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Second-Nature Aesthetics: On the Very Idea of a Human Environment

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Abstract

In the present contribution I start from some hints at recent contributions that have profitably intersected an inquiry into 'the aesthetic' with an investigation of the human nature, such as the books by Giovanni Matteucci and Alva Noë. In this context, I argue for the suitability of the notion of 'second nature' as a concept that is capable to grasp the inextricable intertwinement and complex interaction of biological and cultural aspects that are distinctive of the human being. Borrowing the notion of 'second nature' from John McDowell, I offer a brief reconstruction and interpretation of the history of this concept that makes reference to different philosophers (Adorno, Gadamer, Gehlen, Heidegger, Scheler) and that connects the concept of 'second nature' with the difference between animal ways of inhabiting an environment and human ways of shaping a world. On this basis, I suggest to broaden the framework of McDowell's 'naturalism of second nature' (narrowly focused, in my view, only on rationality and language as constitutive elements of a properly human world) in the direction of a kind of 'second-nature aesthetics', especially focusing on the concept of mimesis and the significance of mimetic components in the process of our 'becoming human'. Beside conceptualization capacities and language, that a vast majority of philosophers and scientists have exclusively focused their attention on, also aesthetic practices play indeed a decisive role in the unceasing process of 'anthropogenesis' or 'hominization'. The aesthetic represents one of the fundamental components of the experience in the environment (or, more precisely, in the world) for the 'second-nature animals' that we are: from the point of view of a 'second-nature aesthetics' inspired by 'naturalism of second nature' there is no human environment but strictly speaking only human (and hence also aesthetic) worlds.

Keywords
Aesthetics; Second Nature; Environment/World; John McDowell; Alva Noë.

I thought the world
Turns out the world thought me.
It's all the other way round
We're upside down.
Pearl Jam. *Cropduster*

We are out of our heads.
We are in the world and of it.
We are patterns of active engagement
with fluid boundaries and changing components.
We are distributed.
Alva Noë. *Out of Our Heads*

1.

In their famous radio debate from February 3, 1965 entitled *Ist die Soziologie eine Wissenschaft vom Menschen?* Theodor W. Adorno and Arnold Gehlen, before going into detail on some specific philosophical and sociological questions that they largely disagreed about, agreed anyway that "the expression 'man (*Mensch*)' is not clear or unambiguous", and that "there is 'no pre-cultural human nature' (*keine vorkulturelle menschliche Natur*)" (Adorno and Gehlen 1965, p. 226). This theoretical perspective clearly had important consequences also for the development of Adorno's and Gehlen's philosophies of art, respectively developed in their books *Ästhetische Theorie* and *Zeit-Bilder*. And this theoretical perspective can be understood, more in general, as representative of a certain philosophical 'mood' or 'spirit' that was quite typical of those decades and was not favourable to the development of theories centred on the idea of a determined and stable nature of the human being (see Martinelli 2004, pp. 243-256).

In recent times, however, the question concerning the definition of what we may call the human nature has powerfully re-emerged in intellectual debates of various kind, such as philosophy, psychology, biology, anthropology, neuroscience, etc. Moreover, this question has proved to have important implications also in the field of aesthetics, with various articles and books on the arts and the definition of the human or the so-called aesthetic niche, often developed from perspectives connected to the philosophy of mind and/or evolutionary theories.

In this context, it can be particularly interesting to notice that an influential philosopher of perception and mind of our time like Alva Noë has tried to apply to the field of aesthetics (or, more precisely, to the field of art, thus implicitly limiting the broader realm of 'the aesthetic' to the narrower realm of 'the artistic', as critically noted by Matteucci 2019, p. 33) some basic theses of his original development of the so-called theory of the extended mind first presented in 1998 by Andy Clark and David Chalmers (see Noë 2009, p. 82). In fact, after having presented in *Out of Our Heads* his radical theory of consciousness, understood not as "something that happens inside us" but rather as "something that we do, actively, in our dynamic interaction with the world around us" (Noë 2009, p. 24), in his subsequent book *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature* Noë has attempted to develop an aesthetic theory connected to the philosophy of mind that understands art as "an engagement with the ways our practices, techniques, and technologies organize us",

and finally as “a way to understand our organization and, inevitably, to reorganize ourselves” (Noë 2015, p. xiii).

Noë’s fundamental thesis in *Out of Our Heads* is that consciousness and “meaningful thought” arise “only for the whole animal dynamically engaged with its environment”, so that, for example, it is wrong and mistaken to claim that computers or also brains alone (i.e. separated from the whole body of the organism interacting with its environment) can think. As Noë thought-provokingly claims, “computers can’t think largely for the same reason that brains can’t” (Noë 2009, p. 8). As he explains, the problem of consciousness

> is that of understanding our nature as beings who think, who feel, and for whom a world shows up. […] Consciousness requires the joint operation of brain, body, and world. Indeed, consciousness is an achievement of the whole animal in its environmental context. […] The brain – that particular bodily organ – is certainly critical to understanding how we work. I would not wish to deny that. But if we want to understand how the brain contributes to consciousness, we need to look at the brain’s job in relation to the larger nonbrain body and the environment in which we find ourselves. […] [W]e need to turn our attention to the way brain, body, and world together maintain living consciousness. Mind is life. If we want to understand the mind of an animal, we should look not only inward, to its physical, neurological constitution; we also need to pay attention to the animal’s manner of living, to the way it is wrapped up in its place. […] To understand the sources of experience, we need to see [the] neural processes in the context of the conscious being’s active relation to the world around it. We need to take into our purview dynamic relationships that cross the not-so-magical membrane of the skull. Consciousness of the world around us is something that we do: we enact it, with the world’s help, in our dynamic living activities. […] [A] careful examination of the way experience and the brain’s activity depend on each other makes plausible the idea that the brain’s job is, in effect, to coordinate our dealings with the environment. It is thus only in the context of an animal’s embodied existence, situated in an environment, dynamically interacting with objects and situations, that the function of the brain can be understood. […] [If] we seek to understand human or animal consciousness, then we ought to focus not on the brain alone but on the brain in context – that is, on the brain in the natural setting of the active life of the person or animal. […] Brain, body, and world form a process of dynamic interaction. That is where we find ourselves. (Noë 2009, pp. 9-10, 24, 42, 64-65, 70, 95)

As one can clearly see from the abovementioned quotation, the concept of environment plays a significant role in Noë’s intriguing philosophical project, inasmuch as his conception of mind is fundamentally based on what we may call the ‘threefold chord’ of brain, body and environment (borrowing the concept of ‘threefold chord’ from Putnam 1999). However, it must be also noted that Noë sometimes seems to rely on a quite general and undifferentiated concept of ‘environment’ that, as the abovementioned quotations clearly show, is often used by him as interchangeable with the concept of ‘world’. So, for instance, Noë exemplifies his conception

by making reference to such organisms as a bacterium "geared into its environment", "geared into the world", thus arriving to emphatically claim: "With the bacterium we find a subject and an environment, an organism and a world. The animal, crucially, has a world; that is to say, it has a relationship with its surroundings" (Noë 2009, pp. 39-40). Another example used in *Out of Our Heads* is that of sea snails, apropos of which Noë claims:

> the sea snail is what it is thanks to the way it is bound to, affected by, and coupled with a specific situation. The world acts on the snail; the snail responds; how it acts is shaped by how it was acted on; the snail is a vector resulting from distinct forces of the body, the nervous system, the world. Its past history *in the environmental context* and its ongoing dynamic exchanges with the environment make the sea snail what it is. [...] Are we so different from the sea snail? (Noë 2009, p. 93)

Notwithstanding Noë's correct acknowledgment of the fact that "it is not the case that all animals have a common external environment", because "from the standpoint of physics [...] there is but one physical world" but "to each different form of animal life there is a distinct, corresponding, ecological domain or habitat", and actually "[a]ll animals live in structured worlds" (Noë 2009, p. 43); and notwithstanding his correct acknowledgment of the fact that "[n]o nonlinguistic brute could fashion [a] particular relation to the world" in the same way in which human beings develop "a relation that is linguistically structured" (Noë 2009, p. 87): notwithstanding all this, his quite general use of the concepts of environment and world may sometimes appear as problematic. The same problem, in my view, also occurs with his frequent use of a quite undifferentiated notion of "animal life" or "environment's action on the animal" (Noë 2009, pp. 91, 93). More precisely, the risk is to make this conception appear as too vague and thus incapable to adequately account for the specificity of the human relation to the environment in comparison to other animals' relation to it – while, in using such a general expression as 'other animals', I am surely aware of the fact that the concept itself of 'the animal' should not be hypostasized and, following Derrida's insightful suggestions apropos of 'the *animot*', should rather undergo something like a 'deconstruction' of the hidden and underlying prejudices that are at the basis of our common way of thinking and talking about animals (see Derrida 2008 and also Cimatti 2013; Filippi 2017).

So, when Noë asks the abovementioned question: "Are we so different from the sea snail?", the answer should be (dialectically, so to speak) both 'No!' and 'Yes!'. In fact, the life of a human being is surely comparable to the life of a sea snail or other animals from

the very general point of view of an organism/environment relation broadly conceived. At the same time, however, it is incomparable to it, not only because of certain specific capacities that pertain to the human being but also, at a more fundamental level, precisely because the development itself of those capacities is largely dependent on a "mutual interdependence of organism and environment" (Noë 2009, p. 122) that in the case of human beings is quite specific and unique.

In place of a natural habitat, what we've got to do with here, after "the emergence of culture" (defined by Michael Tomasello as the development of "early human cooperation" hypothetically traceable back to the so-called "*Homo Heidelbergensis* some 400,000 years ago"), is something conceivable as a "cultural common ground" (Tomasello 2014, pp. 78, 81-82). At the same time, the undeniable existence of certain capacities that make human beings appear as unique, that are "products of *social* interactions […] not studied by the *natural* sciences", and that "institute a realm of *culture* [which] rests on, but goes beyond, the background of reliable differential responsive dispositions and their exercise characteristic of merely natural creatures": the undeniable existence of all this does *not* imply that these capacities must be conceived of "as spooky and supernatural" (Brandom 2000, p. 26). In fact, it is surely correct to notice that, at this point, "a distinction opens up between things that have *natures* and things that have *histories*" (Brandom 2000, p. 26), but the fact that human beings are cultural/historical creatures does *not* mean that they are separated from the realm of nature and do not belong to it: namely, it does *not* prevent us from including also culture and history into the human nature, if we are able to develop a sufficiently broad, complex and articulated concept of human nature. As recently emphasized by Michael Tomasello about the process of 'becoming human' that is distinctive of the somehow particular animals that we are:

> all humans […] live among their own distinctive artifacts, symbols, and institutions. And because children, whatever their genetics, adopt the particular artifacts, symbols, and institutions into which they are born, it is clear that this societal variation cannot be coming from the genes but rather is socially created. The full puzzle is thus that humans are not only a species of unprecedented cognitive and social achievements but also, at the same time, one that displays a novel kind of socially created, group-level diversity. The solution to the puzzle – the new evolutionary process – is of course human culture. But the traditional notion of culture as something apart from biology and evolution will not do. Human culture is the form of social organization that arose in the human lineage in response to specific adaptive challenges. (Tomasello 2019, p. 3)

In endorsing naturalism as a general philosophical view, but at the same time criticizing the limits of what we may call a narrow-minded scientism, also Noë notes in *Strange Tools* that we must conceive of ourselves as "culturally embedded persons" precisely because of "our nature":

> human beings are animals – we are confined by patterns of activity – but we are more than just animals. We are animals who are never engaged only with the task of living but are always, also, concerned with why and how we find ourselves s occupied. […] We are part of the natural order. […] But crucially: nothing compels us to say that human being is a species of animal being; we can instead say that human being and animal being are each species of a more encompassing natural being. It is dogmatic and unimaginative to insist that we can explain the human exhaustively in the terms we use to explain the nonhuman animal. (Noë 2015, pp. 28, 65-66)

Freely (but not arbitrarily) adapting a fitting expression of Adorno to the purposes of the present article, we might say that the aim is thus "to dialectically overcome the usual antithesis of nature and history [by] pushing these concepts to a point where they are mediated in their apparent difference" (Adorno 1984, p. 111). Namely, the aim is to develop something like a dialectical conception of 'natural history'. From this point of view, an adequate conception of the human nature should *not* limit itself to either 'naturalizing culture' or 'culturalizing nature', but should be capable to conceptually grasp the fascinating intertwinement of both dimensions in such a 'naturally artificial' or 'artificially natural' creature as the human being (Wulf 2018, pp. 43-50). In order to clarify the unique intersection between nature and culture that is characteristic of the human nature, and to account for the latter in such a way that "combines both specificity and continuity" and thus paves the way for a view of "human beings as specific although not special" (Ferretti 2009, p. vii), it is possible to introduce in this context the concept of 'second nature'.

2.

The range of philosophers and also scientists that have profitably used the concept of 'second nature' in the 20th century is really wide, complex and diversified, including such different authors as Marxist intellectuals like Lukács and Adorno, on the one side, and neuroscientists like Gerald Edelman, on the other side (see Adorno 1984, pp. 117-118 and 2004, pp. 356-357; Edelman 2006). In the present contribution I will specifically (but also critically, to some extent) make reference to the intriguing way in which John

McDowell made use of this concept in his book *Mind and World* (1994) to develop a philosophical doctrine known as 'naturalism of second nature' which also includes, as a part of McDowell's theory of the mind *as* part of the world[1], an important discussion of the concepts of (animal) environment and (human) world.

Adopting a 'second-nature' philosophical perspective can have some important consequences for a renewed understanding of the aesthetic dimension. However, it is important to immediately underline that, although focused on the idea of environment and thus ascribable to the topic 'aesthetic environments', the aim of the present contribution is partially different from the aims of other philosophical investigations typically included in the field of 'environmental aesthetics'. In fact, with regard to "the very nature of environmental aesthetics" it has been noted that in the last fifty years "this new field of study has emerged largely in reaction to aesthetics' traditional focus on the arts", attempting to "catalogue and characterize a wide range of aesthetic objects and experiences lying beyond the canonical realms of the arts", and often construing the concept of environment "in an extremely broad sense that includes more or less everything except art" (Parsons 2015, p. 228). Borrowing a famous expression from Donald Davidson's seminal essay *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme*, what is at stake in the present contribution is rather the very idea of a human environment, i.e. the basic question whether it is appropriate or not to use this concept with reference to the particular 'second-nature animals' that human beings are, and then some implications of this question also for an investigation of the notion of environment from an aesthetic perspective.

In general, we might say that human beings seem to interact in

[1] McDowell's thought-provoking claim that "the mind is not in the head" (McDowell 1998, p. 276) but is 'in the world' – clearly inspired by Hilary Putnam's famous statement that "meanings just ain't in the head", which also influenced Noë (2009, p. 89) – can be probably drawn close to some results of the so-called theory of the extended mind. As McDowell writes, the main problem in the philosophy of mind "is the assumption that experiences, as mental occurrences, must be themselves internal to their subjects. […] The fundamental mistake is the thought that a person's mental life takes place in a *part* of her. […] [W]e need a way of thinking about the mental in which involvement with worldly facts is not just a point about describability in (roughly speaking) relational terms […] but gests at the essence of the mental. The 'in here' locution, with its accompanying gesture, is all right in some contexts, but it needs to be taken symbolically, in the same spirit in which one takes the naturalness of saying things like 'In my heart I know it', which can similarly be accompanied by an appropriate gesture" (McDowell 2009a, pp. 255-256). Of course, this conception of the mind/world relation also requires an adequate rethinking of the mind/body relation, and in particular the avoidance of what McDowell calls "the Myth of the Disembodied Intellect [that] it is surprisingly easy to lapse into without realizing that one has done so" (McDowell 2009a, p. 322).

a specific and unique way with their environment, which is usually not a merely natural habitat but rather an artificial and historical/cultural one. Also Alva Noë implicitly refers to this fact when he notices that "[m]ost of us live in cities": that is, for the particular organisms that we are the environment includes "not only the physical environment but also […] the cultural habitat of the organism" (Noë 2009, pp. 122, 185). Referring to a recent work by Richard Shusterman, we might say that, if human beings can be defined in general as 'bodies in the world', it is possible to understand our condition today as that of 'bodies in the streets' – where the concept of body is not understood in a reductive way but rather in the complexity of the notion of 'soma' that

> distinguish[es] the living, sentient, purposive human body from the lifeless bodies of corpses and all sorts of inanimate objects that are bodies in the general physical sense […]. Embracing both the mental and the physical, the soma is both subject and object. […] It thus straddles both sides of the German phenomenological distinction between *Leib* (felt bodily subjectivity) and *Körper* (physical body as object in the world). […] It exemplifies the ambiguity of human existence as both shared species-being and individual difference. Philosophers have emphasized rationality and language as the distinguishing essence of humankind. But human embodiment seems just as universal and essential a condition of humanity. […] The soma reveals that human nature is always more than merely natural but instead deeply shaped by culture. (Shusterman 2019, pp. 14-15)

One of the fundamental thesis of McDowell's 'naturalism of second nature' is that human beings normally inhabit two different and indeed irreducible 'logical spaces': the 'logical space of nature', on the one side, and the 'logical space of reasons', on the other side. McDowell describes this relationship as a real "contrast between two kinds of intelligibility", as a "distinction between two ways of finding things intelligible" (McDowell 1996, pp. 70, 246), and as a sort of dualism between the dimension of natural laws and the dimension of cultural reasons or justifications. A dualism that McDowell, however, does not aim either at maintaining in its abstract dichotomous character nor at simply denying by opting instead for some kind of reductionism, but rather at simultaneously incorporating and overcoming (through a sort of *Aufhebung*, as it were). This aim leads him to outline an original philosophical perspective that intends to do justice to both the difference between the two logical spaces (and thus, in general, between nature and culture) and their coexistence in the human being.

Starting from a detailed investigation of the relationship between concepts and intuitions (which ultimately leads also to the decisive question concerning the conceptual, non-conceptual or partially,

not entirely conceptual content of perception), McDowell sketches a general view of modern philosophy as trapped in an *impasse* and somehow unable to avoid falling again and again into opposite but equally unsatisfactory epistemological conceptions that, in turn, appear as instantiations of wider and more general philosophical-anthropological questions. Seeking "a way to dismount from the see-saw" and to overcome the fatal tendency of modern philosophy "to oscillate between a pair of unsatisfying positions" (McDowell 1996, pp. 9, 24), McDowell thus advances the idea of rethinking and broadening the basic naturalistic view that has been predominant in the modern age by recurring to the concept of 'second nature'. For him, 'naturalism of second nature' postulates a continuous but not reductive relationship between nature and culture, and finally makes it possible to satisfactorily account for the fact that the capacity of inhabiting a culturally conditioned 'space of reasons' does not position human beings outside the realm of biology but simply belongs to our natural mode of living which is at the same time a cultural one, i.e. 'second-natural'. As McDowell explains:

> human infants are mere animals, distinctive only in their potential, and nothing occult happens to a human being. […] Human beings […] are born mere animals, and they are transformed into thinkers and intentional agents in the course of coming to maturity. This transformation risks looking mysterious. But we can take it in our stride if, in our conception of the *Bildung* that is a central element in the normal maturation of human beings, we give pride of place to the learning of language. In being initiated into a language, a human being is introduced into something that already embodies putatively rational linkages between concepts, putatively constitutive of the layout of the space of reasons, before she comes on the scene. […] Human beings mature into being at home in the space of reasons or, what comes to the same thing, living their lives in the world; we can make sense of that by noting that the language into which a human being is first initiated stands over against her as a prior embodiment of mindedness, of the possibility of an orientation to the world. (McDowell 1996, pp. 123, 125)

Our mode of living is "our way of actualizing ourselves as animals", and if the development of conceptuality and language "belong[s] to our way of actualizing ourselves as animals", this removes "any need to try to see ourselves as peculiarly bifurcated, with a foothold in the animal kingdom and a mysterious separate involvement in an extra-natural world of rational connections" (McDowell 1996, p. 78). With regard to the concept of human nature, McDowell claims that "our nature is largely second nature", and it is so

> not just because of the potentialities we were born with, but also because of our upbringing, our *Bildung*. […] Our *Bildung* actualizes some of the potentialities we are born with; we do not have to suppose it introduces a non-animal ingredient

into our constitution. And although the structure of the space of reasons cannot be reconstructed out of facts about our involvement in the realm of law, it can be the framework within which meaning comes into view only because our eyes can be opened to it by *Bildung*, which is an element in the normal coming to maturity of the kind of animals we are. (McDowell 1996, pp. 87-88)

As has been noted, for McDowell "cultural evolution does not represent a break with biological evolution": "there is no need to postulate a 'non-animal' part of us" because "it is the fulfilment of biological potentialities by means of cultural development that makes it possible for the subject to recognize the kind of autonomy" embodied by the so-called "space of reasons" (Di Francesco 1998, p. 249). In this context, for McDowell it is especially language that is of fundamental importance for properly understanding the acquisition of second nature, a process of "being initiated into conceptual capacities, whose interrelations belong in the logical space of reasons" (McDowell 1996, p. xx). And it is precisely at this point that also the concept of 'world', as indicative of a specifically human environment (and thus also the question concerning the mind/world relation), explicitly comes into play.

In fact, according to McDowell, those "creatures on which the idea of spontaneity gets no grip" (McDowell 1996, p. 48), i.e. animals lacking rationality and language, actually live in an environment, while human beings alone, by virtue of their conceptual and linguistic capacities, live in a world. The basic distinction at issue here is that between environment and world (*Umwelt* and *Welt*, in German): a distinction that McDowell makes use of in order to differentiate the nature of human beings from that of nonhuman, i.e. non-rational animals, and that he openly borrows from some important passages of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* on the linguisticality of the human experience of the world. However, from a historical-philosophical point of view it is important to notice that what McDowell calls "Gadamer's account of how a merely animal life, lived in an environment, differs from a properly human life, lived in the world" (McDowell 1996, p. 117), should be defined as, say, an only indirectly Gadamerian account. In fact, in claiming that he borrows from Gadamer "a remarkable description of the difference between a merely animal mode of life, in an environment, and a human mode of life, in the world" (McDowell 1996, p. 115), McDowell apparently does not take notice of the fact that, just like he borrows from Gadamer the abovementioned description, Gadamer for his part explicitly borrowed it from a long and complex philosophical-scientific tradition that can be probably traced back to some works of the Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexküll

(Gadamer 2004, pp. 441-450).

As has been noted, it was Uexküll who first put the notion of environment (*Umwelt*) at the centre of scientific inquiry, immediately raising great interest in the domain of philosophy as well (Mazzeo 2010, pp. 9-10). However, Uexküll's attention was focused on the continuity between human and nonhuman animals, such that he identified merely quantitative differences between environment and world, i.e. differences pertaining to their breadth and dimension, and eventually conceived "the *Umwelt* […] as the mere sum of individual *Welten*" (Mazzeo 2003, p. 80). It was rather Max Scheler who, in his 1928 work *The Human Place in the Cosmos*, borrowed from Uexküll the environment/world distinction but interpreted it in terms of a radical and even immeasurable difference between the human being and all other forms of life. According to Scheler, the concept of *Umwelt* should in fact only be used with reference to animals, while the notion of *Welt* is apt to grasp the specific and indeed extraordinary character of the human being, the only living creature that, thanks to its spirit, "is not tied anymore to its drives and environment", and thus "is 'non-environmental' or […] 'world-open'" (Scheler 2009, p. 27). As Scheler emphatically claims, "the being we call human is […] able to broaden his environment into the dimension of world":

> Everything which the animal notices and grasps in its environment is securely embedded in the frame and *boundary of its environment*. […] This is quite different from a being having "spirit". If such a being makes use of its spirit, it is capable of a comportment which possesses exactly the opposite of the above structure. […] The form of such comportment must be called "world-openness", that is, it is tantamount in principle to shedding the spell of the environment. […] *The human being is that X who can comport himself, in unlimited degrees*, as "world-open". […] An animal is not removed from its environment and does not have a distance from its environment so as to be able to transform its "environment" into "world" (or a symbol of the world) as humans can. (Scheler 2009, pp. 27-29)

Also Heidegger, in his 1929-30 lecture course *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, presented somehow analogous ideas, as he dedicated the second part of this lecture course to a long and complex "comparative examination of three guiding theses" ("the stone is worldless, the animal is poor in world, man is world-forming") and he explicitly connected these theses to Uexküll's aforementioned *Umwelt/Welt* distinction (Heidegger 1995, p. 176 ff.). Another significant use of Uexküll's biological thinking can be found in the philosophical anthropology presented in Cassirer's *Essay on Man*, with his famous definition of the human being as *animal symbolicum* understood as "a functional [definition], not a

substantial one" (Cassirer 1992, pp. 23-26, 68). However, it was especially Arnold Gehlen who drew most powerfully on the environment/world distinction and even reinforced it by connecting the two concepts to his famous idea of the human being as a 'deficient', 'unequipped', 'unfinished' and 'undetermined' creature that is "characterized by a singular lack of biological means" (Gehlen 1988, p. 26). As we read in Gehlen's masterwork *Man: His Nature and Place in the World* from 1940, while "the environment is an unchanging milieu to which the specialized organ structure of the animal is adapted and within which equally specific, innate, instinctive behavior is carried out", man is instead "world-open", inasmuch as "he foregoes an animal adaptation to a specific environment":

> In order to survive, [man] must master and re-create nature, and for this reason must *experience* the world. […] The epitome of nature restructured to serve his needs is called *culture* and the culture world is the human world. […] Culture is therefore the "second nature" – man's restructured nature, within which he can survive. […] The cultural world exists for man in exactly the same way in which the environment exists for an animal. For this reason alone, it is wrong to speak of an environment, in a strictly biological sense, for man. His world-openness is directly related to his unspecialized structure; similarly, his lack of physical means corresponds to his self-created "second nature". […] The clearly defined, biologically precise concept of the environment is thus not applicable to man, for what "environment" is to animals, "the second nature", or culture, is to man; culture has its own particular problems and concept formations which cannot be explained by the concept of environment but instead are only further obscured by it. (Gehlen 1988, pp. 27, 29, 71)

This brief historical-philosophical outline shows that there is a long, articulated and complex conceptual history behind Gadamer's claim that, "unlike all other living creatures, man's relationship to the world is characterized by freedom from environment" – which "implies the linguistic constitution of the world" and which leads to the conclusion that "[t]he concept of world is opposed to the concept of environment" (Gadamer 2004, p. 441) –, and hence behind Gadamer's use of the *Umwelt/Welt* distinction. A distinction, the latter, that McDowell for his part explicitly relies on and further develops in outlining some aspects of his 'naturalism of second nature' that, as I said, aims to account for the complexity of the human nature by resorting to a more subtle and finely nuanced idea of the organism/environment relation that is capable of both preserving the continuity between all animals species and doing justice to the specificity of the human experience of the world.

Of course, the question of whether or not there is an unbridgeable gap certain capacities in human and nonhuman animals, namely the discussion between "the supporters of the point of view of dis-

continuity" and those of "the point of view of continuity" (Cimatti 2003, p. 167), is a very old, much debated and, most of all, still open one. This applies to both philosophical and scientific debates, and McDowell's conception has been criticized for example by Alasdair MacIntyre because of its supposed tendency to ignore, or at least minimize, "the analogies between the intelligence exhibited" by such animals as dolphins or chimpanzees "and the rationality exhibited in human activities" (MacIntyre 1999, pp. 59-60). Hubert L. Dreyfus, for his part, has objected that claiming, as McDowell does, "that perception is conceptual 'all the way out'" implies denying "the more basic perceptual capacities we seem to share with prelinguistic infants and higher animals", and has suggested that McDowell could profit from phenomenological analyses of "nonconceptual embodied coping skills" and "nonconceptual immediate intuitive understanding" (Dreyfus 2006, p. 43). Also Hilary Putnam, who was otherwise philosophically very close to McDowell in many respects, has argued that McDowell fails to see that "the discriminatory abilities of animals and human concepts lie on a continuum" because of his "too high requirements on having both concepts and percepts": according to Putnam, "'No percepts without concepts' may be right if one is sufficiently generous in what one will count as a concept", but is wrong "if [...] one requires both self-consciousness and the capacity for critical reflection before one will attribute concepts to an animal" (Putnam 1999, p. 192n).

In replying to these objections McDowell has claimed that interpreting his 'naturalism of second nature' as "a kind of human chauvinism [...] would be point-missing", and that "[d]irecting our attention to perception as a capacity for a distinctive kind of knowledge [...] need not be prejudicial to the possibility of acknowledging that perception is, on some suitable understanding, a cognitive capacity in many kinds of nonhuman animals". From this point of view, "giving a special account of the perceptual knowledge of rational animals" is consistent for him "with regarding perceptual knowledge in rational animals as a sophisticated species of a genus that is also instantiated more primitively in non-rational animals" (McDowell 2011, pp. 14-15, 20; on perception, see also McDowell 1998, pp. 341-358; 2009b, pp. 127-144).

3.

The shift to the question of perception is surely important for the specific purposes of the present contribution on aesthetics. As

is well-known, it is precisely “from the Greek *aisthesis* (sensory perception) [that] Baumgarten intended his new philosophical science to comprise a general theory of sensory knowledge” (Shusterman 2000, p. 264) when he ‘baptized’ aesthetics in the 18th century. It is also important to note that, while McDowell and many other thinkers (including some of his critics) only seem to focus on perception as a capacity for knowledge, thus especially lingering on its relation to conceptuality and language, the role of perception in human life is not limited to knowledge but is also connected to the broader realm of what we may call our specifically human expressiveness. This leads us to the question of so-called ‘aesthetic perception’ (see Matteucci 2019, pp. 111-155) and its role in the context of an investigation of the ‘second-nature animals’ that we are.

As has been noted, aesthetic perception “contributes to structure and shape [our] interaction with the environment”, and “the aesthetic dimension is at least a potential feature of the *human experience as such* in its imaginative, emotive and *expressive* import”: the “expressive (and therefore imaginative and *truly human*) characterisations intertwined with our perception” derive from our capacity to handle certain situations “with *practices* of taste”, a capacity that “emanates from an interest in appearances” which appears as uniquely human. “In this sense, the aesthetic is foremost a *practice* that coincides with the ephemeral emergence of a pointful and *expressive*, and thereby meaningful aspect” (Matteucci 2016, pp. 15, 23, 27 [my emphasis]). Although understandable to some extent, the privileged role assigned to language by McDowell and many other theorists (including Noë, by the way [2009, pp. 87-91, 101-110, 125-127]) does not imply that the ‘second nature’ of the human being must be only characterized in linguistic and strictly conceptual terms. For example, what we may call ‘perceptualization’ (following a suggestive passage on beauty from Cassirer’s *Essay on Man* [1992, p. 151] further developed by Matteucci 2018, p. 408 and Matteucci 2019, p. 80 *et passim*) is at least as relevant as ‘conceptualization’ in order to define the human nature: namely, something definitely belonging to the aesthetic dimension.

If “[a]cquiring command of a language, which is coming to inhabit the logical space of reasons, is acquiring a second nature” (McDowell 2009a, p. 247), also acquiring the capacity to perceive the presence of something like expressivity in our surrounding environment is equally natural (or better, ‘second-natural’) for a human being, although connected to processes that are at least partially autonomous from the process of acquisition of conceptual capacities in the strict sense. And if “[b]ecoming open to the world”

through conceptuality and language (and "not just able to cope with an environment") "transforms the character of the disclosing that perception does for us", thus qualitatively changing the nature of "the responsiveness to affordances that we share with other animals" (McDowell 2009a, p. 315), the same holds true for the world-disclosingness deriving from the acquisition of the capacity to externalize our 'aesthetic perceptions' through appropriate practices and specific devices. We are not only rational and language-using animals but also 'the artful species', and the aesthetic dimension actively concurs to 'the definition of the human' (freely referring here to the titles of important works by, respectively, Stephen Davies and Joseph Margolis): this requires to be adequately understood and taken into consideration also in the context of an investigation of the 'second nature' of the human beings.

Far from being a merely terminological distinction, the above-mentioned environment/world distinction – connected to the idea of human beings as 'second-nature animals', and thus to the idea of human capacities as 'second-natural' – is theoretically and conceptually relevant. In particular, a philosophical discourse of this kind also has relevant implications in the field of aesthetics, and can actually lead to the development of a sort of 'second-nature aesthetics' that: (1) sheds light on the way in which, in the particular case of human beings, the organism/environment relation (especially in the present age of widespread aestheticization, understood at the level of what is "intrinsic to perception, that is to say to *aisthesis*" [Matteucci 2017, p. 220]) can be surely 'naturalized' but not in an immediate way, so to speak, but rather in a mediated or, as it were, dialectical way, i.e. paying attention to the inextricable dialectics of nature and culture/history that is clear, for example, in Adorno's use of the notion of *Naturgeschichte*; (2) sheds light on the fact that the 'second-naturalness' of the organism/environment relation in the specific case of human beings does not only rest on our capacity to inhabit the 'space of reasons' (as McDowell assumes), or in general on the possession of conceptualization powers and language, but also on the development of specifically aesthetic capacities and practices which play a decisive role in shaping a properly and uniquely human world, on the basis of a general idea of the aesthetic itself as 'a matter of practices' (Matteucci 2016, in particular pp. 19-23).

If concepts and language surely extend the "abilities that we share with other animals" in ways that "are almost endless" (Putnam 1999, p. 57) and thus lead human beings to "create by themselves their 'nature'" (Wulf 2018, p. 50), there are nevertheless also

pre-linguistic, pre-conceptual and indeed strictly aesthetic aspects that contribute to the definition of the 'natural artificiality/artificial naturality' of the human *Lebensform*. Among other things, acknowledging this fact also allows to account for Walter Benjamin's claim that "[t]he way in which human perception is organized [...] is conditioned not only by nature but by history", i.e. it is 'second-natural', so to speak ("[j]ust as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception", Benjamin famously adds [2006, p. 104]). No one can deny the world-disclosing role of language that leads McDowell to differentiate an animal life that is led in an environment from a human life that is led in the world. However, as I said, if we broaden the framework of 'naturalism of second nature' beyond the limits of the primacy assigned only to the world-disclosing function of concepts and language, it should also become clear that human beings are world-open – and actually are animals that do not limit themselves to adaptation to a given environment but are 'naturally' led to the creation of their own 'cultural/artificial/historical' world – thanks to a wide set of actions, habits and practices that are also aesthetically connoted. It might even be ambitiously said that "precisely the aesthetic, as emerging phenomenon in the human landscape, acquires the value of a passage at the border between biology and culture, natural dispositions and significations. [...] The emergence itself of the aesthetic, characterized as a passage at the border between nature and culture, marks the emergence itself of the human in the evolutionary process" (Desideri 2011, pp. 80, 93).

In this context, I would like to specifically focus on a single aesthetic notion, namely on *mimesis* (deriving from the Greek verb *mimeisthai* that, in turn, derives from *mimos*), which, according to many scholars, far from being simply associated with imitation and thus opposed to expression (as it has sometimes been thought in the history of aesthetics), originally acquired its meaning in the context of expressive cult and ritual practices, especially dance (Velotti 2005, pp. 146-147). For example, trying to understand mimesis "in a universal sense" as "a primordial phenomenon", and tracing it back to both "the ancient concept of mimesis" connected to "the miracle of order that we call the *kosmos*" and the basic human experience of "all the mimetic forms of behavior and representation", Gadamer makes reference to the original situation in which "all the arts were still closely related to one other, through the religious cult and its ritualistic representation in word, sound, image, and gesture", and claims that mimesis basically means that "something

meaningful is there as itself" (Gadamer 1986, pp. 98-103, 121). However, for the specific purposes of the present contribution, it is especially the reflection on mimesis developed by such critical theorists as Benjamin and Adorno that can be fruitful and inspiring.

According to Benjamin's early work *On the Mimetic Faculty*, man is characterized by "[t]he highest capacity for producing similarities" and "[t]here is perhaps not a single one of his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role" (Benjamin 2005, p. 720). The persistent actuality of Benjamin's concept of mimesis for an understanding of the human nature has also been emphasized by Christoph Wulf with special reference to his writing *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* and his theory that children first learn 'mimetically' how to experience the world, through "processes of *Angleichung* and *Anähnlichung*, assimilation to the other, becoming similar to the other, proximity to the other" (Wulf 2018, pp. 53-54). Such a general broadening of the concept of mimesis beyond the limits of the notion of imitation (*Nachahmung*) can be fruitfully compared to Adorno's own development of a concept of mimesis that also includes the dimensions of expression (*Ausdruck*) and presentation (*Darstellung*), on the basis of a general attitude toward reality definable in terms of perceiving similarities and feeling kinship (*Verwandtschaft*). Beside stressing the importance of mimetic processes of affective sympathy toward loved figures in children's first experiences of life (as noted by Honneth 2008, pp. 44-45), Adorno anthropologically locates the origin of the mimetic comportment in a phase of development of humankind connected to the experience of "the real preponderance" and radical otherness of "natural events as an emanation of *mana*", and also connected to magic: the latter "still retained differences whose traces have vanished even in linguistic forms" and pursued its ends "through mimesis, not through an increasing distance from the object. [...] The relationship was not one of intention but of kinship" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, pp. 7, 10-11, 15). According to Adorno – whose negative dialectics also relies on the concept of 'second nature (*zweite Natur*)', as I said – mimetic comportment "does not imitate something but rather makes itself like itself", and it can be defined as "an attitude toward reality distinct from the fixated antithesis of subject and object" (i.e. distinct from the attitude toward reality based on representational thinking and conceptualization): an attitude which is mostly seized in art and aesthetic experience, thus emphatically defined by Adorno as "the organ of mimesis" and the "refuge for mimetic comportment" (Adorno 2002, pp. 53, 110-111).

In the context of recent scientific-evolutionary theories, the relevance of what we may call the mimetic attitude or comportment has been analyzed and indeed emphasized by some recent investigations of the 'uniquely human' character of certain aspects of our relation to the world. Michael Tomasello, for example, although mostly focusing on the progressive development of cognition, language and conceptualization powers in his investigation of the 'natural history of human thinking', has nevertheless paid great attention also to the pre-linguistic, pre-conceptual and, in some sense, also aesthetic dimension embodied by 'symbolizing in pantomime' through iconic gestures. According to Tomasello (2014, pp. 60-61, 63, 69), "[n]o nonhuman primates use iconic gestures or vocalizations" and presumably our ability to do this "derives from the ability to imitate, at which humans are especially skillful compared with other apes": early humans "created evolutionarily new forms of natural gestures", and although it is true that "[i]n modern humans pantomiming for communication has been supplanted by conventional language", it is nevertheless possible from an Adornian perspective to lean on the irreplaceable and inexhaustible significance of the expressive-mimetic, the pre-conceptual and the aesthetic as genuine sources of experience that should not be minimized, underrated or even suffocated by the extraordinary growth of our conceptualization and linguistic capacities.

In fact, on the basis of a general idea of mimesis as "the power of qualitative distinction" that is essentially different from the power of 'identifying' or even 'quantitative/mathematizing' understanding that is typical of subsumption under concepts, Adorno arrives to speak of the aesthetic in terms of "expressive-mimetic dimension" and "expressive mimetic element", eventually claiming that "[t]here is no expression without meaning" and "no meaning without the mimetic element" (Adorno 2002, pp. 215, 257, 278, 331). This is surely of the greatest importance for an aesthetic discourse connected to the question of the 'second nature' of the human being and the latter's particular relation to an habitat that is not a natural environment but rather a culturally structured world. As has been noted, expressivity is probably "the primary feature of the aesthetic" (Matteucci 2018, p. 411), and there is an especially significant connection between expression and mimesis, so that, in a sense, "*mimesis* is perhaps simply another word to say *aisthesis*" (Desideri 2018, p. 11).

Still in the context of recent scientific-evolutionary theories, Michael Gazzaniga has defined mimetic processes as "the beginning of a baby's social interaction" and as "a potent mechanism in learning and acculturation", claiming that "*the ability to imitate must be innate*" and that "*voluntary* behavior imitation appears to be rare in the

animal kingdom": the latter, in fact, "appears to exist to some degree in the great apes and some birds, and there is some evidence that it is present in cetaceans", but for Gazzaniga "the ubiquitious and extensive imitation in the human world is very different" (Gazzaniga 2008, pp. 160-161). Namely, it is something uniquely human. This can be matched with another observation by Adorno apropos of "the mimetic heritage", as he defines "the human" as "indissolubly linked with imitation: a human being only becomes human at all by imitating other human beings", and such behaviour can be even understood as "the primal form of love", i.e. as something fundamentally and truly human (Adorno 2005, § 99, p. 154). Following Adorno's insights, we might also add that mimetic comportment – based as it is on a sympathetic sense of kinship with otherness, rather than on a subject/object separation and a conceptual identification of all that is non-identical – represents the primary vehicle for the 'human, all too human' search for expression that ultimately leads to art. The latter, in turn, is also understood by Gazzaniga as something uniquely human, and for him "the aesthetic quality of things is more basic to our sensibilities than we realize": "Art is one of [the] human universals. All cultures have some form of it" (Gazzaniga 2008, pp. 204-205).

Should we want to comment on this sentence and broaden the picture, we might add that, if art is a 'human universal', then aesthetic perception is probably even more universal than art, inasmuch as it is 'the artistic' which is grounded on 'the aesthetic', and not vice-versa (Matteucci 2019, pp. 19-35). "Whatever one calls art", as Gazzaniga explains, "one is acknowledging that it is special in some way", i.e. specific of the human being, like "aesthetic sensibility" and "aesthetic reactions" in general: "The creation of art is new to the world of animals. It is now being recognized that this uniquely human contribution is firmly based in our biology. We share some perceptual processing abilities with other animals, and therefore we may even share what we call aesthetic preferences. But something more is going on in the human brain" (Gazzaniga 2008, pp. 217, 220, 244-245). Should we want to also comment on these sentences and broaden the picture, we might add that: (1) if art is based in our nature, the latter however must also include culture in order to adequately account for the complexity and specificity of the human being, i.e. it must be conceived of as 'second nature'; (2) following such alternative perspectives as those offered for example by Shusterman's or Noë's theories, if 'something more is going on' in the case of human beings (in comparison to other animals), it is not something happening only 'in the brain' but rather 'in the soma' or 'in the brain/body/environment relation'.

In conclusion, in search for a concept that is capable to grasp the inextricable intertwinement and "the complex interaction of biological, social and cultural aspects" that are distinctive of the human being (Wulf 2018, p. 41), in the present contribution I have argued for the suitability of the concept of 'second nature'. Borrowing this concept from McDowell, I have offered a brief reconstruction and interpretation of its history in connection with the difference between animal ways of naturally inhabiting the environment and human ways of culturally intervene in the world. At this point, I have argued for a broadening of the framework of 'naturalism of second nature' in the direction of a kind of 'second-nature aesthetics', especially focusing on mimesis. The significance of mimetic components in the process of our 'becoming human' at both an ontogenetic and a phylogenetic level cannot be underestimated. Although it is obviously not possible to reduce the entire realm of aesthetics to the sole category of mimesis, it is nevertheless possible to maintain that the latter, broadly understood, "refers to […] the auratic moment of aesthetic experience" and that "a mimetic exploration of the world is the condition of possibility for a full and complete development of the emotional resources and sensibility" of a human being, "especially with reference to aesthetic sensibility" (Wulf 2018, p. 57). Beside language – that a vast majority of philosophers and scientists, including many supporters of the so-called theory of the extended mind, have usually assumed as "the most important tool of an externalized mind" (Ferretti 2009, p. 149) – also aesthetic capacities and practices, 'externalized' in specific devices, play a decisive role in the unceasing process of 'anthropogenesis' or 'hominization'. The aesthetic surely represents one of the fundamental components of the experience in the environment (or, more precisely, in the world) for the 'second-nature animals' that we are. From the point of view of a 'second-nature aesthetics' inspired by 'naturalism of second nature', there is no aesthetic environment for human beings but strictly speaking only aesthetic world(s).

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