

The Phenomenology of Aesthetics as Everyday Experience: Aesthetic Latching- On and Latched-By ¹

*Katya Mandoki, Professor at Universidad
Autónoma Metropolitana, Mexico*

To define an aesthetic experience as “contemplation” already involves the more or less unknowing metaphorical projection of a religious, mystical situation towards aesthetics.² By this theoretical move, a great number of people are automatically excluded from recognizing this kind of experiences in their life. Is the aesthetic really as extraordinary? Quite the contrary, as I will argue in this paper, the aesthetic is, in fact, the most common, everyday and indispensable activity we perform throughout our life.

The very first impulse we have from the moment we are born is related to the aesthetic. I am referring to the act of latching-on to the nipple and thriving from it. Instead of the mystic “contemplation” that cancels our somatic condition, I will metaphorically project to aesthetics’ theoretical domain this primordial condition of bonding between mother and child that starts at the corporeal experience of the infant latching-on to the mother’s breast. What makes this coupling possible is the morphological affinity between subject and object. This morphological coupling between mouth and nipple permits adhesion. Precisely, as we shall see later, adhesion is the essential aesthetic operation both at an individual and at a collective level.

The judgment of taste demands adhesion of others for its confirmation, so contended Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* § 8, but such adhesion is the result of a formal adherence of the subject to the object of judgment, as well as of the conformation of the former by *sensus communis*.³ In the act of latching-on, subjects are coupled to their objects by their form in diverse registers of experience (visual, aural, corporeal, or verbal). If reality can be understood as a semiotic intersubjective network that we share with others, then aesthetics is that cohesive structure that allows us to adhere to it, somewhat like the sticky filaments of spider cobwebs for insects to adhere to (except that we do not perish in them).

From birth, this process begins in sensation (hunger), where perception (of the breast, the gradual recognition of the mother by smell, touch, visual image) is generated. By the rhythm of sucking, pressing the breast with her little hands, immersing her face, and moving her leg or arm out of sheer pleasure, the baby eloquently expresses its being latched-onto the breast. From this primeval experience of every human as a mammal, all our future aesthetic experiences take root. Aesthetic latching-on sharpens one or several senses simultaneously: hearing is tuned more than any other sense when we are captivated by music; sight is sharpened when we are latched-onto a beautiful landscape or interesting object; smell becomes more keen at a delightful aroma, taste at a delicious flavor, and touch at a soft, silky texture.

There is certain orality, metaphorically speaking, in aesthesis when we nourish ourselves of the world. Latching-on is an act through which we extract the vigor to live, like the seed that adheres and latches-on to the earth generating roots to absorb its nutrients and thrive. Therefore, the notion of "disinterested delight" so common in aesthetic theory, is denied by the concrete experience of this vehement appetite in aesthesis. Let us imagine for a moment what our life would be like without any opportunity for latching-on, without the possibility of being captivated by something: someone we love, a cup of coffee, an animal, music, religious beliefs, projects, dreams, art, friends, trees. This state of lack of latching-on or affective deprivation characterizes the mentally ill who, even without enough firm soil to be rooted and adhered to an intersubjective reality, still desperately extend roots for adhering at least to the nebulous ideas of their fantasies.

We are captivated by what's affectionately significant, valued, and brimful of meaning. Not only from birth, but also when we wake up every morning, moment by moment we seek objects for latching-on. We listen to birds' singing, watch the hues of the sky at dawn, feel the freshness of the shower, smell the scent of the soap, touch our clean clothes, savor our coffee, listen to music, read the newspaper, and so forth. By latching-onto one object or another we daily weave our existence with small pleasures, as the bee latches-onto one flower and another to extract pollen. If our aesthetic appetite were to depend solely on artistic masterpieces, we would aesthetically starve and hardly survive the simple and sometimes difficult act of getting up every morning.

As an alternative to the term "engagement" proposed by Berleant⁴ and "focused attention" by Dickie,⁵ both of which may be applied to extra-aesthetic situations losing their specifically aesthetic import, the term "latching-on" may be closer to ideas such as fascination, seduction, impetus, nutrition, and appetite, more directly related to the phenomenon that interests us. Latching-on is also an alternative concept to "contemplation" criticized by Dewey, and that has remained in mainstream aesthetics as the attitude or aesthetic experience par excellence, including all its religious connotations erroneously associated to a purely mental state.⁶

The prevalence of this notion of "contemplation" is partly attributable to the disqualification by aesthetic theory of the everyday realm, as the typical objection against an aesthetic of the everyday by those who cannot figure out what the hell could be worth contemplating in the plain and ordinary. Moreover, Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez's refusal to include the tragic in everyday aesthetics is due to his underlying contemplative and pleasurable conception of aesthetics.⁷

Among the consequences of this obtrusive notion are: a) the exaggerated weight granted to the visual, to the exclusion of the other senses; b) overlooking the crucial role of the body for aesthetics; c) tacitly denying that intellectual activity also participates in the aesthetic (contrary to its clear indication in Kant's formula in the *Critique of Judgment* § 9 of "free play of imagination *and understanding*"); and d) ignoring that aesthetics implies activity, as it makes it seem purely receptive. Whereas the term "contemplation" metaphorically projects a religious experience to the aesthetic, that of "latching-on" projects it by contrast from a corporeal experience common not only to all human beings but to mammals as well.

Accepting Weitz's proposal, when he advocated an aesthetic theory of open and flexible concepts, will allow us to delineate the domain of the aesthetic as an aperture to the world with the act of latching-on as its dynamic principle.⁸ Latching-on is an activity, not an

attitude (in contrast to Stolnitz's "aesthetic attitude"⁹) and extends along a spectrum of different ranges from a slight, pleasant drowsiness to a passionate and voracious aesthetic appetite. It is imperative to secularize and embody the concept of the aesthetic, even though its feasibility will have to be proven in subsequent applications.

Latching-on implies a rhythm in nature that Dewey emphasized by stating: "Only as these rhythms even if embodied in an outer object that is itself a product of art, become a rhythm in experience itself are they esthetic."¹⁰ It is not random that the baby latching-on to the nipple performs an eminently rhythmic activity.

On the opposite pole in the spectrum of the aesthetic is the contrary to latching-on, namely the passivity of being *latched-by*. In this case the subject feels not *captivated* but *captured* by the object in situations of intrusion upon his or her sensibility. In latching-on there is intentionality, impetus toward an object, Kant's "free play between imagination and understanding", whereas in being latched-by there is aesthetic poisoning, loss of capacity for "free play", and the numbing or lesion of sensibility by aesthetic violence. Latched-by is therefore equally relevant to aesthetic theory as a depletive condition of sensibility.

Just as the subject was established for Althusser in two ways, namely as *subject of* and as *subject by* (subject of an object in the activity of subjectivation and subjected by or "thrown underneath"), the aesthetic subject is equally constituted in subject of latching-on and subjected in being latched-by. Latching-on is an opening, an act of amplitude, whereas aesthetic latched-by is enclosure and narrowness of sensibility in its impotence. In one case the subject latches-on and thrives; in the other it is held captive and depleted. Aesthetic activity understood as latching-on, far from being disinterested, fulfills itself to thrive and extract force for living.

We may be captivated by music and feel energized and solaced, or by a novel to enrich ourselves with the situations narrated, but also by religion to feel sheltered within its worldview, by medicine hoping to be cured, by a profession to satisfy a vocation of service or a necessity for recognition. What we are looking for through aesthetics is vigor, not only pleasure.

Sensibility can have various degrees of fluidity. In this fluidity lies another difference between latching-on and latched-by. Normally sensibility should flow freely at each opportunity that presents itself, since joy is our natural disposition to life, as Levinas once said: "sensibility is joy".¹¹ Aesthetic violence, however, blocks sensibility when it ceases to be a source of delight causing only pain. Those who lead a privileged life of aesthetic nourishment and stimuli in benevolent environments can maintain their sensibility open. By contrast, those who are continually exposed to aesthetic violence by inhabiting sordid, noisy, malodorous spaces, or lead a stressful and aggressively competitive life are latched-by and forced to block their sensibility to avoid suffering.

Many among us who must commute to work every day in overcrowded subway wagons or are stuck in "freeway" lanes for hours during rush hours to arrive at an unsatisfying and stressful day's work, block our sensibility for sheer adaptation to this hostile environment. Something similar, although much more intense, happens in political, ethnic, economic, and religious conflicts where aesthetic violence is exerted against others' identities to offend, humiliate, or cause pain. When sensibility is latched-by aesthetic sordidness, the subject seeks to unblock it. Defensive numbness of the senses is

a reaction of survival and resistance to being aesthetically latched-by. We could add the case of those who, in the face of an adverse reality, look for a strong discharge of alcohol or drugs aiming to latch-on to something by chemical-neural activity, yet end up latched-by them. This intense need for latching-on is indicative of the degree of contemporary sensitive blockage, since the voracious consumption of violence in mass entertainment is not by mere chance. The aesthetics of the masses obtains its effectiveness by these spectacular displays to unblock sensibility through hyper stimulation, but end up creating further numbness that increasingly needs greater and greater impact to react.

Aesthetic latching-on is *Eros*, intentionality or attachment to life, impetus. Thus, there are different forms of latching-on: not only by artistic contemplation when the subject is entranced by the beauty he attributes to an object, but also among the masses latching-on to that Parret calls "intercorporeality and euphony", as in streets political gatherings or showbiz and sports celebrities' fans at the stadium.¹² Parret's idealized "affective being together" in latching-on in euphoria can easily turn into dysphoria being latched-by manipulation, resentment, and guilt. It might be worth mentioning religious latching-on whose extreme is mystics' ecstasy. Intense levels of latching-on can change into latched-by when they are no longer voluntary, as in cases of political or religious fanaticism where the devotee stops being nurtured by his faith to be devoured by it.

Latching-on also occurs towards knowledge through learning and research when we passionately cling to a problem or puzzle until we solve it. In Socratic *wonder* the philosopher latches-onto an enigma with the same appetite as the infant to the nipple. This is why I have insisted that the difference between intellectual and aesthetic activity does not warrant the compartmentalization effected by Kant in his critiques, since the act of knowing imbricates intimately with aesthetic latching-on. All institutions or social matrixes display aesthetic strategies destined to individual or collective latching-on. Their goal is not only to obtain collective assent regarding the feasibility and legitimacy of the realities proposed, but the adherence of subjects, and therefore their acquiescence to constitute identities and realities in relation to them.

Finally, we can propose the additional complementary concepts of *unlatching-to* as rupture of the condition of latching-onto, and the *unlatched-by* as liberation from being latched-by. Unlatched-to is a well-known situation we may all have experienced after having been fully immersed in a project that finally crystallizes and we suddenly realize that our efforts in that direction are no longer necessary. It is a feeling of momentary disorientation until we find a new object for latching-on. A more painful version of unlatching-to occurs when losing a beloved friend, lover, or member of the family. By contrast, when we have been latched-by a consuming or suffocating relationship and we have the strength to break up; we welcome the unlatching-by with a sigh of relief and a sense of freedom and well-being. Note that both latching-onto and unlatching-by are active, whereas latched-by and unlatched-on are passive.

We conclude that aesthesis is a condition of aperture to the world that generates an act of latching-on that nourishes us or is undergone in being latched-by that weakens, confuses, and harms us. It is certainly not enough for solving a problem to simply change the name of "aesthetic experience" or "engagement" for "aesthetic latching-on", since both are the terms that have to be elucidated, not the answers, and a purely nominal or semantic operation does not solve anything. Still, the concept of latching-on as metaphoric

projection from the primordial experience of suckling, does, I hope, contribute a phenomenological basis to outline the concept of aesthesis.

1 This paper is part of my recent book *Everyday Aesthetics: Prosaics, the Play of Culture and Social Identities* Aldershot: Ashgate. 2007. 67-71

2 The concept of "metaphorical projection" is taken from Lakoff, George and Johnson, Mark. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1980.

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4 Berleant, Arnold. *Art and Engagement*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 1991.

5 Dickie, George. "The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude" Philip Alperson (ed). *The Philosophy of the Visual Arts*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1964/1992.

6 Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. New York, Perigee. 1934/1980.

7 Sánchez Vázquez, Adolfo. *Invitación a la Estética*. México: Grijalbo. 1992.

8 Weitz, Morris. "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics". Margolis, Joseph. (ed) *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 3rd edn. 1956/ 1987. and "Wittgenstein's Aesthetics" George Dickie, Richard Scafani Ronald Roblin (eds). *Aesthetics; A Critical Anthology*. New York: St Martins, 2nd edn. 1989.

9 cf. Stolnitz, Jerome. "The Aesthetic Attitude" en Alperson (ed). *The Philosophy of the Visual Arts*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1960/ 1992.

10 Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. New York, Perigee. 1934/ 1980. 162

11 Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*. Alphonso Lingis (tr.) Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press. 13^a imp. 1969/ 1998.

12 Parret, Herman. *The Aesthetics of Communication: Pragmatics and Beyond*. S. Rennie (trans.) Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers. 1993.