to art, but that can be partially associated with its mimetic impulse, concerns, then, the experiential aspect – adverbial rather than assertive, expressive rather than denotative, qualitative rather than logical, perceptual rather than conceptual, dense rather than discreet – of our contact with things. More precisely, the aesthetic as a mode of experiencing, is conceived by Adorno as a "comportment" (*Verhalten*), which, in his words, "is to be defined as the capacity to shudder, as if goose bumps were the first aesthetic image" (*ibid.*: 331).
- 31 Consequently, the aesthetic as comportment is something that determines the entire spectrum of experience, far beyond the realm of art. Art is an aesthetic device, a medium through which aesthetic experience finds disposition and expression (see Iannilli 2020: 119). Since the aesthetic mode of comporting ourselves is that "gaze under which the given is transformed into an image" and "can indeed only be experienced through this comportment" (Adorno 1997: 330), its adoption ultimately concerns experience *tout court*, whether artistic, philosophical, or of any other kind. Similar to Dewey, for Adorno, aesthetic experience is not something other than intellectual or practical experience. Rather it is the opposite of anaesthetic experience that results from the increasingly pervasive inability to meaningfully experience, to emotionally light up in relation to the otherness of the manifesting world. For Adorno, aesthetic comportment in its experiential sense is that which, perceiving their nonidentical residue, knows how to point beyond things at the very moment in which it approaches them.

2.3. Possible Intersections

- 32 From my analysis, it is clear that both Dewey and Adorno consider the aesthetic in reference to the sensible-perceptual component of our relationship with the world and

thus recognise its essentially experiential character. For both, aesthetic experience is dense with relations and its significance arises from the tensions and resistances that run through it. For Dewey, aesthetic experience, like ordinary experience, is part of a complicated process of adaptation that is in constant tension toward enhancement. Aesthetic experience incorporates the aspects of resistance to reality, preserves their trace, but also works to synthesise the disparate elements of everyday experience. In this dissonance lies an attempt to establish the possibility of order, a unity of sense, or an emotionally cemented cohesion. Similarly, Adorno demonstrates that aesthetic experience generates a field of tension, which ignites our thought, but at the same time preserves the claims of the sensible that the concept can never fully assimilate. The aesthetic for Adorno represents the retention of the traces of what opposes resistance, which consequently serves as the impetus of the process that prevents experience from crystallising into a hypostasis.

- 33 There is thus a particular affinity, not merely methodological, between Dewey's experimentalism and Adorno's negative dialectics in radically opposing the hypostatisation of concepts and the reification of the world. Furthermore they are both insistent in highlighting the aesthetic element which informs our whole experience, including intellectual theory, whose recovery is perceived as one of the most urgent and important challenges for modernity. With this underlying awareness, both authors reconsider thought as an experiential modality whose dialectical character, dynamism, and relationality are ensured by an essentially aesthetic element. Dewey and Adorno, in other words, share the idea of a critical theory that welcomes the dimension of nonidentity and ulteriority, and of a kind of aesthetics that is "more than chatter" and "wants to find its way out into the open, entirely exposed" (Adorno 1997: 353). In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno argues that this attitude imposes "the sacrifice of each and every security [...] borrowed from the science" and remarks that "no one expressed this necessity with greater candor than the pragmatist John Dewey" (*ibid.*).
- 34 Another point of convergence is what I would describe as a kind of "ciphered" character of the aesthetic. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey seems to tell us that traces of the aesthetic can – and, in a sense, must – be sought and found in the small things of everyday life. If, in fact, the aesthetic is potentially enclosed in any kind of experience, then even that which at first glance appears to be the most rudimentary, fragmentary, interrupted, or disconnected, can instead reveal its own profound and enriching – that is, aesthetic – significance. This is only accessible to those who have the eyes to see it, that is, to those who are capable of grasping the expressiveness of the experienced things.
- 35 This idea is not that far from Adorno's insistence on the "micrological" character of experience.¹² According to Adorno, part of the aesthetic comportment and the way in which we should relate to what surrounds us consists of being able to discern the extraordinary within the figures of the ordinary. We must recognise the clues of what is not yet mutilated by the disintegration of everyday life. In this perceiving of the nonidentical within the domain of identity and in discovering the possibilities concealed in the microscopic and the fragmentary, "the splinter in your eye [becomes] the best magnifying-glass" (Adorno 2005: 50).
- 36 Despite their distinct philosophical approaches, Dewey and Adorno similarly conceive of aesthetic experience on the basis of real experience. In order to have this real experience, it is necessary to make ourselves capable of establishing a sort of sensual

relationship of perception with the other. This allows us to detect the aesthetic in the anaesthetic and to give course to its hidden potentialities. It is only in this way, as Dewey puts it, that we can have *an* experience, or, as Adorno puts it, that we are able to shudder and ignite the spark that is generated at our contact with things. In this sense, the aesthetic reflection is at the same time a reflection both on a perceived fragmentation and on the possibility that the key to its recomposition lies, precisely, in the aesthetic.

3. Aesthetic and Social Critique

- 37 The final point of my analysis pertains to how both Dewey and Adorno view the aesthetic experience as a form of social critique. The most significant convergence between Dewey and Adorno is, in fact, that they both feel the urgency to reflect on the aesthetic character of our experience because of how increasingly widespread anaesthetic experience is in present society, due to the societal structures that decrease the ability to have real and meaningful experiences. In this sense, they both insist on the importance of the aesthetic in its experiential dimension because its recovery is one of the most problematic challenges for the present day. For both Dewey and Adorno aesthetic reflection is then a reflection on the deterioration of life within capitalistic society. Most importantly, it is a reflection on the possibility that re-enabling the aesthetic enclosed in every experience is the way to reassemble this damaged life, offering the key to a possible reconciliation.
- 38 Although Dewey and Adorno agree that the aesthetic experience undergoes a loss of meaning under capitalist conditions, they differ in their approach to a resolution. For Dewey it is possible to experience unity and harmony in everyday experience by re-engaging with the balance and completeness of the aesthetic that is *already present* in everyday experience. For Adorno, unity and harmony are mostly *absent* under the real conditions of today's society and they can at most find a place – but only *ex negativo* – within a utopian dimension, which, at least for now, remains unachieved. Nevertheless, in both Dewey and Adorno, the aesthetic is strictly related to social critique. Foundational to both *Art as Experience* and *Aesthetic Theory* is the idea that the current social reality functions as a stimulus to reflect on the experiential dimension of the aesthetic. This stimulus, which stems from the reflection on the crisis of aesthetic experience today, must be kept alive precisely through an aesthetic comportment, where the hope for a (not yet existing) better future may emerge.
- 39 While Dewey is known for his enthusiastic pluralism and optimism, Adorno is known for his dark elitism and pessimism. However, if we go beyond these fruitless simplifications, we can see how they both focus their theoretical effort on emphasizing the radical difference between a real fulfilling – and therefore aesthetic – experience and a surrogated version of it. This is precisely because, in the contemporary social, cultural, and material conditions of life, which is rife with the contradictions of advanced capitalism, the second one (the surrogate) is more and more prevailing, and the first one (the real and fulfilling) is more and more made impossible. The emphasis on the aesthetic – namely its experiential dimension and its critical power, which imply one another – is then seen by both as a possible way out of the vicious circle of this untrue surrogated and damaged life (see Särkelä 2022).

- 40 The aesthetic, for Dewey and Adorno, is seen as the last bastion of the possibility of renewing our attitude towards ordinary experience in a society that is becoming ever more "total" (see Adorno 1997: 31) and, at the same time, ever more internally divided. Aesthetic experience, as we have seen, does not arrest itself in bare recognition, does not end in a punctual perception, but rather, as a process, prolongs and intensifies acquired meanings and continues to operate outside its material and temporal boundaries.
- 41 As a dense, significant, active, and operative field, the aesthetic in its experiential dimension preserves the ability to shed light on the degraded situation of the present and thereby opens up a perspective on the future. The operativity of the aesthetic, then, acquires meaning not only at an individual level, but also at a collective one: it implies social critique because it is indicative of an attitude, of a comportment towards reality that keeps itself open and available to unachieved unrealised possibilities. And, by doing so, it becomes the evidence of their possible achievement and realisation.
- 42 This is particularly visible in art, although, as previously noted, cannot be reduced to its dimension. For Dewey, the critical function of art consists in its ability to (indirectly) suggest alternatives to the existent. This occurs not by becoming a vehicle for predetermined messages, as this would limit its open, plural, relational character, but rather by gathering, enlivening and intensifying the aesthetic energies of experience and encouraging our interaction with the environment along new configurations. Similarly, for Adorno, while engaged art always ends up being nothing but a mere vehicle for some sort of ideology, art that is still capable of generating a true aesthetic experience criticises the existent simply by existing. Art becomes resistance to the existent through its simple manifestation because by putting us in an aesthetic disposition, it forces us to experience the brutality of the existent and with the same gesture, it awakens the yearning for what does not, but could be.
- 43 More specifically, for Dewey, the aesthetic is a dimension separate from the alienation of everyday life, not in the sense that it is detached from ordinary experience, but in the sense that it is a development of its non-alienating traits. As a result, the aesthetic takes on a function of critical control over experience and prompts us to cultivate practices that produce more satisfying and less disruptive ways of (social) life. For Adorno, on the other hand, the aesthetic becomes – particularly through what he calls the "ideal of blackness" (Adorno 1997: 39-40) – a critique of the existent when it insists on the presence of laceration and dissatisfaction, on the absurdity of the contradictions that permeate experience. Consequently, the prospect of a – currently absent – reintegration is presented in the backlight as a future and utopian reconciliation.
- 44 From Adorno's point of view, any "affirmative" aesthetic phenomenon is likely to be just a sugar-coated version of reality. It is a harmful fiction to convey images of harmonic completeness, as these portrayals are usually the result of strategical operations predetermined by the logics of the current problematic social system. True aesthetic experience is only that which resists the mere illusion of beauty in order to keep open the possibility of a yet-to-exist dimension of integral wholeness in its absence. For Adorno, the effects of total rationalisation, reification and instrumentalisation have repercussions even on the most recondite processes of experience. What is needed, more than adaptation, is a radical dis-adaptation from the course of the ordinary. We might say that, in Adorno's perspective, as long as pragmatism is unwilling to concede to the negative character of the aesthetic, the

aesthetic experience it describes bears the risk of becoming an apology rather than a critique of the degraded (social) existent.¹³

- 45 Despite these differences, however, both Dewey and Adorno show that the uncompromising critique of surrogated experiences to which the aesthetic is reduced¹⁴ goes hand in hand with the equally uncompromising critique of that society that imposes and reproduces them. For both, to push for a different mode of (aesthetic) experience means to push for a different society. At the basis of the critique is the tension towards the other, the heterogeneous, the plural, the otherwise removed, which crucially informs aesthetic comportment. At its core lies the equation between anaesthetic experience and unacceptable social conditions, namely between aesthetic experience in its meaningful sense and better social conditions, whether these are achievable within the current society, as Dewey hopes, or whether they lie within a utopian horizon, as Adorno suggests. For both Dewey and Adorno, one thing is absolutely clear: experiential character and critical character are intrinsically and reciprocally implicated in the aesthetic.
- 46 The fact that both authors found it essential to connect the question of the nature and meaning of the aesthetic with the question of the fate of experience in advanced capitalist society underlines the importance of continuing to reflect on *Art as Experience* and *Aesthetic Theory* and crucially, as I point out, on a possible dialogue between them, for any future discussion of the experiential dimension of the aesthetic and its critical potential. This is especially true in relation to the actual social reality. This, in conclusion, invites us to proceed to the praxis of the *aisthesis*.¹⁵ Such praxis allows individuals to (at least partially) deviate from the rigid and calcified habits of ordinary experience. It gives rise to a revelatory critique that dialectically alienates us from an already alienated society, allowing us to see that another form of life – the one that *does* live – is actually possible.

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NOTES

1. An example of such investigation is that presented in Tong 2006, who focuses on the comparison on the so-called new generation of the Frankfurt School. As pointed out by Dreon (2015: 74), in fact, the lack of a "fruitful theoretical exchange between the most outstanding figures of classical pragmatism, [...] [and] the various voices of the Frankfurt school" is especially referred "to the first generation of the Frankfurt school."
2. Noteworthy among this rarity is the juxtaposition of Dewey and Adorno made by Iannilli 2020 (in particular 73-135) through the theme of experience design.
3. Lysaker 1998 stresses this shortcoming and calls for a wider philosophical reflection in this direction.
4. On the possibilities of pragmatist aesthetics to dialogue with other philosophical traditions, see the essays collected in the recently published Ramazzotto 2022.
5. Particularly instructive in this regard is the reconstruction made by Särkelä 2020.
6. See Adorno (1973: 14-5). Here Adorno mentions skepticism and pragmatism, and particularly "Dewey's wholly humane version of the latter," as two traditions of thought aware of the fact that "as a corrective to the total rule of method, philosophy contains a playful element which the traditional view of it as a science would like to exorcise." And shortly afterwards he adds, recalling the idea of an aesthetic comportment, that "to represent the mimesis it supplanted, the concept has no other way than to adopt something mimetic in its own conduct, without abandoning itself. The aesthetic moment is thus not accidental to philosophy." Significant is also the context in which this reference to Deweyan pragmatism is placed, namely, a broader consideration of what for Adorno must be a common "mode of conduct" of philosophy and art: "What the philosophical concept will not abandon is the yearning that animates the nonconceptual side of art, and whose fulfilment shuns the immediate side of art as mere appearance. The concept – the organon of thinking, and yet the wall between thinking and the thought – negates that yearning. Philosophy can neither circumvent such negation nor submit to it. It must strive, by way of the concept, to transcend the concept."
7. See Adorno (1997: 335): "That empiricism recoils from art – of which in general it has hardly ever taken notice (with the exception of the unique and truly free John Dewey) [...] – can be explained by the fact that [...] what is essential to art is that which in it is not the case, that which is incommensurable with the empirical measure of all things. The compulsion to aesthetics is the need to think this empirical incommensurability." And (*ibid.*: 353): "That aesthetics, in its desire to be more than chatter, wants to find its way out into the open, entirely exposed, imposes on it the sacrifice of each and every security that it has borrowed from the sciences; no one expressed this necessity with greater candor than the pragmatist John Dewey."
8. Examples are offered in Haskins 2019 and Ramazzotto 2022. On the open and inclusive character of pragmatist aesthetics – and in particular Dewey's – also see works by Roberta Dreon, particularly Dreon 2012 and Dreon 2021a.
9. As underlined by Dreon (2021c: 150): "Things, persons and events" that, for instance, "Dewey says [...] are felt or had, rather than known, in order to emphasize the primacy of life over cognition."
10. On the difference between aesthetic meaning and aesthetic meaningfulness with particular reference to Dewey see Matteucci (2021: 87-9).
11. Simultaneously formed substance and "substantced" form (see LW.10: 111-38).

12. On the importance of the dimension of the minuscule in Adorno's philosophy, with particular reference to aesthetics, see for example Perlini 1974. On this see also Iannilli (2020: 129-31).

13. In this respect, a further interesting primary source to look at is Adorno's essay *Veblen's Attack on Culture*, written in 1941 and collected in *Prisms*, where for instance he argues that "the contrast between dialectics and pragmatism, like every distinction in philosophy, is reduced to a nuance, namely, to the conception of that 'next step.' The pragmatist, however, defines it as adjustment, and this perpetuates the domination of what is always the same. Were dialectics to sanction this, it would renounce itself in renouncing the idea of potentiality" (Adorno 1981: 91).

14. In *Art as Experience* and *Aesthetic Theory* one can find numerous examples of these surrogated experiences, which cannot be explored in depth in this essay. Among the most significant are, in Dewey, the relegation of art in museums and galleries and, in Adorno, the invasive phenomenon of the culture industry.

15. On the aesthetic as practice see Matteucci (2016: 27).

ABSTRACTS

One of the main issues of aesthetics today is the heterogeneity of the concept of the "aesthetic" itself, which can dialectically lead to both enrichment and loss of meaning. Since experience is entangled in this dialectic, the aim of this paper is to focus on two important questions that concern the aesthetic. First, how can the experiential dimension of the aesthetic be understood? And second, how could such experience be configured as an aesthetic compartment with a very critical task, that is, to critique society? These questions will be analysed by comparing John Dewey's concept of pragmatism in *Art as Experience* to Theodor W. Adorno's critical theory in *Ästhetische Theorie*. Although these thinkers use philosophically distinct methods, I will demonstrate that they both highlight the experiential dimension of the aesthetic, which functions as a form of social critique. Not only does this display how pragmatism can enter into dialogue with other philosophical traditions, but it also demonstrates how aesthetics and a critical reflection on society are two of the most fruitful fields for such dialogue.

INDEX

Keywords: Aesthetics, Critical Theory, Experience, Pragmatism, Social Critique

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