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Applying Aesthetics to Everyday Life

Methodologies, History and New Directions

Edited by
Lisa Giombini and Adrián Kvokačka

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Can we design familiarity?

Gioia Laura Iannilli

1. Introduction: Topics and methodology

'Everydayness' and 'design' are two topics, issues or concepts that have been taken up by philosophical aesthetics only relatively recently.¹

This shift, or widening of interest, has been partly hampered by an art-centred aesthetic tradition based on the principles of disinterestedness, uselessness, contemplation and distance. These are principles that hardly find fertile ground in the fields of everydayness and design, the underpinnings of which can be described in terms of interest, usefulness, use, practice and engagement. This is not to say that the traditional principles recalled earlier are entirely foreign to the domains of everydayness and design: we could potentially 'take a step back' and approach an everyday or designed thing or situation, for instance, exactly in the terms implied by these principles; similarly, ascribing them exclusively to the experience of art, in particular today, would be anachronistic if not downright wrong.

The dynamics just described are those that typically characterize the stance of the user or perceiver; however, a shift also occurred in the values typically attached to the creator, or to creativity. These latter are no longer exclusively marked by a 'Promethean' paradigm, based on the conception of the author as a genius-like *individuality* and *ex novo* or, even better, *ex nihilo* producer, but rather by a *co-operative* (see Iannilli, 2022) and relational paradigm, based on the tenet that the management of experience takes place through *innovation*, thanks to the coalescence of multiple competencies. Not least, precisely in light of this last account, it is not wrong to suggest how, notwithstanding the specificities that may characterize the parties involved, there has been a thinning of the very boundary between what has been traditionally referred to as 'audience' (now user, consumer or 'experientor') and 'creator' (or rather, designer, in our case).

Even more interestingly, there are not many studies that, despite granting philosophical dignity to design *and* everydayness, have dealt explicitly or *programmatically* with the design of everydayness and, even more specifically, the *designability* of everydayness as such from both the designer's and the experientor's points of view.

As the title of this chapter suggests, then, my aim is to tackle one specific question, which will be the (sometimes implicit) thread of the analysis and which will be

addressed more explicitly in its last section. In the first three sections of the chapter, which follow this more introductory one, I will provide a reconceptualization of the notion of everydayness, crucial in the framework of Everyday Aesthetics, in terms of familiarity. Namely, I will resort to a Deweyan framework and then I will carry out a comparison of familiarity with two similar but not identical concepts such as niche and habit. Such a comparison will serve both as a test bed for the previous, Deweyan analysis of familiarity and as a further step in the process of reconceptualization of everydayness, namely, as we shall see, as a dimension of experience which is connoted by a contingent stability. From such a reconceptualization will stem a constellation of related questions, concerning qualitiveness, experientor and designer, which will eventually provide us with the tools to answer the main question at stake in this chapter in its conclusions, where it will re-emerge, so to speak. The reader will hence need to be patient, since in order to provide a not naïve answer to our main question we will first have to tackle those preliminary questions that are nevertheless, just like the rest of the text, implicitly aimed at finding an answer to it.

However, before actually starting this journey, it is necessary to characterize the approach I adopted so as to hopefully render the kernels around which the following sections revolve clearer.

My methodology is specifically of a pragmatist–Deweyan type. In particular, the analysis will be guided by (1) a practice- or experience-oriented perspective, that is, informed by the basic principle of pragmatism whereby every conceptualization finds its root and test bed in experience or practice; (2) a specifically situational and environmental conception, that is, characteristic of a field, a dense space – things do not happen in a vacuum! – in which organism and environment necessarily and procedurally interact, that is, in a *spatiotemporal* sense; (3) an anti-dualist and anti-essentialist approach, thus based on the principle that phenomena unfold on *continua*, or internally graded *spectra*, and in this sense also by an emergentist approach, that is, aimed at grasping the dynamics of emergence of some kind of salience or meaningfulness in the relationship that exists between the backgrounds and foregrounds that characterize experience; (4) last but not least, the pragmatist, and in particular Deweyan, lesson will orient my contribution in two senses. First, in the sense of recognizing and valuing the productivity of a tension between quantitative and qualitative, thematic and operative, explicit and implicit aspects of experience. Second, and perhaps more importantly, in the sense of recognizing and valuing the irreducibility of the inherent qualitiveness of experience, the richness of which must therefore be preserved in some way, also on the theoretical and analytical level.

The acknowledgement of this irreducibility is also reflected in another aspect of my methodology, namely that relating to the assumption of an *indicative* or indicator-oriented perspective that *signals* the presence of a markedly aesthetic ‘density’ in a particular circumstance, rather than a perspective crystallized on the enucleation of specific *properties*, that is, a property-oriented perspective, which should unequivocally *define* what is aesthetic. Minimalistically, my conception of the aesthetic, again following a Deweyan perspective, can be described in terms of a passive-active nexus between perceiving (we relate to the world primarily through our senses), emotional sensing (this sense-based relationship might feel good or bad) and expressing (we

express this relationship through both explicit and implicit moves – we ‘thematize’ or label and describe things as well as operatively making, doing, using and consuming things and showing to ourselves and others what we think and feel).

This dynamic or indicative approach is, so to speak, also non-ideological and plural: according to it, then, nothing is aesthetic per se, but, potentially, everything can become aesthetic. This means that the whole spectrum spanning art–everydayness, that is, the two traditionally ‘antagonistic’ poles of aesthetics, including all that has been thematized aesthetically in recent years and all that has not yet been ‘detected’ by the radar of aesthetics, can populate with equal rights that domain we qualify as ‘aesthetic’.

2. Everydayness as familiarity

Most obviously, however, my main concern here is the polarity related to everydayness. Here I understand everydayness not as what happens every day, nor as something reducible – quantifiable, measurable – to a list of things, events, people, activities and so on. Rather, by ‘everydayness’ I mean that which possesses a very distinct qualitiveness and meaningfulness that, as I shall try and show, seems fruitful to be developed in the direction of, or at least test in relation to, a specific characterization as familiarity. This latter, from my point of view, allows for a more nuanced analysis that my methodology calls for.

There have been various efforts within Everyday Aesthetics to define what is everyday, and it has not been an easy task. Two seminal essays in this regard are certainly Melchionne (2013) and Naukkarinen (2013) but, more generally, one could say that the complex conceptual bundle that constitutes everydayness, within Everyday Aesthetics, has been approached either from a restrictivist/discontinuist stance or from an expansionist/continuist stance. The former, which emphasizes the ordinariness of the ordinary as such, and the latter, which is inclusive of also extraordinary aspects of experience.²

Another way to put it has been to emphasize a tension that occurs between familiarity and strangeness or between familiarization and defamiliarization processes (see in particular Haapala, 2005). It must be said that after almost three decades such a debate is no longer that heated. A *general* agreement beyond the specific orientations each time at stake seems to have been reached among everyday aestheticians, about the fact that what we call everyday is a stable yet dynamic feature of our experience, namely what I would define as a *contingent stability*, something that fits us and that we belong to, and a matter of relationships, modalities, processes, rhythms and *continua* involving apparently polarized aspects (positive and negative ones; art- and non-art-related ones; expectation and control and the unexpected; appreciative and non-appreciative modes; slowness and rapidity; naturality and artificiality; spontaneity and nudging; individuality and society; honorific and non-honorific attitudes; etc.) that variously cooperate. Yet, an essential tension still seems to be in force, so much so that a ‘paradox’, or ‘dilemma’, has been referred to as typical of this field (see Carlson, 2014; Saito, 2017). In a nutshell, not only does

the process of making something ordinary extraordinary, or familiar strange, not preserve the everydayness of the everyday but also the very process of thematization, or theorization of it, unavoidably dissolves the specifically everyday quality of the everyday, namely of something intrinsically operative. As Saito (2017, p. 24) nicely put it, ‘experiencing the ordinary as ordinary is *theoretically* [italics added] impossible.’

Interestingly enough, although the word ‘familiar’ recurs in many Everyday Aesthetics works, the only scholar who has made it an explicit topic for a book is precisely Saito (2017). She addresses the many possibilities and limitations afforded, to Everyday Aesthetics, by the combination and/or separation of familiar and non-familiar aspects of experience. To this end, she overcomes the basically cognitive approach put forward by Allen Carlson. In order to solve the aforementioned ‘dilemma’ (at least partially, as he recognizes that such an approach cannot be a sufficient condition for solving it), this latter invokes the necessity for a cognitive understanding of ‘the workings of the everyday world’ (Carlson, 2014, p. 63) to develop a proper aesthetic appreciation. Contrariwise, Saito eventually boils down her argument to the question of mindful attention, namely something that is not straightforwardly conscious or made explicit, explained or cognitively understood, nor straightforwardly unconscious or neglected altogether.

I do believe, however, that experiencing the ordinary as ordinary is possible and it offers the core of everyday aesthetic experience. My argument is this: paying attention and bringing background to the foreground is simply making something invisible visible and is necessary for any kind of aesthetic experience, whether of the extraordinary or of the ordinary. . . . [P]utting something on our conscious radar and making something visible does not necessarily render our experience extraordinary.

There are two sets of contrast we need to consider here. One set is being aware and attentive, contrasted with going through motions on autopilot, although it is not an unconscious state. . . . The other contrast is between experiencing the familiar quality of the everyday and experiencing its defamiliarized strangeness. . . .

It seems to me that the contrast that is important here is not the first set between being aware and sleep-walking on autopilot, but rather the second set regarding the different characters of the experience we become aware of when we get roused out of sleep-walking on autopilot.

Mindful attention can either lead to focus on the familiar quality of the everyday or instead highlight the defamiliarized strangeness of the everyday. Being aware and paying attention is simply a prerequisite of any kind of aesthetic experience, whatever the content. (Saito, 2017, p. 24)

It might be said that, although she does not make an explicit case for it, through the question of mindful attention, Saito seems to be hinting at the usefulness of making familiarity and everydayness (or in her words, ordinariness) closer in the Everyday Aesthetics debate.

On my part, I deem this move equally fruitful. If Saito implicitly – or perhaps not as programmatically as I will do – promotes this equation in order to prove the experiencability of the ordinary as ordinary, my assumption derives from the identification of a specifically spectrum-driven analysis of familiarity that has been carried out in the pragmatist tradition, to which, as a matter of fact, Saito also partly refers.³

In the next sections I will carry out a more detailed examination of the issue of familiarity by first addressing it through a specifically Deweyan lens, then by comparing various kinds of stability and control that are at stake in everyday contexts and finally, by taking up the paradoxical feature recognized to Everyday Aesthetics in the field of Experience Design through the question of the design of familiarity.

3. The spectrum of familiarity: The familiar, family resemblance and the problematic

One philosophically informed way to deal with and make sense of everydayness/familiarity is to turn to the contribution of John Dewey, who, interestingly enough, is widely – yet sometimes critically – recognized as the ‘grandfather’ of Everyday Aesthetics.⁴ In this section, however, my main reference will not be Dewey’s aesthetics book par excellence *Art as Experience*⁵ but the 1930 essay titled ‘Qualitative Thought’ precisely because of a particularly interesting focus, in some crucial passages of the text, on the question of familiarity.

In this essay Dewey – well aware of the gap (or ‘dilemma,’ as one would say within Everyday Aesthetics) that exists between experience *qua* experience (or, as Saito would say ‘ordinary as ordinary’) in its implicit and operative character and experience as the subject of analysis (or, as Saito would say ‘theoretically’) – addresses the problem of the management, or ‘control,’ and of the ‘discretization’ of meaningfulness emerging from an experiential *situation, surrounding* or *horizon* of dense, viscous or ‘pervasive quality,’ through a particular ability that is typical of the way a qualitative thought proceeds.

Interestingly, what makes the pervasive and implicitly operative character of the situation in which one moves ‘viscous,’ and thus allows for relevant distinctions that tend to make its meaningfulness more explicit, is the height at which what Dewey calls the ‘subject-matter’ is placed on a spectrum that runs from what he defines as familiar to what he defines as a problem. The greater the familiarity, the lower the persistence of the pervasive quality in its ‘density,’ since in that case making distinctions out of it is easier, there being precisely greater familiarity.

When the subject-matter is reasonably familiar, relevant distinctions speedily offer themselves, and sheer qualitiveness may not remain long enough to be readily recalled. But it often persists and forms a haunting and engrossing problem. It is a commonplace that a problem stated is well on its way to solution, for statement of the nature of a problem signifies that the underlying quality is being transformed into determinate distinctions of terms and relations or has become an object of articulate thought. But something presents itself as problematic before there is

recognition of what the problem is. The problem is had or experienced before it can be stated or set forth; but it is had as an immediate quality of the whole situation. The sense of something problematic, of something perplexing and to be resolved, marks the presence of something pervading all elements and considerations. Thought is the operation by which it is converted into pertinent and coherent terms. (Dewey, 1930, p. 249)

In the case where, on the other hand, qualitiveness in its 'density' persists, that is, it is not quickly possible to derive articulated distinctions from it, it then presents a certain problematicity. It must be made clear, however, that the problematicity of which Dewey (the upholder of a Hegelian–Darwinist tradition) speaks is not to be read in exclusively negative terms but rather in the terms of a takeover in the experiential field – namely the situation in which we are immersed – by a prominent element which, therefore, can also be positive and which, somehow, seems urgent to be 'worked out'. Inferential activity, which for Dewey spans exclamations (emphasizing a character of greater urgency, of more immediate continuity with the qualitative dimension) such as 'Oh!', 'Yes!', 'No!', 'How beautiful!' and more elaborate expressions, along with perception and aesthetic judgements, and the production typical of the artist (whose logic and mode of proceeding Dewey equates to the mode of proceeding of qualitative thinking) equally constitute, for Dewey, what allows such salience, or qualitative meaningfulness, to be elaborated in a more coherent and richer way: they are equal articulations of a qualitative thought yet with different levels of complexity and density. In this context, too, we can identify the very tension that was ascribed in the previous section to familiarity, to the relationship between awareness and unawareness. It is made explicit here particularly in terms of a tension between thematization and operativity, 'quantification' in an *object* and qualitative *situation*, which turn out to be the pivots of Dewey's discourse.

Dewey's well-known anti-dualistic approach is corroborated in this essay by his reference to a notion that has had an important history in contemporary philosophy, namely that of 'family resemblance'. This notion relates to the impossibility of isolating, in fact, a specific feature of a person's physiognomy from the expression of his or her face, just as it is not possible to pinpoint unequivocally the perceived aspects of resemblance when experiencing a family resemblance.

Even a nose as a feature of a man's face is not completely isolable. For it is characterized by the whole face as well as characterizing that face. A better instance is found, however, when we speak of a man's *expression*. That assuredly is a total effect of all elements in their relation to one another, not a 'single feature among others'. . . . Family resemblances are often detected, and yet one is totally unable to specify the points of resemblance. Unanalyzed quality of the whole accounts for the identification as a *result*, and it is a radically different thing from identification of a man by fingerprints. (Dewey, 1930, p. 260)

This passage is relevant to our discussion because through the notion of 'family resemblance' it is possible to introduce a degree of familiarity that can be located

between the two extremes of a completely unproblematic familiarity, on the one hand, and a completely unfamiliar problematicity, on the other. It has to do neither with an unproblematic identification nor with a straightforwardly problematic (or qualitative) situation. It does, however, represent an important instance of what Dewey describes as the 'pervasive', 'immediate' and 'regulative' quality of a situation in which some kind of 'resistance' is in force. In connection with this, Dewey introduces a 'principle of assimilation' into his discourse: either in terms of a (productive) resistance to such a quality or of a non-resistance to it.

If it is true that what Dewey is concerned with is identifying the dynamics involved in the emergence of meaningfulness, it is precisely assimilation that constitutes the basis for such emergence. It entails the perception of an expressiveness, starting from which distinctions and thus developments, that is, some form of 'control' exerted upon a situation *might*, but not necessarily will, be made explicit.

And it would seem to be precisely the resistance to total explication or thematization that makes the principle of assimilation consistent with the functioning of 'family resemblance', or the perception of the expressiveness of a face and not of its single aspects. And indeed Dewey distinguishes them both from mere 'resemblance' or 'similarity' (i.e. not of a 'family' type; see Dewey, 1930, p. 261), seemingly pointing towards the distinction between a *relationship*, that is, the modality of an experience, its qualitiveness, and a relation, or its factual, 'quantifiable' content.

'Assimilation' denotes the efficacious operation of pervasive quality; 'similarity' denotes a relation. (Dewey, 1930, p. 261)

However, as said, the question of resistance can also be approached from another point of view: namely that of the resistance to total assimilation.

Sheer assimilation results in the presence of a single object of apprehension. To identify a seen thing as a promontory is a case of assimilation. By some physiological process, not exactly understood at present but to which the name 'habit' is given, the net outcome of prior experiences gives a dominant quality, designated 'promontory' to a perceived existence. Passage from this object to some other implies resistance to mere assimilation and results in making distinctions. The pervasive quality is differentiated while at the same time these differentiations are connected. The result is an explicit statement or proposition. (Dewey, 1930, p. 261)

Resistance to assimilation and non-resistance to assimilation (or even experiential friction and non-friction with respect to a situation) cooperate for the constitution, or rather, the emergence, of meaningfulness, whose basis, however, is still familiarity, namely assimilation as a regulative quality. On a side note, it is interesting to observe – also for the purposes of the next section of this contribution – how Dewey introduces the notion of habit in the passage where he discusses the case in which there is no resistance to assimilation. In such a case, the predominant quality is that of identification by acquisition, that is, by habit, and thus what is in force is a process that tends to be

more ‘mechanical’ than that typically involved in the constitution of familiarity, as I shall try to show later. A distinction could be introduced here between assimilation understood as an accomplished fact, as a product (what has been assimilated), and assimilation as a process (in terms of assimilating).

Not least, it is also necessary to address the temporal, and not only ‘situated’ (or properly spatial, and environmental, so to speak), aspect that characterizes these processes typical of the spectrum of familiarity in its various polarizations. This can be done by resorting to a concept, or rather to what for Dewey denotes a true ability, just like a qualitative thought (or creative intelligence, as Dewey will say in 1917 in *The Need for a Recovery in Philosophy*), according to terms and emphasizing modalities that he attributes to a properly aesthetic dimension: imagination. Forward- or future-oriented, from an analytical point of view, imagination allows for a more all-encompassing understanding of experience (which *qua* experience already implies it as such), namely as something that does not exclusively have to do with the past or with the present but entails the interpolation of all these temporal levels.

Dewey describes the imaginative component as a ‘warm and intimate taking in [*scil.* assimilation] of the full scope of a situation [*scil.* of its qualitiveness]’ (Dewey, 1916, p. 244) and discerns it from the ‘imaginary’ through the application of a temporal criterion: ‘Time is the test that discriminates the imaginative from the imaginary. The latter passes because it is arbitrary. The imaginative endures because, while at first strange with respect to us, it is enduringly familiar with respect to the nature of things’ (Dewey, 1934, p. 274). In other words, here, too, familiarity as enduring constitutes a pervasive and regulative quality and thus is characterized by intrinsic stability (cf. ‘with respect to the nature of things’) but at the same time by irreducible plurivocality, or rather processuality, that dynamically and relationally spans time and space.

The Spectrum of Familiarity

Familiar < ----- Family Resemblance ----- > Problematic
 Discrete < ----- more finely grained ----- > Dense
 Qualitiveness

4. An experiment: Familiarity, habits, niches, between practices and environments

In my proposal, familiarity has to do with the dimension of practices, on the one hand, and it may also be equated with a surrounding, or horizon, connoted by a certain stability (albeit a contingent one, as we have seen, yet one that ‘fits us’ and, we might even say, ‘contains’ or ‘envelops’ us), on the other hand. Thus, it can be included in the same semantic sphere as two concepts that in contemporary aesthetics, just like the everyday, have enjoyed a fair amount of attention but mainly from an evolutionary-biological and cultural approach and therefore different from the one proposed here. The first one is the concept of habit, that is, minimalistically, something that has to do with *practices* that are habitual, and the second one is the concept of niche, that is, minimalistically, a *space* that surrounds us, in which we are well ‘situated’ in a

circumscribed way.⁶ In other words, what is familiar can be seen as a surrounding characterized by its own habits or habitual practices; it is an environment in which we feel supported and protected, to which we belong – our horizon of meaning – and which should be conducive, processually, to our thriving. Preliminarily, we can say that all these concepts equally share the (again, contingent, given the processual nature I attribute to the phenomena taken into consideration) features of stability, control and govern over something (not necessarily at a cognitive level) but with different levels of dynamicity. Yet, my thesis is that they involve a type of stability that differs from that described through the spectrum spanning the familiar–family resemblance–problematicity, which seems to me, thanks to the specifically Deweyan kind of reconceptualization that has been carried out, to be more flexible and inclusive. The differences between them, however, are not sharp and radical but nuanced. Thus, they fall under what I would call a difference in ‘density’. Taking on this perspective will aid us in adding new elements to our analysis of familiarity and, eventually, answering the question of its designability.

Recently, the concept of habit has become the topic of detailed and *specifically aesthetic* analysis: see in particular Puolakka (2011, 2018), Portera (2020a, 2022), Fingerhut (2020), Gallese (2020), Candiotta and Dreon (2021).⁷ In these works, what emerges is the acknowledgement of a plasticity and a transformative, even disruptive, power and an expansivity that is proper to this concept but that has not always been recognized to it.

The same goes as far as the notion of niche is concerned: for a more detailed and specifically aesthetic analysis of the concept see at least Davies (2012), Menary (2014), Matteucci (2019) and Portera (2020b). Here I will limit myself to referring the reader to a useful reconstruction of the meanings and the usages of the term ‘niche’ provided by Portera (2020b, pp. 302–3), since she also emphasizes its interdisciplinary relevance and the increasing dynamicization it has undergone within specialized research over the decades in terms of something that is transactionally constructed by an already scaffolded actor while also being a scaffolding for the development of the actor him or herself.

The recalled research concerning an aesthetic analysis of habit and niche confirms the increasing need for a processual orientation in aesthetics. Evidently, then, this will not be the aspect on which I will dwell. What I will try to do is to tackle in a preliminary, experimental way, and without the ambition of being comprehensive, some aspects that mark off these new concepts introduced in our discourse and thus compare them with those that characterize familiarity according to our previous considerations.

As said, there are points of similarity between them but not total overlap.

First of all, familiarity is not specifically a habit; this latter has to do not exclusively, but primarily, with the dimension of automatism, which can be learned, changed or dismissed (hence, processually), for instance, by reiteration but also by other habits (see Bertram forthcoming) and by encountering the unexpected. However, in the case of habits, as opposed to familiarity, as we shall see, the unexpected acts out of contrast and poses a crisis, that is, it seems to demand a total reconstruction. One way to explain this point is to make explicit how, according to my definition, the experience of familiarity can also entail strangeness. For example, when we say that a face ‘looks

familiar', it is because we do not actually fully and simply recognize it. If that face is recognized, what we experience is a mere identification: of the face (of) X, of Y or of Z. In relation to what is 'known', 'familiar' turns out to be too weak a characterization; 'known', in other words, seems to constitute a strong (fixed: it closes the process of exploration) characterization of the 'unproblematic identification' of which 'familiar' is instead a weak, or even inherently processual, characterization (it calls for further exploration). Similarly, when we become aware that there is something we find 'natural' to perform, that is so not because it is acquired through practice, but what is claimed to be 'natural' is something that was not expected to be so. Even in these terms familiarity implies an experience that also possesses an aspect of surprise, which, however, is not the kind of surprise that is typical of the uncanny. On the contrary, it is the surprise of being attuned also to what one did not expect to be able to perform as natural.

The experience of familiarity is a kind of experience that cannot be determined as something cognitively acquired and yet that one feels he or she is able to govern and control: it implies a greater degree of consciousness (in the Deweyan sense of the word i.e. understanding consciousness as a sort of indicator that our experience is taking a specific form that fits us, that works for us; it is as a stance, not necessarily a verbal one, that we take towards our generic experience)⁸ than the unproblematic automatism of habit. The latter, in fact, is something that is assumed to have been acquired, perhaps through habituation to a context, or the application, or reiteration of a particular technique, and this is true even in the case of getting rid of or modifying a bad habit while developing a better one. This could mean that habits are *learned*, while familiarities are *experimented with*, *experienced*. And in this way familiarity is intensified on the basis of the experience that is carried out but not in the sense of a learning that can be technicized.

There is another aspect that can then be taken into consideration, and it has to do with the characters of stability, governing or control that I have equally attributed to the three concepts at stake. In the specific case of habits, since they possess a particularly intense level of automatism as compared to the other two concepts, they could be considered as the ones which escape control the most, insofar as they have a negative connotation, as is the case with a bad habit that cannot be controlled, for example. If, on the other hand, we emphasize the positive side of habits, we are stressing an acquisition that coincides precisely with the ability to govern and control a given situation in an automatic, unconscious, acquired or technicized way. In short, familiarity and habits are not synonymous.

In the second place, the familiar surrounding or horizon does not totally coincide with the spatiality that characterizes niches, since they are the structures, or rather scaffoldings, that sustain the development of our habits and familiarity, and that somehow envelop them. They can be regarded as something in which human beings are already situated at birth, as something already given (not, however, in the sense of factual givenness but rather in the sense of the phenomenological *Vorgegebenheit*, namely of what is implicitly operative, functioning and constitutive, as, for that matter, Dewey (1930, pp. 245, 250, 253–4) also suggests) to the organism. As specifically compared to familiarity, it might be said that a niche is an environment that is at one's disposal, while familiarity is a horizon that shifts within it and which can be

exited from, when, for example, one experiences the unfamiliar while nevertheless remaining within one's own niche. Furthermore, niches can indeed be modified, they are constructed and through so-called feedback loops they reciprocally shape the organisms that they 'contain' and their habits, but in order to do so, longer processes are at stake. To explain the more 'fixed' kind of stability characterizing niches, we might introduce a comparison with the process of getting or getting rid of a house: we might inherit it, move into it, build it or buy it; we might furnish and design it, sell it or move out of it, and although these are all processes that entail change and dynamicity, they will never be as fast as we might wish.

A further example may be related to someone's linguistic repertoire: this latter may be enriched by the acquisition of certain words, which are 'let in' and can slowly make changes in our experience. What occurs then is the use of a new word that becomes part of our familiarity while already being somehow present in our linguistic niche but not as necessarily familiar, that is, as unusual. One could say that the repertoire we carve out of the possible vocabulary is to the mother tongue as familiarity is to the niche. And in this framework, a habit could be considered as a (tendentially) stereotyped manner of speaking, both collectively and individually. A *manner*, or modality, indeed; and this passage seems to recall the question of style developed, for example, by Simmel (1908), between style as a set of defined (i.e. technicized) formal elements and style as a way of proceeding which is specified each time, that is, situated.⁹

It is clear how these three concepts are not necessarily rivals. However, given their sometimes undifferentiated usage, it seemed useful to at least highlight, in a preliminary and experimental way, their points of difference, while also enhancing their relatedness. Then, they are in a kind of relationship that does not make it possible to simply equate them. Last but not least, this analysis was useful in further bringing to the fore the characters of greater 'complexity' connoting familiarity (not simply technicizable as is the case with habits, on the one hand, and more fluctuating than niches, on the other hand), which in the next section I will try and articulate with respect to the question of its designability.

5. The design of familiarity

In the second section of this contribution, I resorted to a question raised by Yuriko Saito concerning the possibility of experiencing the ordinary as ordinary. Her answer was positive, and her argument revolved around 'the different characters of the experience we become aware of when we get roused out of sleep-walking on autopilot', namely the importance of mindful attention in everyday experience from an aesthetic point of view.

In the third section, I have put forward an understanding of everydayness as familiarity in terms of a spectrum that runs from something we might define as 'unproblematic' to something 'problematic', which entails a particular kind of consciousness, namely as something that is felt, that is not limited to present experience but that also spans different spatialities and temporalities and that we have differentiated for instance from what is generally referred to as 'habit' (along with

what is referred to as ‘niche’, along slightly different lines, in the fourth section of the chapter), namely something that is characterized by a higher degree of automatism.

In this section, I will more explicitly tackle a question that is to a certain extent like Saito’s: can we design familiarity? To do so, I will start by referring to a specific (conceptual) case study: Experience Design.

Introducing this latter means stressing a change in paradigm in design theory and practice: from a focus on the *object* as an isolated entity to interact with, or to use (i.e. *Product Design*), or on an experiencing *subject* (as, for instance, the label *User Experience Design* at least seems to suggest) to a focus on experiences as such by employing a more holistic, process-oriented, relational and hence anti-dualistic methodology. It is not easy to define Experience Design in unequivocal terms, since it spans design for tourist, leisure and consumer experience and design for patient and healthcare experience, including also design for education, museum, urban, luxury experiences and many others.¹⁰ It is not a coincidence that the literature on it mainly consists of papers focusing on specific case studies rather than on meta-theoretical efforts aiming at thematizing what it is. Exceptions are indeed Hassenzahl (2010), Newbery and Farnham (2013), Spence (2016), Rossman and Duerden (2019), who provide both theoretical frameworks and concrete examples, but also Wendt (2015) and Iannilli (2020b), who provide a more straightforwardly theoretical kind of research. What all these contributions share, though, is the idea that Experience Design has to do with increasing the quality of experiences, thanks to a positive interaction with processes or devices that have been specifically developed. Experience Design is not a monolithic field, and as such, it can entail many design variations: from extraordinary, memorable, once-in-a-lifetime experiences to more ordinary, ‘low-key’, ones; from experiences which aim at creating some friction to engender some critical sense, reflexivity and awareness in the experientor, by, for instance, *setting* a problem, or by also affording a glimpse into possible future scenarios as to orient present action (such as Critical, Speculative Design and Design Fiction¹¹), to experiences that aim at *solving* problems, being flowing and seamless and even automatic, or also discreet, and at most ‘nudging’ certain behaviours (and everything there might be in between these various typologies). However different they may be, these kinds of Experience Design have in common the fact of bringing on the same plane what is *supposed* to be spontaneous, even ‘natural’ and specifically qualitative, that is, experience, and what is artificial, constructed and that relies also on measurements and data, that is, design. In this sense, we might say that a feature of Experience Design is that of being intrinsically oxymoronic, or paradoxical, and of making something artificial be *felt* as if it were natural, by partially ‘taming’ its complexity. Furthermore, we might say that another aspect they share is that of intensification: one feature of Experience Design is that of making certain elements that would otherwise remain implicit and scattered in experience more salient and perspicuous, both in the sense of creating some sort of friction (in a positive as well as negative fashion) and in the sense of eliminating some sort of friction that might impede the experiential process. In a nutshell, whatever the characterization, Experience Design’s goal is to provide relationships or, as Dewey would say, ‘transactions’, whose *qualitativeness* is enhanced.

Now, given the topic at issue in this contribution, my interest, in this spectrum of possible designed experiences, should clearly fall on the one pertaining to the non-extraordinary side of design as such, or rather, to the side that does not necessarily aim at affording 'special' experiences. But before going deeper into this question, we need to move some other preliminary steps.

As a starting point, let's retrieve the question of the tension between quantities (i.e. something that entails the measurement and reduction of complexity to data or properties – something tendentially fixed) and qualities (i.e. something in which a complexity is 'buzzing' and hopefully preserved – something indeed more dynamic and open, yet regulated). In fact, Experience Design is a perfect instance of this, namely of something in which such tension is largely at stake, and it is rather one of its pillars (both from a conceptual and a practical point of view). While it is clear that reductions, quantifications, measurements, data mining and visualizations and so forth are just as important as the preservation and thriving of qualitiveness in the design process, from a specifically aesthetic point of view, qualitiveness is something that, if not preserved as such, eventually must be stroke. We shall see that one way to tackle this problem is by taking on the point of view of the experientor on the one hand and that of the designer on the other hand.

Moreover, it might be said that Experience Design has a double aesthetic feature: it can, at its extremes, be negative or positive. On the one hand, it can lead to forms of alienation and passivization; this happens, for instance, when the experiences that it makes available and accessible, or that it produces *ad hoc*, are excessively delegated by the experientor, and not sufficiently carried out in the first person, hence causing a loss of experiential intensity. It can also lead to forms of hedonism, and hence inconsiderate and unsustainable consumerism, when one tends to discard things before they have actually reached their peak or have broken down, for instance. Or also, when it levels out experience onto stereotypical and conventional patterns that it repeats in a non-context-dependent and non-differentiating way, encouraging the emergence of forms of homogenization. And this highlights how the kind of 'good' experience that is involved here must possess an *intrinsically relational* nature. On the other hand, Experience Design can be read positively when it affords pre-constituted yet flexible experiential frameworks by emphasizing, stressing or making more perspicuous certain aesthetic features of experience that otherwise would remain unnoticed, and hence, by facilitating experience, it also fosters the development of an ability and even of a reflexivity based on perceptual–sensible–expressive features which, as we have seen in the introduction of this contribution, are typical of the aesthetic. This double feature might be explained also in terms of a tension between some sort of awareness and some sort of unawareness and the ability to take action (or not) accordingly.

This tension resembles that same dynamic that connotes the spectrum of familiarity, whose extremes are characterized by what is completely unproblematic (and taken for granted) on the one hand and by what is utterly problematic (causing some sort of friction) on the other hand. How, then, can the experientor make his or her own way, namely how can he or she control, govern, manage or find certain stability, which is typical of familiarity, in this situation? John Dewey's contribution comes to our rescue once again.

In *Art as Experience* there is a 'spatiotemporal' criterion that defines the type of ability each time exerted in situations that show some level of problematicity (or complexity, or, again, qualitiveness). These abilities can be boiled down to three typologies, which do not conflict with but cannot be reduced to each other: (1) a technical, (2) a technological and (3) a properly aesthetic competence.

In the first case: 'In purely automatic action, past material is subordinated to the extent of *not appearing at all in consciousness* [emphasis added]' (Dewey, 1934, p. 128).

And as Larry Hickman (2001, p. 17) put it, the kind of activity at stake is 'generally and for the most part habitual. It is non-cognitive and non-inferential.' It is a know-how which doesn't fit the dimension of thematization or cognitive understanding but can be learned or taught by doing. Yet, when passive habituation sets it, it can be detrimental to the qualitative management of a situation.

In the second case:

material of the past comes to consciousness but is consciously employed as an instrument to deal with some present problem and difficulty. It is kept down *to serve some special end*. If the experience is predominantly one of investigation, it has the status of offering evidence or of suggesting hypotheses; if 'practical' of furnishing cues to present action [emphases added]. (Dewey, 1934, p. 128)

As Larry Hickman (2001, p. 17) put it, the kind of activity involved is a 'cognitive or deliberate inferential activity. It intervenes when someone wants to address some perceived problem'. It is a know-that, namely, it has to do with an epistemic knowledge that is then applied, also through specific techniques on which it relies; it implies the usage of theoretical knowledge, which can be quantified. And as far as an experientor is concerned, the more he/she must know about how to make a designed device work, for instance, the less such design will be successful. We might say that this competence pertains to the quantitative aspects that a designer should be able to make meaningful, or qualitative, while designing experiences.

In the third case

In esthetic experience, on the contrary, *the material of the past neither fills attention, as in recollection, nor is subordinated to a special purpose*. There is indeed a restriction imposed upon what comes. But it is that of contribution to the immediate matter of an experience now had. The material is not employed as a bridge to some further experience, but as an increase and individualization of present experience. The scope of a work of art is measured by the number and variety of elements coming from past experiences that are *organically absorbed* into the perception had here and now [emphases added]. (Dewey, 1934, p. 128)

Once again it might be said that we are dealing with an ability that can be understood in terms of a 'know-how'. Indeed, it could be said that this third kind of ability shares with the first one the assimilation of something which is carried out operatively and which cannot be cognitively thematized as is the case with technological competence. Yet, the temporal criterion, and in particular the way the 'past' is dealt with in the present,

while also taking the future as a constraint, marks a difference between them: as far as the aesthetic is concerned, we are dealing with an ability to keep these dimensions organically together while fostering stability here and now. And this seems to recall the same difference that we have drawn in the previous section between familiarity in its various possible degrees and habits.

On the other hand, how can the designer afford experiences that do not lean towards the 'dark side' of Experience Design, namely that do not mainly rely on merely quantitative, de-differentiating and passivizing criteria? Here, we can resort to the concept of 'self-effacing goal', usually employed in philosophy in order to explain such things as moral virtues, or the goal of happiness. Yet, an aesthetic analysis of it in terms of 'effortless coolness' meant as a specifically aesthetic ability or sensibility has been carried out by Russell (2011), which makes it viable also for our purposes. 'A goal is self-effacing if our achievement of that goal requires that we look away from the goal rather than pursue it directly' (Russell, 2011, p. 47). For the problem at issue here this means that as far as Experience Design – which indeed implies the at least partial manipulation and reworking of quantities or data – is concerned with the design of experiences that aim at being qualitative or at least at preserving as much as possible the qualitiveness of a certain situation, the more one strives to obtain quality *directly* from quantities (i.e. reduces those qualities to quantities), the less an aesthetic dimension of Experience Design is at stake. In other words, what can be done is an intensification of certain features while avoiding on the one hand the direct and generalized thematization of certain functions of experience and on the other hand the affordance of 'pure' or automatic operativity that can also lead to a fully fledged delegation of experience.

And it might be said that the same applies to the experientor. The more this latter strives to reach a goal or solve a problem qualitatively by exclusively relying on fixed or known and comfortable (even unconscious) aspects on the one hand or on exclusively novel, strange and disrupting (of which he or she is fully conscious of) ones on the other, and hence does not *processually* (enough) dwell also in the wider complexity that is afforded by a qualitative situation, the less he or she will thrive in the sense of possessing that dynamic stability that has been addressed in the first part of this contribution.

This brings us to our main question: can we design familiarity? And namely, can we design something that is neither exclusively conventional, even taken for granted and carried out on 'autopilot' mode (as it seems to be the case in design theory where familiarity means convention¹² or intuition; see Raskin, 1994), nor exclusively sensational, exceptional or totally discontinuous to our usual flow of experience?

In order to start drawing some conclusions, though, I should retrieve the passage in which it was said that the kind of Experience Design that more obviously should interest us here is that pertaining to 'non-special' experiences. Yet, it has also been said that familiarity, in the continuum that oscillates between the completely familiar, family resemblance and problematicity, can also entail the strange, the surprising and something that we cannot fully 'assimilate'. This means that, in principle, familiarity is fostered by all the kinds of (experiences and) Experience Design that we have mentioned and cannot be designed as such: the success of the design of familiarity

is, at the end of the day, in the hands of the experientor who is able to deal with it qualitatively.

Second, it has been said that everydayness, and *a fortiori* familiarity, is not reducible to a list of things, events, people and activities, but it has to do with the ways we relate to them. The same has been maintained by saying that the qualitiveness of a situation cannot be reduced to exact measurements, but its complexity can be preserved by intensifying certain elements, in the case of Experience Design certain relationships, by affording pre-constituted experiential frameworks that are yet open and, again, at the end of the day, in the hands of the experientor who is able to deal with them qualitatively.

A fruitful example comes from the AI field. I am referring to the so-called Moravec's Paradox, formulated by Hans Moravec in the 1980s (see at least Moravec, 1988) but still in force in the current AI discourse. According to Moravec, common sense and the ability to perform everyday and familiar tasks are not yet something that can be managed, carried out, reproduced or designed by AI, while as far as the generation of elaborate and extremely complex tasks is concerned, it has no problem in performing them. Here it is as if Moravec underlined how easier it is to directly reproduce experiences that are striking and exceptional, or discontinuous, namely more 'tamable' in terms of thematization, or that pertain to a level of experience that is *cognitively determinable* (after all it is an Artificial Intelligence he is talking about), rather than those that have to do with familiarity, namely those experiences that mostly, but not exclusively, rely on a tacit potential, or that pertain to a level of experience that is *operatively felt*, more holistic and relational, or aesthetic.

To conclude, familiarity, despite its seeming trivial nature, which would instead suggest an easy designability, both on the side of the designer who affords experiential frameworks and on the side of the experientor who concretely experiences them and as a matter of fact is the designer of his or her own familiarity, has proven to be a quite complex yet crucial level of experience to attain, as far as the preservation and also the enhancement of its qualitiveness is concerned. Along these lines, a non-naïve, and hence complex, conception of familiarity is in order insofar as this latter is not equated with a straightforward 'naturalness', since it indeed has to do with, especially today, surroundings, situations or horizons that are also populated by artificial, 'pre-oriented' or designed components. All in all, familiarity, just like Experience Design, is a tendentially antinomic concept and hence something that cannot be *directly* designed but it is something that can only be achieved processually, with time, indirectly and without escaping its various oscillations.

Notes

- 1 This text partly retrieves and further elaborates aspects already addressed in other contributions I authored. The notion of experientor and the nexus perceiving-sensing-expressing have been first developed in Iannilli (2020b) and then in Iannilli and Naukkarinen (2022), to which I refer the reader. A more detailed analysis of an aesthetics of Experience Design and of various kinds of abilities at stake in experience

- can be found, again, in Iannilli (2020b). Finally, for a lengthy historical-conceptual analysis of Everyday Aesthetics, I refer the reader to Iannilli (2019).
- 2 Within these two wider stances there may be variations, such as is the case with the continuists Thomas Leddy and Ossi Naukkarinen. The former, evidently oriented towards a philosophical paradigm that prioritizes exceptional and artistic experiences, or, in terms Leddy would use 'auratic' ones, and the latter, oriented towards a philosophical paradigm inclusive of phenomena and modalities ranging from art to non-art, from the extraordinary to the ordinary.
 - 3 In particular, she refers to William James and John Dewey. For a comparison of the notion of Care and Mindfulness as developed by Saito and the notion of Mind as developed by Dewey see Iannilli (2020a, pp. xxiii–xxviii).
 - 4 In this regard see for instance Novitz (1992), Irvin (2008), Dowling (2010), Sartwell (2010), Leddy (2012) and Saito (2019). It might be said that even when the relationship between certain everyday aestheticians and Dewey's aesthetics has been problematic, the quarrel generated has been productive for the development of the subfield.
 - 5 Which has been my main reference in, for instance, Iannilli (2020b, 2021), to which I refer the reader.
 - 6 Naukkarinen (2013), for example, subsumes habits, routines and familiarity into the semantic sphere of the everyday. Here we are interested in comparing familiarity, however, with two concepts that, perhaps more than others, are at the centre of more recent debates.
 - 7 See also the recent conference 'Aesthetic Habits' on this topic, which is proof of the great attention that habits are currently enjoying (*Humboldt Kolleg: Aesthetic Habits/Ästhetische Gewohnheiten*, 2022).
 - 8 "Consciousness" is the more acute and intense in the degree of the readjustments that are demanded, approaching the nil as the contact is frictionless and interaction fluid. It is turbid when meanings are undergoing reconstruction in an undetermined direction, and becomes clear as a decisive meaning emerges' (Dewey, 1934, p. 270).
 - 9 According to our interpretation this is a question also addressed by Dewey (1934, ch. 6), in very similar terms. For a more detailed analysis I refer the reader to Iannilli (2020b, pp. 85–6).
 - 10 For an in-depth research profiling study based on a bibliometric analysis of the wider domain of Experience Research, in which Experience Design can be included, see Roto et al. (2021).
 - 11 I refer the reader to well-known design practitioners and theorists Dunne and Raby's website, where they explain in a very effective manner the characters of these kinds of designs, taking Critical Design as a starting point: <http://dunneandraby.co.uk/content/bydandr/13/0>.
 - 12 I thank Virpi Roto (Aalto University) for this suggestion.

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