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A cosmological aesthetics: feelings and events in A.N. Whitehead

Abstract

In Whitehead's philosophy, perception is enlarged to every entity of the world: "prehensions" and "feelings" constitutes reality as a series of events. In other words, Whitehead builds a "cosmo-aesthetics", mixing up aesthetics – in its etymological sense – and cosmology (beyond Kantian interdiction). Aim of this work is to study the implications of these intuitions according to which what we perceive (and feel) in the world should serve as a basis for a speculative analysis of the world itself.

Keywords

Cosmo-aesthetics, Perception, Whitehead

1. Introduction. Beyond Kant: from Bergson to Deleuze

Henri Bergson progressively extends duration (*durée*) from the inner self (Bergson 2003) to cosmos in itself (Bergson 1944), inaugurating a new philosophy of perception, presented in particular in *Matter and memory*, where he tries in the first place to think the origin of perception within a system of absolute images (Bergson 1919: 1-85) that perceive each other completely (before the separation of a percipient subject and a perceived object) and, in the second place, he deduces all the metaphysical implications: all reality coincides with a series of contractions and distensions – both perceptive – of an immanent field, that expresses the actualisation of a virtual impetus (Bergson 1919: 233-89). Notoriously inspired by Bergson's philosophy, Deleuze points out, in *Difference and repetition*, that what is at stake in building a new philosophy of concrete and sensitive reality is the renewal and overthrow of the Kantian transcendental aesthetics (Deleuze 2001: 56; Montebello 2013: 35-44): reversing its subjective starting point, aesthetics should become a much larger discipline, no more confined with-

in the sensitive faculties of a presupposed subject (Deleuze 2001: 133). On the one hand, this radical overthrow, in Deleuze's as well as in Bergson's thought, constitutes a return to the original concept of aesthetics, conceived, following Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's philosophy, as a specific analysis of *aisthesis*, i.e. sensitive knowledge (Baumgarten 1750-8); on the other hand, this acknowledgement of a specific aesthetics domain does not delimitate its borders, but opens up immediately to a genuine and large metaphysical dimension.

If this renewal of aesthetics eventually leads, in Bergson's philosophy, to a metaphysics of time and, in Deleuze's thought, to a "transcendental empiricism" that find its core in the notion of event and of plane of immanence, the most significant consequence is that, for both, cosmology, as a speculative analysis towards the world, returns as a discipline, more than two-hundred years after the notorious Kantian interdiction (Kant 2000: 456-583). In short, from Bergsonian system of images to Deleuzian plane of immanence – through some other important intuitions made by Gilbert Simondon, Raymond Ruyer and Jean Hyppolite, among others – a common and fundamental idea emerges, i.e. that of a "cosmo-aesthetics", a wide-spread perception enlarged to reality itself, beyond the subject-object scheme¹. Here we may find a rediscovery of both the world as an immanent concept and of metaphysics as its proper understanding.

Is this a vain return to the abstract in philosophy? That would probably be the case, if the root of this renewed metaphysics was not genuinely "aesthetic", i.e. embodied in perception: in fact, the starting point is nothing but the sensitive experience, able to undermine the Kantian subject-object scheme and to conceive it, consequently, as a pure effect of a former reality. Real empiricism, as Bergson notoriously states, coincides here with a real metaphysics (Bergson 1946: 205).

Aim of this work is to enrich and specify these remarks through some references to Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy. His cosmological reflections on feelings as systems of "prehensions", linked to emotional tonalities and moods, should clarify as much the starting point as the objectives of a cosmo-aesthetical program, in

¹ This topic was at the core of my PhD dissertation, *Cosmogeneresi dell'esperienza. Il campo trascendentale impersonale da Bergson a Deleuze*, written under the supervision of professors Tonino Bernardo Griffero and Pierre Montebello, and defended on April 17th, 2018, at the Università di Roma Tor Vergata.

which the analysis of what we perceive (and feel) in the world should serve as a basis for a speculative analysis of the world itself.

2. Whitehead and “prehensions”

It is not surprising that Whitehead’s philosophy concerns these topics. Firstly, Whitehead’s thought perfectly fits in the line of thought that connects Bergsonism to Gilles Deleuze’s thought. Deeply influenced by Bergson, whose name recurs multiple times in his works (see for instance Whitehead 1978: XII, 33; Whitehead 1948: 52) and in turn esteemed by the French philosopher², Whitehead’s intuitions inspire, as we will see, some of Deleuze’s major notions. Furthermore, Whitehead’s journey into philosophy is quite similar to Bergson’s: from “insular” problems (initially connected to mathematics and then to scientific thought in general), throughout progressive enlargements, he arrives then to the idea of a cosmology (Bonfantini 1972: 7-8; Robert Mesle 2008: 11-9), which is coherently articulated in *Process and reality* – subtitle: *Essay in cosmology*.

The key-concept in Whitehead’s cosmology is undoubtedly that of “prehension”, introduced in the third part of the work, titled *Theory of prehensions* (Whitehead 1978: 219-81; Kraus 1998). Prehension is the process behind reality and it is consequently present in every facet of it. It is a mechanism of appropriation of elements (Whitehead 1978: 219): every component of reality – from cellular conglomerates up to human and animal behaviours – acts, i.e. takes elements in order to form its existence. Whitehead defines these elements as “actual entities”, which constitute the process by which the prehensive activities tends to reach a completeness, a satisfaction – or “self-enjoyment” (Whitehead 1978: 289)³ – i.e. the fulfilment of their creative impulse. Satisfaction determines the end of the process and the objective constitution of a new entity, which could then be “prehended” – be object of prehension – by another entity, and so on;

² Bergson states, in *Duration and simultaneity*, that “this work [*The concept of nature* by Whitehead] (which takes the theory of relativity into account) is certainly one of the most profound ever written on the philosophy of nature” (Bergson 1965: 62).

³ Whitehead reprises this concept from the Australian philosopher Samuel Alexander (Alexander 1927).

this leads to the constitution of a series of successive and simultaneous prehensions. Every actual entity is then an ongoing process of prehensions which tends to its own satisfaction. In Whitehead's eyes, nature is a system – or a “nexus” (Whitehead 1978: 291) – of simultaneous prehensions (or, as we will show, a system of events) between actual entities.

According to Whitehead, the mechanism of prehension is perceptive: every actual entity “captures” reality through perceptive modes. In other words, prehension is a perceptive act: the infinite number of prehensive activities are, in fact, constitutive perceptions – or *intra*-prehensions – which coincide with nature in its continuous development, or “concrecence” (Whitehead 1978: 7). This system, as Jean Wahl points out (Wahl 2013: 138), is to all intents analogue the aforementioned first chapter of *Matter and memory* by Bergson: perception and reality tends to coincide, in a monism that explicitly refuse to distinguish the primary (or objective) qualities from secondary (or subjective *qualia*). In this regard, Whitehead opposes itself to what he calls the “bifurcation of nature”, a historic phenomenon that starts with modern science and its expulsion of sensitive qualities from a merely mechanical matter (Whitehead 2015: 18-32).

If reality and perception coincides, this does not imply that every perception constitutes – in a merely idealistic form – reality; every aspect of reality is instead perceptive *per se*, includes a perception in itself. Consequently, we can already glimpse that Whitehead aims to “equalize” every natural entity to a same level, in order to switch from a classical and hierarchical ontological split – from inorganic domain and organic one up to psychological one, and so forth – to a much simpler one – a dualism between actual entity (individual) and pure mass phenomena⁴.

The tight connection between prehensions and perceptions clarifies how, according to Whitehead, the first and primary access to reality, by an entity, is not cognitive, but affective. Prehension is in fact defined by Whitehead as a “feeling” (Whitehead 1978: 238)⁵. More specifically, feelings are positive prehensions, processes of appropria-

⁴ Influenced by Whitehead, Raymond Ruyer, in his bio-philosophy, arrives to similar conclusions (Ruyer 2007: 6); Deleuze reprises these intuitions in *Mille plateaus*, with Félix Guattari (Deleuze, Guattari 2005: 30).

⁵ The first chapter of the third part of *Process and reality* is significantly titled *Theory of feelings* (Whitehead 1978: 219-35).

tion of elements, guided by a tonality, a *mood*. Whitehead insists on the fact that “feeling” is a strictly technical term (Whitehead 1978: 238), not necessarily linked to its usual sense: his conception of feelings is then obviously non-anthropomorphic, linked to the reality as a whole. Nevertheless, the fact that he uses this term is significant: primary-physic feeling, i.e. prehension – in Whitehead’s view there are many other types of feelings – is below-consciousness and pervades reality, present even in the mechanical vibrations of matter. Feelings and affectivity, then, are the keys in order to articulate the relations between subject and reality. Whitehead detects five major characteristics of feelings, that will help us in order to better understand the mechanism of prehension:

1. the “subject” which feels something, obviously restructured, as we will see, compared to philosophical tradition;
2. the “initial data” which are to be felt, i.e. a pure multiplicity, the immediate experience that appears to us. If we follow the comparison made by Wahl, this characteristic recalls, in Bergson’s philosophy, the absolute manifestation of the system of images;
3. the “elimination”, performed by the so-called “negative prehensions”: it is the removal of initials data, in order to extract a solid and definite object, i.e.
4. the “objective datum” which is actually felt. Here again, the link with Bergsonian philosophy is strong: for Bergson, according to his system of images, we go from an absolute perception, diffused in reality, to a “diminished” perception, from now on completely objective. The “elimination”, performed by negative prehensions leads eventually to a
5. subjective form, i.e., the concrete and peculiar mode by which this concrete subject actually feels the objective data. In other terms, the subjective form determines the “how to feel” something (Whitehead 1978: 221).

This latter characteristic, as Shaviro points out, is the genuine affective tone produced by the development of a feeling: beside the object, it is simultaneously produced a tone: the “how” is tightly linked to reality (Shaviro 2009: 59). Whitehead is, in this context, deeply influenced – as in many other parts of his work – by the philosophy of William James and, more specifically, by his theory of feelings presented in the *Principles of psychology*: according to James, it is untrue that we tremble because we fear something, but, on the

contrary, we fear something because we tremble. There is a primacy of body and affectivity as accesses to reality, from which actual feelings consequently derive: “whatever moods, affections, and passions I have are in very truth constituted by, and made up of, those bodily changes which we ordinarily call their expression or consequence” (James 1983: 1068). Whitehead reprises James’ theory and radicalizes it: every experience – even non-human – is affective and emotional. What happens in the universe – at any given level – is an emotional episode.

The very idea of prehension and its characteristics obviously implies a strong modification of the concept of subject, even if, as we have said, prehension is a subjective process and requires, thereby, a subject in order to develop itself. According to Whitehead’s theory of feelings, a constituted subject can no more be seen as a cause, but as an effect of prehension, i.e. as the term of the process that lead the actual entity to satisfaction⁶: the constitution of subject is, in other terms, the effect of both the feeling and the process that the latter puts in place. This is the reason why Whitehead proposes to rename subject as “superject”: “The term ‘subject’ has been retained because in this sense it is familiar in philosophy. But it is misleading. The term ‘superject’ would be better. The subject-superject is the purpose of the process originating the feelings” (Whitehead 1978: 222). Beyond the Latin *subiectum* which means “to be under” and constitutes a substratum for its accidents, Whitehead conceives the subject as a “throw ahead”, i.e. an effect, following the Latin *superiatio*: it is an inversion of the Cartesian *cogito*, that keeps nevertheless its subjective-interior primacy. As Didier Debaise has shown, this transformation of *subiectum* into *superiatio* does not make disappear, in Whitehead’s cosmology, the idea of a subjective starting point: if the superject is an effect of the process, there is a subject of the process itself, conceived as a potential tension towards its satisfaction, more in the form of a *sentio* than in the form of a *cogito* (Debaise 2015: 93-6). Here again, affectivity is the starting point of the whole process.

⁶ If the expression wasn’t confusingly similar to some Foucault’s concepts, we would have used the expression “process of subjectivation”.

3. From “prehensions” to the event. Whitehead via Deleuze, Deleuze via Whitehead

Prehensions that coordinate themselves, linking one with another, constitute, according to Whitehead, an “event”, i.e. a nexus of perceptions that persists beyond the single completed processes (Whitehead 1978: 230): the event constitutes, in other terms, the actual passage of nature in a given moment (Whitehead 2015: 36). Objects of nature, then, are not stable or fix: Whitehead fights the idea of a “simple location” of phenomena in space and time (Whitehead 1948: 49-50). Being composed by prehensions, objects are firstly parts of events, i.e. *nexus* of prehensions. Even if an object seems to be fix and stable object, realized once and for all (and in a way it is, mostly because it persists in time as a completed and satisfied process), it constitutes in fact an event, with a “volume” (Whitehead 1978: 300) that coordinates the prehensions occurred starting from its first objective realization. In other words, an event keeps occurring and keeps to connect and articulate prehensions and point of views, making nature grows as a whole: prehension after prehension, there is a “conrescence” of the universe. In this regard, Deleuze quotes, in order to make clear the fact that, according to Whitehead, a stable object is first and foremost an event still occurring, the sentence pronounced by Napoleon to his soldiers before the battle of the Pyramids: “Forty centuries are contemplating us” (Deleuze 1993: 78)⁷: the Pyramids, as an event and not only as a realized process, seem to prehend, in a given moment, Napoleon’s soldiers⁸. Nature constitutes itself then as a series of events that follow one after another and that increase its volume and realize its conrescence⁹.

The notion of event, as it is well known, is a key-concept in Deleuze’s thought; since his first works, in the late 50s, and through his fundamental works in the late ‘0s (*Difference and repetition* and *Logic of*

⁷ The exact sentence pronounced by Napoleon is “From the heights of the Pyramids, forty centuries look down on us”.

⁸ Deleuze reprises here the example of the Pyramids, made by Whitehead himself (1978: 208).

⁹ One can see in Whitehead’s cosmology a form of Spinozism, in which modes (prehensions) expresses a substance that is not stable, but grows in complexity. Here again, there may have been an influence of Samuel Alexander, who wrote a remarkable work on Spinoza (Alexander 2016).

sense), he tries to elaborate this notion, conceived as a process of actualisation of a singularity within a concrete state of thing (Deleuze 2001: 189, Deleuze 1990: 53), i.e. the genesis of reality itself: the event – states Deleuze – is not merely what occurs in reality, but is included *in* what occurs (Deleuze 1990: 149), it's the incorporeal condition of its actual occurring. Initially, the main influence in the elaboration of this notion was the Stoic philosophy¹⁰, which gives priority to a notion of event conceived as an incorporeal dimension that realizes itself in reality, although not being completely reducible to it. During the 80s, Deleuze progressively approaches Whitehead's philosophy (Deleuze 2015: 90)¹¹ – through the fundamental mediation of Jean Wahl (2013) – and finds in it a genuine philosophy of the event able to dismiss the attributive thought (the subject-verb-predicate structure as a key to understand reality), on behalf of a notion that englobes subjects, objects and predicates within a perceptive process. In *The fold*, Deleuze devotes crucial pages to Whitehead's conception of event. Deleuze, in particular, shows four characteristic, that will help us specify its nature. Every event has:

1. an extension, i.e. the outpouring of the prehensions between their parts and the whole they are progressively appropriating;
2. an intension (or intensity), i.e. the tonality of every actual entity the appropriates elements, the “how” of the subjective form;
3. the prehension as such;
4. the ingression, i.e. the entry, in the succession of prehensions, of what Whitehead calls an “eternal object” (Whitehead 1978: 44-6). It is what enables the event to persist in the transition between different realized prehensions (like, for instance, the Pyramids). Every event actualizes, in other terms, a pure virtuality, an eternal Quality (Deleuze 1993: 76-80).

Deleuze gives the example of a concert:

A concert is being performed tonight. It is the event. Vibrations of sound disperse, periodic movements go through space with their harmonics or sub-multiples. The sounds have inner qualities of height, intensity, and timbre. The sources of the sounds, instrumental or vocal are not content only to

¹⁰ The main influence is, in this regard, an essay written by Émile Bréhier (1928).

¹¹ Letter from 1982: “Empirisme transcendantal veut dire: création de concepts. Par exemple avec Bergson, le philosophe qui va très loin dans un empirisme transcendantal, c'est Whitehead (je commence maintenant à mieux connaître son œuvre)” (Deleuze 2015: 90).

send the sounds out: each one perceives its own, and perceives the others while perceiving its own. These are active perceptions that are expressed among each other, or else prehensions that are prehending one another: “First the solitary piano grieved like a bird abandoned by its mate; the violin heard its wail and responded to it like a neighbouring tree. It was like the beginning of the world”. The origins of the sounds are monads or prehensions that are filled with joy in themselves, with an intense satisfaction as they fill up with their perceptions and move from one perception to another. And the notes of the scale are eternal objects, pure Virtualities that are actualized in the origins, but also pure Possibilities that are attained in vibrations or flux. “As if the instrumentalists played the little phrase far less than they were performing the rites it required in order to appear”. (Deleuze 1993: 80)

Deleuze eventually specifies the concept of event, in the form of a genuine mood, later, with a reference to a term derived from the philosophy of John Duns Scotus, i.e. haecceity – from the Latin *haecceitas* (Deleuze 1987: 80). The event is an haecceity, the concrete and singular way of being of every entity: Deleuze means it as an individuation, that, before being personal or subjective, is – like in Whitehead’s cosmology – primarily atmospheric-perceptive, able, in other words, to englobe and realize “pieces” of world that can be distinguished in subject and object only for the sake of simplicity. Deleuze gives the examples of a walk, a disease, a wind, as events that realize a singular state of being (Deleuze 1995: 34), but that do not reduce to it, constituting essentially a tonal trait: “Climate, wind, season, hour are not of another nature than the things, animals, or people that populate them, follow them, sleep and awaken within them. This should be read without a pause: the animal-stalks-at-five-o’clock” (Deleuze, Guattari 2005: 263).

4. *Conclusions. Towards a cosmo-aesthetics*

In conclusion, from Whitehead’s philosophy – and through Deleuze and Bergson’s intuitions – we can derive an ambitious cosmo-aesthetics program that has four main characteristics:

1. *the revaluation of the immediate experience*. Whitehead rediscovers the importance of the concrete¹² in opposition to the mediation

¹² Not surprisingly, the ground-breaking book written by Jean Wahl and dedicated to Whitehead, James and Gabriel Marcel, which will significantly influence Deleuze’s philosophy, is titled *Vers le concret* (*Towards the concrete*).

of concepts (in a dialectical sense), of subjects (in a criticist sense) and of language (in a linguistic sense). Consequently, the immediate experience of reality has a philosophical dignity *per se*, mainly because it is the first and foremost aspect of reality that we know.

2. *The naturalization of the world.* The access to reality by the perceptive subject is genuinely ontological rather than only epistemological: cognitions and feelings are things in the world, such as (and maybe more than) objects and subjects. The traditional and philosophical question “how do we access world?” is senseless, according to this perspective.

3. *The reunion of knowledge fields.* Philosophy, science, ethics, religion, etc. are all rooted in human experience and perception. Whitehead – and also Bergson, Deleuze, Simondon – intends to go beyond the divorce of disciplines, in order to rediscover their mutual aesthetic root: consequently, he seems to rediscover the original root of the aesthetics, expressed, as we have said, by Baumgarten as a sensitive knowledge. However, the *specificity* of the aesthetic domain does not coincide here *ipso facto* with its *autonomy*, i.e. with a subjective study in feelings toward the world, but constitutes a sensitive premise for a vast cosmological speculation. This is the very idea of a cosmo-aesthetics, i.e. a study of sensibility that opens up immediately to a metaphysical dimension. Whitehead states, in this regard, that the study of the perceptive mechanism of prehension contains no less than the heart of his entire cosmological thought: “This section on simple physical feelings lays the foundation of the treatment of cosmology in the philosophy of organism. It contains the discussion of the ultimate elements from which a more complete philosophical discussion of the physical world—that is to say, of nature—must be derived” (Whitehead 1978: 238; see Sherburn 1961).

4. *From “how you feel” to “how the world is”.* Starting from the analysis of feelings, the aim of cosmo-aesthetics is to build, then, a new metaphysics. Feelings possesses, as we have seen, an ontological nature that coordinates, in an original way, an affective and a cosmological turn, where aesthetics meets metaphysics.

Revaluation of immediate experience, naturalization of the world, reunion of different knowledge fields and of the ontological and epistemological dimensions, together with the possibility of building a non-Kantian bridge between science and metaphysics, constitute the core of the cosmo-aesthetical project, whose heart lies in this ambi-

tious sentence: “It should be the task of the philosophical schools of this century to bring together the two streams into an expression of the world-picture derived from science, and thereby end the divorce of science from the affirmations of our aesthetic and ethical experiences” (Whitehead 1948: 157).

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