

Before *Art as Experience*: Dewey's theory of perception and qualitative thought between aesthetic and linguistic practices

Gioia Laura Iannilli

University of Bologna

gioialaura.iannilli2@unibo.it

Abstract In this paper I will present a fragment of a wider research project aimed at reconstructing John Dewey's aesthetic theory of perception using and correlating writings spanning the end of the 19th and the first three decades of the 20th century, before the publication of *Art as Experience*. Specifically, I will analyze relevant aspects of the 1930 essay *Qualitative Thought* emphasizing aspects that bring to the fore Dewey's interest in the relationship between aesthetic and linguistic practices through the lens of the core concept of 'familiarity'.

Keywords: Qualitative Thought; Aesthetic and Linguistic Practices; Familiarity; Assimilation

Received 30/09/2022; accepted 22/12/2022.

0. An attempt to reconstruct John Dewey's aesthetic theory of perception

A growing interest has been manifested, over the years, in John Dewey's take on language, starting, for instance, from the critical article authored by Black (1962), until very recent research carried out by Dreon (2022), where the scholar develops the concept of 'enlanguaged experience'.

My contribution revolves around a very specific aspect that has been tackled by Dewey and that, as far as I am aware, hasn't been yet addressed explicitly, especially in connection with the topic of aesthetic and linguistic practices: familiarization processes. Using this lens, I believe provides one, hopefully perspicuous, strategy to reconstruct Dewey's wider aesthetic theory of perception in terms of a passive-active nexus between perceiving-sensing-expressing. And this topic is precisely at the center of my current research project, which consists in reconstructing John Dewey's aesthetic theory of perception using writings spanning the end of the 19th century¹ and the first three decades of the 20th century, before the publication of *Art as Experience*.

In the framework of this article, I will focus only on a portion of this wider research project, namely on the 1930 paper *Qualitative Thought* (henceforth *QT*), for a number of reasons. First, 1930 is interestingly the year before Dewey gave his 1931-32 *William James Lectures* at Harvard, entitled "Art and Esthetic Experience", which notoriously constitute the basis for *Art as Experience*. In 1930 Dewey was, in all probability, already pondering the contents of and even actually drafting his future lectures, and this is quite

¹ In this regard see Iannilli (2021).

clearly testified by the many hints at the immediate, qualitative or aesthetic experience he provides in *QT*; Second, it is worth focusing on *QT* because here Dewey addresses aspects that bring to the fore the radical connection of aesthetic and linguistic practices: he carries out a study aimed at emphasizing the relevance of and at reconstructing the dynamics in which a specific ability, namely a qualitative thought (of which the «judgment of the esthetic expert» and «logic of the artistic construction» are great examples) unfolds, in relation with «the meaning of regulation by an underlying and pervasive quality» (Dewey 1930: 246). Dewey delves into the question of how to preserve and even to intensify the perceived, or sensed qualitateness of a situation while expressing it in a (non-necessarily) propositional form; Third: he describes the way a qualitative thought proceeds in terms of something that runs on what I call ‘the spectrum of familiarity’, namely something – a horizon of meaningful practices – spanning ‘the familiar-family resemblance-problematicity’. This spectrum and its management are particularly relevant because they epitomize the dynamics through which the organism-environment transactions described by Dewey can become meaningful.

*QT*², while being one fruitful instance of Dewey’s attention to aesthetic matters before *Art as Experience*, is also just one step in the wider journey aimed at reconstructing and shedding a different light on Dewey’s aesthetic theory of perception. So, even though there is a larger, more intricately intertwined of publications, preparatory studies and events that deserve being taken into consideration in this framework, due to the limited space allowed by this article, I will have to defer to another occasion their further correlation and only indicate, in the last section, what the next step of this journey will be.

1. A starting point: experience’s qualitateness

Dewey’s theoretical efforts are fundamentally aimed at philosophically rendering the complexity of experience in all its richness. Methodologically, this is reflected in at least one exemplary way in which he carries out such a task. Namely, in showing how aspects that are seemingly ontologically opposed, or that are at least generally assumed to be so – having been hypostatized –, are in fact equally involved parts of a dynamic and continuous processuality; elements equally belonging to an internally graded spectrum of which at most they can be described as extremes.

Dewey, at the same time, is interested in describing the different degrees of conspicuousness internal to such a processuality. He seeks to account for those aspects that stem from an operative and implicit background, that is, from within an experiential horizon of which they are meaningful saliences. Dewey aims to precisely capture the *dynamics of emergence* of the latter.

The question at the heart of the 1930 essay is, indeed, that regarding an implicitly operative experiential meaningfulness (or qualitateness) which, insofar as it is a qualitative thought being involved, can become the subject of inferential procedures that perform attempts at making it explicit, at discerning it. The kind of propositionality resulting from these attempts that interests Dewey, however, is not reducible to mere denotation, or assertion, since these are propositional forms tendentially detached from the aforementioned qualitative, operative background. Instead, what Dewey is interested in is how this latter can be managed as to form an *expression* that not necessarily, but *possibly*, be a propositional articulation which is controlled, regulated, and configured by

² For an analysis of the ‘psychological background’ of *Art as Experience* in particular in connection with *Qualitative Thought* see Shusterman (2010).

the background itself. In this context, as we shall see, a particularly pivotal role is assigned by Dewey to the predicative, interjective and evaluative dimensions of experience. Even more significantly, in Dewey's attempt here to grasp the dynamics underlying the emergence of a certain meaningfulness, an exemplary role is ascribed to aesthetic perception and artistic production as not necessarily propositional ways of enacting such emergence.

It seems useful, then, to set a starting point for the analysis of this text, selected among those preceding the publication of *Art as Experience*, in a couplet of notions that define a polarity within which such dynamics of emergence unfold: density and discreteness. They represent the extremes of a *continuum* in which quality and quantity, implicitness and explicitness, experiential situations and inferential objects co-constitute each other in significant ways.

The beginning of Dewey's essay coincides with a peremptory statement, given the three relevant points that are recalled, namely: the immediacy of experience, its qualitiveness, and the management of the latter through a commitment to comply with a certain regulativity that characterizes it (Dewey 1930: 243).

As it has been mentioned above, Dewey's goal is to do justice to the repleteness and complexity of the experiential dimension as such. However, and this is a distinctive feature of Dewey's argumentative strategy, he pursues such a philosophical program by bringing to the reader's attention, at times almost disarmingly, some seemingly trivial aspects that can hardly be controverted in their immediacy. In the case of the crystal-clear opening statement, Dewey maintains that that on which everything else is based, that from which everything grows, develops, to which both 'common' and scientific knowledge necessarily refer, is the qualitative world of lived experience, being the complex of transactions occurring between organisms and environments. Dewey argues that, despite the pervasive qualitiveness that fundamentally informs this dimension of immediate experience, various forms of thought or conceptual elaboration, whether philosophical or scientific ones, actually sclerotize it, by locating on the one hand the world in its quantitative and mechanical objectivity, and on the other hand the world in its qualitative and experiential subjectivity. In other words, Dewey delivers a (recurrent, thus usual) critique of metaphysics and epistemology insofar as, as Mackenzie (2016: 23) has well put it,

Metaphysics is concerned with the ontological status of qualitative objects as compared with the objects of scientific study, perhaps treating qualitative objects as mere appearances or attempting some kind of explanatory reduction to the acceptable objects of the scientific image. Epistemology and related fields are concerned with the actual and possible cognitive relations between the (now merely subjective and mental) qualities of experience and the objective, non-qualitative world.

This criticality also applies to a certain acceptance of the notion of 'common sense', which is called «ambiguous» by Dewey. The notion of common sense to which Dewey directs his critique is not that which pertains to a thought concerned with actions and their consequences or a thought that has to do with objects inherent in the practices, vicissitudes, and problems of life, which in itself is very close to the conception of qualitative thought proposed by Dewey. The problematic meaning of common sense he refers to is that which instead designates and is appealed to in order to corroborate established traditions, namely, that which is «given». This is a point of great relevance to the discourse carried out by Dewey because it sheds light on a more radical problem, namely, a misconception of the notion of givenness. Dwelling on this aspect allows

Dewey to further clarify the nature of the pervasive or immanent qualitative background he speaks of, which, in fact, according to the terms Dewey uses to describe it, might well be equated with what is generally considered «given» (Dewey 1930: 254).

The use of the term given is acceptable to Dewey insofar as it simply indicates the immediate and even «brute» operativity of qualitiveness, without in any way implying the designation of something that ‘receives’ (the senses, mind, thought, consciousness, etc.) and something that ‘gives’. Such a designation is, actually, one that is in fact made whenever an attributive and classificatory doctrine of propositionality is advocated, and from which – following Dewey – a properly ‘emergentist’ approach should instead be kept quite distinct (Dewey 1930: 245).

Moreover, it should be noted that in this Deweyan text the notion of givenness appears in two main forms. On the one hand, Dewey resorts to the properly English term «given» (Dewey 1930: 253). On the other hand, however, this notion also occurs in the form of the Latinism «datum-data». The latter renders in a particularly effective way the distinction between a qualitative whole, that is, «the original datum», and the specific quantifications that emerge from it, which, however, for Dewey, possess legitimacy insofar as they are understood in these relative terms, and not as fixed and isolated entities (Dewey 1930: 250).

However, we are not dealing here with an immutable and extrinsic entity, but with something which, on the one hand, is natural and indeterminate («brutely», as Dewey says, present and widespread) and which, on the other – contextually – is constituted and regulative (it assumes and confers prominence through a cooperation of energies). Insofar as this is not acknowledged, and thus qualitative objects and considerations are neglected, there are at least two implications to be drawn concerning aesthetic, moral and political issues. Indeed, the failure to acknowledge a pervasive and meaningful qualitative background results in such issues being (at least implicitly) considered to have no logical foundation or, even if they are subjected to some kind of intellectual analysis, to be brought back, and thus confined, according to a ‘principle of economy’ (Dewey refers to the «economic man»), within logical categories generally considered to be the only ‘legitimate’ ones, which are supposed to make them, so to speak, (quasi-)measurable subjects (Dewey 1930: 245).

More specifically, in the first case, one would resort to the idea that phenomena pertaining to aesthetic, moral, etc., issues should be completely ascribed to ultimate ineffable entities; in the second case, the related intellectual activity would be reduced to a mechanical enucleation of isolated entities or properties (Dewey 1930: 258).

2. A second starting point: *situation and object*

The artificiality of such inferential procedures is, for Dewey, patent. For they suggest a necessarily dichotomous view of experience by contrasting, at least in the case of the passage just referred to, subjectivity and objectivity, as well as non-measurability and some kind of ‘measurability’. Instead, what Dewey intends to explore and demonstrate is how there is an underlying coherence, i.e., an immanent logic, in our management of the meaningfulness of things, and thus in the distinctions we make, as we shall see shortly, precisely by virtue of a certain control and regulativity exercised by the quality of the «subject-matter» as a whole. This is an organic cooperation of functions that has varying degrees of conspicuousness and development. The ‘subject-matter’ is that which ‘pushes’ in its complex internal coherence. It is the condition, the environment of the unfolding of experience, the dense *milieu* where we move, with its constraints and facilitations. And it is in these very lines that Dewey summarizes the viewpoint just illustrated with an explicit declaration of intent: «Consideration of the meaning of

regulation by an underlying and pervasive quality is the theme of this article» (Dewey 1930: 246).

One might say that such a declaration actually marks a second starting point in the essay. The first was the one, recalled at the beginning of this analysis, in which the qualitiveness of experience was peremptorily asserted, almost in an effort to draw the reader's attention to the context in which s/he is constantly, operatively situated: the implicit and practical horizon of the lived world. Now Dewey proceeds by thematizing the latter, while proposing to draw a distinction between a «situation» and an «object». A distinction that, in fact, allows him not to resort to the somewhat inconvenient notion of 'givenness', entailing instead processes of organic development in which some significance is expressed (Dewey 1930: 246).

A situation, then, is precisely the 'subject-matter' mentioned by Dewey just above («This larger and inclusive subject-matter is what is meant by the term 'situation'»): an existence that is complex but that at the same time is 'kept together' by a dominant pervasive quality (Dewey 1930: 246).

An object corresponds to some distinction that is made from a situation to which it refers. It is the outcome of an intellectual activity of selective determination and correlation controlled by the situation itself. Here Dewey reiterates an important aspect: from the failure to acknowledge the operative existence of a pervasive quality, i.e., a situation that 'keeps things together', comes the impossibility of accounting for both the logical force of 'objects' and the relationships between them. In light of these considerations Dewey proposes two further points of development in the treatment of the complex (and at the same time simple, we might say) concept of situation. These points concern respectively its character of immediacy and at the same time of mediacy (Dewey 1930: 47-8). On the one hand, the character of immediacy is designated by the dimension of *implicit* operativity of the situation – its irreducible qualitiveness – which, in terms of propositional analysis, corresponds to the universe of discourse of whatever explicitation, or propositional element. It is not something simply *implied*, it is not an allusion of some kind, but it is precisely something that is so pervasive that any explicitation cannot but be a distinction, a discretization of it (thus an object). On the other hand, the character of mediacy is designated by a radical relationality that exists precisely between the very distinctions just mentioned and the situation from which they emerge. Such radicality derives exactly from the fact that the distinctions are always the distinctions *of* the situation, which is therefore their regulative principle, or pervasive element of qualitative control and verification. This regulative principle is, moreover, *sui generis* precisely because it cannot be thematized per se. It coordinates operatively, tacitly; it is what allows us to act without having to explicitly question what is being carried out. This is also why, as Dewey says, we are not aware of it as a clearly nucleable and determinable element, but as something that acts in the background, keeps certain elements together, or shows us the direction when making explicit our considerations, conceptions, ideas, etc.

3. Towards the aesthetic relevance of language

To corroborate and further argue for the relevance of the character of 'immediacy-mediacy' or 'qualitiveness-relationality', Dewey describes the perception of this regulative principle in terms of a) an «impression», of something that is «felt» (clearly foreshadowing what would later be the central conception of aesthetic experience as pervasively controlled by a relational-emotional quality) and then, with due 'anti-Bergsonian' precautions (Dewey 1930: 249), of b) «intuition». As mentioned, Dewey

seeks to describe the dynamics involved in the emergence of a certain meaningfulness and in what follows he provides a first ‘tracing’ of such emergence.

The point, for Dewey, is that, be it felt (namely, something that can be referred to in the terms of a conclusion reached without the explication of its reasons) or intuited (namely, something that has been accepted as an intellectual object) what makes the pervasive and implicitly operative character of the situation in which one moves ‘viscous’, and thus allows for relevant distinctions tending toward the explication of its meaningfulness, 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 (Dewey 1930: 249).

In the case where, on the other hand, qualitateness 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 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, according to Dewey, is what allows this salience to be carried out and elaborated in a more coherent and articulated way.

Dewey then brings the discussion more explicitly on the level of language by treating it from a specifically aesthetic-expressive standpoint. In particular, he mentions those brachylogous interjections that can also take on an exclamative form (which signals a certain intensity of the perceived quality), such as ‘Oh!’, ‘Yes!’, ‘No!’, ‘How beautiful!’, ... which, in their ‘primitivity’ (but not necessarily superficiality or ‘rawness’, since they could be the condensation and the integration of previous experience and exercise and hence possess an intellectual import) provide a simple yet excellent example of qualitative thought in its purest form. They, hence, already are, an articulation, yet an elementary one, of qualitative thought. The refusal, then, to speak of any *consummatory* experience (to which Dewey refers in *QT*, prefiguring with this term the highly renowned formulation of aesthetic experience as «an experience» of *this* kind, or «fully rounded out» in *Art as Experience*) by some, because it is deemed an artificial and even repulsive activity, since words would fail in their attempt to render the repleteness of such an experience, would be further proof that, in its implicitness, the pervasive quality already «speaks so completely for itself» (Dewey 1930: 250). The point, for Dewey, however, is to highlight how it is not thought that fails, but rather language that is insufficient, in particular, when reduced to its propositional function, because «thought so completely grasps the dominant quality that translation into explicit terms gives a partial and inadequate result» (Dewey 1930: 251). In this sense then, again, what is at issue is stressing how it is the dominant quality of the situation that regulates the attempts at coherent distinction or explication that are made, which are neither the emission of mere subjective states nor the supervening of properties external to the situation (Dewey 1930: 250).

In this part of the essay, in fact, Dewey devotes ample attention to the exemplarity of artistic construction (so much so that he defines the artist’s logic as the logic of «qualitative thinking»; cf. Dewey 1930: 251) and of aesthetic perception and appreciation as particularly efficacious intensifications of the qualitative intellectual processes described thus far (Dewey 1930: 251).

Furthermore, here Dewey addresses the question of certain properties which, after an analytical activity (thus in a non-‘primary’, or immediate way: experiential *qua* experiential), are enucleated and classified as ascribable to an artistic-aesthetic construct

(and thus to the quality that pervades it). Such properties, in some cases, can even be derived mathematically, literally measured, or quantified (Dewey 1930: 251).

In pointing out this process of reduction Dewey highlights an aspect that is fundamental to an experience that is properly aesthetic: first-person experience. Without the latter, that is, without an experience that is directly felt, and therefore one's own, referred to by Dewey in the terms of an «independent qualitative apprehension» (Dewey 1930: 251), distinctions relating to the qualitative totality that pervades a work of art, but more generally an aesthetic construct, can only be mere mechanical, or indeed conventional, formulas. And this is a problem that would affect the various actors involved in the aesthetic constellation, from the producer to the perceiver and the critic, or more generally would concern the dynamics of aesthetic appreciation. The emphasis on a dimension of *apprehension* would then seem to designate an activity that is also, in some sense, intellectual, but, more generally, a process whereby something is acquired, learned – apprehended – as well as at the same time enjoyed. Dewey is talking about an ability, which is exemplified by the 'artistic thought', but of which, however, it is not exclusive («Artistic thought is not however unique in this respect but only shows an intensification of a characteristic of all thought»), that characterizes «all non-technical, non-'scientific' thought» (Dewey 1930: 251-2). In doing so he seems to distinguish 'artistic thought' from 'technical thought' and 'scientific thought', reiterating here, as a matter of fact, the pattern that, as I have tried to show in Iannilli (2020: 100-8), can also be found later in *Art as Experience*. My thesis is that such a pattern differentiates an aesthetic know-how from a technical know-how and a technological know-that. A practical ability, which merges knowledge and involvement in the ongoing experiential process, according to the paradigm of exploration (cf. Matteucci 2019: 104). This latter is a paradigm that brings to the fore the passivity-activity nexus central to Dewey, in which orientation in an experiential field is operatively regulated by the trend lines, the modes, the 'hows', that innervate it. However, we shall return to this point later. It is true that the first two forms of competence or ability are called know-how because they share the feature of being an 'operative knowledge' where what is at issue is a level of elaboration of the pervasive qualitateness of the situation that tends to preserve its density. However, they, at the same time, differ in the ways in which past, present and future are 'kept together', or interpolated therein. In the case of the aesthetic know-how, the developmental, incremental, and prospective dimension plays a key role, while in technical know-how, what prevails is rather an established, conventional knowledge that is applied almost automatically to 'solve' a current problem. What then distinguishes a technological know-that, instead, concerns a level of elaboration that, in fact, makes it a knowledge that is not primarily operative (even if it employs codified conventions and techniques), since it performs a true thematization – if not even a true instrumental quantification – of the pervasive qualitateness of the situation.

4. The spectrum of familiarity: aesthetic perception between resistance and non-resistance to assimilation

Dewey, however, is not arranging these abilities into a hierarchy per se, since they are equally part of experiential processes. And the same is true of language, which can be articulated in different modes, all equally pertaining to the experience of human beings: primarily instrumental, labeling, descriptive, and assertive, generally aimed at the handling of life's incumbencies, under certain conditions language can take on a 'denser' connotation, for instance, in its narrative, poetic, and specifically expressive form, namely, in its *stricto sensu* aesthetic articulation. What Dewey is concerned with is highlighting the kind of ability – of qualitative thought – that is most capable of

preserving and intensifying the density of the qualitative situation. And it is clear how it is an ability pertaining to the artistic-aesthetic dimension, which in any case always performs some kind of abstraction with respect to experience as experience. After all, at the very moment pervasive qualitiveness, the situation, the 'subject-matter', 'pushes' and becomes object and thus thought, as thought it must express itself propositionally, and in so doing it necessarily loses its primary density. This is indeed particularly evident in the dimension of propositional judgment as a further configuration of the experiential compagination.

That is the main topic of the second part of the essay.

Dewey's emphasis in these lines on the «subject-predicate» propositional structure and the relational and co-constitutive function of the copula has major implications for the discourse (Dewey 1930: 253). a) It signals the sense of development and growth implied by the qualitative complex that pushes in a certain direction. It indicates a certain intentionality and orientation, an expressiveness (Dewey 1930: 254); b) It signals the selective and at the same time non-falsifying character of the propositions through which one is committed to comply with and pursue that sense of development and growth, which in fact exerts control over propositional³ activity. It indicates an ability to perceive and valorize trend lines (Dewey 1930: 255).

Not least, it also offers Dewey the opportunity to specify his own theory of perception now connoted in an ever more obviously aesthetic sense. The starting point here is the so-called «association of ideas» which, in Dewey's immediatist perspective, should be ruled out. This theory is advocated and justified instead by the classical tradition of empiricism, based on a principle either of physical contiguity or similarity, which would suggest that it is some «conjunction or external identity» that operates a connection between two things. The first principle is not, according to Dewey, sufficient to make a connection, since «there is an indefinite number of particulars contiguous to one another in space and time» (Dewey 1930: 257). The second one is equally insufficiently selective since «saying that two objects are associated *because* they are similar is either to offer the problem as a solution or to attribute causal efficacy to 'similarity' – which is to utter meaningless words» (Dewey 1930: 258). In other terms, in some respect, everything can be similar. «Control», which the principles just described lack, is, on the other hand, as we have seen, fundamental to Dewey, who then indicates, at least tentatively, «*controlled* association» (by a pervasively present and immediate – not external – quality; emphasis added) as the form of qualitative thinking that stands out at the center of his analysis.

Not incidentally, Dewey then again appeals here to the exemplarity of aesthetic judgments, since they seem bound to preserve, more than others, particularly in their 'basic' and 'pre-analytic' form, the qualitative immediacy of the situation (Dewey 1930: 259).

A new element in the discussion, and also of no little historical-philosophical significance for the connections it, as we shall see, generates, is the fact that Dewey directly correlates thought as controlled association with the perception of the expressiveness of a face. Even more interestingly, Dewey references a notion made famous by Ludwig Wittgenstein, namely that of «family resemblance». The latter, however, has been used by other authors, such as Ernst Gombrich (1972: 12-3) who, also in order to downplay the extent of originality attributed to Wittgenstein in this framework, resorts to an example borrowed specifically from Francesco Petrarca (1364:

³ Dewey contrasts a «whole universe», which is unthinkable to be included in a proposition and a «qualitative whole needing statement» in order for it to work, which therefore can be thought and carried out in its necessity (Dewey 1930: 255).

XXIII, 19, 78-94), namely, that relating 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 (Dewey 1930: 260).

The reference here is to an emergence from an underlying qualitative unity that thus takes on aspects that 'are together' in a series by virtue of a proportionality, not attributive, principle of analogy⁴, by virtue of an 'expressive' basis – a *style*, we might say – that they share and that is not itself a determined image (Dewey 1930: 261).

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, that Dewey introduced earlier in the text. In this sense we can speak of a spectrum spanning 'the familiar-family resemblance-problematicity'. Family resemblance 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, as we shall see shortly.

It is, in fact, another term, that becomes more prominent than «controlled association» in the essay's closing lines, namely «assimilation». And this is an aspect of no secondary importance in the light of Dewey's radical critique, particularly intense and more explicit in *Art as Experience*, of associationism (both in the form of the sense data theory and in the form of the empathy theory). While it is indeed true that what Dewey is concerned with is to identify the dynamics of the emergence of meaningfulness, thus even before the latter is distinguished into predicative and propositional structures, it is precisely assimilation which constitutes the basis of such emergence: either in terms of a (productive) resistance to such a quality or of a non-resistance to it.

It implies a similarity that is felt or, again, intuited, in the terms I have explained above. It entails the perception of an expressiveness, starting from which distinctions and thus developments, that is, some form of 'control' exerted by and upon a situation *might*, but not necessarily will, be made explicit. It is, therefore, an 'as-similation', *ad-similatio* or *ad-simulatio*: a process in which experiential components that are operatively involved, but not yet thematically determined, are made similar, to the same degree in which they are experienced within a correspondence, which expresses the overall qualitative texture of the field where they already act as vectors. In expressing this background through their co-operating they bring out, or embody in a 'simulation' that is mimetic personification, a possible criterion (not a content) of similarity, which then can begin to operate and be exercised *also* propositionally. If the content of similarity is a «relation», as Dewey writes, assimilation is a principle of 'relationality', or rather, it is a *relationship*. It can thus manifest itself even with the mere appearance of a single object of apprehension, where the latter intervenes with its properties alone to intensify the experiential dynamics of the field. Hence, the ensuing principle of association also becomes based on a far stronger and far less mechanical principle than the typically empiricist ones of physical contiguity or cognitive similarity. The progression is well illustrated by Dewey in the following passage.

“Assimilation” denotes the efficacious operation of pervasive quality; “similarity” denotes a *relation*. *Sheer* assimilation results in the presence of a single object of

⁴ For a specifically aesthetic treatment of this issue see Matteucci 2019: 55, 57,102-3, 107, 109, 118, 126, 196, 228.

apprehension. [...] 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 [...] 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: 261)

At a closer look, this excerpt from Dewey says something more about the aesthetic import of assimilation.

First: it would seem to be precisely the resistance to total explicitation 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), pointing toward the distinction between a *relationship*, i.e., the modality of an experience, its qualitiveness, and a relation, or its factual, ‘quantifiable’ content.

Second, the reference to the *sheerness* of assimilation indicates, *ex-negativo*, also another possible modality, namely that of resistance to assimilation. And this means that, in Dewey’s argument, resistance to assimilation and non-resistance to assimilation are equally involved in the constitution, or rather, the emergence, of meaningfulness, whose basis, however, is still familiarity, namely, assimilation as a regulative quality.

5. Outlining the exploratory feature of aesthetic perception: between conventionality and creativity

It is interesting to observe how Dewey introduces the notion of habit 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 – an instantaneous recognition which cannot be equated with aesthetic perception – i.e., 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 (in its non-naïve or simplistic conception). In this sense, we could speak of a twofold feature of assimilation: assimilation as an accomplished fact, as a product (what has been *assimilated*), and assimilation as a process (in terms of *assimilating*).

Here it is worth dwelling on one specific aspect, namely, the fact that familiarity and habits share what I have defined a ‘contingent stability’, yet, what differs is that in habits this latter is of a less ‘exploratory’ and hence more ‘settled’ kind.

The recognition of this shared feature is at the center of a wider analysis I have carried out somewhere else⁵, in which I compared the concept of familiarity – here more properly understood in the sense of familiarization processes – not only with habits, but with another concept that, along with it, is currently successful in aesthetic debates: that of niche. What made me develop this comparison in the first place was the fact that, if it is true that familiarity has to do with the dimension of certain practices, which are carried out by an organism within a certain horizon, then we can say that, at least heuristically, it is something having to do with both habits, namely habitual practices, and niches, namely the environments where human beings find themselves.

Having acknowledged this similarity, I have pondered whether it could be pressed so far as to suggest an equation, and eventually argued for the impossibility to use the three

⁵ See Iannilli (forthcoming), where I also partly refer to the relevance of *QT* for Dewey’s theory of aesthetic perception.

concepts indifferently, even though the differences between them are not sharp and radical, but nuanced; and even in spite of them sharing the characteristic of being ‘contingently’ (i.e. ‘contingent’ since they are always the outcome of processes that constitute them as such) ‘stable’ (i.e. since they, to various extents, constitute the elements that ‘infrastructure’ human beings’ lives).

The aforementioned impossibility to totally equate them is due to different degrees of dynamicity between them: I argue that in this ‘contingent stability’ habits and niches are either more ‘fixed’, or ‘given’, than familiarity. At any rate, I am not going to readdress the whole threefold comparison here, but I will limit myself to pointing out some aspects that connote, in particular, the relationship between familiarity and habits, which have also been one of the underpinnings of Dewey’s overall philosophy and which he has explicitly called out in *QT*. This, notwithstanding the acknowledgement of the relevance in the discourse of niches which, minimalistically, can be considered as the structures, or rather scaffoldings, that sustain the development of familiarity and habits, and that somehow envelop them, but that, through so called ‘feedback loops’, are equally shaped by them. Again, the processes and dynamics concerning these concepts should not be seen as mutually exclusive but, so to speak, as co-operative and inclusive. However, for the sake of the argument, as specifically compared to familiarity, it might be said that a niche is an environment that is already ‘given’, 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.

Habits, on the other hand, have to do not exclusively, but primarily, with the dimension of automatism, which can be learned, changed, or dismissed (hence, still processually) for instance, by reiteration, but also by encountering the unexpected. However, in the case of habits, as opposed to familiarity, the unexpected acts out of contrast and poses a crisis, that is, it seems to demand a total reconstruction, while familiarity, as understood on our spectrum, also includes ‘the strange’ or the unexpected. For example, when we say that a face ‘looks familiar’, we say so when 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.

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 toward our generic experience) 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. Habits, in this sense, also have to do with what is ‘conventional’, and thus, with what, *per se*, is not always creative. 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.

A further example may be related to someone’s linguistic repertoire: this latter may be enriched, and become more ‘expressive’ in a Deweyan sense, through the acquisition of

certain words, which are ‘let in’ and can slowly make changes in and reorganize 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, or conventional manner of speaking, both collectively and individually.⁶

Anyhow, to go back to the specific spectrum of familiarity, it is also necessary to address the temporal, and not only spatial, and environmental, so to speak – but *spatiotemporal* – aspect that characterizes these processes typical of the spectrum of familiarity in its various polarizations: namely its properly ‘exploratory’ feature. Heuristically, this can be done by resorting to a concept, or rather to what for Dewey denotes a true ability, just like a qualitative thought, according to terms and emphasizing modalities that he attributes to a properly aesthetic dimension: imagination.⁷ Dewey describes the imaginative component as a «warm and intimate taking in [*scil.* assimilation] of the full scope of a situation [*scil.* of its qualitateness]» (Dewey 1916: 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: 274). In other words, here, too, familiarity as enduring constitutes a pervasive and regulative quality, and thus is characterized by an intrinsic stability (cf. «with respect to the nature of things») but at the same time by an exploratory, or processual feature, that dynamically and relationally spans time and space, just like it happens when one travels (in this regard, I refer the reader to Iannilli & Matteucci 2021 for an analysis of Dewey’s theory of aesthetic experience between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*). And this brings us to the next step of the reconstruction of Dewey’s theory of aesthetic perception carried out through the lens of familiarization processes. While it has not been possible to retrieve the original notes for the *William James Lectures* which, as I said in the introduction, were held one year after the publication of *QT*, I had the opportunity to analyze other unedited, unpublished, notes⁸ dating as far back as 1922. Dewey wrote them for another lecture he gave – and, interestingly enough, he is the inaugural lecturer of both series – in 1925 in memory of the editor of *The Open Court* and *The Monist*, Paul Carus. From Dewey’s *Carus Lectures*, entitled “Experience and Nature”, evolved the homonymous book. In these notes, at times mere fragments, it is possible to identify many themes that would later become central to *Experience and Nature*. What, however, I find most interesting, and that I aim at correlating with the other relevant texts I have already included in my project of reconstruction of Dewey’s theory of aesthetic perception, are some passages in the *Notes* whose terms will not be taken up so explicitly later in that book, and which have to do with the topic of what I would call ‘home-building’ or,

⁶ 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 (that is, technicized) formal elements, and style as a way of proceeding which is specified each time, i.e. situated. According to my interpretation this is a question also addressed by Dewey (1934, chap. 6), in very similar terms. For a more detailed analysis I refer the reader to Iannilli (2020: 85-6).

⁷ This is something that, for instance, has been addressed from a specifically aesthetic viewpoint in terms of «perceptualization» by Matteucci (2019), in a more cognitivist fashion in terms of «scenario visualization» by Arp (2008), and in relation to sustainability in terms of «Aesthetic Footprint» by Naukkarinen (2011).

⁸ Thanks to the support of the Alwin C. Carus Grant, which I was awarded in Summer 2022, and afforded me the opportunity to access the Special Collection Research Center where Dewey’s papers, manuscript and lecture notes are archived.

indeed, ‘familiarization’, in a framework where the travel metaphor is explicitly employed to describe experience. This theme is articulated by Dewey mainly within the ‘homesickness-familiarity’ polarity and, in particular, from the point of view of its management, between conventionality and qualitiveness, in line with what Dewey dealt with in *QT* (and also, in fact, in *Art as Experience*).

Postponing the development of certain pressing issues to a later occasion is, for that matter, a strategy adopted by Dewey himself in *QT*.

In the closing lines of the essay he first reiterates that the qualitiveness of experience is the focus of his attention and that it is precisely in the background, in that which keeps everything together and sustains it, that the starting point and the regulative principle of all our further distinctions and expressions must be sought (Dewey 1930: 261).

Further demonstrating how pressing and effective the issue is, and how necessary it is to make it perspicuous, Dewey concludes by arguing that – resuming the introductory discussion on the relationship between knowledge of different kinds – indeed, not even scientific thought is exempt from qualitiveness. Science possesses, in the first place («directly»), the dimension that is its own, the background of its own knowledge. In the last place («indirectly»), however, it implicitly references the lived background, the world as lived (Dewey 1930: 262).

Symmetrically, he then argues how artistic construction and aesthetic appreciation have, like (a certain way of doing) science and philosophy, a genuinely intellectual creative bearing, in that they are all instances of a control and selection exercised by a qualitative operative background as much in productive as in perceptual terms.

Dewey finally concludes by postponing further consideration of the implications this has for aesthetic judgment and for aesthetic theory literally to an occasion (actually two, if we count both the *William James Lectures* and *Art as Experience*) which will immediately follow: «but the development of this point in its bearing upon esthetic judgment and theory is another story» (Dewey 1930: 262).

References

Arp, Robert (2008), *Scenario Visualization: An Evolutionary Account of Creative Problem Solving*, Cambridge, MA-London, The MIT Press.

Black, Max (1962), «Dewey’s Philosophy of Language», in *Journal of Philosophy* 59/19, pp. 502-23.

Dewey, John (1925), ‘Experience Nature and Art’, in *Experience and Nature*, in *The Later Works*, vol. 1, ed. by Jo Ann Boydston, Larry A. Hickman, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1987 – Charlottesville, VA, IntelLex Corporation, 2003.

Dewey, John (1926), ‘Affective Thought’, in *The Later Works*, vol. 2, ed. by Jo Ann Boydston, Larry A. Hickman, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1987 – Charlottesville, VA: IntelLex Corporation, 2003.

Dewey, John (1929), ‘Experience Nature and Art’, in *Art and Education*, Merion, Barnes Foundation Press, 1954, pp. 22-31.

Dewey, John, (1930) *Qualitative Thought*, in *The Later Works*, vol. 5, ed. by Jo Ann Boydston, Larry A. Hickman, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1987 – Charlottesville, VA, IntelLex Corporation, 2003, pp. 243-62.

Dewey, John (1934), *Art as Experience*, in *The Later Works*, 1925-1953, vol. 10, ed. by Jo Ann Boydston, Larry A. Hickman, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1987 – Charlottesville, VA, IntelLex Corporation, 2003.

Dreon, Roberta (2022), *Human Landscapes. Contributions to a Pragmatist Anthropology*, Albany, SUNY Press.

Gombrich, Ernst H. (1972), 'The Mask and the Face: The Perception of Physiognomic Likeness in Life and Art', in Ernst H. Gombrich, Julian Hochberg, Max Black, *Art, Perception and Reality*, Baltimore-London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 1-45

Iannilli, Gioia Laura (2020), *The Aesthetics of Experience Design. A Philosophical Essay*, Milano-Udine, Mimesis International.

Iannilli, Gioia Laura (2021), «Dewey on the Threshold of Aesthetics. The Critique of the Reflex Arc Concept», in *Studi di Estetica*, vol. 22, pp. 183-96

Iannilli, Gioia Laura (Forthcoming), 'Can We Design Familiarity?', in Lisa Giombini, Adrian Kvakacka (eds.), *Applying Aesthetics to Everyday Life: Methodologies, History, and New Directions*, London, Bloomsbury.

Iannilli, Gioia Laura & Matteucci, Giovanni (2021), «Modes of Experience: Everyday Aesthetics Between Erlebnis and Erfahrung», in *ESPEE*, vol. 10, pp. 39-55

Leddy, Thomas (2012), *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, Peterborough, Broadview Press.

MacKenzie, Matthew (2016), «Dewey, Enactivism, and the Qualitative Dimension», in *Humana.Mente Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 31, pp. 21-36.

Matteucci, Giovanni (2019), *Estetica e natura umana. La mente estesa tra percezione, emozione ed espressione*, Roma, Carocci.

Matteucci, Giovanni (2021), «On Dewey's Trail. From Aesthetic Meaning to Aesthetic Meaningfulness», in *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, XIII, pp. 1-14.

Naukkarinen, Ossi (2011), «Aesthetic Footprint», in *Aesthetic Pathways*, 2/1, pp. 98-111.

Petrarca, Francesco (1364), *Le familiari*, XXIII, 19, Firenze, Le Lettere, pp. 78-94.

Shusterman, Richard (2010), «Dewey's *Art as Experience*: The Psychological Background», in *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 44/1, pp. 26-43.

Simmel, Georg (1908), «Das Problem des Styles», in *Dekorative Kunst*, XI/7, pp. 307-16.