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ECOLOGICAL AESTHETICS

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It. *Estetica ecologica*; Fr. *Esthétique écologique*; Germ. *Ökologische Ästhetik*; Span. *Estética ecológica*. By virtue of the Greek etymology of the word “ecology” (οἶκος, “environment”, as well as “house”), ecological aesthetics may indicate two different phenomenological perspectives, developed as subdisciplines, concerning our aesthetic relationship with the world. Until the first decade of the 21st century, ecological aesthetics had mostly identified the appreciation of natural environments with specific regard to their preservation. More recently, the term ecological aesthetics has been used to emphasize and investigate the sensorial – namely, aesthetic – relations that affect human corporeality and emotions within a wider range of surroundings.

THE CURRENT DEBATE

At the end of the 1980s, the Kantian thesis of the *Analytik des Schönen* concerning the “doctrine of disinterestedness” and aesthetic judgment was also reinterpreted through renewed attention to our relationship with nature. In particular, the American philosopher Arnold Berleant has proposed an aesthetics of engagement – a “participatory model” of aesthetic experience that considers the environment as “a field of forces continuous with the organism, a field in which there is a reciprocal action of organism on environment and environment on organism and in which there is no real demarcation between them” (Berleant 1988). At the same time, in Europe Gernot Böhme expanded the New Phenomenology project commenced by Hermann Schmitz and laid the foundations for an aesthetic whose fundamental theme was the question of “finding oneself in envining worlds” (Böhme 1989).

Despite both approaches recovering Baumgarten’s seminal concept of Aesthetics understood as “the science of sensory knowledge”, they pursued different paths. On the one hand, Berleant has continued the tradition of aesthetics viewed as the philosophy of art, focusing on natural environments considered as cultural artifacts and their appreciation. His thought contributed to the emergence of environmental

aesthetics which has been often redefined “ecological” to underline an open criticism of the environmental degradation wrought by human beings (Toadvine 2012).

On the other hand, Böhme’s theoretical perspective of the *ökologische Naturästhetik* has extended aesthetic experience far beyond the boundaries of its relationship with art. The German philosopher located Schmitz’s concept of “atmosphere” at the center of his studies and rethought it as emotional affections. Atmospheres, caused by the encounter between the qualities of objects and human sensory perceptions, emerge from a peculiar environment and invest the human body that is immersed in it (Böhme 1989). In contrast to Böhme’s neo-phenomenological approach, Martin Seel (1991) has proposed an *Ästhetik der Natur* based on the Kantian notions of beauty and aesthetic judgment referred to the subject’s feeling. According to Seel, aesthetic attitudes (correspondence, contemplation, and imagination) foster non-destructive behaviors towards the environment and sustain the ethic purpose of preserving nature.

NEW PERSPECTIVES: AFFORDANCES AND TECHNOLOGY

Ecological aesthetics inherits the rich legacy of ecological studies, starting from Jakob von Uexküll’s theory of *Umwelt* – which was in addition a source for the Heideggerian renovation of “mesology” (Berque 2010). Peter Sloterdijk’s trilogy *Sphären* (1998; 1999; 2004) has expanded the concept of atmospheres, defining them not only as affective qualities but also in terms of an ethics and politics of such spheres of existence. Recovering the meaning of *oikos* as “house”, Sloterdijk emphasizes the mutual belonging of organisms and environment, also in consideration of fundamental anthropological and cultural perspectives.

Ecological aesthetics investigates the experience also considering theories of perception developed in the field of experimental psychology. Broadening Böhme’s “ecological approach to aesthetics” (Böhme 2017a), Tonino Griffero has drawn on the notion of *affordance*, which was coined by the psychologist J.J. Gibson (2015) to indicate sensory information that invites organisms to move and perform in accordance with the environmental characteristics. Atmospheres perform precisely as *affordances* that emerge between the environmental qualities and the living body (*Leib*), conditioning the emotional aspects of the aesthetic experience (Griffero 2016).

Rather than focusing solely on a renewed relationship with natural environments, ecological aesthetics is concerned with the emotional experience aroused by environmental situations or dispositions created *ad hoc* – “aesthetic works”, in the definition of Böhme –, including exemplary works of art or installations designed to offer and intensify a reflective experience of the mutual influence between environment and body. The artificial and technological elements present in the space dispose the environment and the consequent aesthetic relationships that can emerge within it (Thibaud 2012; Tavani 2018). The new challenges of ecological aesthetics concern the experiences and practices of living – notably, the conditions of life offered by contemporary cities in their aesthetic configurations (Griffero 2019).

DIALOGUE WITH OTHER FIELDS: MEDIA THEORY AND MEDIA ECOLOGY

In the last decade, the debate among numerous scientific and academic sectors aimed urgent attention at terms and topics in the field of ecology. The three-volume collection *Habitus in Habitat* presents contributions from different disciplines on the ecological concept of “habitat”. This notion is critically addressed in the Humanities with regard to issues of primary concern in both phenomenological and aesthetic discourses, such as emotion, perception and cognition (Flach et al. 2010). As evidence of a still fruitful interest, media theorist Florian Sprenger (2019) recently proposed an extensive archaeological study on the term “environment” and its socio-cultural influence. Since the 19th century, the human environment has undergone profound transformations characterized by the constant presence of technologies that have re-determined relationships with our surroundings, as already noted in some seminal studies on technical (Simondon 1958) and cybernetic (Bateson 1972) environments. Nature and the natural are rethought as something alienating and dynamic in which machinic and non-human technical elements live (Morton 2016), shaping a real techno-environment that influences the biopolitical and economic dimension of daily experience as well as its aestheticization and theatricalization (Pelgreffi 2018).

The neo-phenomenological perspective of ecological aesthetics thus encounters philosophical reflection on the sensory relationship with the world (Alloa 2018) as well as media theories (Hansen 2015; Peters 2015; Somaini 2016). Starting from these studies, ecological aesthetics is called to investigate the changes caused by technological devices on the human sensorium and to highlight the expansions and anesthetizations that contribute to determining the experiential, creative and critical potential that emerge from the media environments in which we are immersed (Montani et al. 2018; Buckley et al. 2019; Eugeni, Raciti 2020).

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