AN ATTEMPT AT ELUCIDATING A PHILOSOPHICAL TOPIC: AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE *OF* OR *IN* THE CITY

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ABSTRACT

The notion of aesthetic experience attempts to account for an important part of human experience and, although it embraces an immense and multifaceted variety, the complexity and vagueness of which have been an authentic challenge to its definition (to the point that some suggest its conceptual uselessness), it is still crucial and decisive for an entire philosophical discipline: aesthetics – which is not to be confused with the philosophy of art, although it often intersects with it. This chapter considers the case of the city – which is not so much an object as a multifaceted and fragmented environment where aesthetic experiences can occur – in order to attempt to elucidate (or at least to make a contribution to the elucidation of) the meaning and scope of this philosophical topic.

KEYWORDS

Aesthetic Experience, Experience of/in the City, Trivial Experience, Vagueness, Fragmentation.

1 This work is funded by national funds through the FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P. [under the Norma Transitória] – DL 57/2016/CP1453/CT0098 and under the project PTDC/FER-FIL/32042/2017.

1.
PROLOGUE, OR ELUCIDATING THE TITLE

In October 1974, over a three-day period, the French writer Georges Perec committed himself to an exhaustive description – an inventory – of everything he saw, heard and felt in a well-known location in the 6th arrondissement of Paris, Place Saint-Sulpice, flanked by the church of the same name. Perec placed himself in different spots in the square with the aim of taking note of the states of affairs and events – or, more precisely, the non-events – occurring around him, focusing, in his own words, on "that which is generally not taken note of, that which is not noticed, that which has no importance: what happens when nothing happens other than the weather, people, cars, and clouds" (Perec, 2010, p. 3) – in short, what he elsewhere called the "infra-ordinary". He thus installed himself in a tobacconist's, in a café by the "Mairie", in another café called Fontaine de Saint-Sulpice, "on a bench right in the sun, among the pigeons, looking in the direction of the fountain (sounds of traffic behind)" (Perec, 2010, p. 32), all at different times of day (10:30 a.m. on the first day (18 October), then 12:40 a.m., then 3:20 p.m., etc.), taking note of the weather, variations in the brightness of the day or the dusk, the passing of buses (the number 63, the number 87, the number 96, the number 70) – buses sometimes full of people, at other times emptier, buses that marked the rhythm of the square, themselves affected by the circadian rhythm of the city. He took note of the cars – a red Fiat, a green one, a German car, an apple green *deux chevaux* (Citroën 2CV), a yellow concrete mixer truck, a lady taking three children to school, a hearse and people gathered at the church's door, the ringing bells, a Basset Hound, two men smoking pipes, the wind shaking the leaves from the trees, advertisements on trucks and buses, letters of the alphabet, KLM, a P for "parking", the rain as it intensifies, a young woman smoking a cigarette, another truck from "Walon Déménagements", a Japanese woman preparing to take a photograph of it, the crushed stone or the sand on the ground, a man agitated by nervous tics, holding his cigarette just like Perec does (between his middle finger and his ring finger), the asphalt, the calm, the lassitude or tiredness of the eyes, "a cloud of pigeons that suddenly swoops down on the central plaza, between the church and fountain" (Perec, 2010, p. 6). These notes (and many more that I cannot

paraphrase here) were published as a short text in *Cause Commune* nº 1 in 1975 and would later, in 1982, be published as a book titled *Tentative d'épuisement* d'*un lieu parisien* (the inspiration for the title of this chapter).

This work by Perec, like many others that intersect with it and are related to it, has many specificities that are irrelevant to what I wish to say in this chapter; in a certain sense, I could almost say that my choice to write about it is to some degree arbitrary. Nevertheless, there are many elements in it that are relevant to the attempt to understand the broader philosophical topic of aesthetic experience.[2] *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* is a literary work, and therefore a work of creative and artistic genius, but despite the rules and constraints (many of them self-imposed by the author) that characterize "Oulipian" literary games, it was born in the daily context of the trivial experiences of the city – experiences which, at a given moment or perhaps not at all (this is a controversial aspect that is at the heart of the matter), acquire the traces of aesthetic experience. If it is true that Perec's purpose is to describe, inventory, and exhaustively enumerate everything he sees, as if engaged in a methodical, almost scientific classificatory endeavour, it is also true that many of the aspects to which he attends have to do with sensory perception, with the way in which the objects being inventoried appear and manifest themselves: their colours, noises, fluctuations, rhythms, dispositions, interactions and their indistinct *je-ne-sais-quoi*, which, taken together, emotionally affect the writer-beholder and stimulate his or her imagination. The banality in all this is that perhaps all works of art go through these processes of transformation, from trivial experience to aesthetic experience. By this I mean that perhaps works of art are nothing more than the intensification, the problematization, the sensitive and imaginative reconfiguration of aesthetic experiences (some more intense, others more banal) which, in a discontinuous, if not fragmentary way, are condensed into the memories and nerves of their authors. This, of course, would already be a lot, making them extraordinary and worthy of our fascination.

2 The basis of this chapter was a presentation in Portuguese, where the wordplay with Perec's French title is more obvious. There, I used the word "*lugar*", which immediately translates to "*lieu*" (place, but also topic) – as in "*lieu parisien*", "*lieu philosophique*". The use of "topic" in the English title still resonates with the etymology of the Greek *τόπος*, which relates both to "place" and to "subject", "theme" or "general idea".

Before delving into the matter, I wish to say something more about Perec's relationship with the places in the city. In 1969, Perec started planning a project that he called *Lieux* (Places). It consisted in choosing twelve locations in the city of Paris – streets, squares and crossroads – which he then set out to describe over a period of twelve years. He would describe two locations per month in two different ways: at first, he would sit in a café or walk in the street, a notebook and pen in hand, trying his best to describe, in the most neutral way possible, the houses, shops, and people he passed, the advertisements and, in general, all the details that meet his attentive gaze; at another moment, he would be away from the place he wanted to describe and would write a description from memory, drawing on the recollections evoked by that location, the events that occurred there, and the people he had met there. As soon as these descriptions were written, he would put them in an envelope sealed with wax, often accompanied by photographs taken by a male or female friend who accompanied him. He would sometimes also insert metro or cinema tickets, restaurant receipts, flyers, etc., into these envelopes. Over time, these descriptions, which comprised a set of 288 texts, revealed the transformations undergone by these locations, but also by his memory and himself, thus providing a record of the effects of time on the different locations in the city, on his memories and on his own ageing. This method – which he described in his 1974 book *Espèces d'espaces* (Perec, 1985, pp. 76-77)[3] and which he admitted he had not followed in 1973 because of the production of his film *Un homme qui dort*, but which he intended to resume immediately afterwards – was finally discontinued in 1975. Nonetheless, this unfinished project was echoed in several other works of description, such as the one that focused on Place Saint-Sulpice. Another, quite personal and intimate, project is called *La Rue Vilin*,[4] which is also the name of a popular street on the eastern side of Paris, in Belleville, in the 20th arrondissement, where he lived for the first six years of his life. This street was once photographed by Robert Doisneau and immortalized in films such as *Sous le ciel de Paris* (Julien Duvivier, 1951), *Du rififi chez les hommes* (Jules Dassin, 1955), *Orphée* (1950) by Jean Cocteau and even *Le ballon rouge* by d'Albert Lamorisse (1956). In

3 Although the book was originally published by Galilée in 1974, I have used the 1985 edition.

4 Published in the newspaper *L'Humanité,* nº 11, Novembre 1977.

the second half of the twentieth century, however, it became progressively degraded,[5] ultimately being urbanistically reconfigured in order to give way to the present Parc de Belleville. Today, it stands as a short, sloped pedestrian street that provides access to the park, nestled between residential buildings and the back of a clinical laboratory.

2.
A PHILOSOPHICAL TOPIC: AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Although it is not easy to ascertain exactly when the expression "aesthetic experience" first appeared in the philosophical discourse,[6] it is unlikely that it was before the eighteenth century, when the word "aesthetics" was substantivized in order to name a new philosophical discipline and "aesthetic" was used as an adjective for an old but unrecognized type of knowledge, *cognitio aesthetica* (or *sensitiva*).[7] In fact, this exact term does not even appear in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, although it is clear that the kind of experience that underlies "aesthetic judgement" [*ästhetische Urteil*] is of the kind that would later be called "aesthetic experience".[8] It would seem that the expression only became common in philosophical discussion well into the nineteenth century, if not into the twentieth. However, this does not mean that certain aspects

5 *En Remontant la Rue Vilin* (1992), a documentary by Robert Bober (Georges Perec's friend) made from old photographs of the street, narrates the story of the progressive dereliction of the famous street.

6 In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the Polish philosopher Wladislaw Tatarkiewicz sketched a history of the concept (of "aesthetic experience") in his famous book *A History of Six* (aesthetic) *Ideas*. Despite some interesting intuitions concerning the semantic evolution of the idea, however, it still fails to provide a comprehensive account of its history. See Tatarkiewicz, 1980, pp. 310-338.

7 In the "Prolegomena" to his *Aesthetica* (1750), Baumgarten defines the new discipline as follows: "§1 Aesthetica (theoria liberalium artium, gnoseologia inferior, ars pulcre cogitandi, ars analogi rationis) est scientia cognitionis sensitivae" ["Aesthetics (the theory of the liberal arts, the logic of the lower cognitive faculties, the art of thinking beautifully, the art of the analogue of reason) is the science of sensible cognition."] (Baumgarten, 1750, p. 1).

8 In the "Analytic of the Beautiful" and the "Analytic of the Sublime", we encounter something like a phenomenology of the experience that gives rise to aesthetic judgment. See Kant, 2000, pp. 89 ff.

of what the expression is supposed to cover did not challenge ancient and medieval philosophers, even if their focus was usually more on beauty or the experience of beautiful things (symmetrical, congruent or harmonious things), not infrequently with metaphysical and religious connotations.[9] I am perhaps oversimplifying, but my argument is not intended to be essentially historical. In any case, it was only much later, in the modern era, in a world that was becoming disenchanted – where the human being was losing certainty and experiencing a divide between reason, which promised to understand and dominate nature, and the sensitive, emotional, and even animalistic side of human nature, which still escaped the control of the intellect – that the question of the sensitive and sentimental experience of the natural world and of human artefacts began to be given attention by philosophers. At first, they questioned our ability to have such experiences – the possibility of sharing them and discussing them – in a *theory of taste*. Indeed, it was no longer only the experience of the *beautiful* that was being discussed but also the experience of the *sublime* and the *picturesque*, as is evident in the works of various eighteenth-century British philosophers, namely Edmund Burke (on the *sublime*) and William Gilpin (on the *picturesque*). Unlike what would often occur in the nineteenth century (when aesthetics and philosophy of art were often confused), the objects that were thought to give rise to aesthetic experiences at this time were not only artistic but also natural objects and phenomena.

Some of the traits of such experiences have also become more philosophically explicit, such as the question of *disinterestedness*, which Kant would postulate in his characterization of the experience underlying aesthetic judgment, that is to say, a certain "psychical distance" (as Edward Bullough would later call it)[10] between the subject and the object, whose existence is less

9 We can probably think of the experience of the tragic, associated with the emotions of pity (*φόβος*) and terror (*ἔλεος*) (as described by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, see 1997, pp. 99-101 [1453b1-22]), or even the comic, as forms of aesthetic experience.

10 Edward Bullough introduced the notion of "psychical distance" as an aesthetic principle in an article published in 1912 in the *British Journal of Psychology*: "... the transformation by Distance is produced in the first instance by putting the phenomenon, so to speak, out of gear with our practical, actual self; by allowing it to stand outside the context of our personal needs and ends..." (Bullough, 1912, p. 89). This certainly resonates with the Kantian notion of disinterestedness (Kant, 2000, pp. 90-91 [§ 2]).

relevant than its appearance when it comes to the possibility of that experience. The cognitive (but not necessarily conceptual or propositional) character of experience – the cognition present in aesthetic experience – is a sensitive, "inferior" cognition insofar as there is a certain obscurity in this type of intuitive perception, a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi*.[11] And indeed, vagueness will be inevitable in the conception of the aesthetic, for there is always something that escapes the abstract and determinate concept,[12] something that cannot be reduced to an apophantic proposition about a state of affairs. Finally, another trait that has become more explicitly relevant to its characterization is the emotional or hedonistic aspect of the experience, the pleasure that is produced by it[13] – or the combination of pleasure and displeasure that is produced in the experience of the sublime.[14]

These are the basic traits that are commonly identified and discussed in debates on the nature and content of aesthetic experience – an experience that is often confused with the experiences occasioned by contemplating works of art. This confusion is responsible for our inadequate understanding of aesthetic

11 This expression was used as early as the seventeenth century by painters, as Leibniz recalls in his *Meditationes de cognitione, veritate et ideis* (1978), which uses the Latin *nescio quid*.

12 Kant is of course responsible for the distinction between determining and reflective judgments. Aesthetic judgments are typical examples of the latter, since they occur in the absence of a determinate concept. The absence of a determinate concept in the representation of a beautiful object (or event) causes the cognitive powers – the understanding and the imagination – to stimulate each other continuously in what he terms the *free play* of these powers of representation. See, for instance, Kant, 2000, pp. 15-20 and 102-104 [§ 9].

13 Schopenhauer, for instance, would place great emphasis on pleasure (*Wohlgefallen*) in aesthetic contemplation (*aesthetische Betrachtung*), a different but very similar notion to aesthetic experience. See Schopenhauer, 2010, pp. 219-225 [§§ 38-39].

14 Although other eighteenth-century (French, British and German) authors certainly acknowledged the hedonistic aspect of aesthetic experience, it was again Kant who offered a deeper and more systematic articulation of the pleasure we take in the experience that generates aesthetic judgments. Moreover, and certainly inspired by the British tradition's attention to the ideas of the beautiful and the sublime (particularly in Burke), he distinguished between a positive and a negative pleasure, and even a feeling of displeasure, in the experience of the sublime. See Kant, 2000, p. 129 [§ 23] and 140-143 [§ 27]. For a historical perspective, see also Talon-Hugon, 2015, Part Three, chapter II.

experience to the extent that what determines whether or not we are dealing with an aesthetic experience should not be the type of object that arouses it.[15]

3.
THE SCOPE AND NATURE OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Not all authors have allowed themselves to be limited and obscured by this confusion, however. As early as the eighteenth century, Edmund Burke spoke of experiences of natural spaces and phenomena – green fields, abyssal canyons and volcanic eruptions – that generated feelings of pleasure or astonishment and amazement. Kant, too, allowed for aesthetic judgments in response to natural phenomena (see for instance §§ 4, 16-17, 25-29, 41-42 and 58 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (2000)), as did certain Romantic thinkers to follow (such as Hölderlin, Novalis, Schlegel and Schelling). In the twentieth century, authors such as John Dewey expanded the territory of aesthetic experiences beyond the fine arts and art in museums, focusing on the type of experience and no longer on the type of object involved.

Dewey characterized aesthetic experience as "an" experience that is out of the ordinary, that stands out from the humdrum of daily life because of its qualities of unity, internal coherence, completeness, and significance, and which is therefore as likely to occur in the resolution of a philosophical or mathematical problem, during a sports game or in a gastronomic experience as in the contemplation of a work of art. (Dewey, 1980, pp. 35-57)[16] As a result, Dewey expanded the field of aesthetic experience (even if, deep down, his project was also to redefine art in terms of that experience, which created another type of

15 Aesthetic experiences cannot adequately be defined by the objects of experience. If they could, this would imply that only certain objects, with certain specific properties – say, aesthetic properties – have the ability to cause aesthetic experiences. This position has indeed been adopted by some, particularly by those who seek a realist or externalist account of aesthetic experience, most likely hoping to avoid the relativism of a subjectivist standpoint. What this approach cannot account for, however, is the fact that a subject of experience is always needed – not only for the very existence of an aesthetic experience but for the ascription and emergence of aesthetic properties.

16 John Dewey dedicates an entire chapter ("Having an experience") to the characterization of aesthetic experience.

confusion that I will not be dealing with here). Despite inheriting this qualitative characterization of aesthetic experience, another well-known American philosopher, Monroe Beardsley, took a step back and used this characterization to define art while simultaneously connecting aesthetic experiences with aesthetic objects. According to him, the distinctive function of art was precisely to create aesthetic experiences: intrinsically pleasing experiences, with a certain intensity, in which the subject's attention and a succession of mental states are focused and oriented in a way that generates a gratifying feeling of "coherence" or "completeness" (Beardsley, 1958, pp. 527-528). This characterization was met by a shower of criticism (the most well-known and radical of which coming from George Dickie)[17] to the effect that it was too subjectivist and phenomenological for some in the analytic camp. Beardsley was accused of simply transferring the properties of the objects of experience – their unity, coherence and completeness – to the psychological experience itself (Dickie, 1965, pp. 131-133). On Dickie's view, aesthetic experiences thus characterized are a metaphysical myth, a mere verbal construction without much theoretical utility, such that we might as well dispense with the concept. This radical view sounds quite exaggerated, but it reveals two possible conceptions of aesthetic experience (mostly from the Anglo-American tradition):[18] one based on an attempt to describe the quality or phenomenology of experience (which we find in Dewey and Beardsley), the other, which treats aesthetic experience as an experience of cognition, based on a description of its content – that is to say, of what it is capable of knowing – focusing not on what counts as an aesthetic object but on the properties or aesthetic qualities of the objects of experience.

I do not intend to dig too deep into the details of these controversies, which can be overly scholastic. I would point out, however, that this apparent dichotomy between the subjectivist or phenomenological perspective of aesthetic experience and the epistemic, objective or realistic perspective reveals old hesitations in aesthetics, which are nevertheless due to the mixed or even hybrid nature of these experiences (in fact, the hybridity we generally find in aesthetic concepts). On the one hand, the cognitive and the affective

17 In his famous paper "Beardsley's phantom of aesthetic experience" (Dickie, 1965).

18 For a survey of analytical approaches to the notion of aesthetic experience, see Iseminger, 2003, pp. 99-116.

features are interwoven; on the other, the determination of the qualities or aesthetic properties of the object of that experience cannot totally dispense with the consideration of its subjective character, or rather – to avoid being misunderstood – such qualities or properties emerge in the very experience that arises from the encounter between the subject of the experience and what he or she experiences. It is not just a matter of detecting previously existing aesthetic properties, as some epistemic theories claim, to the extent that such properties or qualities can only emerge from that very encounter. What is more, continuing to speak of a subject and an object of aesthetic experience likely obscures the specificity and uniqueness of that experience insofar as this kind of experience dissolves such distinctions, including the distinction between what is merely cognitive and merely affective, or between merely passive and merely active experience. Furthermore, even if aesthetics has historically been primarily concerned with issues related to aesthetic reception and has tended to convey aesthetic experience as a passive experience, I believe that one can also speak of it as an active experience. Someone who practices a creative, imaginative activity certainly, or potentially, has traces of aesthetic experience.

Summing up what I have been claiming thus far about aesthetic experiences: they can occur in the presence of or be related to any and all artefacts, phenomena, events, processes, practices or contexts, artistic or non-artistic, natural or human, rural or urban; they are clearly had *by someone*, and they must be experiences *of something*; in this sense, they consist not only in the detection and (sensible) cognition of aesthetic qualities and properties, but also in a set of emotional and imaginative effects on the subject (agent) of the experience that stimulate an effort to imbue the experience with meaning. This aspect anticipates the questions considered below.

4.
TRIVIAL EXPERIENCE VS. AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

If anything can be the object of aesthetic experience, how can we distinguish *aesthetic* experiences from *trivial* ones? We have already seen that the most phenomenological approaches to aesthetic experience (by Dewey and by Beardsley) have tried to characterize it by appealing to specific traits – namely,

focus, intensity, unity, coherence and *completeness* – which allow us to distinguish it from ordinary, everyday experience. In addition to giving the impression of simply transferring aesthetic qualities from objects to psychological experiences, however, such introspective characterizations still seem to carry with them certain moral and metaphysical prejudices regarding beauty and the intrinsic value of aesthetic experience, such that simply calling them aesthetic experiences gives them an honorific character. But perhaps not all aesthetic experiences have to be absolutely overwhelming, capable of fostering a(n) (almost mystical) feeling of unity and completeness in the subject of the experience. Perhaps aesthetic experience does not have to be "an" experience, as in Dewey's famous formula. In fact, we may have incomplete, fragmented, ambiguous, soft, delicate or even weak experiences that can and should be considered in the field of aesthetics.[19] Except for a few rare events that leave an indelible mark on our lives – and perhaps this even applies to them – it is not easy to identify "an" (aesthetic) experience, not easy to demarcate it clearly from the sphere of trivial experiences. How easily can we answer questions such as: when did this experience begin? When did it end? When did it become aesthetic, and when did it cease to be so? Instead of aesthetic experiences, as properly individuated psychological events, perhaps we should simply talk about "experiencing aesthetically", to use the adverbial formula employed by Robert Ginsberg (1986). Let us consider some examples.

19 Since the 1990s, some philosophers (particularly in the Anglo-American tradition, but also in the Nordic countries) have been extending the field of philosophical aesthetics to include aspects of everyday experience in their research. (Of course, philosophers from other traditions – Walter Benjamin, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, etc. – occasionally treated such topics, but not necessarily in a systematic fashion.) One of the problems of "everyday aesthetics" has been the apparent contradiction between making an effort to consider ordinary humdrum experience while keeping a relevant notion of aesthetic experience that implies particularly rich and salient features of that experience, in order to justify its distinct character and intrinsic value. Different (and sometimes opposing) answers have been given to the issue of the "ordinariness" of everyday aesthetic experience, some trying to preserve the "ordinariness" and familiarity of experience by focusing mostly on the aesthetic qualities (cleanliness, tidiness, sloppiness) of daily activities (domestic chores, gardening, grooming), others allowing for the transfiguration of daily settings and situations with experiences that unveil "the extraordinary in the ordinary". One of the most systematic and comprehensive presentations of these topics is certainly that provided by Leddy, 2012, but see also Irvin, 2008 and the entry on "Everyday Aesthetics" in the *International Lexicon of Aesthetics*, Iannilli, 2018.

Imagine that a woman is walking down the street. She is restless, thinking of the terrible day she's just had at the office, worried about the tasks she still has to complete when she gets home. Suddenly, her attention turns to a fragile, almost inaudible but mellifluous chirping – a sound that is all but drowned out by the noise of the traffic around her. She directs her gaze to a tiny, exotic-looking bird that has landed on a utility pole, and she stops to appreciate the delicate and charming little animal, its harmonious chirping and colourful plumage, before continuing on her way with a smile on her face. In this scenario, we can perhaps isolate and identify what might be called an aesthetic experience. But now imagine a second scenario – one in which a different woman, on a sunny Sunday morning, is preparing to ride her bicycle through a picturesque district of the city. She stops at a lookout to enjoy the splendid view across the river, enjoying the distant whistle of the cruise ships (which is occasionally interrupted by the annoying ringtones of other people's mobile phones). Along her route, she is further disrupted by the sudden swerve of a car that almost crashes into her bicycle. After a while, she gets off her bike to pick up some unusual, eye-catching stones (one with an unusual, baroque configuration, another with a particularly crystalline surface, a third with a strangely symmetrical fossil) to add to her "cabinet of curiosities". Later that day, still riding her bike, she receives a phone call with bad news from the doctor while simultaneously spotting a perfect streak of twilight tones in the sky – a combination she does not recall ever having seen before – behind a magnificent cumulonimbus cloud that looks like Dumbo the elephant. Who can actually say whether this sequence was a continuous process or a discreet experience, or perhaps various short experiences interspersed with trivial ones that were concurrent with aesthetic perceptions? And even if certain particular experiences can be recognized, how can they be individuated, precisely demarcated from the rest of our humdrum experience?

Despite these challenges, it would seem to be true that aesthetic experiences (or *experiencing aesthetically*) are not the same as ordinary or trivial experiences (*experiencing trivially*, if you will). In the former, there seem to be particular modes of perception and attention that afford singular kinds of cognitive processes (mainly sensory, but with symbolic and conceptual elements) and emotional (affective, hedonic) responses and that enable particular forms of

engagement with what is being experienced.[20] Yet it would seem equally to be the case that there are no real differences between these kinds of experience when it comes to their cognitive or affective structure, even if there may be contextual and modal differences. What I mean is that the psychological and sensorial apparatuses that make both kinds of experience possible are structurally the same; they can be used in a distinct fashion or style, however, which enables qualitatively different experiences. The subject of the experience will likely be unable to completely control such modes of perception, even though she can become more alert, more aware, predisposed to these kinds of experience, etc. She will certainly be unable to control her emotional responses, the feelings that emerge during such experiences, although she will probably become more emotionally available if she consciously takes up what many have called an *aesthetic attitude*.[21]

20 Informed by psychological research on perception and attention processes, some philosophers have recently distinguished between different modes that may help us to understand aesthetic experience. According to Jean-Marie Schaeffer, even though we can find these different modes in most kinds of experience (both trivial and aesthetic), some modes are privileged in the "aesthetic regime" of experience. For instance, *distributed attention* (where the subject sweeps the perceptual field without any particular focus, as opposed to focalized attention) *polyphonic attention* (which, being without an assigned task, treats all elements and possible relationships between elements as potentially relevant, as opposed to monophonic attention, which is set a specific task, assigned to it by the subject or stimulus encountered, with the aim of arriving at the desired result by the most economical and reliable route) and *parallel attention* (which spreads itself over several different sources of information, since in certain situations contextual richness is actively sought, as opposed to serial attention, which is adopted when we want to arrive at the fixation of a particular belief as quickly as possible) are modes that are particularly fostered by the "aesthetic inflection" of attention. See in particular Chapter II of Schaeffer, 2015, where he develops these issues comprehensively. A young Hungarian philosopher, Bence Nanay, who has been dealing with aesthetics from the perspective of the philosophy of perception, has also emphasized the role of certain modes of attention in aesthetic experiences. See Nanay, 2016, pp. 12-35.

21 Theories that accept the idea of an *aesthetic attitude* or an *aesthetic state of mind* may be inclined to admit that any object whatsoever could be the focus of aesthetic experience as long as the subject of experience adopts an attitude, which usually implies some sort of detachment (or maybe even disinterestedness). But then again, the ensuing form of subjectivism cannot overlook the phenomenological fact that an aesthetic experience, like any experience simpliciter, necessarily implies a focus, a *something* that is experienced, its intentional content. Therefore, the structure of aesthetic experience will also depend on "what" is being experienced, in the sense

Many contemporary authors have criticized and fought against this other "myth"[22] of aesthetic discourse, but it will be difficult to eliminate it completely if we want to keep open the possibility of characterizing aesthetic experiences as being different from trivial experience, and this seems acceptable to me, provided that aspects such as the question of disinterest are also reviewed in order to ensure that not only observers, contemplators, spectators and merely passive audiences, but also participants, artists, performers, and those involved in creative activities (or in certain modes of perception and attention that are open to the possibility of aesthetic experience) can be subjects of aesthetic experience.[23]

5.
AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES *OF* OR *IN* THE CITY

How can we aesthetically experience *a* (or *in* the) city? We already know – or I hope the reader will at this point concede – that anything can be experienced aesthetically. Hence, there will be no problem in considering the city as the *focus or context* of these experiences. If I include this ambiguity (*focus or context*),

that it is something that affects the subject and that she attends to. For instance, Thomas Leddy's account of aesthetic experience has no problem accepting the "aesthetic attitude" perspective but conversely focuses on objects that have "aesthetic properties". According to this approach, aesthetic experience is the "experience of objects with aura". No stranger to Benjamin's account of natural *aura* ("a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be" [Benjamin, 2006, pp. 104-5]), Leddy's aura "is a phenomenological characteristic of an object experienced attended with pleasure or with some combination of pain and pleasure", something "experienced as having heightened significance", "emotional force", "*claritas*", in sum, "[a]ura is what aesthetic properties have in common". For his account, see Leddy, 2012, pp. 127-133. This notwithstanding, Jerome Stolnitz, the most famous proponent of the notion of an "aesthetic attitude", introduced it when surveying the history of disinterestedness in eighteenth century British philosophy. See Stolnitz, 1961, pp. 137-9.

22 Most famously, the same George Dickie who, in 1964, had already published a well-known article attacking the "Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude": "I shall argue that the aesthetic attitude is a myth and while, as G. Ryle has said, 'Myths often do a lot of theoretical good while they are still new,' this particular one is no longer useful and in fact misleads aesthetic theory" (Dickie, 1964, p. 56).

23 An alternative to the subject-object dilemma (and disinterestedness) in aesthetic experience is provided by Arnold Berleant (2013) with his notion of "aesthetic engagement".

it is because of the difficulty of thinking of the city as a whole, as a possible "object" that can be apprehended and contemplated in its entirety. Perhaps we can better conceive of this possibility by picturing the aerial view we have of a city when travelling by plane, although in this case it would no longer be a city what we are experiencing but rather a vague, blurry, almost formless blotch on the surface of the earth, with indefinite boundaries. Unlike the traditional image of a medieval city – a somewhat concentric and coherent set of buildings and structures clearly circumscribed by defensive walls, with an easily identifiable centre and correlate periphery – contemporary cities are a pervasive landscape of massive but heterogeneous built environments, dense areas of complex urban structures interspersed with sparser opened spaces, "*terrains vagues*", almost empty and sometimes resembling the countryside yet scarred by recognizable relics of a human presence: roads, bridges, derelict buildings, discarded machinery, landfills and other indications of previous or future urban activity.[24] Thus the city is more appropriately described as an *environment* of aesthetic experience than an *object* in a strict sense. In addition, cities are not only a set of architectural artefacts and urban equipment, but also networks of relationships and human activities. They are therefore highly complex and varied entities that offer, in a multiform and fragmented way, different contexts, situations, multiple events and objects to aesthetic perception. Experiencing the city aesthetically will always be a fragmented experience, depending on the physical and social and cultural context of each street, each crossing, each bridge, each plaza, each park, each borough. Of course, it also depends on the time of day or night, the season, weather conditions, lighting, the amount of traffic, whether there are crowds, etc. All this determines the rhythm, the *atmosphere*,[25] the sensorial,

24 Given the relentless contemporary process of urbanization, Arnold Berleant asks not what a city is but rather "Where is the city?": "The contemporary city has no perceptible boundary but is rather a node in a pervasive and seemingly endless industrialized landscape which most of its inhabitants rarely leave" (Berleant, 2016, p. 106).

25 The vague but evocative concept of "atmosphere" has been a part of the discourse of philosophical aesthetics at least since the German philosopher Gernot Böhme introduced it in his proposal of a "new aesthetics" (although he admittedly imported it from the New Phenomenology of Hermann Schmitz, and although it would be easy to find much earlier metaphoric uses of the notion in aesthetics, sometimes expressed through the terms *Stimmung*, *aura* and *genius loci*). The atmosphere

emotional and spiritual landscape that will tinge the experience(s) in the city.

Nonetheless, there is still a sense in which we can say that we experience *the* city, and not merely *in the* city. As we have seen, the city is not just a physical environment but a social one, a shared space where people pursue social and economic endeavours but also politics, religion, leisure and, most generally, culture – culture made of language, art, stories and myths that are constantly transforming the meaning of living in the city and that are inherited by its citizens and urban communities. There is also a historical and imaginary dimension to the city that helps to shape its identity, if not its urban aura. Thus, there is always a real or imagined city that is referred to by its dwellers and by its visitors as having a certain character, a certain appeal, a certain atmosphere, something that is expressed in literature, in movies, in popular culture, and that allows one to say that one – the subject – is aesthetically experiencing *a* city.

In any case, one of the best ways to experience the city aesthetically is to cross it, to endure it (we might recall here, with the help of Lacoue-Labarthe,[26] the etymology of the word "experience", from the Latin *experiri*, to test, to endure, to go through), which has to do with crossing, passing through, but also with an ordeal, an endeavour. The experience of the *flâneur*, of which I have spoken on other occasions, is perhaps one of the most suitable for aesthetically *engaging* with the city, and this is likely how it began to be seen as worthy of contemplation or aesthetic appreciation. I will not develop the history of *flânerie* here, but I will mention eighteenth-century

"relates objective factors and constellations of the environment with [one's] bodily feeling in that environment" (Böhme, 2017, p. 1). It can thus be understood as an in-between entity, a "quasi-thing" (Griffero) between subject and object that expresses the affective quality or "feeling" that "tinctures" the environment or situation in which the perceiver is immersed. For a general presentation of the notion, see Böhme, 2017, pp. 1-24 and Griffero, 2018; for more on atmospheres in urban settings, see Böhme, 2017, pp. 125-134.

26 In *Poetry as Experience*, Lacoue-Labarthe quotes the French writer Roger Munier: "First there is etymology. *Experience* comes from the Latin *experiri*, to test, try, prove. The radical is *periri*, which one also finds in *periculum*, peril danger. The Indo-European root is *per*, to which are attached the ideas of *crossing* and, secondarily, of *trial, test*. In Greek, numerous derivations evoke a crossing or passage: *peiró*, to cross; *pera*, beyond; *peraô*, to pass through ..." (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1999, p. 128, n. 15).

contributions such as Joseph Addison's "rambles" and "speculations", which he reported in his famous journal *The Spectator*,[27] Louis-Sébastien Mercier and the extensive volumes of his *Tableau de Paris*, and even Restif de la Bretonne, who ran through the city of Paris during the dangerous nights of the French Revolution in order to write *Les nuits de Paris ou le Spectateur Nocturne*. These are obvious examples of aesthetic contemplation of the city around the same period in which the philosophical discipline of aesthetics was born.[28]

Sitting comfortably among these writers is Georges Perec and his attempts to describe different corners of Paris, sometimes walking, sometimes while sitting in cafes and watching the buses pass, but who could have equally chosen to ride these buses, using their windows as moving screens, or to experience the city from the balconies of Haussmanian Paris – a city that Agnès Varda captured in her short films and in the psycho-geographical derivations of her *Cléo from 5 to 7*. A city can thus be aesthetically experienced dynamically (walking, driving or riding a Vespa, as Nanni Moretti did in one of his most popular films, set in Rome, *Caro diario*) or from a stationary point (like Álvaro de Campos peering through the window of his bedroom and spotting a little girl in front of the tobacconist's, eating chocolates on the other side of "a street continually crossed by people / A street inaccessible to any thoughts").[29]

27 For other examples of London walkers and the psycho-geographical literary accounts of their urban experience, see Löffler, 2017.

28 For a brief introduction and a literary anthology of Parisian *flânerie* in the nineteenth century, see Paquot and Rossi, 2016.

29 My translation of a short excerpt from Álvaro de Campos's (one of Fernando Pessoa's heteronyms) poem "Tabacaria" (The Tobacconist), a metaphysical modernist urban dirge in which the poet reflects on the anonymity of city life while contemplating a busy street in Lisbon. Available at the online archive http://arquivopessoa.net/textos/163.

6.
BACK TO PLACE SAINT-SULPICE

The pigeons are on the plaza. They all fly off at the same time.
Four children. A dog. A little ray of sun. The 96. It is two o'clock.
(Perec, 2010, p. 47)

These are the last words of Perec's description, an arbitrary conclusion to an experience that could have continued endlessly. City life never stops. In fact, the author would repeat this sort of experience on other occasions and in different locations in Paris. In 1978, for instance, he would go to a "car studio" belonging to Radio France (a van used as a mobile studio) to record a six-hour monologue in which he described, in the exact same way, whatever (*infra-ordinary* events) he saw, heard, felt at the Carrefour Mabillon (a famous Parisian intersection) near Saint-Germain-des-Près, in what became the radio show *Tentative de description de choses vues au Carrefour Mabillon le 19 mai 1978*.

The city is not just a complex set of visible surfaces, nor is it simply a composite of tactile volumes. It is a dynamic and multi-sensorial environment made up of states of affairs, relationships between objects, structures, agents and events (events that result from the interaction of all previous elements); it is a continuous variation of processes, movements and flows. Aesthetically experiencing *the* city *or in the* city can involve a bundle of multiple, diverse and fragmentary experiences, some more significant or more intense than others, loaded with sensory information and perceptual interactions, but also impressions and affective dispositions that result from these interactions, combined with the modes of attention and sensitivity of the subject of the experience. What matters when experiencing the city aesthetically, in all its multiplicity, its composition and its rhythms, is being sensorially attentive, cognitively awake and emotionally involved with the environmental reality and with the life – whether human, animal, vegetal or mineral – that occurs within it.

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