

# Modes of Experience: Everyday Aesthetics Between *Erlebnis*, *Erfahrung*, and *Lebenswelt*

Gioia Laura Iannilli - Giovanni Matteucci

This paper focuses on the notion of experience, whose conceptual analysis seems to be often neglected or at least not sufficiently made explicit in the current discourse on Everyday Aesthetics. In our investigation this notion will be tackled, in particular, through the lens of such concepts as *Erlebnis*, *Erfahrung*, and *Lebenswelt*, which are drawn from the continental philosophical tradition. Purpose of the paper is to present a provisional framework aimed at clarifying that a more accurate conceptualization of experience allows for a better contemporary reflection on the aesthetics of everyday life. | Keywords: *Aesthetic Experience, Erlebnis, Erfahrung, Lebenswelt, Everydayness*

## 1. Experience as Everyday Aesthetics' Underlying Core Concept

As it developed over the last few decades, Everyday Aesthetics has established itself as a sub-discipline that deals with phenomena that are also (if not, at least in some cases, somewhat exclusively) located outside the perimeter of a culturally defined sphere such as that of the Fine Arts. In an attempt to delineate its own research scope, this sub-discipline has therefore been mainly concerned with understanding whether the boundaries of the aesthetic are or are not to be traced with respect to the art world. As is well known, the views that have emerged in this regard diverge. In order to bring these differences to the fore, these views have been categorized on the basis of various oppositional labels, such as, for instance, 'weak-strong' (Dowling 2010; Ratiu 2013; Forsey 2014), 'expansionist-restrictivist' (Leddy 2015; Puolakka 2017), 'continuist-discontinuist' (Matteucci 2016). Another way of describing these views has been provided by Shusterman (2012), by stressing a 'transfiguration-

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ordinariness' opposition originally meant to highlight a different conception of the aesthetic in general. A comparison between these dichotomic couples can be found in the overview offered by Iannilli (2018; 2019).

Rather than returning to the terms at issue in these disputes, here we would like to address a question that underlies them and yet, as such, seems to us to have usually been ignored. Whatever the answers or types of answers to the question about the relationship between everyday aestheticity and artistic aestheticity are, in our opinion the everyday aesthetician should first of all clarify what notion of experience he or she adopts in carrying out his or her analyses. Actually, while there has often been an interest in discussing what an *aesthetic* experience is, or how it is configured, there has unfortunately been a neglect in clarifying in what sense one can speak of an aesthetic *experience*, while naïvely assuming that the notion of 'experience' can be considered univocal and unambiguous and, hence, universally acceptable.

This neglect risks being a reason for developing an unclear or flawed theoretical approach. This undoubtedly affects what has seemed so far to be the main question of Everyday Aesthetics, which lies at the core of the abovementioned controversies on the specificity of the everyday (non-artistic) mode of the aesthetic. Much of what has been discussed in this regard might perhaps be part of an unintentional comparison between alternative models not of the aesthetic, but of experience. It is no coincidence that such debates do not seem to adequately emphasize the fact that Everyday Aesthetics implies a mapping of experience as such and, consequently, a particular conceptualization of it, even prior to a determination of the aesthetic dimension. If the model of experience one wants to enforce in the description is not made clear, the risk is to be unable to compare the different strategies of articulation offered by Everyday Aesthetics. One question that needs to be asked, then, is whether there are conceptual models of experience that prove particularly fruitful for addressing the analysis of the aesthetic in its everyday mode, that is, beyond (or outside) the territory of the arts at least potentially.

We believe that one of the strengths of Everyday Aesthetics is having challenged the possibility to define the aesthetic starting from the identification of specific objects (just like artworks, in the case of the classical approach of aesthetics). Instead of selecting a circumscribed set of objects, Everyday Aesthetics invites us to see or consider the aesthetic in its concretization in practices, processes, actions, gestures, and behaviours. In our opinion, this means equating the aesthetic with an experiential dimension. Therefore, the question whether there are well-defined contents that belong to the proper domain of the aesthetic can be left aside at first. Instead, the question of what conception of experience might be able to accommodate this same dimension cannot be avoided, all the more so because the experience at issue here, in our specific framework, must be clearly compatible with the characterization of everydayness. It is not, therefore, a matter of an experience (or a conception of it) established starting from the exceptionality or extraordinariness of some culturally defined contents, regardless of how much one might leave open the possibility that there is a continuity between such

an operative dimension in the everyday and some cultural manifestations that are strongly characterized in some sense. And even in the case in which it is believed that the aesthetic in the everyday possesses its own extraordinariness (which is uncertain anyway), it would still be necessary to justify this belief by starting from an everyday flow which, as such, is not exceptional or ordinary.

The work we present here is a theoretical sketch, whose aim is to outline what is currently an ongoing research project. For this reason, we will simply proceed on the level of a conceptual characterization, retrieving or drawing from the contributions of some of those who, in an exemplary way, have placed the notion of experience at the centre of their philosophical analysis. As a sketched proposal, this work cannot but be programmatic. We will limit ourselves to provide general indications with generic references aimed at establishing connections between continental philosophical traditions and Everyday Aesthetics.

## 2. Between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*: Starting from Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel

We have just said that the ordinariness of the aesthetic is what Everyday Aesthetics deems relevant. But what does it mean to speak of ‘non-exceptional’ or ‘ordinary’ experience in our historical context? Today, the conspicuous or even emphatic practices of production, promotion and consumption of ‘certain’ experiences, also thanks to the so-called new technologies, are indeed widespread, and precisely on an aesthetic basis. Let’s just think of the countless phenomena of aestheticization of the everyday that populate our real and virtual environments today. Moreover, all this is clearly related to the fact that the sub-disciplinary path of Everyday Aesthetics began in the 1990s, namely the historical moment in which a phenomenon such as aestheticization took off and spread widely. This connection between the flourishing of Everyday Aesthetics and the advent of aestheticization is not secondary at all (Matteucci, 2017). As a consequence, we can say that Everyday Aesthetics, and its inherent way of conceiving of experience, answers to processes of radical transformation of experiential regimes, also on the basis of technological advances.

From this point of view there are important analogies between our historical-anthropological context and the context that fuelled the thought of Walter Benjamin, who tried to identify and interpret the violent impacts brought about by metropolitan reality and mass culture. Also for this reason Benjamin’s reflection on experience can serve as a trigger or starting point for our investigation.

More specifically, it is useful to recall Benjamin’s stance here because of the conceptual typology he proposes. In his essay *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire* (Benjamin, 1939), by exploiting a terminological richness of the German language that has no counterpart in English, Benjamin distinguishes between experience as *Erlebnis* and experience as *Erfahrung*. These are two crucial terms in the history of philosophical thought (on this, with reference to Everyday Aesthetics, see also Ratiu (2017, pp. 40-43)). If *Erfahrung* generally amounts to

what is defined as ‘experience’, *Erlebnis* has no corresponding unambiguous single term in English. It is usually translated as ‘lived experience’, as if it were a specification of experience in general or as if it designated that particular portion of the experience that is, indeed, ‘lived’. To grasp the nuanced meaning implied by the two German terms, however, it is useful to take into consideration their respective etymologies.

*Erfahrung* comes from the verb *erfahren* and therefore from *fahren*, which means ‘to travel’; instead, *Erlebnis* comes from the verb *erleben* and therefore from *leben*, which means ‘to live’.<sup>1</sup> In both cases there is the prefix ‘er-’, which makes the subsequent verb transitive. Consequently, in the first case, experience is understood as taking a journey that makes what is encountered along the way become a content of the journey itself; it is as if along the way what is encountered turned from an obstacle into a ‘baggage’ that the traveller collects and carries with him or her in the continuation of the journey. An eminent philosophical example can help clarify what we mean. Think, for instance, of that “Experience of Consciousness” (*Erfahrung des Bewußtseins*) whose “science” (*Wissenschaft*) Hegel outlines in his *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807). He describes it precisely as the integration in consciousness of the various “determined negations” that consciousness absorbs in itself in the course of the journey it makes to progressively rise as “Absolute Spirit”. Should the English grammar allow it, we would have to say that experiencing as *erfahren* means ‘to travel something’.

With *Erlebnis*, on the other hand, experience is understood as ‘to live something’, just as one experiences a circumstance (i.e., being abroad) savouring, so to speak, a certain situation (i.e., being on vacation) and so forth. The function of the prefix ‘er-’, in this case, is to present life as a relational operativity, and not as a mere indistinct flow. If the *Leben selbst* is the relentless flow of life, the *Erleben* is the process of moving about in a vital relationship until assuming a (also reflective) stance within it.

In order to fully grasp the conceptual polarity in question, one should not consider *Erlebnis* as a subset of *Erfahrung* in general. Instead, one should make a distinction between ‘experience as a journey’ (*Erfahrung*) on the one hand, and ‘experience as life’ (*Erlebnis*) on the other. There would then be a further complication to be taken into account, due to the fact that while the ending ‘-ung’ of the term *Erfahrung* indicates the taking place of an action, the ending ‘-nis’ of the term *Erlebnis* indicates the abstract property that is realized in an action. But for our purposes this further complication can be neglected here.

Starting from this terminological-conceptual distinction, Benjamin defines two experiential regimes that are tendentially opposed. In particular, he pays attention to the experiences of shock that are ‘lived’ (precisely!) in

<sup>1</sup> The *Erlebnis/Erfahrung* distinction on the basis of the identification of the difference between *leben* and *fahren* has also been explored, albeit within the framework and with the partiality of the hermeneutic-ontological tradition, by Amoroso (1988, pp. 13–45). This text also offers precious indications on the history of the concept of *Erlebnis* from its origin in the *Goethezeit* until its revival in Husserl, also in relation to the notion of *Lebenswelt*, which will be dealt with later in this paper.

the metropolises, namely the scenario for Baudelaire's poetry. Such *Erlebnisse* are linked to sensationalism, to what is emphatic, to what is even more liable to manipulation and commodification. Now, in his view, such a way of living contrasts with the integration in which experience is accomplished as a journey, namely *Erfahrung*, in the sense that it narrows its space or scope. The more one is engaged in living the environment, in dealing with its stimuli and shocks, the more one reduces the ability to sediment, to let 'settle' the contents of his/her own interaction with the environment. This way of experiencing fails in making that interaction an integrated baggage of experience, and thus in fully actualizing its expressive potential.

It is not hard to see that in this contraposition, the pole of *Erfahrung* has a priority, or at least a more positive connotation. This latter seems to bring with it a characterization of experience in a fuller sense. Consequently, we will have to say that whatever has the character of shock, of trauma, and is encountered in an environment saturated with stimuli, which is embodied in Benjamin's time by the metropolis (particularly, in Baudelaire's case, by Paris), denies experience in the proper sense. Thus, if experience in general and without characterizations is *Erfahrung*, *Erlebnis* becomes the way to express a lesser form of it, in terms of something that tends to impoverish it.

Benjamin is not entirely unprecedented in this analysis. His diagnosis concerning the characterization of life in the metropolis echoes a theme that was already addressed by Georg Simmel. In his celebrated essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903), Simmel similarly contrasts metropolitan and non-metropolitan life. In fact, we could even say that Benjamin focused on and clarified the technical terms which he found useful for retrieving a Simmelian antinomic relationship. In fact, Simmel grasps this tension when describing the relationship between the shock of metropolitan frenzy and the progressive sedimentation of the slow, cyclical temporality of non-metropolitan life. Suffice it to consider that experience as *Erfahrung* is described by Benjamin in a way that recalls the characteristics of non-metropolitan life highlighted by Simmel, namely in relation to the cyclical and ritual recurrence of civil and religious festivities that make a community cohesive. It is in such situations that experiences resonate in the current moment as endowed with meaningfulness, while integrating tradition and expectation, past and future. Hence, experience as *Erfahrung* is charged with the potential of auraticity, while *Erlebnis* is a contraction in the moment involving the negation and disappearance of any echo of an aura.

Thus, to go back to another of Benjamin's all-too-famous theses, the experience of *Erfahrung* seems to take place in relation to that same aesthetic dimension of the aura that was in force before the age of mechanical and technical reproducibility of art. An auratic art that would be the 'object' of an *Erfahren* would now be replaced by an art that is no longer auratic, but the object of a mere *Erleben*. The antinomic matrix introduced by Simmel in his analysis of the two experiential regimes, would thus seem to be not only resumed, but even radicalized in Benjamin's analysis.

Indeed, with his own analysis Benjamin also underlines how an incessant, everyday, ordinary increase in shock produces a growing numbing of the ability to relate with the environment that results in a true anaesthesia. Busy with parrying the blows that come from the hectic environment in which it is immersed, the consciousness would not have the necessary energy to dwell in the expressive relationship with the context and therefore to integrate its potential into its baggage. What fails in the regime of *Erlebnis* would be, in other words, the aesthetic ability to relate with the environment that, instead, is reflected in the sense of aura that surrounds the experiential regime of *Erfahrung*. The loss of experience-*Erfahrung*, thus, would also mean a loss of aestheticity.

In this regard too, Benjamin's debt to Simmel cannot be ignored. The analysis of the metropolitan *viveur* offered by Benjamin seems to recall, in fact, that of the attitude of the *blasé* developed by Simmel. Both are so immersed in the sensationalistic spectacles of the metropolis that they are no longer impressed by anything. Their gaze shows the same detached indifference that is obtained through habituation. Therefore, it is quite telling that Benjamin's metropolitan *viveur* is embodied by a borderline case of a traveller (i.e., a potential subject of *Er-fahrung*), namely, the *flâneur* who strolls in slow motion at the pace of the turtles he walks on a leash.<sup>2</sup> According to this diagnosis, the regime of *Erlebnis* contracts the journey to the point of shattering it into atomic, crystallized, repetitive instants. Experience is no longer articulated, is no longer *Erfahrung*, and loses the potential connection with an aura.

On a closer look, this has several interesting implications in relation to the topic of everydayness, and therefore for the framework of an Everyday Aesthetics. As an *Erlebnis*, experience becomes an-aesthetic precisely in becoming everyday, in becoming no longer extraordinary and incapable of dynamism. In other terms, *Erlebnis* denotes an experience that is of an everyday kind precisely to the extent that it is no longer sensitively pregnant or expressive – like the haughty eyes of the *blasé*, which never return a meaningful correspondence to those who meet them. Therefore, according to this typological thesis that Simmel lays out as an antinomy and Benjamin dialectically retrieves, the increase in shock, or the increase in shocking interactions would be a sign of the loss of both aestheticity and experientiality in the proper sense (here the close nexus between these two elements is indeed to be stressed). Precisely to the extent that all this becomes everyday and familiar, experience would result in a loss of aestheticity.

### 3. Beyond Benjamin's Typology

All this constitutes a significant conceptual problem for the everyday aesthetician. Indeed, if the everydayness of *Erlebnis* amounts to a dissolution of aestheticity, the very notion of Everyday Aesthetics turns out to be inconsistent or oxymoronic. The apparent corollary of Benjamin's analysis is that when we speak of aesthetics in an everyday mode we are at best speaking of something that is inherently deficient from an experiential point of view.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin (1939, p. 282) recalls how “around 1840 it was briefly fashionable to take a turtle for a walk in the arcades” by the first *flâneurs*.



Insofar as *Erlebnis* is the effect of a mere stimulus, a reaction to a shock, our lived everyday experience would be reduced to a clash with the surrounding reality. Hence, our everyday would not generate anything that could be considered authentically experiential in a properly aesthetic sense. So the loss of the aura that resonates in Benjamin's concept of *Erfahrung* is *tout court* the collapse of the aesthetic into an empty lived everydayness. As a consequence, from the point of view of an enquiry into the question of experience, the label 'Everyday Aesthetics' risks losing any meaning.

This apparent puzzle, however, is not surprising. In fact, defining everyday (aesthetic) *experience* is far from being a simple task. That's why, insofar as *Erlebnis* is concerned, in order to avoid the risk of lapsing into forms of mechanical reductionism, it is necessary to begin from a sufficiently dynamic and processual vision of experience in general. And it would certainly not help to widen the notion of experience as auratic *Erfahrung* to the point of including extraordinary everyday scenarios.<sup>5</sup> This could lead to a sort of aestheticism of the everyday that sublimates this latter into the artistic to endow it with some sort of aesthetic connotation. Actually, it should be pointed out that this is the path already taken by Benjamin, who in the essay on Baudelaire refers to the involuntary memory described by Proust in order to show a rare, 'happy' case in which an *Erlebnis* turns into *Erfahrung*. So much so that it eventually deserves the prestige of a refined literary narration; indeed, a way of transforming the everyday into an artwork.

It is therefore no coincidence that in *Everyday Aesthetics* the notion of everyday life tends to lean towards one of the two extremes of habitual and almost mechanical triviality, on the one hand, or of the extraordinary, an almost artistic event, on the other. In this regard, a rather balanced view is that offered by Ossi Naukkarinen (2013), who, in response to Melchionne (2013), defines in a precise manner what it means to be 'everyday' and 'aesthetic' exactly by deepening the dynamic and processual character of the experience as such, with its various gradations of intensity. As Naukkarinen has observed, when one enters the exceptional and the extraordinary, a character of shock emerges, which resembles the *Erlebnis* that is criticized by Benjamin as something not properly experiential and aesthetic. At the very least, according to Naukkarinen, that level should not be attained as a steady condition, as this would be devastating or destabilizing. It is true that one can reach that level in the processuality that constitutes the everyday. In fact, though, when it prevails, one exits the everyday as such. In such instances, the aesthetic that is encountered in an everyday setting configures another type of interaction.

Yet everyday experience is still to be meant as life, since the everyday surroundings are precisely 'lived'. But this is a form of *Erlebnis* that is defined according to a very different meaning from the one against which Benjamin polemicalizes. In this regard, it may be useful to recall a different usage of the

<sup>5</sup> This seems to be the direction taken by Leddy (2012), who provides a phenomenological interpretation of Benjamin's notion of aura in order to qualify the everyday as aesthetic. Investigating this, however, would deserve an attention that we cannot provide here for the sake of the discussion.

concept of *Erlebnis* that can be traced back to Wilhelm Dilthey,<sup>4</sup> a philosopher who is regarded as one of the first and main theorists of experience as *Erlebnis*. In Dilthey many of the characteristics attributed by Benjamin exclusively to *Erfahrung* constitute salient aspects of *Erlebnis* as such, starting from its irreducibility to an instantaneous and punctiform event and also from its configurative nature.<sup>5</sup> It is not pointless to note, then, that with his argument against *Erlebnis*, which results in dissociating experience as life from the aesthetic, Benjamin is targeting only a reductive conception of this notion: the one that flourished in Germany in the generations following Dilthey.

On this basis, we could say that, in order to develop an Everyday Aesthetics, it is not enough to use a grid that opposes *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* as merely antinomic experiential modalities (as happens in Simmel) or, at most, as dialectical in an art-centric sense (i.e., such that they can be condensed or synthesized, but only in highly artistic works, as happens for Benjamin with Proust's narrations or with Baudelaire's poems). Taking up a less narrow notion of *Erlebnis*, such as that offered by the line of thought that starts with Dilthey, might help here. One can therefore move away from a view of experience that is centered on the stimulus-response mechanism. Instead, one can start from the emphasis on the performative and expressive component of experiencing. In this way, experience as (everyday) life does not appear as devoid of components of accumulation, sedimentation and stratification, which indeed constitute the aesthetic surroundings of true familiarity.

Familiarity emerges to the extent that there is a continuous texture we are enveloped in, yet not in a single point in time nor on the basis of a dualistic relationship between subject and object. The very sense of familiarity implies a relational field. Not by chance the word familiarity refers to a dense context such as the network of 'relatives', of people one is inherently but multifariously related to. So much so that if we ought to become familiar with an environment that is extraneous to us, we generally build a series of practices that serve as a cocoon-ish dimension within which we move at ease, notwithstanding the individual atomic contents that we encounter in the wider space in which we live. This is an operative mode that remains stable also while the contents on which it is exercised vary, at least within certain limits. We recognize operatively – that is, through use, practice, and behaviours – our points of orientation and reference with respect to the environment around us; way before any conceptual determination (i.e., thematically). The environment possesses a familiar physiognomy, like a face that we know and whose individual features we may not be able to recognize, although it conveys a halo (an aura) of familiarity. In this sense, the experience that seems to be best suited to Everyday Aesthetics, though meant certainly 'as life', cannot be that of shock. It is a sort of *Erlebnis-Erfahrung* at once. So a structural limit of the typology proposed by Benjamin emerges.

<sup>4</sup> A similar move is proposed by an anthropologist like Victor Turner (1985 and 1986).

<sup>5</sup> For the sake of conciseness see Matteucci (2004, pp. 59-82); see also the aesthetic writings collected in English in Dilthey (1989) and the seminal interpretation provided by Makkreel (1992).



The everyday is, therefore, already ‘experience’ as a dialectical nexus between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* in the sense in which these notions are defined by Benjamin. As mentioned, the possibility of such a dialectical synthesis was apparent to Benjamin himself, in that he ascribes poetic excellence to Baudelaire (who also investigated such everyday aesthetic phenomena as fashion) precisely for having expressed the connection between these two poles. That is why we have claimed that Benjamin presents a *dialectical* conception of experience considered in the entire *Erfahrung-Erlebnis* arc. And yet, he attributes this synthetic capacity exclusively to art (i.e., Baudelaire’s poetry). On the one hand, this solution overcomes the merely antinomic contrast that can still be found in Simmel. On the other hand, however, it is flawed in conceiving this dialectical-aesthetic articulation of experience as possible only at the level of artistic expression, *de facto* overshadowing the level of everydayness.

#### 4. A Little Help from John Dewey

The retrieval of this aesthetic-dialectical characterization of experience within the everyday comes into play through a perspective which is very well-known to everyday aestheticians, and which emerged in a milieu similar to that of Simmel and Benjamin: John Dewey’s. A contemporary of Simmel (Dewey was born in 1859 and Simmel in 1858) and active during Benjamin’s time (*Art as Experience* was published in 1934), Dewey in turn witnessed the transformations that followed the development of the metropolis and the opposition between experiential regimes.

The kind of experience described above is in fact what Dewey (1934) has in mind when he speaks of having “an experience”. Indeed, having an experience does not equate with the *Erlebnis* of a shock that hits and does not develop as such. It is an experiential articulation shaped on the basis of the repetitive *rhythm* of natural cycles, such as the seasons of the year, but also such as certain festive occasions that for Benjamin embody the potentially auratic meaningfulness of *Erfahrung*. Thus, the Deweyan conception of experience stands in some ways on the threshold between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* in the sense we have seen before. It is as if Dewey thematized an experiential field in which two modalities usually thought of as primarily separated or opposed are instead understood as primarily co-operative polarities of a single dense field in which they are therefore integrated.

This integration does not happen only on the emphatic level of artistic configuration, but already in the operative texture of everydayness. In this sense, the relationship between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* in Deweyan terms is an integrated, polar, continuistic one. This is why the conception of experience offered by Dewey is both a strongly unified conception and is also capable of doing justice to the aesthetic dimension of the everyday as such. Above all it does not presume artistic paradigms, despite various misunderstandings of this stance. In this, it is similar to Dilthey’s conception of *Erlebnis* as relational rather than as punctiform. Both Dewey and Dilthey speak of an experiencing that emerges according to the rhythm of life (anything but an indistinct flow),

based on a significance (or *Bedeutsamkeit*) that is immanent and intrinsically extra-propositional. And they both connect this significance precisely to the aesthetic, in a very close nexus between sensing and expressing that art ‘only’ intensifies. While this significance immanent to the experiential field as a correspondence between organism and environment expresses itself, it also confers a sense of familiarity, or inherence to us, on what appears to be an aesthetic phenomenon, thereby giving qualitative importance to *an* experience in the flow of experience. The all-too-famous meal in Paris that Dewey brings as an example counts as an experience not because of its punctiform extraordinariness. The kernel of the question is that its qualitative intensity, which binds together what happened during the meal, is integrated into an individual’s life insofar as it will work as an immanent source of salience for this individual to appreciate the significance of the meals he or she will later have. It will become more than a term of similitude. It expresses in itself the multi-aspectual sense that the whole series of events we might label ‘Having a Meal’ can take on for an individual, by embodying not only what it means to share a meal in good company in a certain environment, but also how a meal can mark a turning point for a person’s life, the matrix of experiences with qualitative intensity that are variously constituted, the sense of knowing ‘how to be in a situation’ that will act as an operative competence at hand, and so forth.

Our proposal, then, is to consider the experientiality promoted by Dewey as an amendment of antinomic or dialectical views that are not entirely integrative and that tend to oppose modalities such as Benjamin’s *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* (and it would be interesting to ascertain to what extent this amendment is accidental and to what extent intentional). Our thesis is that on the basis of this integrative model of experientiality we can construct aesthetic practices that are valuable not only to the individual who experiences them in a merely lived moment, but also because they nest and accumulate potentials for meaning that are experienced as familiarity. They can thus become devices also for an intersubjective ecological niche by virtue of the meaningfulness they aesthetically make viable and available. The everyday, caught in this dynamic, expresses an aesthetic familiarity that is not reduced to the present since it interpolates the past, the present and the future, the here and the elsewhere, as Baudelaire’s poem *À une passante* analyzed by Benjamin shows in literary terms.

##### **5. The Expressive Import of Familiarity: Experience and *Lebenswelt***

One of the problematic issues this essay aims at delving into can be summarized by the following question: what kind of everyday, or: familiar and non-‘exceptional’, experience can Everyday Aesthetics be concerned with, particularly in the context of these first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in which radical processes of aestheticization of experience are widespread? We shall see now that there is a further notion that Everyday Aesthetics might consider in order to become more aware of the implied conception of experience it actually advocates. This is another notion that could be clarified by comparing Everyday Aesthetics as such with an apparently extraneous philosophical tradition.

Everydayness and familiarity do not constitute a monolithic dimension, as we have tried to show. They imply a plethora of aspects dynamically and processually related to each other that are not reducible exclusively to our interactions with and within urban or even metropolitan reality *tout court*. This premise is useful to clarify how our reference to the contributions by Simmel, Benjamin and Dewey in particular is exemplary with respect to the problem of the constitution of familiarity in a context in which the individual and society undergo various stimuli (stimuli that, as we have seen, also exceed the set of those ascribable to the art world). This is because this experience, in some ways, must be very similar to what must have been the experience of the metropolis carried out by the individual at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Another way to clarify this point is to note how what can be described as the ‘metropolitan’ character of everyday experience is today experienced online, for example, or digitally. This is an increasingly pervasive environment that may not engage us physically. It does in fact ‘furnish’ our everyday lives and, in particular since the last two years, it has begun to shape in an unprecedented and meaningful way our idea and practice of familiarity.

In any case, the type of experientiality that is most useful to illustrate this context consists in what emerged in the previous sections: an amendment, in a strongly continuistic and processual Deweyan sense, of the relationship between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* understood either antinomically or dialectically. This is apparent in the fundamentally relational conception presented in Naukkarinen (2013), albeit without the aim of programmatically bringing to the fore the philosophical references involved in the discourse. Given the purpose of our essay, however, it seems worthwhile to carry out a further exploration of the references underlying the conception of everyday experience *sub specie aesthetica* promoted by a contemporary Everyday Aesthetics.

The amendment of the described modes of experience in a Deweyan sense implies the idea of an almost tacit, operative sedimentation, a subsistence of experience in a state of potential meaningfulness, that can acquire the connotation of particularity and perspicuity and that can therefore also, yet not necessarily, be thematized. At a closer look, this conception is not far from that which connotes another fundamental concept coined within the continental philosophical tradition: that of *Lebenswelt* understood as a ‘fabric’ of continuity of practices with a strong intersubjective connotation. The in-depth study of this aspect through key points will allow us ultimately, in this concluding section, to further clarify what we mean by ‘the expressive import of familiarity’.

Synthetically, the concept of *Lebenswelt* as it was first thematized in Husserl’s late philosophy (see especially Husserl (1936)) has to do with the plane of knowledge. The peculiarity of this concept lies in being perceived as ‘natural’, ‘given’, and at the same time being constituted, namely historical. In Husserl’s reflection, it concerns the set of sedimented pre-Galilean knowledge that is disrupted by the arrival of Galileo and modern science.

On the other hand, by developing the discourse *sub specie aethetica*, the plane on which we move properly concerns the constitution of *Lebenswelt* on a different basis. In this context, in particular, we would like to dwell on the plane of expressivity. Clearly, we do not mean to claim that the question can be wholly resolved on such a plane. Yet, we believe that it can exemplify in a particularly fruitful way the connotation of meaningfulness that, previously, we have already ascribed to what has been called a nexus between sensing and expressing as distinctive of the aesthetic.

We refer to *Lebenswelt* when we speak of a pervasive, operative, even implicit fabric or set of practices, ideas, values, etc., that we share to a greater or lesser extent with other conspecifics with whom we happen to live together in different contexts. As such, *Lebenswelt* would seem to coincide with a dimension of familiarity, of everydayness. But is it really so? Our thesis is that between everydayness and the *lebensweltlich* dimension of experience there is a relationship of dynamic continuity and reciprocity, which therefore cannot be thought of as an identity relationship. Everydayness is a peculiar configuration of aspects of a background that is not properly of an everyday kind precisely because it is *lebensweltlich*. This configuration is peculiar because it is not always conscious, and above all not always carried out on a propositional level. It is a way of making those background aspects perspicuous and salient, of making them more explicit, of bringing them from the background to the foreground. Exactly this transition is described by the integration between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* according to the conception of experience we outlined before.

Has Everyday Aesthetics ever been aware of these layers? Only partially.

Fruitful indications about this issue can be found in the relatively recent literature that has appeared in this field. Although different labels are sometimes used, it seems to us that the distinctions that are made there are consistent with those we advocate. In this key, it is interesting to mention some attempts to distinguish and link different but related levels in which everyday experience would take place.

First of all we can mention Haapala (2017), in partial continuity with Haapala (2005), where a distinction is proposed between a 'lived world', or individual level of experience, and a 'life world', or collective, cultural, social level of experience. The two levels are intertwined into a circular relationship based on the temporal aspect of experience. Then we can recall Naukkarinen and Vasquez (2017), in which a distinction is made between a 'daily life' experience and an 'everyday' experience. The former is understood as a non-thematized background imbued with routines, while the latter is seen as the emergence, from the almost imperceptible flow of routine, of a particular type of pattern that corresponds to the everyday, which the authors see as a stance we take towards our daily life. We can then recall Ratiu (2017) resorting to a Gadamerian (see Gadamer (1960)) phenomenological-hermeneutical reading of the notions of *Erlebnis* as a lived and immediate experience in which consciousness is intentionally directed to phenomena, and of *Erfahrung* as

an experience derived from an interpretive activity that occurs temporally. Both of them would equally be part of the *Lebenswelt* of which also Ratiu emphasizes therefore both the individual and cultural-intersubjective dimension.

Three more examples are in line with this path. Formis (2010) discerns what she defines as the *ordinaire* (the ordinary) from the *quotidien* (the everyday). On the one hand, *ordinaire* would be a more general, even transcendental, collective and potential mode of living. On the other hand, *quotidien* would be a dimension with a specific and actual spatiality and temporality which includes the various, single applications of this general mode. In other terms, the ordinary would be an invariable, universal dimension of experience, while the everyday would be the form, or the set of forms, it can take on, variably. Matteucci (2019) focuses on the relationship between an “aspectual complex” and a niche. He holds that our everyday is what stems out of our encounter with such a complex: it is a scenario as a *pars pro toto* of a “niche” that we inhabit. Finally Iannilli (2020) addresses the relationship between backgrounds and foregrounds. She holds that our everyday, our familiarity, consists in a “fully rounded out” area of experience that emerges from something that (following the corresponding mathematical concept) she labels “neighborhoods”. In the first case, “fully rounded out” would be a rather (i.e., contingently, dynamically, processually, non-essentially) stable, focused, saturated, foreground that we deem our own, personal, familiar. In the second case, “neighborhood” would be a proximal surrounding in which we are immersed, an environment, a milieu, a background that we share with others.

Going back to our issue, we can say that in all these cases everydayness, or familiarity, is meant as a way of expressing *Lebenswelt* in a specific present context. It should be noted that when we say ‘expressing’ we also imply a shift from a density (the dense texture of the *Lebenswelt* in which we are immersed) to a discreteness (the recognizability of the familiar, everyday space, that we experience as our own), in which very particular structured forms emerge. *Lebenswelt*, in other words, is denser and finds specific emergencies and expressions in everyday familiarity. Here, namely between the two layers, there is an expressive nexus.

The distinction at issue concerns, on the one hand, operating in an automatic way when one is immersed in environments that are taken for granted in their functioning, and, on the other hand, sensing that some aspects of this fabric actually possess some kind of ‘viscosity’ that is not reducible to cognitive recognition, but as such are savored as one’s own and therefore as familiar and everyday. An example may help to understand the point. Belonging to *Lebenswelt* is the set of practices that are carried out when one enters a coffee shop in general by performing a series of gestures that are perceived as ‘normal’: one approaches a counter, orders a coffee, buys it, waits for the order to be completed, drinks it and leaves. All these gestures imply the acquisition of a competence on how to activate as effective devices the elements that ‘furnish’ the surrounding space according to their operative expressiveness (‘operative’ in the sense of the German *fungierend*, which is

proper to the phenomenological lexicon). One will be rude or well-mannered, but also evidently local or foreigner, depending on the degree to which this competence is shared. One thus remains within the perimeter of the impersonality of the *Lebenswelt*. Moreover, though, when all of this acquires the hue of familiarity, these same gestures, far from losing their automatism feature, are in fact charged with a *peculiar*<sup>6</sup> expressive value. It is *that* counter that is approached, *that* 'usual' coffee that is ordered, *that* familiar face to whom one smiles that is serving us, *that* way home that we take as we leave the place, etc. In the familiar surroundings, thus articulated, the traits of a *Lebenswelt* become aspects that can be quasi-formalized in a precise surrounding that is traced by the everydayness of those who inhabit it by virtue of its expressive import. It is as if we crossed the threshold that leads from impersonality to a personal domain that is not necessarily, entirely and immediately private.

This, indeed, does not mean that *Lebenswelt* needs familiarity to become expressive. *Lebenswelt* is a network of expressive correspondences between organisms and environment on a perceptual basis. Let's just think of the role played by affordances in the creation of the networks of automatisms that are implemented in our social reality. The question is thus of a different kind. On this same non-cognitive but aesthetic basis, *Lebenswelt* can find a more explicit manifestation and expression in the experiential nuclei of familiarity and everydayness precisely when these are actually practiced by this organism in this environment in a certain way, or according to a certain style. Then the more implicit *Lebenswelt* becomes that everydayness, that familiarity. Indeed, the same *Lebenswelt* can become many different everydaynesses, many different familiarities, depending on the moment and context. It is as if, in the shift from *Lebenswelt* to familiarity or everydayness, the impersonal and purely operative content of the former is reduced through experiential forms that tend to take on a more clear-cut configuration that traces specific familiar surroundings.

This passage leads us to a further feature of the relationship between *Lebenswelt* and everydayness. In both cases, a principle of stability, of sedimentation, is in force, despite the fact that, at the same time, a dynamic continuity and mutual transformation processes are also in force. If what has been said so far is true, *Lebenswelt* is dynamic and fluid in a higher degree than familiarity, or everydayness. The latter requires *de facto* a greater level of qualitative stability, otherwise it would not be felt as familiar, everyday. To go back to our example of the coffee shop, what is at stake is not experiencing with 'a' counter but with 'that' counter. This, as already mentioned, obviously does not prevent us from becoming familiar with 'things' other than our own nucleus of familiarity and everydayness by virtue of our *Lebenswelt*. But this eventually produces a process of modification of what we experience as familiar and everyday. In other words, *Lebenswelt* and familiarity are both dynamic but at different rates, so to speak, or with different degrees.

<sup>6</sup> This qualification is used "intransitively", as in those enunciations like "this soap has a *peculiar* smell", which Wittgenstein deals with for instance in Wittgenstein (1958, p. 158).



Sedimentation and transformation, operativity and expressiveness, potential making sense and actual practice of making sense are clearly the cornerstones of this relationship. And in our opinion, they further corroborate the thesis that has been argued so far, according to which what is proper to (a contemporary) Everyday Aesthetics is an integrative mode of experience that has these very characteristics. Namely, Everyday Aesthetics should not reduce its discourse or even itself to the extremes of 'pure' and 'uncontaminated' low-key ordinariness on the one hand, or the aesthetically validating, striking exceptionality on the other. In this sense, thanks to the mediation of *Lebenswelt* in its aesthetic acceptance, it would overcome the opposition between two conceptions that are both reductive as far as experience-*Erlebnis* and experience-*Erfahrung* are concerned.

## 6. Conclusion

The path we attempted to trace ends here. It was meant to show how Everyday Aesthetics could (or perhaps should) reconsider today important references that have generally been kept outside of its own focus due to the temporal and geographical origins of the sub-discipline. As a matter of fact, although the historical origins of Everyday Aesthetics are well delimited temporally (the 1990s or so) and geographically (the United States and Northern Europe, in particular Finland), its roots seem to lie in a context that is geographically broader and historically deeper. This reconsideration can happen once the problem of experience is grasped in its centrality for establishing a research program that addresses the aesthetic dimension of everyday life in a theoretically aware manner.

The integrative nexus of the *Erlebnis-Erfahrung* polarity brings together references such as Simmel and Benjamin (as well as Dilthey). Moreover, through the retrieval of the notion of *Lebenswelt*, it leads to a reconsideration of the phenomenological matrix of Everyday Aesthetics while showing a fruitful convergence with its more usual pragmatist matrix. We believe that, in order to help Everyday Aesthetics fully take root in the context of the European continental tradition, these passages concerning the notion of experience can play a role that is by no means secondary. Namely, they can help specify those modes of the aesthetic that today dominate our technologically infrastructured ecological niche, which makes the Everyday Aesthetics' program even more urgent.

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Gioia Laura Iannilli  
Department of Philosophy and Communication Studies  
Via Zamboni 38, Bologna, Italy  
[gioialaura.iannilli2@unibo.it](mailto:gioialaura.iannilli2@unibo.it)

Giovanni Matteucci  
Department of Philosophy and Communication Studies  
Via Zamboni 38, Bologna, Italy  
[giovanni.matteucci@unibo.it](mailto:giovanni.matteucci@unibo.it)