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This is the author's manuscript

Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/2001150> since 2024-07-26T10:03:06Z

Published version:

DOI:10.7413/2035-8466006

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Habits and Aesthetic Experience

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Citation: Bertinetto, A. (2024). Habits and Aesthetic Experience. *Aisthesis* 17(1): 61-77. doi: 10.7413/2035-8466006

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Abstract. It is often assumed that habits and aesthetic experiences are fundamentally and irreconcilably opposed. Typically, aesthetic experiences are considered to necessitate non-habitual behavior and to provoke unexpected mental states and extraordinary affective sensations. This article challenges this assumption. Moving beyond potential structural analogies between habitual behavior and aesthetic experience, I focus on two key aspects. Firstly, I argue that the experience of beauty and aesthetic experiences in general actually depend on certain habits, specifically those engaged in aesthetic agency and appreciation, which I term «aesthetic habits». Secondly, I propose that habits have an aesthetic origin, as they virtuously evolve and adapt to their environment. This transformative capacity, along with their ability to resonate with specific situational demands, embodies an improvisational quality that should be encouraged, reflecting the inherently unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of aesthetic experience.

Keywords. Habits, aesthetic experience, improvisation, passivity, style.

1. Introduction

In philosophical discourse, the notion of aesthetic experience lacks a clear and univocal definition. It is understood as an experience of dis-

interested pleasure, disconnected from functional or cognitive relationships with practice (Kant [1790]; Hilgers [2017]), or as a particularly intense, unusual, and emotionally rewarding engagement with objects and aspects of the world (Dewey [1934]; Berleant [2013]; Matteucci [2019]). Furthermore, it can be perceived as a contemplative experience or a participatory experience, or alternatively as a transformative experience, or on the contrary, merely distracting. Yet, regardless of the disagreement about its definition and constitution, aesthetic experience is generally considered a hedonic, affective, and cognitive state of mind that arises in response to art, nature, and everyday phenomena. This state of mind is often considered a special one, because it allegedly transcends ordinary practical dimensions, occupations, and concerns. Consequently, it is often assumed that habits are incompatible with aesthetic experiences. Becoming accustomed to an experience could seemingly undermine its aesthetic quality. As Martin Seel articulates, the aesthetic caliber of an experience hinges on de-habituation (Seel [2014]: 260).

In this article, I will challenge this view and argue that habits are not impediments to aesthetic experience. Instead, habits enable aesthetic experience. Moreover, they are deeply intertwined with aesthetic experience because, when they operate felicitously, they inherently respond sensitively to environmental changes and challenges.

2. *Habitual practices as a source of aesthetic experience*

My thesis is that, far from being a-aesthetic or anti-aesthetic, *habitual practices can be a source of rewarding aesthetic experiences*. In fact, we not only derive pleasure from everyday activities and experiences (see Haapala [2005]; Saito [2017]), but we are inclined to weave these aesthetic experiences of ordinary practices into our habitual lifestyles: the very ordinariness of an experience becomes aesthetically valuable precisely when we relish the rhythm of daily routines. This value complements the aesthetic qualities of everyday landscapes and objects, such as a cherished coffee cup or a vintage stereo system¹. In other terms, an artifact that is part of our ordinary routines can be aesthetically appreciated precisely because of this habituation.

This view is not new. It holds a crucial place in the aesthetics of 18th-century Britain (Szécsényi [2022]). Joseph Addison suggested that a routine activity, such as an evening walk, could evoke a «state of bliss and happiness» (Bond [1965]: 476) and that almost any element in one's surroundings could elicit pleasure. As Richard Steele (1671-1729) articulated, we are naturally predisposed «to receive a certain delight in all we hear and see» (Bond [1965]: 421).) – a propensity that is judicious to cultivate by indulging in «innocent

pleasures» (Bond [1965]: vol. 3, 539), hence fostering habits of self-enjoyment. This mindset accentuates the joy of the ordinary, finding satisfaction in habitual interactions with objects, places, and people.

3. *Habits as causes of aesthetic value?*

Elaborating on the previous considerations, it can be argued that *habits themselves determine the aesthetic value of experience*. This idea has been articulated by Steno Tedeschi (1881-1911) in the early 1900s. A cousin of the Italian novelist Italo Svevo (1861-1928), Tedeschi developed an aesthetic proposal that engaged with representatives of the Grazer Schule's aesthetics. His thesis is that habit is the cause of attributing beauty, or aesthetic value, to objects, places and person (Tedeschi 1907; 1909a; 1909b).

A garment fashioned according to a recent fashion is initially deemed unattractive, but gradually [...] it acquires, through suggestion, value and hence beauty in our eyes. (Tedeschi [1907]: 10; my transl.)

A city that was initially indifferent to us but in which we stayed for an extended period will, over time, become dear to us; [...] in general, places, things, people that are not distinguished by any inherent value become precious to us simply out of habit. (Tedeschi [1909]: 10; my transl.)

Thus, we perceive the building we see every day as beautiful, as contemporary everyday aestheticians assert, precisely because we see it every day, on a habitual basis. This perception would be due to the fact that the effort to grasp it perceptually decreases, making the experience increasingly enjoyable. Similarly, a melody that initially seems odd and dissonant becomes aesthetically valuable with familiarity, as the effort to perceive it – to have a holistic representation of it – lessens. Thus, objects we become accustomed to seem aesthetically normal (and, therefore, good) compared to unfamiliar ones.

In a nutshell, repeated exposure to phenomena makes them familiar, and therefore aesthetically enjoyable. Yet Tedeschi realizes that habituation can also result in a dulling of sensitivity, thus obstructing aesthetic enjoyment. When the aesthetic aspect is not due to the appreciation of forms but to the feelings evoked in the observer, habit is the cause of this dulled aesthetic enjoyment (Raspa [2014]):

Habit dulls, numbs feelings, which, upon continuous, uninterrupted repetition, find no resonance in our emotional strings. The sentimental premise that shook us so profoundly before the habit now leaves us cold, insensitive, accustomed. (Tedeschi [1907a]: 13; my transl.)

Thus, on the one hand, habit seems essential for aesthetic experience, while on the other, it seems to hinder it. If the habitual experience – be it perceptual,

imaginative, or emotional – involves a particular activity, especially an attentional activity, its repetition refines this activity, resulting in aesthetic pleasure. If, instead, it involves mere passive exposure to a representation, it results in a habituation that diminishes its aesthetic scope.

This is the aesthetic version of the so-called «double law of habit», observed by many philosophers (among others: Hume, Butler, Maine de Biran, Ravaisson; see Piazza [2018]: ch. 5; Portera [2021]: 53-59). According to this law, (a) on the one hand, habit weakens, leading to habituation, the (passive) experience of sensation (indeed, repeated exposure to the same stimulus decreases the reaction to its impact); (b) on the other hand, habit strengthens sensitivity for the active exercise of perception, judgment, and sensorimotor patterns (indeed, the voluntary repeated practice of action sequences, like playing patterns on a musical instrument or driving maneuvers, reduces the effort and even the explicit will of the action).

Thus, (a) while a habit acquired passively through forced repetition would lead to the anaesthetization of the corresponding experience, (b) a consciously exercised habit would lead to heightened sensitization. This sensitization is, in itself, an aesthetic trait of the habit. This suggests that the relationship between habits and aesthetic experience is characterized by inherent ambiguity and that it is untrue that habit always hinders aesthetic experience. In fact, habit exercised attentively is a condition of aesthetic enjoyment.

4. *Passivity in habits and aesthetic experience*

However, the aesthetic experience can also be seen as something beyond the individual's active control. Indeed, it seems plausible to argue that the condition for an effective aesthetic experience is its occurrence to the experiencer in a surprising manner: it is an overwhelming experience that involves and captivates the subject unexpectedly, unforeseeably, and in a way that cannot be actively controlled and steered. The aesthetic experience occurs when we are surprised by a spontaneous feeling of wonder, of which, so to speak, we are spectators – involved and participating spectators, of course – rather than active initiators (see Bertinetto [2022]: 156 f.).

Interestingly, habits too, when functioning regularly, in a certain sense seem to happen to the individual rather than being guided by them (see Pelgreffi [2018]). When we act habitually, we act *mindlessly*, or, as it were, under the guidance of an autopilot. Rather than being under the conscious control of what we do, we undergo habitual behavior, although, usually, when something strange, irregular, or innovative occurs, we regain conscious control of the habit underlying our actions, we thematize it, and perhaps we change our behavior. If, as I will elaborate

in the following section, a virtuous habit is such that it can plastically adapt to the changing environment, transforming or giving way to other habits, then a well-functioning habit, given a certain environmental situation, is a habit which acts smoothly and fluidly. We participate in its flow without exercising consciously and rigidly active control: we follow it spontaneously.

Hence, another argument supporting the compatibility of habit and aesthetic experience – an argument which is informed by the phenomenological tradition and its recent progress – relates precisely to a potentially meaningful analogy between the aesthetic and habitual experiences as *passive* dimensions of human behavior; that is, experiences that are, at least in part, passively endured rather than actively performed.

On the one hand, aesthetic experience can be understood as an event that we undergo, rather than actively create. Although we might set the preconditions (such as attending a concert or museum), the actual aesthetic experience remains largely out of our control. Aesthetic experience entails a deep immersion/absorption in one's actions or unfolding events to the point of *self-forgetfulness* (Høffding, Roald [2019]; Mäcklin [2021]). This immersion leads to a state of enrapture, and this inherent passivity appears to be central to the aesthetic aspect of agency. This *passive agency* distinctly marks the exercise of aesthetic creativity in practices characterized by flow or fluency.

On the other hand, this *flow dimension* also appears to be a key aspect of agency guided by habits (see Lanzirotti [2020]; Miyahara et al. [2020]). When habits work well and smoothly we perform actions in a state of *flow*, that is, without explicitly directing them and without thematizing what we are doing: it feels as though we are merely observers of our own behavior. Habits guide us, rather than being actions of which we are thematically aware².

This would seem to suggest that the habitual experience, precisely because of its habitual nature that well organizes and regulates our attunement with the natural and social environment, can be a source of satisfaction: a source of aesthetic-type satisfaction and well-being, in the sense that we enjoy the harmony and rhythm of a behavior that makes sense under the conditions of its practice.

5. *The aesthetic origin of habits*

These reflections pave the way to a further argumentative step: the view that the close connection between habit and aesthetic experience is rooted in the idea that habits themselves have an aesthetic origin and functioning (see Portera [2020; 2021]; Bertinetto [2023a]). At first glance, this thesis may appear unconventional. However, it can be substantiated by drawing upon a concept of habit originally formulated by John Dewey. Dewey [1922] posits that hab-

its encompass not only mechanical routines but also dynamic, adaptable, and intelligent methods of life organization. Habits are not merely routines generated by, and comprising, the (almost) automatic and unconscious repetition of behavioral patterns – (stable) skills/dispositions by which humans engage with the world in an unreflective, unconscious, and unintentional (mindless) manner (Dreyfus [2002]). Rather, habits are practical forms of (organizing) life that can be more or less rigid and repetitive or elastic/plastic, changeable and intelligent, i.e., capable of adapting to the circumstances in which they operate (see Levine [2012])³. Accordingly, when healthy, habits are effective means of orchestrating the interaction between individuals and their environment (both natural and social). They are shaped through responses to environmental affordances (Noë [2009]; Gibson [1979]; Chemero [2003]) and are sustained by the (inter)actions they facilitate, as noted by Aristotle ([2011]; Di Paolo et al. [2017]). This perspective acknowledges that habits can be simultaneously repetitive and adaptable. However, even intelligent habits can become rigid, evolving into purely mechanical, repetitive behavioral routines beyond our control. Conversely, the tendency towards fixation can be mitigated by disengaging from the automatic pilot mode when needed.

The capacity to adapt felicitously to environmental affordances can be seen as an essential factor in the very formation of habits. In fact, their acquisition appears to involve a refinement process, including the capacity to respond effectively and adaptively to the environment. As Luigi Pareyson (1958-1959) noted, it is not the mere repetition of the same gesture that cultivates a habit. Instead, habits (or at least certain habits) are formed through a process wherein gestures become increasingly precise, more attuned to situational and environmental specifics. Felicitous responses to environmental affordances shape perceptual, sensory-motor, cognitive, affective abilities that, in turn, scaffold, organize, and regulate our behavior. In essence, the pleasure obtained from successfully adapting to environmental conditions encourages the reiteration of such behavior in a way that is attuned to new affordances, thus establishing a (plastic) behavioral pattern which is the more efficacious (intelligent and virtuous) the more it embodies adaptability, by cultivating a (meta)habit of responsive sensitivity and attentiveness to specific environmental affordances and needs (Magri [2019]): from basic needs, such as feeding, to educational and cultural development. This refinement of habit through the (meta)habit of responsive attention to the particularities of the situation is a habit of responsively and sensitively adapting habitual behavior and can be considered an aesthetic process.

One can argue that habits are shaped and acquired aesthetically, as their acquisition and development demand attentiveness, sensitive and plastic adaptation, and enjoyment (or discomfort): enjoying (the success of) a behavior, gesture, action, or ordinary practice – such as making coffee or squeezing oranges every

morning – while adapting it to changing contingent situations, is foundational for forming a (good) habit. At the core of habit formation, there appears to be the savoring of a gesture or behavior that, due to its aesthetic satisfaction, is reiterated by the agent and refined in response to environmental challenges and opportunities to make it more aesthetically satisfying or pleasing.

6. *Aesthetic habits*

To the view developed so far one might object that emphasizing an alleged aesthetic origins of habits does not shed much light on the relationship between habit and aesthetic experiences and practices. In response to this, I contend that aesthetic experiences, both within the realm of art and beyond, are contingent upon, and scaffolded, by habits. As Ernst Gombrich (1979) argues, our perceptions are governed by habits that organize experience through patterns, thereby building predictive mechanisms and generating expectations (Clark [2016]). This is evident in the phenomenon known as «perceptual narrowing» (Richards [2022]: 108): our sensorial systems tune out actual sensory inputs and lose sensitivity to unexperienced stimuli. Repeated exposure to specific perceptual patterns – be they visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, or gustatory – leads to the development of perceptual habits. These habits, on one hand, ease the perception of analogous patterns, creating experiential expectations, and on the other hand, obstruct the perception of divergent patterns and structures. As remarked by Gombrich, the order of experience is based on the strength and tenacity of such perceptual habits. Regular exposure to certain perceptual patterns engenders perceptual habits that empower us to grasp and appreciate the organization of forms. Consequently, the habitual exposure to artifacts (for example, movies and pictorial or photographic images, but also particular kinds of music, etc.) that promote specific perceptual patterns can lead to a different organization of our perceptual experience, that is, changes in our perceptual habits (see Fingerhut [2020]).

Elaborating on this view, it may be proposed that aesthetic practices are manifestations of habits and patterns of perception, imagination, cognition, and agency that have become sedimented through repeated exposure: *aesthetic habits*. These are patterns of behavior that both constrain and enable aesthetic performances and experiences. It might be for this reason that Tedeschi posited that *habits engender beauty*.

Acquired through sustained immersion in aesthetic and artistic experiences, aesthetic habits play a multifaceted role. First and foremost, they foster aesthetic expectations and shape expressive-aesthetic styles of behavior. In this regard the notion of *style* deserves a special consideration. *Style* is «a quintessential aesthetic phenomenon» (Noë [2023]: 143). It is an organization of perceptual patterns

that provide regularity and recognizability – «To have a style [...] is to inhabit a visible way of doing something» (Noë [2023]: 143) – and is in itself an aesthetic trait of behavior and action, as well as of artifacts and works of art. As such, it defines the perceptually recognizable features that characterize the organization of the perceptual experience of reality and the expressiveness of persons, communities, aesthetic practices, artistic genres and artworks (Merleau-Ponty [2012]: 153, 174, 177, 208-222, 382 *passim*). Moreover, the incorporation and expression of a style involve the acquisition of skills that, by responding through training and corrections to the affordances of the natural and social environment, become habitual, shaping aesthetic values and preferences, thereby becoming normative for aesthetic experience and agency (see Boncompagni [2020]: 185); see Noë [2023]: 149). As such, styles are, on one hand, (expressions of) aesthetic habits of perception, agency, cognition, and imagination: they form the recognizable kinetic and expressive⁴ qualities that characterize individual behavior, as well as the highly regarded values and typical patterns of thinking that delineate their character⁵. On the other hand, styles are also aesthetic habits that shape and establish normative standards for aesthetic practices, including artistic traditions, genres, and movements (see Dewey [1934]: 264-265).

Beyond their expressive manifestation in styles, aesthetic habits exert a broader influence on both the production and the reception of art, encompassing its the creation, enjoyment, and appreciation. They cultivate proficiency and enhance sensitivity across various facets of aesthetic agency. Furthermore, the context-specific exercise of aesthetic agency – including perception, imagination, cognition, as well as creation and performance – influences aesthetic habits, aiding in their evolution and transformation. The scope of aesthetic habits is extensive. It spans from perceptual habits, performing and creative skills, expressive gestures, and stylistic orientations to preferences in art, fashion, cuisine, décor, travel, and beyond. The formation of these habits relates to our engagement with aesthetic/artistic practices, aesthetic tools and technologies, cultural traditions, etc.

Aesthetic habits are formed both actively and passively. They may be cultivated deliberately, for example, to develop or enhance specific perceptual and performing skills – such as attending certain types of concerts to deepen one's appreciation of a particular music genre. However, habits can also arise inadvertently through the repetition of certain satisfying experiences, which may then take on a normative role in shaping our actions and aesthetic perceptions. For instance, one might frequently attend concerts of a specific musical genre, influenced by the enjoyment of companionship with friends who share this interest. Over time, this genre evolves into a normative benchmark for the individual's musical taste, becoming a part of their «aesthetic self» (Fingerhut et al. [2021]).

Regardless of how an aesthetic habit is formed – intentionally or unintentionally – the central point remains: our aesthetic engagement with the world, wheth-

er through artistic creation or aesthetic appreciation, is informed and shaped by our aesthetic habits. Thus, it is an oversimplification to regard aesthetic experience solely as an unexpected event that contrasts with ordinary experiences and habitual behavior. In fact, the possibility of an aesthetic experience relies on the perceptual and performing abilities as well as cultural frameworks that shape an individual's aesthetic sensibilities within specific socio-material and historical milieus. For example, those not attuned to perceiving quarter tones may overlook the subtle nuances of Indian classical music. Similarly, someone unversed in the radical ethos of avant-garde art may struggle to appreciate its innovative forms and expressions. This underscores the importance of habits in enabling genuine aesthetic experiences. In line with Tedeschi's perspective, the occurrence of an aesthetic experience and the appreciation of beauty – or what may be described as the aesthetic value or success of an object or event – are dependent upon a developed familiarity with that type of object or event.

7. An objection, and a reply

A critical response to the aforementioned considerations might posit that aesthetic experience is a special, somehow extraordinary event not reducible to the usual daily behavior and that, accordingly, the aesthetic value and impact of efficacious aesthetic practices do not reside in their accommodation within our routine aesthetic habits, but rather in their capacity to stir and disrupt the established aesthetic habits of the appreciators. Consider, for example, avant-garde art, radical musical improvisation, and street art: the actualization of their aesthetic experience is hindered by entrenched, conventional, traditional aesthetic habits and necessitates the challenge or transcendence of such habits, which are tied to standardized, homogenized artistic and aesthetic practices and are hostile to the challenge of novelty.

This observation is undeniably accurate. Indeed, the peril of rendering our tastes homogenous and rigid, leading to a suffocating aesthetic conformity, is a constant threat. The establishment of an aesthetic habit (perceptual, affective, cognitive, and so forth) renders one attuned to particular patterns while desensitizing to others. In this way, we become habituated to a certain taste, losing the ability to value what deviates from the assimilated aesthetic convention. Yet, some types of innovative aesthetic practices, especially certain kinds of particularly disruptive or revolutionary art, are capable of revealing to us the ossification of our aesthetic and artistic preferences, perhaps inviting or even pushing us to change them.

Nonetheless, it is irrefutable that the appreciation of innovative artistic endeavors does not necessitate the annihilation of all habits, but rather the culti-

vation of different habits. First and foremost, even artistic disruption, including the irreverent, revolutionary, alternative, and nonconformist actions emblematic of the avant-garde, can itself become a prosaic routine, something to which we can become accustomed and that is no longer capable of stimulating relevant aesthetic novelty: as already Adorno (1955) noted, *Neue Musik* swiftly becomes a boring cliché if its aesthetic motivations are not perpetually rejuvenated and reinvigorated. Similarly, so-called *Free* or *Non-idiomatic* musical improvisation – that is, not tied to specific harmonic and melodic stylistic patterns – evolves into a standardized idiom, with its own conventions and clichés if it solidifies into a slogan or an aesthetic dogma, no longer acknowledged as an apt response to the exigencies of a particular cultural milieu (see Goldoni [2022]). In short, countering aesthetic habits that have become mechanical, routine, and cliché can itself become a sclerotic and conformist habit.

Secondly, habit is not solely an impediment to aesthetic experience, or to certain aesthetic experiences. Habits, or at least some habits, are necessary for undergoing aesthetic experiences, even in the case of particularly disruptive, critical, or challenging art. Without adequate aesthetic habits, one cannot aesthetically appreciate artworks that question conventional or conformist modes of aesthetic experience. The appreciation of revolutionary or critical works of art requires different or new aesthetic habits. Cultivating these alternative habits demands a capacity – or indeed, an habit – to perceive and interpret differently, to grasp the essence of the novel, and to react appropriately. This also applies to maintaining the disruptive power of innovative art, which otherwise becomes a new cliché. Rather than the obliteration of all habits, what is imperative in the realm of aesthetic experience is the reinforcement of responsiveness and attentiveness – which, as delineated in Section 5, are intrinsic elements of a virtuous or intelligent habit. Elaborating on this premise, it becomes evident that to abandon ossified aesthetic habits, for instance in order to appreciate disruptive art – and in order to do so in such a way that disruptive art does not itself become another of the conformist aesthetic routines, an aspect of mechanical adjustment to trite and worn aesthetic conventions⁶ – one should foster the positive habit of perceiving and valuing distinctively, i.e. the propensity for developing a fine aesthetic sensitivity in response to the aesthetic demands of the situation.

The general point can be put as follows. Habits enable aesthetic experience; yet, they also constrain and, eventually, even suffocates it. As Shakespeare's Hamlet claims, habit (or custom) is a *monster* because, while it certainly makes actions fluent (and, for this reason at least, is an angel), it also dulls our perceptual sensitivity (and that is why is «of devil»)⁷. Therefore, when it comes to the relation between habits and the aesthetics, it is arguable that balancing advantages and drawbacks is crucial.

On the one hand, it is a widespread belief that when we form a habit, this leads to a reduction in attention towards our movements, actions and perceptions. In turn, this diminished attentiveness can bring about a conformist aesthetic attitude even with respect to aesthetic and artistic practices that, on paper, should, could, or would intend to creatively stir our aesthetic behavior and enrich our aesthetic self with different and unprecedented experiences. Accordingly, one might argue that when attention diminishes, so does our alignment with the specific context and situational opportunities, implying a decreased contribution of aesthetic sensitivity to our overall experience of the world. As we know, this is also what Steno Tedeschi argued: repeated exposure to an emotional-expressive stimulus leads to desensitization and reduces its aesthetic impact, to the point where the factor that triggers it – an artwork or another aesthetic artifact like, e.g., a cloth – ends up leaving us indifferent.

On the other hand, however, as I argued drawing from John Dewey (1922), the incompatibility between habits and aesthetic experience applies only to mechanical habits that solidify into mere repetitions of behavioral patterns, insensitively disconnected from reality and its changes, entrapping agents in routines that stifle creativity. As we have just seen, this can also happen to artistic practices and experiences that make the disruption of what is aesthetically habitual their flag. And yet, it is possible to cultivate intelligent and virtuous habits that enhance attention, sensitivity, and responsiveness to the specifics of the situation. In fact, and importantly, the effective response to each unique situation reinforces the habit itself, making it more fluent and proficient at organizing experiences precisely because of its flexibility in adapting to the situation.

In other words, promoting and invigorating the renewal of aesthetic habits – not solely in terms of refinement but also transformation – is highly advisable, to reinforce their effectiveness in organizing and regulating behavior, making our actions and perceptions fluent and attuned to the situation. This is undeniably a laudable *aesthetic* (meta)habit, which, as we have seen in Section 5, regulates the good formation and proper development of all habits, and indeed is at their origin, and which, all the more so, is particularly required in the realm of aesthetic experience. In the conclusion of this article, I will briefly elaborate on this point.

8. Conclusion. Improvisation and brief habits

The reflections carried out so far in this article seem to suggest that within the realm of aesthetic experience in general (not limited to art), it is necessary to educate and refine – making it a habit – the attitude of attentiveness and sensitivity to the specifics of the situation in which our agency is exercised, as it seems to be at the origin of habit formation itself. The issue of aesthetic habits, therefore,

involves the important theme of aesthetic education, an education that must cultivate the habit of plastically renewing habits.

Furthermore, this habit, or (meta)habit as I have termed it, appears to be normatively opportune for the proper functioning of our aesthetic experience and agency. However, the issues concerning the relationship between habit and aesthetic education, as well as between habit and aesthetic normativity, undoubtedly require further reflection, which I cannot fully develop within the confines of this article⁸. What I can do, in concluding this article, is discuss a crucial aspect of these issues, the *capacity for improvisation* that habits seem to require in order to be aesthetically felicitous and virtuous.

The point is as follows. The activation of habit that is aesthetically virtuous because it feeds back into its own patterned structure, thereby making it attuned to its situation and appropriate, is inherently improvisational: improvisation is not just permitted by the habit (as Pierre Bourdieu, seems to suggest, by defining the *Habitus* as the «durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations»; Bourdieu [1980]: 57); rather, improvisation is required to ensure that the habit remains good, intelligent, effective, and sensitive. Human proclivity to vary and adapt one's own habitual schemata of behavior by inventing new ways of merging the old competence and the new repetition can be understood in terms of an improvisational use of habit (see Pelgreffi [2020]).

Merleau-Ponty ([1967]: 120-121) illustrates this point with the examples of the organist and the typist, who embody habitual patterns of action that allow the execution of movements and gestures in an automatically fluid manner, precisely because they are capable of plastic modification and invention based on the unforeseeable demands of the situation. Indeed, habitual patterns guide an improvisational exercise of the related actions, which in turn, plastically modify the patterns, adapting them to new tasks and situations. The attunement of the habit in relation to the situation of its exercise is therefore a plastic *improvisational adaptation* that makes the habit appropriate to the specific use, by making it aesthetically sensitive and attentive. Hence the activation of habits makes sense not based on abstract criteria, but by generating behavioral patterns or forms capable of acquiring normative traction, «as we go along» (see Miyahara et al. [2020]; Bella [2020]).

To reiterate: the inadequacy of an aesthetic habit – or the aesthetic inadequacy of a habit – stemming from a dulled sensitivity, does not necessitate the eradication of all habits in order to facilitate a successful aesthetic experience. Rather, what is needed to enable such aesthetic experiences that can invoke wonder and elation is the reinforcement of habits' responsiveness and attentiveness. Overcoming a stagnant aesthetic habit involves and necessitates the enhancement of the good habit of perceiving and appreciating differently, *the habit of improvising new patterns of behavior*, or rather *the habit of improvising an aesthetic sensitivity in response*

to *situational affordances* – e.g. those generated by unexpected artistic practices that may be surprising perhaps simply because they originate from cultures different from our own. The aesthetic otherness that clashes with cultural and aesthetic habits rooted in our habitual environment (Bertinetto [2024]) can therefore be a stimulus to renew our habits, awakening the (meta)habit of attentiveness to what the situation demands.

More generally, cultivating the ability to renew the habits related to aesthetic experience, especially by refining our sensitivity to the varied and nuanced aspects of artworks and other aesthetic phenomena, is advisable. This cultivation helps prevent the dulling of our capacity for satisfying aesthetic experiences and ensures that we continue to be surprised by the diverse facets that can capture our attention. Such an attitudinal resource is fundamental for engaging with aesthetic experiences, which, as suggested in Section 3, possess appreciative and affective dimensions that are often surprising, overwhelming, and unexpected. They can indeed be seen as forms of experiential improvisation. Therefore, the (meta)habit of improvising upon our habits is virtuous because, all things being equal, it allows for a satisfying aesthetic resonance with the world. In fact, the improvisational practice of habits, including aesthetic ones, sustains and enhances their efficacy, fluidity, and aesthetic resonance⁹. Consequently, habits are not inherently obstacles to the creativity of aesthetic experiences; rather, they support our aesthetic life and experiences, which are rooted in *aesthetic sensitivities that are both habitual and improvisational*.

Undoubtedly, as I previously noticed, the risk of homogenizing our taste in a negative way, the risk of *cliché*, is ever-present. This risk can, however, be reduced, if not entirely avoided, by developing and enhancing the aesthetic (meta)habit of adapting, refining and changing our aesthetic habits through forms of experiential and experimental improvisation. In this regard, in the field of aesthetic experience, we can welcome the suggestion, evoked by the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi and by German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, to form *briefhabits* (see Leopardi [1817-1832]: vol. I: 827, 919; Nietzsche [1882/1887]: § 295, 167f.)¹⁰. *Habits*: that is, patterns of behavior that organize and give shape, coherence, and meaning to the experience. Yet, *briefhabits*: this means habits inclined to fade and transform improvisationally to aesthetically accommodate the changes of the world we live in, thereby avoiding rigidity and stagnation. Brief habits thus have an «ecological nature», as they are

capacities to quickly establish new productive practices (and to quickly dispose of them) as environmental stimuli change, [...] «improvising» based on the random variations that present themselves from time to time. All this, mind you, is due to the solid baggage of past habits that [the aesthetic agent] has acquired: one does not improvise to improvise, but rather becomes accustomed – with practice and exercise – to dance improvisationally with the contingencies to which we are exposed. (Portera [2023]: 22)

Brief habits are virtuous and desirable because they can incorporate the ever-changing environment as Dewey ([1922]: 15) suggests. Furthermore, as Leopardi observed ([1817-1832]: vol. I, 966, 919), such brief habits are indicative of creative talent and aesthetic genius, which are characterized by a tendency to frequently alter habits in order to adapt improvisationally to varying circumstances.

After all, in art, as in life, an *effective style is a lively one*: a pattern that, although recognizable, is capable of renewing itself on every different occasion. Usually, it is only *ex-post*, when the existential and/or cultural event has concluded its course, that it is possible to recognize in different works the same style (as when only with time can we recognize the style of an era over time, for example in cinema or music). When style, as the expressive dimension of habit, is put into practice, its manifestations are never identical; this is because style shapes itself improvisationally in each instantiation. This aligns with Aristotle's conception that habit is formed by the very actions it enables (see Section 5), indicating that habit is a process of/in continuous transformation. Getting attuned to brief habits, then, is a way to aesthetically respond to the fact that a habit may be suitable at one moment and inappropriate at another. Moreover, this attunement to brevity should not be seen as a rigid, unchanging rule; sometimes, the maintenance of a long-standing habit may be the most fitting response to the given circumstances. This principle holds true in the aesthetic domain as well.

However, a more adequate understanding of the issue requires examining the relationship between habits and aesthetic normativity, a topic to which another article is devoted (Bertinetto [2024]). In this paper I aimed to argue for the relevance of habits to aesthetic experience, including the idea that there are specific aesthetic habits: habits that foster, even by constraining their operational and normative scope, certain aesthetic practices, activities and experiences. Certainly, much more can be said to explore this topic further, but I hope to have proposed at least a promising line of research¹¹.

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Notes

- 1 The aesthetic experience might even overshadow any negative aesthetic properties of an object (like the habitual clutter on my desk) when they suggest a gratifying existential rhythm that is inherently pleasurable – say, a consistent workflow.
- 2 Nonetheless, we can retake control over habits and intervene for changing them. Therefore, passivity does not preclude habitual behavior from having intentional and normative significance (see Bertinetto [2024]).
- 3 On these two main views of habits see Carlisle [2014]: 3.
- 4 More generally, it is plausible to believe that emotions, including their artistic expression, have a practical-cultural dimension and are thus habits that also take shape within artistic

practices. On this topic, particularly in relation to expressiveness in musical improvisation, see Bertinetto (2023b).

- 5 This point is elaborated in relation to Husserl by Sheets-Johnstone (2014).
- 6 This conformist aesthetic attitude into which one can easily fall by conforming to conventional taste can be understood as expressing a relevant aspect of Martin Heidegger's «das Man». This concept is often translated as «the They» in English, which describes the anonymous way in which people can be absorbed by conventional norms and social expectations, losing their authentic personal engagement with life (see Heidegger [1927]: 163-179).
- 7 Shakespeare ([2004]: 193-194): «That monster custom, who all sense doth eat, / Of habits devil, is angel yet in this, / That to the use of actions fair and good / He likewise gives a frock or livery / That aptly is put on».
- 8 I have discussed the relationship between habits and aesthetic normativity in Bertinetto (2024). I will devote a future work to the (of course, very Deweyan) issue of habits and aesthetic education.
- 9 On resonance, aesthetics and improvisation, see Matteucci (2022).
- 10 On Leopardi's and Nietzsche's view of habits see Portera (2023).
- 11 Previous versions of this article have been used for talks I gave at the conference *Aesthetic Experience: Philosophical, Psychological and Neuroscientific Perspectives* (Fondazione Amendola, Turin, November 2023), as well as at a series of Japanese universities (Kanazawa, Sapporo, Waseda and Sophia in Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto) during a research stay in 2024, generously supported by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Sciences. I would like to thank those who attended my talks for their valuable comments, questions, criticisms, and suggestions. |

