

Enjoyment in Levinas and the Aesthetics of Everyday Life

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Through the concept of enjoyment in Levinas, this paper examines the phenomenological and ontological dimension of everyday aesthetics. Enjoyment, in Levinas, forms an essential element in the constitution of the subjectivity of the human being and is no longer to be seen as a moment of 'inauthenticity' or 'alienation'. The experience of the objects of everyday experience is not related to that of objects of representation or of tools, but rather to that of a system of nourishment into which the subject is integrated, as in an 'element' or 'atmosphere'. This constitutive closeness of enjoyment indicates the fundamental difference between what we understand as everyday aesthetics and other aesthetics characterised by contemplation or disinterest. | Keywords: *Levinas, Enjoyment, Everyday Aesthetics, Phenomenology, Beauty, Sublime*

1. Introduction

It is night and we get home tired. Once we open the front door, we turn on the light, which has a slight orange touch. It is neither too bright nor too dark, however it illuminates the objects with a night halo that is clear enough to make them recognisable without highlighting. We take off our clothes and shoes and put on pyjamas whose texture immediately announces relaxation and calm. We are hungry and go to the kitchen to prepare dinner. While we do it, we put on a playlist that we play every night, full of songs that we have heard dozens of times. We know them by heart and there is nothing unpredictable in them, rather, we already advance each phrase that is going to be sung and each note that is going to be played. All the music that is being played is included in a playlist called, 'music for cooking'. No song stands out from any other, none steps on the next, but they all follow each other harmoniously, maintaining a homogeneous style as if they were part of an extensive medley. It also seems that the rhythm of the music matches our rhythm as we cut the potatoes and aubergines or beat the eggs. We are not paying attention to the music too much, in fact at times we forget that it is playing. However it is there, along with the light that rests slightly on

the objects; the pyjamas that caresses our body announcing rest and relaxation; the aroma of the food in the night background; perhaps the distant sound of cars or of the television in the living room sending out its tunes from the centre of the house like the crackling of a fireplace, but also together with the passing of the day that we feel concentrated on that precise moment, as if the night accumulated at that very moment all the weight of work at the time we could finally relax. All these senses and affections create a whole of sensations where the comfort of the pyjamas does not stand out from the musical harmonies nor from the aroma of the food that we are in the process of making. They are all part of the same silent symphony which, precisely because of its harmony and extreme familiarity, we no longer listen to, but which shapes each of our nights and which we feel as close as our own skin.

The music, the clothes, the soup, the sounds, the weight of the hours are not here as an object of contemplation, they are not the direct object of the phrase, rather they constitute a circumstantial complement of the place. We are in them and not in front of them, they are the customary framework through which things can appear a posteriori.

This undifferentiated space of sensations will constitute the centre of the reflections on the aesthetics of the everyday that will be carried out in the following pages. I will not be interested in romanticising these experiences, but in exposing their ontological dimension in our constitution as subjects. Things, rather than being merely useful, are values to which we adhere and which form a part of our life.¹ Human beings inhabit these things - they are not simply represented to their conscience. Thanks to Levinas and his concept of enjoyment, we will be able to revalue the role of aesthetic experience through everyday aesthetics. I will also consider the notions of alienation and reification, through which these attitudes have been interpreted by many thinkers in the philosophical tradition.

The text will be developed as follows: first, I will introduce some common conceptions of everyday life within phenomenology and aesthetics. Later I will go on to deploy the Levinasian critique of these conceptions, and his notion of enjoyment as an alternative to them. I will then discuss the relevance of this concept for the aesthetics of everyday life and, finally, I will try to differentiate this aesthetic dimension from the more classical conceptions, those of the beautiful and the sublime.

2. The Beautiful Versus the Everyday

This character of aesthetic experience - a notion in which we generally do not include normal daily experiences such as preparing dinner (explicitly extra-artistic experiences) but mainly arts such as music - could seem a way of

¹ As Husserl (1985, p. 51) already pointed out: "The world is there for me not only as a world of mere things, but also with the same immediacy as a world of objects with values, a world of goods. I simply find the physical things in front of me furnished not only with merely material determinations but also with value-characteristics as beautiful and ugly, pleasant and unpleasant, agreeable and disagreeable, and the like [...] These value-characteristics and practical characteristics also belong constitutively to the Objects 'on hand' as Objects regardless of not I turn to such characteristics and the Objects."

trivialising both art and the concept of aesthetic experience by introducing them into our daily lives in the same way as a perfume or scent is applied. However, underestimating these practices would, on the contrary, trivialise the constructive character that these aesthetic practices have in our daily lives, and how the choices of ambient music, or of any aesthetic decision that surrounds us in our day to day life, is characteristic of what we build as a home.

An eminent example of such an undervaluation of aesthetics in the everyday sphere can be found in the first chapter of José Ortega y Gasset's *Essay on aesthetics as a preface*, entitled *Ruskin, usability and beauty*. The relevance of his statements, in comparison with what we are going to argue here makes it worth quoting him at length:

Reading poetry is not something I do very often. is not one of my usual occupations. Generally speaking, I cannot conceive that it could be anyone's regular occupation. Just as we demand a certain seriousness for creating poetry, we should also demand a certain seriousness for reading it. Not a seriousness that is all show, but rather that feeling of inner awe that invades our hearts at very special times. Contemporary pedagogy is beginning to have a deplorable influence in the cultural realm of esthetics by making art a usual normal, regulated thing. This way, we lose the feeling of *distance*; we lose *our respect* for and our *fear* of art; we approach it at any time in the dress and mood we happen to be in, and grow accustomed to not understanding it. The real emotion to which we refer when we speak of aesthetic pleasure these days is [...] a pale delight, lacking in vigor and depth, which merely touches the work of art. [...] The English interpretation of things consists in their reduction to ordinary domestic objects. The Englishman above all, aspires to live well, comfortably; what sensuality is to the Frenchman and philosophy to the German, comfort is to the Englishman. Now then, comfort and convenience, requires different conditions of things, different according to the vital function that in each case the convenience is intended to serve only one condition is generic, inevitable, and almost a priori to everything convenient: that it be customary [...] Whatever we are not accustomed to, for the sole reason that we are not accustomed to it, makes us uncomfortable. [...] Naturally, such a view can only recommend to the intellect those arts that, to be exact, are not really art, the industrial or decorative arts. Ruskin insists on introducing Beauty into the severe, meek English home; to do this he must first domesticate it, weaken it, exhaust it. And so, reduced to a ghost, to an adjective, he leads it to the honourable dwellings of British subjects. [...] I need to drink water from a clean glass, but don't give me a beautiful one. [...] It would seem to me that in drinking water for it, I drank the blood of a fellow human being [...]. Either I attend to quenching my thirst or I attend to Beauty: a middle term would be a falsification of both. So when I am thirsty, please give me a glass that is full, clean and without beauty. (Ortega y Gasset, 1975, pp. 127-131)

It is not my intention to claim that Ortega y Gasset is wrong here. It is very likely that the 'Authentic Beauty of Art' is similar to what he points out, i.e., something that constitutes an event which is 'exceptional', 'singular' and necessary of a certain 'distance'; ultimately, the experience of art, especially since Kant's aesthetics. But such an assertion can lead us to confusion, not only

because it could be an apparent condemnation of our daily lives to a kind of ‘anaesthetic’ asceticism², but because it is more than likely that the truth itself is missing.

Adorno’s aesthetic theory is also a good representative of this devaluation of aesthetic experience in everyday life. Quotations like “In the false world all ἡδονή is false” (Adorno, 1997, p. 36) or “to be entertained means to be in agreement” (Adorno, 2002, p. 115) are two good examples of this devaluation. His aesthetic conception is a paradigmatic example of the idea of aesthetic experience understood as negativity, an idea common to both artistic and natural beauty. The autonomy that Adorno conceives for art is precisely what gives it its independence from other consumer objects. This autonomy constitutes the truth of art, which gives it a power that is, in turn, an essential lack. As power, art is shown as an autonomous object in the face of market and consumption that seem to encompass everything, but in doing so it cannot show complacency in itself, rather it can only constitute a reflection of the alienation of society. Art can only constitute a negative experience that announces a promise of happiness and reconciliation with respect to this alienated society. However, in Rancière’s words, “mais si l’œuvre promet cette réconciliation, c’est au prix de la différer indéfiniment en repoussant toutes les conciliations qui cacheraient le maintien de l’aliénation” (Rancière, 2009, p. 138).³ The true value of art consists of reflecting and promising a home that, like an utopia, can never be built since, ultimately, if art fulfilled its promise, art itself would end (Adorno, 1997, p. 32).

Ultimately, art is essentially a promise and, therefore, it can never fulfill itself, since in that fulfillment the promise is no longer a promise. An understanding of the aesthetic experience within this discursive realm condemns it to absolute negativity, where there can be no solid ground on which to build a proper home. If aesthetic experience can only be a promise of happiness, it cannot build such happiness, but only announce it or reflect it.

Adorno’s global conception of aesthetics is representative of an aesthetic idea that continues to anchor aesthetic experience to a notion of the singularity of the work of art as an exceptional, distant and eminently negative moment that cannot be inhabited; inhabiting would indeed be related to the always-despicable consumption. The industrial dimensions of art that are integrated as objects in our daily lives are not simply ignored but explicitly disregarded as they are related to consumption. Art, for Adorno, cannot be inhabited nor does

² In keeping with the spirit of Ortega y Gasset, Sartre comes to admit that the beautiful can only exist in an aesthetic attitude, considering ultimately that “the real is never beautiful. Beauty is a value that could never be applied more than to the imaginary and that involves the annihilation of the world in its essential structure. That is why it is stupid to confuse morality with aesthetics” (Sartre, 2004, p. 193). The beautiful, for Sartre, only exists in the imagining attitude as an annihilation of the world in the face of the realising attitude of practical life (in which the useful and the good are integrated). The beautiful is always an attitude (Sartre speaks of attitudes, not of objects or beautiful things) that makes an epoché of the reality of the world. There is no beauty without epoché, there is no beauty without an aesthetic attitude, according to Sartre.

³ “If the artwork promises this reconciliation, it is at the price of indefinitely deferring by rejecting any reconciliation that would hide the maintenance of alienation.” Unless otherwise indicated, translations of texts not originally published in English are by the author.

it seem to provide any positive dimension to pleasure or enjoyment. In what sense, therefore, can we understand all aesthetic phenomena we have described at the beginning in an eminently positive way?

If we withdraw from the puritanical condemnation of the everyday pleasures that could be derived from the above considerations (with all its compendium of degrading nouns, such as 'consumption', 'reification', 'alienation', 'possession', and so on), and rather observe them from the perspective of inhabiting, many of these practices gain a new meaning and allow us to better understand the aesthetic relationship we have with our environment, not only in a purely negative way, but also as a constitution of our 'being in the world'.⁴

3. Levinas and Enjoyment

Heidegger is a common reference in the aesthetics of everyday life (see, for example, Haapala, 2005; Carreño, 2019; Leddy, 2014; Hainic, 2015) when seen from a phenomenological perspective. His analysis of everyday life in *Being and Time* or his ontology of the work of art in *The Origin of the Work of Art* provide extensive material for this aesthetics and its different branches. However, despite the meticulousness he employs to describe daily life in his main work *Being and Time*, the everyday is still a 'fallen state' for him, a kind of inauthentic affective position that represents a fall in front of the anguish. Although Heidegger is 'careful' to consider this ontological-existential question not in a moral but in a structural way⁵, he clearly privileges the state of anguish described as a fundamental temper or state of mind. Only through it can we have a proper access to Being.

Both in *Totality and Infinity* and, in a more informative language, in *Time and the Other*, Levinas explicitly positions himself against the primacy of the affective disposition of anguish in the face of the hypothetical inauthenticity of everyday life:

However much the entirety of preoccupations that fill our days and tear us away from solitude to throw us into contact with our peers are called 'fall', 'everyday life', 'animality', 'degradation', or 'base materialism' these preoccupations are in any case in no way frivolous. One can think that authentic time is originally and ecstasis, yet one buys oneself a watch; despite the nudity of existence, one must as far as possible be decently clothed. And when one writes a book on anxiety, one writes it for someone, one goes through all the steps that separate the draft from the publication, and one sometimes behaves like a merchant of anxiety. The man condemned to die straightens out his uniform before his last walk, accepts a final cigarette, and find an eloquent word before the salvo. (Levinas, 1987, pp. 59-60)

⁴ Levinas, years before this already mentioned the dangers of this kind of thought, especially referring to existentialist philosophies: "It enables one to denounce the joys of communication, collective works, and everything that makes the world livable, as Pascalian diversion and the simple forgetfulness of solitude. [...] concern for things and needs would be a fall, a flight before the uttermost finality that these needs themselves imply, an inconsequence, a nontruth, inevitable, to be sure, but bearing the mark of the inferior and the reprehensible" (Levinas, 1987, p. 59).

⁵ "So neither must we take the fallenness of Dasein as a 'fall' from a purer and higher 'primal status' [...] We would also misunderstand the ontologico-existential structure of falling if we were to ascribe to it the sense of a bad and deplorable ontical property of which, perhaps, more advanced stages of human culture might be able to rid themselves" (Heidegger, 2001, p. 220).

In the primacy that Levinas gives to the ethical relationship over ontology, everyday life is no longer understood as a negative step of inauthenticity through things, but rather as a primal situation towards a genuine contact with otherness. As regards the considerations of the inauthentic Heideggerian Dasein, human beings, for Levinas, face their daily life with happiness, enjoying their nourishments. To live is, for Levinas, to enjoy in the first place, and enjoyment is the first step for that openness to the world that would allow us to access the ethical dimension. Without delving into the totality of Levinas metaphysical project and its complexities, I am interested here in the peculiar phenomenology of everyday life as enjoyment described by Levinas, in order to rescue the type of particular intentionality that occurs in everyday aesthetic experience.

Levinas conceives the human being in their daily life as someone who “lives from”, not as a completely independent subject⁶, but as a being already ‘entangled’ in things. “We live from ‘good soup’, air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep, etc. These are not objects of representations... We live from them” (Levinas, 1991, p. 110). In other words, these objects (soup, air, light...) that constitute our living are not noemas in the manner of intentional objects, as in the Husserlian sense; they are not objects of representation for a consciousness. The representative intentionality that turns the objects of the world into noemas cannot properly inhabit the world precisely because it does not leave from itself, but rather reduces the world to the noema, to a clear and distinct idea that is immanent in thought. The world, from Levinas’ notion of representation only has what thought put into it, so it becomes a “first-person thought”.⁷

However, the subject doesn’t even understand things in the way of tools, in the Heideggerian sense. The tool is always something direct towards an utility, something else beyond itself. In that case, the relationship of things would always be vicarious of a subsequent sense to which the subject is dependent. The enjoyment of objects results in Levinas in an end in itself which is not dependent on any other need such as, for example, the preservation of material existence. That is why the subject of enjoyment is “independent”.⁸ The human being does not lament for having needs, as if they were only an intermediate step, a mere ‘tool’ in the pursuit of satisfying higher ulterior needs; rather they are pleased to have them, “what we live from does not enslave us; we enjoy it. [...] the human being thrives on his needs, he is happy for his needs” (Levinas, 1991, p. 114). This happiness constitutes their own independence, the enjoyment of joy as the constitution of their own subjectivity: “Subjectivity originates in the independence and sovereignty of enjoyment” (Levinas, 1991, p. 114).

⁶ Which Levinas calls the subject of hypostasis.

⁷ Levinas refers especially to Husserl in these paragraphs. However, his considerations about the German author may not be particularly fair. This has been noticed by Harman in *Guerrilla Metaphysics* (2005, pp. 34-35).

⁸ “Whereas the recourse to the instrument implies finality and indicates a dependence with regard to the other, living from [...] delineates independence itself, the independence of enjoyment and of its happiness, which is the original pattern of all independence.” (Levinas, 1991, p. 110)

Faced with Husserl as with Heidegger, the intentionality of enjoyment builds its first independence in its original joyous contact with the world. This 'joyful' consciousness faces the world not by affirming itself as an object, as in a form of representative spontaneity, but by exposing itself 'indigently' to it, bathing in that exteriority and allowing itself to be affected by it. That is why enjoyment takes the form of nourishment. To live is to love life and the constitution of subjectivity consists of nourishing ourselves with the world, not in the recollection of the subject in their interiority. In the words of Levinas, "Life is *love of life*, a relation with contents that are not my being, but more dear than my being: thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun. Distinct from my substance, but constituting it, these contents make up the worth [prix] of my life..." (Levinas, 1991, p. 112).

In short, need, according to Levinas, is not constituted as a lack that has to be filled, but as something positive that not only causes pleasure, but only through that pleasure it is capable of constructing that first stage of subjectivity, "Living from, it is dependency that turns into, into happiness – essentially egoist sovereignty, essentially selfish happiness" (Levinas, 1991, p. 114).⁹ That is, the soul is only happy when it satisfies its needs, not when it gets rid of them. The independence of enjoyment from any subsequent need becomes paradigmatic in the aesthetic experience as in a play: "The aesthetic orientation man gives to the whole of his world represents a return to enjoyment and to the elemental on a higher plane" (Levinas, 1991, p. 140) and: "The suspension or absence of the ultimate finality has a positive face—the disinterested joy of play. To live is to play, despite the finality and tension of instinct to live from something without this something having the sense of a goal or an ontological means—simply play or enjoyment of life" (Levinas, 1991, p. 134).¹⁰

Faced with the rationalistic spontaneity of representative intentionality, the proper modality of enjoyment intentionality is sensibility. In contrast to the cognitive dimension of the former, this one has a vital dimension. Here Levinas approaches Kant in a kind of dualism between reason and *sensibility*.¹¹ Understanding and reason, for Kant, are faculties that give a background to the things which they focus on. Sensibility, on the other hand, is simply 'content'

⁹ It is important to clarify that enjoyment, as the concept of selfishness may show here, is not the ultimate form of ethical life for Levinas, but just the primal phase through which the subject – being open to the objects of enjoyment – may hear the call of the Great Other. To pass from the implicit to the explicit a master who evokes attention is necessary" (Levinas, 1991, p. 138). That is to say, only if we pass through the experience of enjoyment will we be able to build a proper ethical relation with the Other in capital letters.

¹⁰ This idea is exposed more clearly in *Time and the Other*: "Prior to being a system of tools, the world is an ensemble of nourishments. Human life in the world does not go beyond the objects that fulfil it. It is perhaps not correct to say that we live to eat, but it is no more correct to say that we eat to live. The uttermost finality of eating is contained in food. When one smells a flower, it is the smell that limits the finality of the act. To stroll is to enjoy the fresh air, not for health but for the air. These are the nourishments characteristic of our existence in the world. It is an ecstatic existence – being outside oneself – but limited by the object" (Levinas, 1987, p. 63).

¹¹ "The strength of the Kantian philosophy of the sensible likewise consists in separating sensitivity and understanding [...] Kant does indeed go beyond the phenomenology of the sensible. But at least he does recognize thereby that of itself the sensible is an apparition without there being anything that appears. Sensibility establishes a relation with a pure quality without support, with the element" (Levinas, 1991, p. 136).

with finitude. While thought searches for the background, sensibility is content with the figure, the form in its concrete presence, or, as Levinas points out, “sensibility touches the reverse, without wondering about the obverse; this is produced precisely in contentment” (Levinas, 1991, p. 135). Sensibility is the quality of the finite, that which conceives it as something “by itself” (Levinas, 1991, p. 136) a pure appearance “without there being anything appearing” (Ibid.). Sensibility, in short, is the affective modality that has a predilection for the finite as an end in itself: “The finite as contentment is sensibility” (Levinas, 1990, p. 138).

Sensibility is not an inferior theoretical knowledge bound however intimately to affective states: in its very gnosis sensibility is enjoyment; it is satisfied with the given, it is contented. Sensible ‘knowledge’ does not have to surmount infinite regression, that vertigo of the understanding; it does not even experience it. It finds itself immediately at the term; it concludes, it finishes without referring to the infinite. [...] This earth upon which I find myself and from which I welcome sensible objects or make my way to them suffices for me. The earth which upholds me does so without my troubling myself about knowing what upholds the earth. I am content with the aspect of this corner of the world, the universe of my daily behavior, this city or this neighborhood or this street in which I move, this horizon within which I live, turn to me; I do not ground them in a more vast system. It is they that ground me. I welcome them without thinking them. I enjoy this world of things as pure elements, as qualities without support, without substance. (Levinas, 1991, pp. 136, 137)

Sensitivity, insofar as its objects are not representations for a consciousness (as in representative intentionality), is not related to them as singularities. Rather, it is related to a world of pure apparitions or, as Levinas claims, of “adjectives without substantive” (Levinas, 1991, p. 132). It is what Levinas understands as the *element*: an undifferentiated quality that constitutes a kind of atmosphere in which human beings are introduced. But this quality is not ‘represented’ to me as we pointed out, rather it ‘wraps’ me, I ‘bathe’ in it, “The relation adequate to its essence discovers it precisely as a medium: one is steeped in it; I am always within the element” (Levinas, 1991, p. 132). Although, in an ontic way, we could consider that the element is made up of different objects like water is made up of hydrogen and oxygen atoms, the form of enjoyment does not take water, to follow the metaphor, for its separate particles, rather it takes it as a continuum, as a pure quality, in which the bather immerses himself.¹²

It is important to note here that this ‘element’ is not an ontical quality in which all subjects are immersed in the same way, as if there were a universal element common to all human beings. This would go against Levinas’ philosophy in itself, since in that case the elemental would be conceived as a part of the totality and therefore, it would annul in itself the relationship of the Same with the Other, thus assuming the elemental within the representative logic in which the difference is determined by the identity.

¹² “We can, to be sure, represent the liquid or the gaseous to ourselves as a multiplicity of solids, but we then are abstracting from our presence in the midst of the element. The liquid manifests its liquidity, its qualities without support, its adjectives without substantive, to the immersion of the bather” (Levinas, 1991, p. 132).

In other words, each ‘element’ indicates an existential dimension in which the subject immerses themselves in their world, which is, however, at each moment their own in the particular way that the relationship of the Same with the Other has to exist. The examples used by Levinas – soup, shows, ideas – always end with an ellipsis to indicate their hypothetical and contingent nature. The element can be anything in which a subject bathes as long as it is part of the element that constitutes the independence of this subject: the knot that individualises the steps of the subject’s life. I point this out to meet Harman’s criticism that seems to take this ‘element’ as constituting some kind of empirical substance.¹⁵ From Harman’s perspective, the element into which human beings immerse themselves is always the same and, consequently, enjoyment is also the same. Harman seems to be unaware that Levinas provides us with an ontological structure and not an empirical-ontic one. The element refers to an existential dimension in which the things of our daily life are presented to us in enjoyment; it is not, thus, a literal element.

4. Enjoyment and Everyday Aesthetics

Enjoyment, understood in this way, introduces an ontological dimension in what we understand by everyday aesthetics. Thus, returning to what has been said before, I will establish a link between both concepts to clarify that this form of aesthetic experience is not simply an alienation, from the perspectives that we saw in the critical theory or Heidegger, but a dimension of our subjectivity and a fundamental aspect in the way in which we inhabit the world.

From the unreflective dimension characteristic of enjoyment, as we have seen, the objects of its daily life are not represented, but we inhabit them, so we are interior to them. Things do not appear before us as objects of analysis or contemplation, we are inserted in them without them having to claim their presence to our attention. Their silent way of accompanying us in our day to day life is their specific way of existing. As Heidegger had already claimed: “The readiness-to-hand which belongs to any such region beforehand has the character of inconspicuous familiarity” (Heidegger, 2001, p. 137). A similar idea about everyday life can be found in Bataille as quoted by Highmore: “the everyday receives our daily inattention” (Highmore, 2002, p. 21). The only way that we can understand enjoyment as an experience of the everyday is as an experience of something that does not appear to our attentive consciousness precisely because it is extremely close to ourselves, something that we simply live without reflecting upon it. This calls into question the concept of experience devised by Dewey: “The enemies of the aesthetic are neither the practical nor the intellectual. They are the humdrum; slackness of loose ends; submission to convention in practice and intellectual procedure” (Dewey, 1958, p. 40). Dewey also faces Yuriko Saito’s requirement for an aesthetic experience as developed in her *Aesthetics of the Familiar*: “Being attentive is

¹⁵ “For Levinas, there is a single formless element from which the things of our lives emerge [...] It is confined to a single passive or receptive layer of reality, and refuses to become entangled in all the manifold layers of objects. Strictly speaking, this would mean that enjoyment is always the same enjoyment” (Harman, 2005, p. 43.)

a prerequisite for any kind of aesthetic experience” (Saito, 2017, p. 3). My contention here, on the contrary, is that there is a mode of aesthetic experience that does not entail this type of attention and that, in fact, exists precisely in that lack, in the pure life of those who attend to their ‘needs’ without representing them or singling them out from the rest of their lives. Returning to Highmore, “things become ‘everyday’ by becoming invisible” (Highmore, 2002, p. 21). This happens when things become invisible and take the form of a kind of atmosphere or environment that is not ‘confronted’ with me but through which I am. As Arto Haapala (2005, p. 45) points out, “before being looked at [things] are looked through.”

Haapala’s definition of ‘place’ has many resonances with what I have claimed about Levinas’ notion of element:

Together these things determine an ‘environmental character’, which is the essence of place. In general a place is given as such a character or ‘atmosphere’. A place is therefore a qualitative, ‘total’ phenomenon, which we cannot reduce to any of its properties, such as spatial relationships, without losing its concrete nature out of sight. (Haapala, 2005, p. 42)

For Haapala, our way of being in the world is the construction of a familiarity around us that, ultimately, is the way we have to ‘inhabit’ the world: “‘Placing’ is the process of ‘home building’. Familiarising oneself with the environment is home building in the sense that home is by definition of utmost familiarity. Home is a place where everything is familiar” (Haapala, 2004, p. 46).

In this sense, the lack of attention is no longer considered as a characteristic of the aesthetics of everyday life, but as a necessary condition for this experience to be lived as such.¹⁴ The fact of being immersed in the experience entails precisely its familiarity. Familiarity is that which never catches one’s attention, by simply being there, exerting its timid influence without ever standing out. Its mode of appearance is precisely that of hiding in the centre of our life, like Poe’s stolen letter. As Haapala mentions in another text: “The ordinary, average everyday is closest to us, but for this very reason ‘the farthest and not known at all’. We are embedded in the structures of the everyday; they constitute our very existence. I think that this is true also of the aesthetic aspects of the everyday: most often they go unnoticed because they are so close to us” (Haapala, 2018, p. 144). Although we can eventually rescue that dimension from eternal unconsciousness and realize the importance that these elements have in our lives, the genuine influence of the things in our daily existence has a different nature than when we pay attention to them. It is the fundamental difference between being involved in an activity and contemplating it. In her text *The aesthetic value of the unnoticed*, when considering the experience of a ray of sunlight appearing every day in her office, Francisca Pérez Carreño points out that:

There is certainly something really lacking when I stop typing on my computer and contemplate the sun entering through the balcony. What

¹⁴ As we will mention in the next footnote, this experience would be understood more as an *Erfahrung* than an *Erlebnis*.

is lacking is my own presence, my movements and actions inside the scene. I stop being part of the environment to become a beholder. And, consequently, my experience changes. (Carreño, 2019, p. 157)

However, as Carreño emphasises later, this lack of attention does not entail a lack of aesthetic pleasure, but rather that this pleasure is located on another place:

It is not that the non-aesthetic features of the object are aesthetically experienced only once they are attentively contemplated, but rather that the object was from the beginning aesthetically perceived, if non-reflectively. There are some symptoms revealing that my activity was suffused with pleasure also during the time it was routine: I didn't realise the time passing, my body expressed calm and comfort, or I smiled. Equally, children playing don't reflect about having fun, but they have: they jump, run and laugh. To the contrary, familiarity does not convert a certain ugly building in our way home into something beautiful. Familiarity allows us to see it daily without paying attention to it. We don't perceive its ugliness constantly, but from time to time we are sadly disappointed by its presence. (*Ibid.*)

A lack of consciousness is not ultimately a lack of experience, although such experience does not stand out as a singularity in consciousness. Rather, in this situation, the aesthetic phenomenon does not present itself to our consciousness as an objective noema, but as an elemental environment in which everything is offered mixed. Our enjoyment of food may not reside so much in the food in itself as in the summer environment that 'enveloped' it at that time, or perhaps the pleasure comes from the awareness that while I was eating this food I was with the person I liked the most in the world, or maybe the grass was extraordinarily green that afternoon, or maybe it looked extraordinarily green because the person I loved was there... That is, the aesthetic object fades into a general synesthetic atmosphere in which all the sensations come together in a style, an 'element' that does not differentiate itself in its particular parts by not being distinguished by consciousness. This dimension no longer assumes the object in its otherness, but rather in the feast of relationships that our sensibility projects. The object thus loses the sovereign autonomy of the work of art to become a relational nexus, in which what belongs to the subject and what belongs to the object is no longer clear.

This is the consequence of the absolute breakdown of distances. The object never appears to be confronting us as an object in itself, nor does it require specific attention from us, nor is the thing a simple extension of myself, rather the thing is entangled in a whole system of values that introduces it into an existential structure of the subject. As Haapala points out: "The aesthetics of place is stamped by our existential structures; in one sense of the word, it is more subjective than the aesthetics of unfamiliar surroundings. (Haapala, 2005, p. 50)

Proust is one of the authors who have best understood the aesthetic dimension of our life beyond consciousness. All his reflection on involuntary memory points to the powerlessness of conscious memory to bring together the true essences of the past-in-itself. Voluntary memory, in its objectifying dimension, can scarcely make the past a diffuse present, but it cannot bring its true

presence as past. However, even further, what involuntary memory does is precisely to recall episodes lived in the past that were retained in the unconscious and that explode from time to time. At that moment these episodes appear to the involuntary memory with all their beauty. However, if they are beautiful, if memory can recall the happiness of certain moments or particularly sensitive experiences, it is precisely because those experiences were fully lived, although not attentively. Each of the experiences that Proust describes in detail is full of extraordinarily rich and complex aesthetic dimensions that Proust, through the redemption of writing, will only unfold and objectify in the work of art by drawing from it its truth and its essence. Only distance can bring us back to the truth of certain facts, but only full presence can give us the material for such an experience. For example, the smell of one's grandmother's house can only be noticed after many months without visiting her, although this does not exempt that smell from being there from the beginning and from being experienced as such. Nevertheless, it was in such an intimate way that our conscience could hardly identify it, we just enjoyed its faithful closeness unconsciously.

In *On Some Motives in Baudelaire*, reflecting on involuntary memory and resorting to Freud, Benjamin comments: "Put in Proustian terms, [...] only what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously, what has not happened to the subject as an experience [*Erlebnis*]¹⁵, can become a component of the *memoire involontaire*" (Benjamin, 2007, p. 160-161). It is sensitivity meant as a purely passive quality, one that commands in these phenomena that the subject never thinks, but simply lives. Sensitivity, in Proust, becomes sovereign at the very moment when it alone can appear, as consciousness sleeps or withdraws:

For the truths which the intelligence apprehends through direct and clear vision in the daylight world are less profound and less necessary than those which life has communicated to us unconsciously through an intuition which is material only in so far as it reaches us through our senses and the spirit of which we can elicit. (Proust, 2014, p. 237)

A reading of Proust from the perspective of everyday aesthetics has yet to be done, however. Here I have just pointed out some ideas that link to my thesis. However, Proustian oeuvre could be considered as an artistic work that constantly redeems these unconscious aesthetic experiences enunciating their truth through the artistic work. Examples of this would be numerous, and would extend beyond the scope of the present essay.

5. Enjoyment and the Experience of the Pleasant, the Beautiful and the Sublime

Enjoyment, as I have pointed out, is an eminently subjective and subjectivising experience. The elements that surround us as defining our being in the world adhere to us and therefore, despite being outside of us and being recognised as such otherness, are collected in the territory of the Same. If we rely on

¹⁵ Benjamin uses here the distinction between 'Erlebnis' and 'Erfahrung'. Both can be translated to 'experience', but 'Erlebnis' refers to a consciously lived experience, while 'Erfahrung' refers to an unconscious and unreflective one.

a Kantian conception, the existence of objects of pleasure is required as a necessary condition for the experience of enjoyment, making it an experience that would not satisfy the necessary requirements, neither those of quality nor of quantity, for such an experience to be considered aesthetic, both according to the beautiful and to the sublime. This experience is not disinterested, since the existence of the object is required beyond its mere contemplation, nor is it universal, since the aesthetic world that surrounds me is constitutive precisely of my subjectivity. If we were to assume Kantian categories, only the faculty of sensitivity would intervene in the experience of enjoyment, that is, the aesthetic faculty in the sense of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Therefore, there would be no free play between imagination and understanding, but only this passive faculty.

In the case of the sublime, the distance is even greater since while preserving the essential characteristics of the beautiful – universality and disinterest – reason is the intervening faculty. In the experience of the sublime, it is not the object that produces the experience; rather, the object is only a medium for the discovery in ourselves of a faculty that is superior to any of the senses: Reason. As Kant points out in his *Critique of Judgement* (1987, p. 106): “Sublime is what even to be able to think proves that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense.” The pain and pleasure experienced in the sublime is the confirmation of an idea that cannot be schematised through imagination. Thus, there is, on the one hand, the acknowledgment of the separation via the rejection of the object, and on the other, the satisfaction in the acknowledgement of a moral superiority in us.

In Lyotard’s concept of the sublime the scheme changes. As Rancière comments, it is no longer imagination that is powerless but reason itself in the face of the pure alterity of the sensible. “Elle manifeste la servitude de la pensée à l’égard d’une puissance intérieure à l’esprit, et antérieure à lui, qu’il s’efforce en vain de maîtriser” (Rancière, 2004, p. 126).¹⁶

In both, however, whether the accent is placed on one faculty or the other, the experience of the sublime manifests itself as the absolute opposite of what we understand here by enjoyment. That is to say, the sublime is the verification of a separation within ourselves that privileges one side, either reason, which revitalizes our moral superiority in front of the natural world, or sensitivity, which revitalizes this world that will never cease to be mysterious to us. In enjoyment, the experience is not of separation, but of union. Enjoyment, as we saw, is ‘content’ with the appearance without projecting any kind of infinity on it; it is satisfied with the pure appearance and with its clash with sensibility. In this sense, enjoyment is spiritualised, but is content with mere sensation, and thereby brings us closer to the sensation of what is pleasant.

This satisfaction of enjoyment, a completely interested and subjective happiness, therefore departs from all the honorary aesthetic categories indicated by classical aesthetics. It consciously moves away without entailing

¹⁶ Benjamin uses here the distinction between ‘Erlebnis’ and ‘Erfahrung’. Both can be translated to ‘experience’, but ‘Erlebnis’ refers to a consciously lived experience, while ‘Erfahrung’ refers to an unconscious and unreflective one.

a kind of feeling of inferiority, but rather supposes a different stage of the constitution of the subjectivity, i.e., of the movement between the Same and the Other. In Levinas we read that “enjoyment, as interiorisation, runs up against the very strangeness of the earth” (Levinas, 1991, p. 142). Enjoyment is a process of selfhood and familiarisation. The movement of the sublime, on the contrary, is the presentation of a strangeness. It is the phenomenal display of something that we can never fully inhabit, an experience of negativity and absence. Enjoyment is fulfillment and satisfaction.

Contentment, as we have seen, characterised sensitivity in the experience of enjoyment as that which did not go beyond appearance. This was done by Levinas to highlight the passive dimension, in a phenomenological sense, that enjoyment possesses as it is governed by the faculty of sensitivity. However, the fact that one is simply content does not imply that one only stays on the ‘surface’. In any case, this surface already gives us access, in its immediacy, to a symbolic depth without ‘presenting it to consciousness’. This, therefore, involves an important leap, so much so that Levinas’ apparently radical division between reason and sensitivity can make us confused, since what is apparently done is to link reason with activity and sensitivity with passivity. When understanding the symbolic value of our passive attitude, what Husserl would call passive synthesis, we could consider that this aesthetic dimension of enjoyment is not simply a passive letting go of the world, but, in effect, a primal form of symbolic appropriation of the world. Alluding to this experience, Simon Høffding and Tone Roald claim what follows:

Referring to passive syntheses does not mean that the subject is passive or inert. Think of my simple perception of the tree outside my window. I direct my attention to it, but its appearance is not exhaustively explained by this attention. [...] The tree is in the attentive foreground, but, like any figure-ground constellation, the surroundings or other ‘features’ – these familiar buildings, given from this particular angle in this particular light – enclosing it, partly constitute what makes it ‘this tree’. And emotions of nostalgia and anticipation are likewise activated, as I see its first little spring leaves, reminding me of this season of lush growth and of the past springs during which I’ve seen the tree. None of these associations are actively or purposively initiated by me, but co-presented as immanent in the perception of the tree. (Høffding and Roald, 2019, p. 7)

Merleau-Ponty, more than Levinas, constantly sought to establish a union between matter and spirit, sensibility and reason, first from the concept of body and, lastly, through the concept of flesh. Without entering into Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, I would like to conclude this section with a quote from the posthumous work *The Visible and The Invisible*, in which Merleau-Ponty states precisely that the everyday and apparently passive character of objects is not without depth, but rather implies a whole symbolic network, since the “sensible itself [...] is capable of establishing itself up on a level or horizon” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 237).

It is perhaps from this dimension that the constitutive character of our unreflective aesthetic experience could be better understood, without having

to consider that there is a duality between understanding/reason and sensitivity. In *The world of perception* he expresses this idea:

The things of the world are not simply neutral objects which stand before us for our contemplation. Each one of them symbolises or recalls a particular way of behaving, provoking in us reactions which are either favourable or unfavourable. This is why people's tastes, character, and the attitude they adopt to the world and to particular things can be deciphered from the objects with which they choose to surround themselves, their preferences for certain colours or the places where they like to go for walks. (Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p. 63)

Ultimately, the experience of enjoyment departs from the classical aesthetic categories devised in the Kantian model, insofar as the requirements of disinterest and universality are not met. Although we can consider them as closer to the pleasant, these objects of enjoyment are not simply objects of an absolutely passive sensibility, but the enjoyment with these elements is symbolically charged. The objects with which we surround ourselves constitute our home, our first appropriation and, ultimately, the first step of our subjectivity. The pleasure of enjoyment with objects is sensitive but not thereby irrational. Rather, it is sensitive in the way of the unreflective, but this sensitivity, also relying on Merleau-Ponty, is loaded with meaning.

6. Conclusions

The concept of enjoyment in Levinas has allowed us to understand a possible model of ontological understanding of the aesthetic experience in everyday life. The idea is, therefore, to capture the role that pleasantness, sympathy or attraction in general have in our daily lives as a way of constructing and edifying our personality. Daily life is not exempt from aesthetic experience, as we constantly make unconscious judgments that make us approach some objects rather than others; surround ourselves with objects that are more pleasant to us than others; schedule when to go outside; dress a specific color of clothing, and so on. All these aesthetic choices do not entail the realisation of an epoché of our natural attitude, but are precisely the essence of it. The way in which we enjoy life; how we 'wrap' ourselves in the objects that we love, constitute an extension of our subjectivity that, despite being referred to as the Same, is not the Same, but part of a world that enfold us: the world of our objects, customs, desires, ideas and pleasures.

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