What is My Value?

Digital Questions in Aesthetic Education:

the Case of Video Game

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Keywords: aesthetic education, video game, play, value

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1. An idea of aesthetic education: seductive capitalism, digital ecosystem and balance search

Aesthetic education is a new and multifaceted field of study that is usually, or at least initially, perceived as an *education in arts* or *through the arts*. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) itself – since the Seoul

Agenda of 2010 – never mentions aesthetic education, but rather *arts education* – and now the terminology has shifted to *culture and arts education*[1]. UNESCO also explains two primary objectives of culture and arts education: transmitting cultural values through artistic products and developing critical and transversal skills through artistic processes[2]. In light of this position, it is essential to take a step back.

Undoubtedly, *art* constitutes a privileged place of emergence of the aesthetic experience, also from an educational standpoint, as John Dewey masterfully highlighted[3]. However, it is neither the sole nor the primary path. Aesthetic education means, literally, "education to *aisthesis*". The Greek word *aisthesis* «includes not only what we call sensation (sensory knowledge of a quality), but also what we call perception (sensory knowledge of an object)»[4]. Far from being a mere synonym of *artistic*, the adjective "aesthetic" refers therefore to a human experience as fundamental as *inhaling* – another meaning of the Homeric term *aío*, from which *aísthomai*, "perceiving"[5], derives. Such an etymology of *aisthesis*, when considered with pedagogical intentionality, raises a series of challenging questions: can I perhaps refrain from feeling a sensation of cold when I touch a frozen surface or even more, when I enter a room in which, *à la* Böhme, I perceive a cold and rigid atmosphere? But above all – since our focus revolves around values – can I perceive a face, a speech, or an image as beautiful through mere rational understanding or an effort of will?
Can I regard something as good and beneficial for me if it initially causes discomfort or pain, such as being separated from a digital prosthesis or a beloved video
game to which I have grown accustomed?

Furthermore: if we define aesthetics as encompassing all cognitive and productive capacities that are inseparable from the body – such as perception, imagination, intuition, taste, feeling and memory –, and these capacities allows us to grasp and express, in a

[1] See https://www.unesco.org/en/frameworkcultureartseducation .
[2] See ENO (European Network of Observatories in the Field of Arts and Cultural Education) Yeabooks to have an idea of this type of research and its main sociological approach: L. Ferro, E. Wagner, L. Veloso, T. Ijdens, J. Teixeira Lopes (eds.), *Arts and Cultural Education in a World of Diversity*, «ENO Yearbook 1», Springer, Cham 2019; E. Wagner, C. Svendler Nielsen, L. Veloso, A. Suominen, N. Pachova (eds.), *Arts, Sustainability and Education*, «ENO Yearbook 2», Springer, Cham 2021; T. Klepacki, E. van Meerkerk, T. Pernille Østern (eds.), *Arts and Cultural Education in a Challenging and Changing World*, «ENO Yearbook 3», Springer, Cham 2024 (in press).
[3] See J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, Allen & Unwin, London 1934.
[4] I. Gobry (ed.), *Vocabolario greco della filosofia*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2004, p. 8 (the translation from Italian is mine).
[5] R.B. Broxton, *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1951, p. 98.

"clear and confused way" as Alexander Baumgarten articulated[6], links and correspondences among things that constitute the aesthetic-logical truth of the world or, more precisely – as Roberto Diodato suggests[7] – of all the possible worlds that we are capable of envisioning but not ultimately defining or controlling, then we must ask: *what necessity* (first question) and *what concrete way* (second question) do we have in order to intervene on our experience of those worlds? *What possibility* (third question), then, do we have to critically distancing ourselves from a digital experience that accompanies us from birth to death, where the boundary between real and unreal dissolves and the flow is continuous?

Spontaneity and pleasure – as well as immediacy and displeasure – seem to want to escape any control of reason, both theoretical and practical. Despite this, everyday aesthetic or better seductive capitalism conveys our perception of what is or is not beautiful through the media, thus shaping our feeling, imagining, desiring and acting, as Gilles Lipovetsky demonstrated[8]. Therefore, while philosophers and pedagogues ponder questions such as the nature of beauty and what its reference criteria and its conditions of possibility are within educational contexts and processes[9]; while we are asking ourselves what is the nature and perceptibility of values, if they have a universal value or a profile that is always historically and subjectively defined[10], the *cultural industry*[11] and the *society of the spectacle*[12] – using two historical and well-known expressions – predetermine our tastes with the aim of fostering consumption and exercising social control.

It's evident that all these issues are manifested on multiple levels, each layer opening itself up to further interpretations. Environmental emergencies, social conflicts and

[6] G. Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, Frankfurt a.d. Oder 1750-1758, especially § 21.
[7] R. Diodato, *Esperienza estetica ed esperienza anestetizzata*, in R. Diodato, L. Aimo, *Un'idea di educazione estetica*, Morcelliana-Scholé, Brescia 2021, p. 13.
[8] See G. Lipovetsky, *Plaire et toucher. Essai sur la société de séduction*, Gallimard, Paris 2017 (kindle edition) and the book written with J. Serrot, *L'esthétisation du monde. Vivre à l'âge du capitalism artiste*, Gallimard, Paris 2013.
[9] See D. Bruzzone, R. Diodato (eds.), *Quale bellezza? Idee per un'educazione estetica*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2024. Another interesting interdisciplinary study on the issue of imagination is C. Diotto, M. Ophälders (eds.), *Formare per trasformare. Per una pedagogia dell'immaginazione*, Mimesis, Sesto San Giovanni (MI) 2022.
[10] See C. Rozzoni, N. Conceição (eds.), *Aesthetics and Values. Contemporary Perspectives*, Mimesis International, Milano-Udine 2021.
[11] T. Adorno, *The Cultural Industry. Enlightenment as Mass Deception*, in T. Adorno, M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), ed. by G. Schmid Noerr, engl. transl. by E. Jephcott, Stanford University Press, Redwood City 2002, pp. 94-136.
[12] G. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), engl. transl. by D. Nicholson-Smith, Black & Red, Detroit 1977.

personal crises are just refractions of a broken mirror that asks to be reassembled. Processes of specialization and individualization have gradually intensified our focus on the particular – whether it be taste, perspective, concept or product – leading to a lossof sight of the organic unity of the whole, as well as of the excess of the whole compared to the sum of its parts, as Michel Odent figured out[13].Simoultaneously, these drifts from the Anthropocene have facilitated the machinations of dominant powers, which are solely interested in directing collective consciousness and the common tension to unity towards individual and predetermined objectives. These are simulacra of beauty – reproducible and cheap, devoid of any reference beyond themselves[14]. They effectively manipulate the emotional currents of many individuals and to increase the profits of a selected few. Most crucially, however, they alienate the humanity from the world it has created by, as prophetically articulated by Fromm in 1955[15].

Within the digital ecosystem we inhabit, all these factors are assuming the character of pervasiveness for profit purposes, the extent of which we have yet to fully comprehend. Daily exposure to mediation processes operated by electronic devices, the extension of media environments, the growing accessibility of environmental images and immersive experiences are leading to a progressive reconfiguration of sensitive perception[16]. We know that these processes generate risks related to perceptive anesthetization, to the derealization of the imaginary, to the atrophy of the *sensorium,* and to other cognitive and emotional disturbances. Nevertheless, they may help to configure the relationship between body and technical prostheses in an interactive way, as the virtuous examples of intersection of different languages – pedagogically developed, for example, by the Reggio Emilia Approach[17] – show and the scientific literature support[18].

The complexity and insidiousness of the issue requires a critical reflection. Every great technological revolution has undermined our identity, thus dividing public opinion (as well as the philosophical thought) between detractors and supporters. The first ones – *à*

[13] M. Odent, *The Future of Homo*, World Scientific, Singapore 2019 (kindle edition).
[14] See J. Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation*, Galilée, Paris 1981.
[15] See E. Fromm, *The Sane Society*, Rinehart & Company, New York 1955.
[16] See L. Floridi, *The Fourth Revolution. How the Infosphere Is Reshaping Human Reality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014. See also D. Idhe, *Philosophy of Technology. An Introduction*, Paragon House Publishers, St. Paul (Minn.) 1993.
[17] See L. Manera, *Elementi per un'estetica del digitale. Media interattivi e nuove forme di educazione estetica*, Mimesi, Milano-Udine 2022.
[18] See D. Buckingham, *The Media Education Manifesto*, Wiley, New York 2019; C. Panciroli, P.C. Rivoltella, *Pedagogia algoritmica. Per una riflessione educativa sull'Intelligenza Artificiale*, Morcelliana-Scholé, Brescia 2023; P.C. Rivoltella, *Screen Generation*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2006.

la Plato – see technology as the atrophy of human faculties, and the second ones – *à la* Hegel – recognize in every content or aspect of the world a logical dignity, a moment of learning and growth of the spirit[19]. However, in the present times we are facing a scenario characterized by rapid transformation, and the *ephemeral* and *intangible* nature of which exposes the human ability to process and integrate such innovations not only to benefits but also to serious risks. This is especially true for new generations, born in this ecosystem, as Serge Tisseron figured out[20]. Therefore, for those individuals who have a "thin skin" – referring to the operative concept of *moi-peau* developed by the psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu[21] – we must try to articulate the issue.

From an aesthetic-educational point of view, and mainly from a learning standpoint, there are three key factors to begin with:

1. The concept of *extended-reduced mind*: functions, data and mental facts (feelings and emotions included) are increasingly managed by technologies. This leads to a decreasing exploration and development of the body-mind's own resources and to an increasing dependence on machines.
2. The issue of *implicit learning*: in our current performing society, everything changes rapidly and we constantly need to act without prior learning. Consequently, there is no time to critically integrate what has been experienced and the possibility to make a free choice is therefore increasingly compromised.
3. *Early exposure to digital devices and environments*: during the first years of life, the child knows no separation from external reality and begins to take note of himself and of the world through his body. Therefore, we do not yet have data on the long-term impact of the increasing use of screens from a very early age on development.

These dynamics create a pronounced generational gap and exposes us to significant unknowns. The so-called "digital natives" already hear and dream in another language. Therefore, the first necessity is to sharpen listening and observation, and at the same time it is crucial to develop confidence in their ability to cope with situations unknown to us, thanks to faculties and languages, which are equally unknown to us. Yet, the essential question is whether there is a *balance* that we must always be mindful of and maintain.

[19] See E. Bencivenga, *Critica della ragione digitale. Come ci trasforma la rivoluzione tecnologica*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2020.
[20] See S. Tisseron, *3-6-9-12 Apprivoiser les écrans et grandir*, Éditions érès, Toulouse 2013.
[21] See D. Anzieu*, Le moi-peau*, Dunod, Paris 1985.

We wonder if there is a fundamental human experience, neither negotiable nor conditionable,
which we must acknowledge and protect to preserve the conditions necessary for being human. Hans Blumenberg identified this chance in the ability to linger, to take time: *das zögert*[22]. From our point of view, this ability lies originally and metaphorically in the very possibility of breathing[23], of slowing down and making conscious a spontaneous and physiological exchange act; in fact, it is only through a pause that a new image, thought, gesture or word can take shape: only in this way the *aisthesis* can express itself fully. Pedagogically speaking, this means protecting the conditions of an encounter with ourselves and with the others, always both cognitively and emotionally connoted, that is above all embodied: a relation that has to be intimate, two-way, conscious and free.

Drawing attention to a specific experience – the *video game* – and, thanks to this one, exemplifying a wider way of proceeding in the aesthetic-educational field: a *method* that takes into account the intersection of several disciplinary perspectives in order to grasp, question and transform obstacles, dystonia and apparent dead trends into new paths of thought and action[24]. We propose a theoretical and pedagogical diagnosis of what is at stake and we present a pedagogical project that responds to it through an integrated aesthetic approach. More specifically, starting from a linguistic approach we first question the nature and the power of the context in relation to the screen seduction. Secondly, by examining neuroscientific data and different experiments we consider the opportunities and the risks connected to a massive video games consumption and the great profit of industry connected to that. Finally, we analyse the underlying aesthetic and theoretical concept – the *play* – and we show how it could be preserved and stimulated in order to guarantee authentic freedom and responsibility chances.

2. The case of the video game

[22] H. Blumenberg, *Pensosità*, ital. transl. in "Aut-Aut", 332 (2006), pp. 3-8 (original german version here: https://www.deutscheakademie.de/en/awards/sigmund-freud-preis/hans-blumenberg/dankrede).
[23] See above, p. 2.
[24] For more on this method, both in terms of its fundamentals and in relation to other application cases, see L. Aimo, *Istruzioni per l'uso*, in R. Diodato, L. Aimo (eds.), *Un'idea di educazione estetica*, cit., pp. 47-80 and the second part of the volume (pp. 81-262) and Ead., *La bellezza del processo. Osservazioni di metodo in chiave estetico-pedagogica*, in D. Bruzzone, R. Diodato, *Quale bellezza?*, cit., pp. 108-125.

Alex Mitchell and Jasper van Vught wrote: «As a multimodal one, the experience of video games is necessarily complex, involving the emotional, cognitive, and physical processing of narrative, (audio-visual) stylistic, and rule-based components, functioning in a range of different ways from the ludic to the artistic. All of this together creates a very particular experience»[25]. Since the universe of the video game – and the experience it offers – is multifaceted, multi-layered, and in constant transformation, it can be investigated from different perspectives – from the linguistic to the phenomenological[26]– each based on precise ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions[27]. Even from a solely aesthetic standpoint, then, there are many focuses and approaches. Considered as one of the most significant development in the modern popular arts, video games raise new topics of concern that range from ontology of video games to the nature of video game interactivity, to the ethics of video game, and to the aesthetics of game design and game play[28].

Here, the word *video game* is used in its basic meaning: it is a game run by an electronic device that allows us to interact with the images on a screen. This case allows us to make some aesthetic-educational considerations that are also valid for smartphones and social networks, but which, for example, prove to be ineffective or, at least, not exhaustive for immersive environments. The video game experience is indeed configured in many cases in proto-immersive terms: the image is grasped as *reality itself* and not as its mediation; the player relates to the image reproduced on the screen as a *presence* rather than as an iconic representation, and he dives into it on the basis of an *affordance*. In order to question the aesthetic-educational stakes connected to these specifical characters of video games, we start from two different disciplinary approaches that focus on the issue of learning and development: the linguistic one of James Paul Gee and the neuropsychiatric one of Manfred Spitzer.

[25] A. Mitchell, J. van Vught, *Video game Formalism: On Form, Aesthetic Experience and Methodology*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2024, p. 80.
[26] See for example: A. Ensslin, I. Balteiro, *Approaches to Video game Discourse: Lexis, Interaction, Textuality*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York 2019; A. Anable, *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2018; B. Keogh, *Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Video games*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2018.
[27] To get an idea of the breadth of the field of study, one only has to look at the DiGRA network (https://digra.org). Founded in 2003, DiGRA is the premiere international association for academics and professionals who research digital games and associated phenomena. It encourages high-quality research on games, and promotes collaboration and dissemination of works by its members.
[28] See J. Sharp, *Works of Games. On the Aesthetics of Games and Art*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2015; J. Robson, G. Tavinor (eds.), *The Aesthetics of Video Games*, Routledge, London 2018.

2.1. Value of the process or of the content? The linguistic approach by James Paul Gee

James Paul Gee, one of the most famous US linguists, now retired, did research at the Games, Learning and Society Group of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and was a member of the National Academy of Education. In 2003 he wrote a very popular text entitled: *What Video Games Have To Teach Us about Learning and Literacy?*. In a short time, the book became a classic of educational literature because it adopts a different approach from the one usually employed in Media Education, often divided between the supporters of the so-called "edutainment" and those in favour of the "serious game". In the face of these two opposing trends, Gee invites to a change of perspective: what matters is looking at a child when he is playing[29]. The devices are not as important as the practices, the languages, the *contexts*. In particular, within a video game, the scholar identifies three semiotic fields:

1. The *internal grammar* (rules and language of the game).
2. The *external grammar* (the system of social relationships that intervene among the players, the set of the discourses building micro cultures, and the affinity groups).
3. The *identity of the player* (which moves between his real identity, his virtual one – the double that is the character in the game – and his projective one, which means the projects and the intentions of growth and movement that the player elaborates on his avatar).

For Gee, in this interweaving of semiotic fields the value of learning is given by the fact that it's always contextualized:

1. Internal grammar is discovered by *playing* through a combination of surprise and challenge.
2. External grammar is understood thanks to the *community* of players that the single player joins.
3. Finally, the player is *personally* involved in this triage through how much he plans for his avatar and how much of his performance he projects onto himself.

[29] J.P. Gee, *What Video Games Have To Teach Us about Learning and Literacy?*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2008, revised and updated edition (kindle edition).

Unlike what usually happens in school and other educational contexts, the video game enables a *situated learning* that is also highly *engaging*: it proceeds by trial and error, repetition and imitation, and at the same time it trains to a multimodal language. The video game is therefore highly addictive and persuasive to the extent that it is increasingly being used in awareness-raising campaigns, notably for environmental education[30]. Furthermore, according to the scholar[31], the player is invited by the structure of the game itself to reflect on how these three semiotic levels are planned. Nevertheless, here we get to the first critical point of Gee's approach.

"Why is bad good?"[32] This is the question that Gee asks his son while they are playing "Sonic Adventure 2 Battle", a video game that lets the player choose whether to step into the role of the good guy (the policeman) or of the bad guy (the delinquent). The answer of the child demonstrates that he understands well the question: if he chooses to be "bad", for him will be "bad guys" all those opposing him – who are actually "good" according to common sense. It's an *ethical problem* or rather, as Pier Cesare Rivoltella points out[33], a problem of the foundation of ethics: what makes good all that we call good? Starting from this consideration, Rivoltella suggests you should approach Gee's text by leaving aside the *medium* for a moment and by keeping the focus onto the message. From this perspective, in the same way of Lipman's "Philosophy for children"[34], different reasons for dialogue can arise among the players, and in particular between adults and children: an ethical laboratory can thus be established. Always referring to the question to Gee's son, we may be wondering:

1. "Are violence and bad *acceptable*?" We know that brutality and spectacularity of killings and violence excite players. If we are in the video game "Lord of the Rings" and we are the elves fighting against the orcs, violence towards bad people is therefore legitimized and relieved of responsibility. It's not different from what happens in "Modern Warfare" (among the most best-selling video games), in which we play the role of Americans fighting against dangerous Arabian or Russian terrorists. For sure, we can say that it is a video game and therefore a fantastic

[30] See "Playing for the Planet", an Alliance that supports the video games industry to take action on the environment, and in particular its project "Green Game Jam" (https://www.playing4theplanet.org/green-game-jam).
[31] J.P. Gee, *What Video Games Have To Teach Us about Learning and Literacy?*, cit.
[32] *Ivi.*
[33] P.C. Rivoltella, *Prefazione all'edizione italiana*, in J.P. Gee, *Come un videogioco. Insegnare e apprendere nella scuola digitale*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2013, pp. XVI-XXI.
[34] See M. Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991.

reality, but the logic of the victim and the device of revenge – as René Girard promptly explained[35] – has been nourished by these assumptions for millennia and continues to fuel a spiral of violence.

2. "Is good a process of *approximation* through experiencing different perspectives?" There are also video games that challenge social imaginaries and stereotypes, including the romantic vision of war or heroism. For instance, in "Operation Flashpoint" (even if it is quite outdated now), we play the role of an American soldier on the front lines and we experience his boredom and the suspension of time: he is waiting for an enemy attack at any moment, or for the orders of a commander, who doesn't care about his soldiers. According to Rivoltella[36], this type of game helps to develop the positional thinking or, in other words, to put oneself in the other's shoes. However, even in this case, as in "This War of Mine" – war survival management video game based on the siege of Sarajevo and the victims' point of view – we keep on wondering how these scenarios continue to fuel an imaginary of war and revenge, preventing from breaking the logic within the game itself.
3. "Is death bad?" Another essential point is the theme of the reversibility of *death*. The word Avatar (the synthetic double of the gamer) in Sanskrit means "descended (*ava*) on Earth (*tara*)" and in the Hindu religion indicates the manifestations through which the divinity takes on a human form. Even if in the video game our double dies, we neither know the limit nor the law of cause and effect (the so-called "karma"), which in the Hindu religion regulates the continuous cycle of reincarnations for the human being. In the video games, we can press reset and start again: no trace, no effect, and no remains of what we did or suffered. The video game space is therefore free from risks and compromises, but it is also a technological space of domination, a micro world in which we have the illusion of being able to decide on life and death, our ownand others'.

At this point, a fundamental aesthetic-educational question arises: is it enough *to talk about* these issues between us and with the kids? Gee would answer: yes. The scholar states that, when the learning process is effective (and that of the video game is so), the apprehension of good or bad things depends on the community[37]. For example, he states that episodes of violence in real life cannot be traced back to the use or abuse of violent

[35] See R. Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, Grasset, Paris 1972; Id., *Le bouc émissaire*, Grasset, Paris 1982.
[36] P.C. Rivoltella, *Prefazione all'edizione italiana*, cit., p. XIX:
[37] J.P. Gee, *What Video Games Have To Teach Us about Learning and Literacy?*, cit.

video games: according to him – and to most scholars[38] – the activation depends on the reference context. But what if the reference context is the ecosystem set up by video games? If children spend 8 hours out of the 24 (more than those spent sleeping, at school and, for sure, discussing with parents or others adults) playing video games – especially just in front of and inside the "shooters" –, if they are exposed over and over again to the so-called "procedural rhetoric" – a type of persuasive power related to the main characteristics of computers, as process execution and rule-based symbolic manipulation, that goes beyond other forms of computational persuasion[39] – what kind of effects can we expect? This is not intended to deny the side benefits of video games – such as in some cases fostering brain plasticity[40] or its awareness-raising power about critical issues[41] – but to not underestimate their risks.

2.2. Digital dementia: Manfred Spitzer's neuropsychiatric perspective

In order to answer the last question, we consider the studies of another scientist: Manfred Spitzer, neuropsychiatrist, visiting professor at Harvard, director of the Psychiatric Clinic and the Center for Neuroscience and Learning at the University of Ulm. The starting point of his reflections is that the brain changes through its use: thinking, imagining, feeling, and acting leave mnemonic traces. Neuroimaging methods – able to map dimensions and activities of entire regions of the brain – have demonstrated that the electrical impulses transmitted by the synapses modify the synapses themselves making them more efficient, while, if unused, they atrophy[42].

Through randomized controlled trials, Spitzer stated that the widespread use of digital devices is leading to the increase of *dementia*: in other words, to the decline, or even to the lack of total or partial development of the different cognitive abilities, such as memory, the ability to concentrate and contemplate, the ability to discern and decide, and independent thinking. This can cause addiction to devices, to specific learning and

[38] See D.I. Waddington, *Locating the Wrongness in Ultra-Violent Video Games*, in "Ethics and Information Technology", IX/2, 2007, pp. 121-128; M. Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2009; G. Young, *Ethics in the Virtual World. The Morality and Psychology of Gaming*, Routledge, Abingdon (UK) 2014.
[39] I. Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2007.
[40] D. Bavelier *et al*., Brain *Plasticity through the Life Span: Learning to Learn and Action Video Games*, in "Annual Reviews of Neuroscience", XXXV, 2007, pp. 391-416.
[41] See above note n. 30.
[42] See M. Spitzer, *Geist im Netz. Modelle für Lernen, Denken und Handeln*, Spektrum Akademischer Verlag, Heidelberg-Oxford 1996 (engl. ed. *The Mind within the Net. Models of Learning, Thinking, and Acting,* MIT Press, Cambridge [MA] 1999).

behaviour disorders, to anxiety, depression and relational difficulties. Obviously, the greatest impact is the one on new generations: if a mental decline is inevitable in the aging process, what really makes the difference is the *starting point* of the deterioration. We need to figure out whether we must start from a sand dune or from Everest Mount in order to reach the sea – as Spitzer writes in his best-known text, *Digitale Demenz. Wie wir uns und unsere Kinder um den Verstand bringen* (2012)[43]. Furthermore, the effects of the mental decline are not immediately visible, since, while a computer crashes very soon, our mind works without particular symptoms up to 70 percent of damage[44].

In addition to all the mentioned effects connected to the abuse of technological media, the scholar highlights the risk factors of video games related to the issue of perceived, suffered, and perpetrated *violence*. In this regard, the scientist reports an American study on empathy called "Comfortably numb" conducted on 300 university students[45]. The participants were divided into two groups: those who belonged to the first group individually played a typical "shooter" video game in a room, while the second group was given a game without violence. At the end of the session, each player had to fill out a questionnaire about this experience. In the meantime, with an excuse, the game administrator left the room and, in the next one, he let the recording of a very realistic quarrel play. The outcome of the experiment was the following: those who had played the violent video game did not react to what they had heard in the next room, or reacted much slower than the other group. In a very short time, the power of the screen made aggression and violence so *familiar* that this group did not perceive as unusual, dangerous or noteworthy what was happening a few meters away: what occurs is a process of *desensitisation* and *anaesthetisation*.

In the face of these and other data[46], the following question arises: Why aren't these studies and data disseminated or discussed? In various ways, they are covered up in

[43] Id., *Digitale Demenz. Wie wir uns und unsere Kinder um den Verstand bringen*, Droemer, München 2012 (kindle edition).
[44] *Ivi*.
[45] B.J. Bushman, C.A. Anderson, *Comfortably Numb. Desensitizing Effects of Violent Media on Helping Others*, in "Psychological Science", XX, 2009, pp. 273-277.

[46] For other studies confirming the desensitisation process by video games and media violence, see N.L. Carnagey, C.A. Anderson, B.J. Bushman, *The Effect of Video Game Violence on Physiological Desensitization to Real-Life Violence*, in "Journal of Experimental Social Psychology", XLIII, 2007, pp. 489-496; D.A. Gentile, P.I. Lynch, J.R. Linder, D.A. Walsh, *The Effects of Violent Video Game Habits on Adolescent Hostility, Aggressive Behaviors, and School Performance*, in "Journal of Adolescence", XXVII, 2004, pp. 5-22; D.A. Gentile, M. Saleem, C.A. Anderson, *Public Policy and the Effects of Media Violence on Children*, in "Social Issues and Policy Review", I, 2007, pp. 15-61; H. Polman, B.O. de Castro, M.V.

generic formulas, such as "there is not enough evidence to establish correlations between the use of video games and attention, learning or behavioural disorders, as well as episodes of physical violence". Even Spitzer asked himself the same question, and his answer was the following: because there are *huge profits*[47]. The turnover of the video games exceeded the entire turnover of the cultural industry already in 2014, it was estimated at around 23.5 billion dollars in 2015, and in 2022 it reached almost 300 billion: a market twice as large is expected in 2029[48]. It is a business indifferent to its effects on children and young people, and on the future of humanity. It is a business that even restrains politics, which should instead limit its powers. This industry is rarely the focus of academic studies, which tend to analyse a narrow section of video games «that are contemplative or serene, philosophically minded, or open-ended and creative»[49] or are interested in other aspects.

This is the case of the article cited above[50] in which C. Thi Nguyen does not consider the violence of the video game – since he considers it "fictional" – but rather the actuality of the actions performed by the player that are positively capable of soliciting the opponent and providing him with the struggle he seeks. There are several studies that, in addition to this, also show how action games contribute to developing the attention span compared to quieter games such as "The Sims" or "Tetris"[51]. In both cases, these are noteworthy observations which, however, in addition to not comparing these data with attending non-electronic or virtual games and activities, tend to downplay or outright deny

van Aken, *Experimental Study of the Differential Effects of Playing Versus Watching Violent Video Games on Children's Aggressive Behavior*, in "Aggressive Behavior", XXXIV, 2008, 3, pp. 256-264. And also M.A. Barnett et al., *Late Adolescents Experiences With and Attitudes Toward Video Game*s, in "Journal of Applied Social Psychology", XXVII, 1997, pp. 1316-1334; A. Sakamoto, *Video Game Use and the Development of Sociocognitive Abilities in Children: Three Surveys of Elementary School Children*, in "Journal of Applied Social Psychology", XXIV, 1994, pp. 21-42.

[47] M. Spitzer, *Digitale Demenz*, cit.

[48] See https://www.statista.com/topics/868/video-games/ and https://www.statista.com/statistics/1344668/revenue-video-game-worldwide/ .

[49] C.T. Nguyen, *Games and the Moral Transformation of Violence*, in J. Robson, G. Tavinor (eds.), *The Aesthetics of Video games*, cit., p. 181. For studies about noncompetitive, critical, open-minded games see G. Frasca, *Simulation versus Narrative*, in M.J.P. Wolf, B. Perron (eds.), *The Video Game Theory Reader*, Routledge, New York 2003, pp. 221-235; L. Konzack, *Philosophical Game Design*, in M.J.P. Wolf, B. Perron (eds.), *The Video Game Theory Reader*, cit., pp. 33-44; M. Flanagan, *Critical Play. Radical Game Design*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2013; M. Sicart, *Play Matters*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2014.

[50] See C.T. Nguyen, *Games and the Moral Transformation of Violence*, cit.

[51] See G. Dale, A. Joessel, D. Bavelier, C.S. Green, *A New Look to the Cognitive Neuroscience of Video Game Play*, in "Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences", MCDLXIV/1, 2020, pp. 192-203; C.S. Green, D. Bavelier, *The Cognitive Neuroscience of Video Games*, in P. Messaris, L. Humphrey (eds.), *Digital Media. Transformations in Human Communication*, Peter Lang, New York 2006, pp. 211-223.

the possible risks of mass consumption of violent video games. As a result, another question arises: What can *we* do?

3. Rephrasing the questions

Before understanding what to do, we have to ask other questions. In particular, one *aesthetic* question that Spitzer does not ask and that Gee mentions without developing it: Why do people *like* video games so much? Gee replies: because children and teenagers can still *play there*. They are allowed a total immersion in the present moment and the opening up of countless extraordinary possibilities: wearing different clothes, acquiring powers, having adventures, constructing and deconstructing, releasing tensions, making discoveries, meeting people, learning by doing. The play – otherwise banned from home and school, but also from the street and generally from society – seems to survive only within the digital dimension. Following Lipovetsky, we could add that the screen – supported and validated by the so-called "cool state" of education[52] – saves from the struggle of collective life and exercises a strong seductive power. This power is inherent in the medium itself, the language, and the continuous renewal of products, images and programs.

By increasingly delegating their educational task to digital tools, adults unknowingly subject the value of children to *market logic* that regulate their ideation, production, and communication. This practice conditions children to become less familiar and less trusting of their own internal capabilities—of their body-mind, which is far more complex, sophisticated, and remarkable than any machine. This body-mind's delicacy or perceived impotence is frequently emphasized (the risk of aggression or illness, for example) rather than its capacity for training, development, reworking, and regeneration. Moreover, this body-mind exists within an environment that is itself highly complex and replete with unexplored potential, yet it is predominantly portrayed and thus perceived in terms of danger and imminent collapse. In this regard, as Michel Odent writes[53], it is emblematic that there is more interest in the advances of artificial intelligence than in the evolution of natural human intelligence.

Moreover, as Enrico Euli shows in depth, *gamification* – by covering and mystifying an increasingly violent, unfair and discriminating everyday life with a world no longer

[52] G. Lipovetsky, *Plaire et toucher*, cit.
[53] M. Odent, *The Future of Homo*, cit.

parallel to it but superimposed on it (in particular the virtual one) – tries to impose itself as the only form of life for all living beings[54], and doing so betrays the very nature of the *play*: «an activity *to be taken seriously* therefore (verisimilar, engaging, exciting, persuasive, organised...), but not *serious*, because it never gives up presenting itself as fake»[55]. This last remark is crucial. As Euli explains, playing is fundamentally a *simulation*. The etymology of the term allows us to focus on its two fundamental characteristics: the first – from the Latin *similis* – is that play is always *similar* to the real, but *not equal* to it; the second – from the Latin *simul* – is that the action of playing always moves on a *multi-level* interface, *actual* and *potential*, communicating several types of messages and connecting a wide range of actions-passions, both cognitive and emotional[56].

It follows, for Euli, that every authentic emotive-cognitive process is structurally "ludic-like" or "playful" because it takes place within simultaneous relations that go on to constitute simulation contexts. These contexts, in turn, define relations and what we term "reality data." This "reality data" subsequently interacts with the relations and contexts from which it emerges, either reinforcing or disrupting them. Any epistemological perspective that proposes itself as univocal or absolute is therefore false: «The false is nothing other, in fact, than the pretense that does not want (anymore and never) to appear (even) as such; it is the simulation that does not merely pretend, but pretends not to pretend and not to be pretended»[57]. The seductiveness, immersiveness, and pervasiveness of video games seem to go in this direction.

The argument presented so far leads to the need to reformulate the question asked at the beginning of the paragraph more precisely: If the world were a habitable, indeed, a "playable" place, would kids still choose video games? If we retained the possibility of self-discovery and testing our limits without the perpetual risk of losing face?; if we still perceived a possibility of thought and action in a world that is daily described as teetering

[54] E. Euli, *Homo homini ludus. Fondamenti di illudetica*, Sensibili alle foglie, Roma 2021, p. 59 (the present and following translations from Italian are mine). To get an idea of the theoretical assumptions and expansion horizons of gamification process, see J. McGonigal, *Reality is Broken. Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*, Penguin, New York 2011. To deepen the difference between *play* and *game*, and in particular the fact that the second one imposes itself as an increasingly stringent, complex and all-encompassing structure, see B. Kampmann Walther*, Playing and Gaming. Reflections and Classifications*, in "Game Studies", III/1, 2003.
[55] E. Euli, *Homo homini ludus*, cit., p. 19.
[56] *Ibid*.
[57] *Ivi*, p. 22.

on the brink of decline; if we were raised since childhood to recognize and honor every experience, including pain and loss, would we still prefer a virtual life – *real* but *not complete*, *fictional* and yet with the *presumption of posing as true* – to an embodied life? Artademia can help us to reflect on these questions.

3.1. Artademia: bringing back into balance

Artademia has been an experiential school since 2014, without grades and desks. In this school, seniors – from 14 to 20 years old – essentially follow a tailored study program, similar to the ones of university: there are some transversal and compulsory courses for all the students, but the most of them are to be chosen –, a study program developed and constantly recalibrated with teachers and assigned tutors[58]. Within this offer, there is a specific curriculum on "New technologies and communication" that offers IT and coding courses, and in addition to that, gives to the students the opportunity to learn how to build a business plan for the launch of their own product, or how to develop an advertising campaign and communication strategies. Thus, the students discover how simple it is to give life for example to fake news and false advertising in order to act on customers' emotions. They understand the logic and techniques of the market, becoming aware of it and responsible for it, both as buyers and producers.

Where does all that lead? It enables the student the student to engage with every aspect and level involved in what is, essentially, just a video game.. Yet, it is a game with short- or long-term tangible effects on the quality of his own life and of others. Compared to the merely discursive reasoning, which we use in order to discuss ethical or aesthetic issues connected to video games, Artademia invites the students to *experience* firsthand all the interests and implications of the question, and to *discuss* them contextually. Furthermore, while pursuing particular specializations, young people have the opportunity to pursue very different experiences: from pottery and carpentry workshops to those of mindfulness and emotional education; from the most popular sports to the refined ones; from vegetable

[58] See S. Pagani, *Fiori che volano. Il manuale del Metodo Artademia*, Artademia, Milano 2021; L. Aimo, *L'arca del nuovo linguaggio*, in R. Diodato, L. Aimo, *Un'idea di educazione estetica*, cit., pp. 189-261. Unlike previous and famous non-directive education projects – such as the Sudbury Valley School on which much of Peter Gray's seminal study that gave rise to his best-seller *Free to Learn. Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life* (Basic Books, New York 2013) – Artademia creates step by step *with* every student a personalised learning programme also to overcome the attraction that nowadays new technologies and virtual reality generate and it is for this reason that it is examined here. As this is an evolving project, visit the website for all updates about it: www.artademia.it.

gardening to wildlife pedagogy; from international cuisines to the arts from different regions of the world. All this while learning traditional school subjects such Mathematics, Literature, Philosophy, Foreign Languages… all in an experiential way. Why?

If it is true that over a hundred years ago, when school was invented, technical skills had to be integrated with abstract-theoretical knowledge – for example, everyone had experience with fire but did not know how combustion worked – now we are facing the exact opposite problem[59]. The experience of fire is missing, and we must reintegrate it in order to allow children and young people not only to root concepts that otherwise remain remote and alien, but also to stimulate a sensoriality, an imagination and, more broadly speaking, an *aisthesis*, which right now risks atrophying or colonization by other-directed environments. Given the sensory and information bombardment that young people are constantly subjected to in a subliminal and sophisticated manner by the media and marketing, we have to ask ourselves whether and how other types of content can still grasp their attention. Only in this way, young people will be able to build their own "I-Skin"[60] and to mediate their relationship with the environment, included the digital one. That is the reason why, at the entrance of Artademia, boys and girls leave their smartphones at the school reception for the whole morning. Morning are always so full of sensory and more widely aesthetic experiences that students often forget to pick up their phones when they leave. But that is not all. During the two long planned breaks, they can choose to practice sports, board games and artistic activities, or to chat to each other instead of using their tablets and PCs at their disposal.

Why? Because of what we could call a natural process of *homeostasis*. Spitzer says that the best way to train the brain – despite what we believe – is neither crossword puzzles nor Sudoku, but running[61]. During running, we use in an organic way all the muscles of our body, including the brain. After having created the conditions for an approach to aesthetic experiences increasingly unknown to teenagers – i.e. experiences in which there is a high involvement of the perceptive dimension but also of imagination, taste and feeling – after having overcome the resistance to face something new and unknown or of which they have traumatic memories, children themselves prefer *live experiences* to mediated ones or, better, they find a *personal balance* between them. In other words, at

[59] The following example is taken from a lecture given by Silvia Pagani, Artademia's founder, to teachers during Artademia method training (2019).
[60] See above, note n. 19.
[61] M. Spitzer, *Digital dementia*, cit.

Artademia a game of football wins over Fifa23 as well as a love or friend letter written with a brush – perhaps on a papyrus just made during the History lesson concerning the Egyptians – is considered a better option to a standard one typed on a laptop. The crucial things are no more performance and result, no more judgment and comparison with others, no more speed and homologation. Sensory pleasures, self-awareness, and freedom of choice become predominant together with their taste for discovery and their possibility of experiencing their own *value*: a value understood neither as an exchange price nor as a skill or a merit, but as the ability to *feel*, as the power to *be* and to *act*, as having space and time to *linger*, *imagine* and *experiment* in a continuous exchange and "consummation" – *à la* Dewey – between organism and environment.

Thanks to this type of experiential learning, in a context where human relationship and enthusiasm are the cardinal principles[62], in a continuous intersection of languages and knowledge that integrate and balance the digital world, young people can develop a critical, systemic and aesthetic embodied intelligence. Through it, they understand that their value is usually dictated by algorithms ruled by economic interests and that itis structured according to a competitive and separative logic, which is not the only possible one. As a result, they recognize that in video games – through the possibility of anonymity, through continuous redemption and non-involvement with the power of their body and its sensitivity – they only have the illusion of taking a break from social pressing. At the same time, thanks to the live experiences and to the environment they are plunged in every morning at school, the students become more confident in themselves and others, and come to understand that the quality and the responsibility for the smallest choices of everyone will influence the society where they are used to feel overwhelmed. They have the chance to experience their own and others' unique value, a value given by the unrepeatability of their being in the world: a «potential bomb»[63] – using the words of André Stern, Childhood Ambassador and Promoter of the movement called "Ecology of Childhood" – that needs favourable conditions to express itself.

There are many criticisms that can be raised against this new school model – from costs to learning assessment – however, as other illustrious examples demonstrate – from the

[62] The three main principles of the Artademia method are: *experience*, *relationship* and *enthusiasm*. For their analysis see L. Aimo, *L'arca del nuovo linguaggio*, cit., pp. 211-228.
[63] Interview with André Stern, in L. Aimo, *Utòpia. Elementi per un'educazione estetica: nascita e matematica*, Aesthetica, Sesto San Giovanni 2024, p. 75.

Finnish system to Still I Raise project[64] – these are problems that are entirely surmountable. The real difficulty is to dismantle the school as a control and surveillance device – *à la* Foucault –, the belief that considers teaching a transmission of information and education a preventive or reparative practice rather than a larger and deeper custody and refinement of the human ability to linger. This is obviously a complex topic, the analysis of which lies beyond the scope of this article[65]. What is crucial to achieve now is ensuring that only within such an educational context, students are *free to play and to learn* – quoting Peter Gray's best seller[66] –, but first of all they have time and space to listen to and to take care of what – taking up the etymological meaning of aesthetics[67] – the *breath* tells them. In doing so, spaces for freedom and responsibility may emerge.

Only in such an *integrated aesthetic system* the adolescents can recognize when they perceive they are holding their breath and when instead their lungs dilate, relaxing the tense muscles of the body and the rigidity of the mind. Only thanks to this awareness, they get to understand what is really bad or good for them and for others, and they have the possibility to modulate and train their breathing: holding their breath if necessary and whether they want it, but also taking long inspirations, which would have been once impossible to conceive. Only through similar aesthetic education projects – which are not limited to media educational courses but include them within an eco- and human-friendly environment – we may imagine to develop a critical approach to the new technologies and a creative mind facing the challenges of the future.

[64] See P. Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons 2.0: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?*, Teachers College Press, New York 2014; K. Robinson, L. Aronica, *Creative Schools. The Grassroots Revolution That's Transforming Education*, Penguin Books, New York 2016 and https://www.stillirise.org (where you can also find its founder's books, Nicolò Govoni).
[65] For a deeper analysis of these complex and fundamental issues we suggest R. Diodato, L. Aimo, *Un'idea di educazione estetica*, cit., and L. Aimo, *Utòpia*, cit.
[66] P. Gray, *Free to Learn*, cit.
[67] See above, p. 2.