

# Aesthetics and ethics between beauty and learning. Different dimensions of the (envious) gaze in educational and knowledge relationships

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**Abstract.** The aesthetic appearance of beauty is intertwined with the experience of looking; and this opens up exciting paths for us to explore within the space of the complex dimensions of learning. The act of “taking something of beauty” (or something related to beauty, including its opposites) is driven by curiosity and desire but accompanied by a sense of fear and paralysis; that which attracts us may become monstrously or terribly beautiful, or – to draw on the lexicon of excess associated with beauty – “too beautiful”. There is a sort of unsustainability inherent in beauty. This text explores the dimension of envy, so understood, starting from its ethical declension, bordering with the dimension of justice; in this case, envious glance is rather a questioning look; it wonders, that’s to say, how the merit of other’s success happened. These declensions of the envious glance are analysed starting from literature, from myth and from the iconography connected to the power of looking.

**Keywords.** Aesthetic, ethic, beauty, learning, knowledge.

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*Il silenzio dell'invidioso fa troppo rumore.*  
Kahlil Gibran

*L'invidia è ammirazione segreta.  
Una persona piena di ammirazione che senta  
di non poter diventare felice abbandonandosi  
[rinunciando al proprio orgoglio], sceglie  
di diventare invidiosa di ciò che ammira...  
L'ammirazione è una felice perdita di sé,  
l'invidia un'infelice affermazione di sé.*  
S. Kierkegaard

*...ché a tutti un fil di ferro i cigli fóra  
e cusce sí, come a sparvier selvaggio*  
D. Alighieri

## 1. Beauty and learning: How we make sense through the senses.

Comparison with the outside world and with others is inherent to the process of human existence. The means employed for this comparison are the senses. Everyone

takes in information through the senses: we see, hear, taste, smell and touch. Even in the current way of speaking, the most common categorizations of learning styles are based on the senses, whether one prefers visual or auditory learning and memory, everyone innately gives priority to one of these styles when acquiring knowledge.

Our development is closely linked with our aesthetic dimension (Gundara, 1986). In this paper, the aesthetic dimension will be represented by the gaze. The term “aesthetics” comes from Greek language and philosophy. The word at its root, “aesthesis” means an unelaborated, elementary awareness of stimulation, a sense, feeling or sensation. However, a deeper connotation of aesthesis conveys a sensory recognition. This is important, in the perspective of this discussion, because of the nature of body-based experiences and the recognition that aesthesis involves.

Our emotions are modified by the way we gaze on the world and on other changes (Heidegger, 1976, 188). Our childhood activities start with what Piaget defined as the sensorimotor stage of co-ordination, which is how motor functions and senses begin to explore and take in (learn about) the surrounding world. (Piaget, 1976; Vidal, 1989).

Aesthetic recognition, on the other hand, is characterized by the experience of understanding (Rasmussen, 1990) and represents a qualitative worldview that gives life meaning. This kind of meaning requires interpretation, sensuous symbolic forms and the emotions.

Learning, as a taking-in-the-world activity, can be characterised as a relational complexity. The aesthetic dimension of learning has been passing through philosophical thought about education since Plato’s view of an “idea” came about as the result of what has been seen, of knowledge as a “vision”. The relationships among vision, aesthetics, what is visible and what is sensible create an experience that Dewey called emotional. The act of seeing or viewing, implicates both an embodied and a situated existence in a material world: we share a similar manner of existence with other viewing subjects, but we live this existence in a discrete, autonomous, specific and personal story-based way.

What we perceive with our senses can be harmonious, rhythmic and regular, or it can be the opposite, disharmonious, arrhythmic and irregular. The rhythmic alternation within humans and the world, the rhythmic variation within a balanced relation to a particular context (Di Gregory, 2008, 250) can introduce a link between aesthetics and ethics. If ethics is, as Nel Noddings asserts, “how we should conduct our lives and, especially, how we should interact with others” (Noddings, 1998, 136), then according to Dewey, emotions, imagination and empathy, as effective factors, are a part of our moral experience, meaning, and understanding (Dewey, 1934). The possibility to discern and see various possibilities for acting, within a given and common situation, is a dramatic form of moral imagination (Dewey, 1922).

Knowing the right thing to do requires education and practice. For the ancient Greeks, the idea of “good” or “right” was closely linked with the idea of beauty. Education to seek beauty gives a connotation of gaining pleasure from the qualities of what can be valued as positive, intrinsic and immediate. This takes us towards expansion, where we exist in terms of our relationships, where we are interconnected.

From the encounter between ethics and aesthetics comes the awareness of a human being as *energheia* [energy], as a power to exist. Aristotle named this power *energheia* (*Metaphysics*). Spinoza called it *conatus*, Freud, *libido*. Humans, as desiring subjects, with a willing power, cannot perceive the limits of their power, except by comparison with the

rest of the world. We perceive our desire in relation to what feels “good” for us, in a horizon of beauty. Yet, through comparison, humans can learn measurement, differences and, perhaps, injustices. The act of comparing, and having models, could be a starting point for our considering the relationships among beauty, envy, gaze and learning.

The envious suffer when they see another’s beauty. They suffer when faced with what cannot be possessed. This pain has to do with the feeling of losing one’s self, of losing the possibility of being (Frankel, Sherick, 1977). The effect of envy, in this perspective, is a revision of the self, a revision of others, and a revision of one’s desires. What I envy is beauty to me. The aesthetic appearance of beauty is intertwined with the experience of gazing or looking. This concept opens up exciting paths for us to explore within the space of the complex dimensions of learning.

The act of “taking in something of beauty” (or something related to beauty, including its opposites) is driven by curiosity and desire but it is also accompanied by a sense of fear and sometimes paralysis. That which attracts us may become monstrously or terribly beautiful, or – to draw on the lexicon of excess associated with beauty – “too beautiful”. Hence, there can be a sort of unsustainability inherent in beauty. That which is too beautiful and therefore becomes monstrous or terrible can not only generate an oxymoron but it can also lead us to experience a bewildering sense of excess that immediately spurs us to exert some form of control over the immense and baffling open space that we are glimpsing. Therefore, we will strive to reduce that which we perceive as difficult to manage.

Thus, the concept of “monstrous” – wherein beauty and fear are inextricably intertwined – gains ground. The term monstrous has lexical and semantic connections with the visual dimension of the “envious gaze”. The Latin lemma *monstrum* comes from the intensified form of *monere*, which means to “advise” and to “warn”. The *monstrum* is something that is shown or “that shows itself”, particularly in the semantics of religion. More specifically, it can be a wondrous, divine or extraordinary sign.

That which is wondrous and appears to be a warning necessarily demands our attention, either in terms of an effort to safeguard and protect or to closely and mistrustfully observe and analyse. Becoming aware of the ways in which the act of looking relates to learning and beauty brings us to the realization – within an observational perspective on the dynamics of envy – that looking is a competence that can be educated. Indeed, looking is the outcome of our educational history. Our way of looking at things and our very way of life (envying or being envied) greatly depends on our particular culture of looking.

Exploring the relationship between envy and learning represents an unusual perspective within a theoretical or practical reflection on education, a context in which envy is generally perceived as unexpected. Nonetheless, it would appear that the category of envy can shed new light on the landscape of learning, if viewed from within the philosophical paradigm of problematics, phenomenology and pedagogical research,<sup>1</sup> which has focused on this subject, not in absolute or ideal terms but rather as a function of its unalienable cognitive and emotional intertwining with its own environment and with history.

The inalienable need to take the context of learning into account and the crucial importance of viewing educational dynamics in terms of complexity (as E. Morin tea-

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr: A. Banfi, M. Bertin, P. Bertolini in Italy, and in a broader perspective: W. Dilthey, M. Heidegger, H.G. Gadamer, P. Ricoeur, L. Pareyson.

ches<sup>2</sup>) and of narrative thinking, (as in the vision of G. Bateson<sup>3</sup>) cannot but lead us to consider the extent to which learning is meta-learning. This then is joined by the fact that our knowledge of our knowledge increasingly needs to include space for reflection on the emotions elicited by and acted out around an educational event.

Our way of looking has undergone and continues to undergo aesthetic training: we learn to select, to choose, to marvel, to discover and identify harmony and belonging. Furthermore, the act of looking has historically been accompanied by a set of didactics of its own. Educating the use of the eyes has always been a ritualized practice and closely connected with the dynamics of constructing relationships. From the parent-child relationship to the regulation and surveillance of the power of sight in the medieval precept “*custodia oculorum*”, wherein the act of looking has always been considered potentially dangerous in two opposing directions. Looking can bring “in” that which we perceive as being “outside” of ourselves. It can also make visible to the outside what is inside of ourselves. The internalization of the other and the externalization of the self can allow an image to enter one’s self and be learned-acquired<sup>4</sup>. As an *eidōs* or idea, this image may function as a model or representation.

Neuroscientific research seems have provided a physical basis for this process by proposing the existence of what are called mirror-neurons. But we will return to this topic later. For now, we will examine the gaze in relation to the subject and its own behaviours (including moral), before going on to see how the relationship with the other is based on the physical dynamics and interactivity found in an educational context.

Displaying or receiving a form can be a highly ambivalent gesture. The act of looking can penetrate, offend or even reveal too much. Looking has its own geometric and geographical features: we can lower our gaze, look from on high to indicate dominance or bend over and look up to express submission. To help us make a smoother transition from the concept and practice of the *custodia oculorum* toward the notion of a complex trade between internalization of the other and externalization of the self, it would be useful to focus on the idea that looking is conceived of and experienced as a human action, and as a consequence, that seeing is an intentional act which may be exercised in the same way as speaking.

The *opsis* of the ancients denoted a cognitive support for upright moral behaviour: the eyes have the ability to seek out and touch. It was thus of key importance to control their use. Guarding one’s gaze therefore meant monitoring its behaviour, defending oneself from the danger of seeing the wrong things.

In the second millennium, the need to be vigilant over that which could penetrate internally became much more important, while in the first millennium this vigilance was primarily directed against going in pursuit of something external, touching it and taking it for oneself. The monastic tradition in particular laid great emphasis on the notion of the “custody of the eyes”, a practice aimed at avoiding visual encounters with anything that could perturb the soul. However, it should be noted that this practice was

<sup>2</sup> E. Morin, 1999, *L’Intelligence de la complexité*, L’Harmattan, Paris; 2000, *Les Sept savoirs nécessaires à l’éducation du futur*, Seuil, Paris

<sup>3</sup> Bateson, G. (1979). *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity (Advances in Systems Theory, Complexity, and the Human Sciences)*. Hampton Press

<sup>4</sup> F. Cambi writes that the subject is opened beyond himself (“*tesi al di là del sé*”): Cambi, 2006, page 52.

not intended to suggest that those adopting it were superior. Its purpose was to moderate the extent to which it was possible to see inside another person and scrutinise their soul and likewise to prevent one's own soul from being scrutinised by others.<sup>5</sup>

To extend our reflection on the fundamental need to care for our gaze, to address this two-way aspect, this meeting-point between the internal and the external is interesting. Though our gaze is directed at the outside world, it is also the vehicle and the means by which the world (in the form of images) and the gaze of others can enter inside of us. The risks associated with this mutual transference are at the core of the convergence postulated here between envy and gaze on the one hand and the deepest dimensions of learning on the other. Learning is clearly a gesture of taking, but also of drawing near. Learning implies grasping, but also welcoming and receiving. This same spectrum of meanings applies to the gaze. It is not by chance that gaze and its related verbs have always been connected with knowing. Examples include the Greek *oída* = "I have seen", and therefore I know, the Italian *vedo* = "I see", which also has the sense of "I take note", which can be equivalent to the English "I see", which can also mean "I understand" or "I know". Thus seeing, looking and knowing intertwine and generate both risks and opportunities.

Knowledge may be acquired with delicacy, curiosity, or a spirit of enquiry, but also with rapacity, or a greedy, sly, aggressive or hoarding attitude. We may set out to acquire knowledge by attempting to arrest the world and others in their path so that they cannot move or evolve, so that they cannot force us to change perspective or modify our personal view of the world, so that they cannot engage us in a burdensome critical responsibility towards ourselves or even others. This is what happens when the envious gaze comes into play.

It is not by chance that among the so-called sins or at any rate among human emotions, envy is the dimension of the subject that has been least investigated and most shied away from. It is rare to hear somebody admitting to being envious. Indeed, when – rather than expressing our happiness or satisfaction on account of another's good fortune – we let slip an "I envy you", we always feel bound to qualify this by adding "in the good sense, of course". It is as though the lexicon of everyday life and discursive practice show that there is both a positive and a negative connotation of envy.

Envy has always been morally stigmatized; for example, from a Catholic perspective, it is considered the opposite of charity. Aside from the issue of religious or moral condemnation however, what is of interest to us here is the fact that envy has a different relational identity to acts of charity or generosity. And it is precisely from a pedagogical and therefore relational perspective that envy may be interpreted as a solitary feeling: it is to be kept secret, to be hidden. It is admitted only with great reluctance even to oneself. (This because the word envy is rarely uttered without anger. This anger stems from the experience of feeling disadvantaged with respect to the person envied, and because admitting to envy would mean admitting one's own inferiority.)

The only relationship dynamic possible for an envious person is one of fixation. Envy is a feeling that isolates and impedes exchange. This is why it may be identified, including from the perspective of philosophy of education, at the intersection of the

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<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, it is of interest to point out here that quite the opposite was true of this learning; to look with care was based on appropriate regulation of one's gaze. The highest goal, for monks in the religious tradition of desert asceticism, was not to distance themselves from others looking in, but to acquire the ability to see through the gaze of others. Thus, they avoided looking so as to be able to see in a different and better way.

internal-external exchange and therefore, pedagogically, at the deep core of being and (not by chance) at its deepest non-visible roots, which reach down to where identity was formed and continues to be constructed.

At the core of the subject, where from earliest infancy envy negotiates with narcissism and object investment, where recognition of the other and therefore of the paradigm of difference is established, there is also the need for a primary affect to be born. This happens even before the exogenous (and therefore endogenous) affect can be rooted in the omnipotent avidity of the young child, who by nature seeks unlimited satisfaction of its desires. This is discussed in depth in the 1957 classic by M. Klein<sup>6</sup> who, by identifying the earliest clashes between omnipotence and limits during this developmental phase, also shows that frustration is an inevitable consequence of such conflict. In this sense, envy blocks both the relationship, and the subject's own enjoyment and development, given that it sets in motion both internal and external destructive movements with the effect of impoverishing the self and its object of desire.

The specific nature of aesthetic experience with respect to more general experience is illustrated in Dewey<sup>7</sup>. From Dewey's perspective, aesthetic experience is not defined by its object (a work of art, for example) nor by any special trait related to beauty. Any aesthetic theory must be founded on a view of aesthetic experience as a clearer and more intense development of general experience that not only arises in response to art but also in the context of everyday life.

## 2. Learning (with) the other

Exploring envy within the dynamics of learning, or of failing to learn, inevitably means comparing envy (understood both as a passion and as a cultural element) with the notion of another key dimension of learning connected with aesthetic experience and relationships, namely admiration. If we were only to see admiration as the opposite of contempt, we would miss out on its complex emotional link with envy. According to Perniola<sup>8</sup>, the three dimensions of admiration are appreciation, surprise and envy. All three of these aspects are concurrently present in the Ancient Greek word for the verb to envy *ágamai* (*ágalma* meant both divine image and economic value as understood prior to the invention of money). The verb has three meanings; to be awed, to admire and to feel envy or resentment.

Following this line of argumentation, given that admiration plays a key role not only in cultural economics, but in all the emotional and cognitive dimensions of learning, any spectrum of emotions associated with it should be viewed as a mode or style of learning: from genuine enthusiasm to awe and envy. Not even passions described or understood as shameful can be excluded. Thus, envy stands alongside voraciousness. Therefore, envy does not solely concern a competitive logic that regulates relationships of domination or rivalry.

It is Ovid, in the *Metamorphoses*, who describes envy as living at the end of a val-

<sup>6</sup> Klein M. (1957), *Invidia e gratitudine*, trad. it., Martinelli, Firenze, 1969

<sup>7</sup> J. Dewey, *Art as experience*, New York, Penguin Putnam, 1980.

<sup>8</sup> L. R. Gonçalves & A. Fabris (Orgs.) *Os lugares da crítica de arte* (pp. 109-129). São Paulo: ABCA/Imprensa Oficial do Estado. Perniola, M. (1998). *Estética no século XX* (pp. 155 ss.). Lisboa: Estampa.

ley from which the sun can never be seen. No wind blows through it. Sadness and cold reign there. The imagined personification of envy has a pale face and a tongue tinged with poison. Envy is aggravated by the successful endeavours of humans. Dante takes up this description in the *Divine Comedy* and reworks it by presenting envy as having two dimensions with two associated metaphorical landscapes: a number of the aspects of envy described by Dante are particularly relevant to the theme of this section, where a strong association between envy and gaze is being proposed. The feeling of envy contains desire but does not fulfil it because its focus is on depriving the other of a form of happiness rather than obtaining that happiness for oneself.

Moving on to examine this desire in the context of learning, we can see that individuals dominated by envy<sup>9</sup> have great difficulty in getting to know others, given that they experience this knowledge of the envied other (generally creative and therefore dynamic in nature) as humiliating. Each new piece of information is therefore desirable but at the same time tormented, because it obliges those who desire fixity to engage in movement: the envious party is incapable of assimilating the input received from the other. Their fixity significantly interferes<sup>10</sup> with their potential to be curious, with their capacity to know and to experience pleasure. In order to better comprehend this fixity, which Medusa's eyes express and embody, we need to examine the desire of the envious more closely, labelling it as the desire to totally coincide with the other, to restore the narcissistic completeness undermined by the discovery of the limit, of the difference and of the distance between oneself and the other.

However, difference and otherness represent the very foundation of the educational relationship with objects, the world, and with others – the latter being so poorly tolerated because of envy. It follows, as has been usefully explained in a Brazilian essay on the key role of the body in the economy of envy<sup>11</sup>, that the aspect of the body which allows contact to be made and unity sought, but which at the same time allows distance to be maintained between the envious and the envied parties, is precisely its gaze. As mentioned earlier, internalization of the other and externalization of the self allow an image to enter and be learned-acquired; neuroscientific research appears to have endowed this process with a physical basis, in postulating mirror-neurons.

Specifically, recent discoveries in the scientific disciplines that study neurology, and precisely what are known as mirror-neurons, are enabling us to look more carefully at the importance of the learning context and in particular at the key role of relational exchange, which educational dimensions (among others) may promote or foster. (I say “more carefully” because pedagogical science and philosophy have long been strong proponents of claims concerning the social nature of human beings and the notion that learning might occur through imitation, which for other disciplines were viewed as mere “suspicions”. When put together, these discoveries would imply that learning is optimized within relationships, both in terms of environment, context and circumstance, and in terms of affect, teaching and orientation.) In particular, when viewed from a pedago-

<sup>9</sup> Winnicott, D. W. (1994). *Melanie Klein: about the idea of Envy*. In D. W. Winnicott, *Psycho-analytic explorations*. Winnicott, Donald W.; Winnicott, Clare (Ed); Shepard, Ray (Ed); Davis, Madeleine (Ed) Cambridge, MA, US: Harvard University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph, B. (1996). *Acerca de la curiosidad*. *Psicoanálisis*, 18(1), 13-25.

<sup>11</sup> A. Novaes, *Os sentidos da paixão*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras. (1987)

gical perspective, mirror-neurons invite us to revisit the notion of mediation in learning. This is not a question of replicating what we see, but of establishing a relationship with our learning object, which is based on desire and is deeply visual in nature. In effect, in line with what is suggested by neurological studies on mirror-neurons, we do not slavishly reproduce the gestures or postures of the other, but we mediate, between the internal and external domains, the possibility of transforming our learning into a more reflective gesture, which educational science and psychology define as learning to learn.

In essence, the image of the other generates imitation insofar as it activates the capacity to draw to oneself the pre-viewed, pre-figured result of what one sees in the other. From an educational point of view, as will be discussed in this section which uses mythological contents as a narrative and illustrative support to evoke notions of re-learning, educational acts are believed to be agents of mediation that act, almost in the sense of intervening in the direct relationship – of the specular gaze – with the learning object, creating in the subject true transference ability. It is precisely this ability that then enables us to ask ourselves, concerning each object that we encounter, see or experience, how that object may be utilized to enhance our understanding of our daily existence, and of our own needs.

Transference generates learning that originates in the things that we see and that therefore does not arise only in response to those things. This implies a true transfer of content among different spheres of experience. Moving from knowing how to do something to knowing that we know how to do it allows us to mediate with the world by drawing on the ability to apply experience to theory and by passing from theoretical knowledge to application. This results in the establishment of a stable inclination to take in existential “inputs” and transform them via a progressive fine-tuning process. This transformation occurs even more intensely when the experience in question has emotional valence. Mirror-neurons function not only as an appropriate metaphor, but also as an effective mediator of behaviour that is attuned to one’s emotions. Thus, these emotions come to acquire a supportive function for the self, and for others, by establishing and consolidating, over time, satisfactory images of the self, as well as positive feelings and confirmation of one’s awareness of one’s own efficacy and capability.

Throughout history, a link has perennially been drawn between the act of looking and power, as in the popular saying, “the eyes are the window of the soul”, or St. Jerome’s comment<sup>12</sup> that they are the “battering ram for breaking into the interior world”. Our gaze can reveal or offend, communicate and create bonds. The hearts of *Stil Novo* poets were wounded via their eyes. However, looking is not always benevolent as it may also be offensive, mistrustful or spiteful. Thus, the eye can become the ‘evil eye’ acted out in the complex space of envy, with a look that encroaches on the other in an almost physical way.

The act of looking is simultaneously both the most dangerous and the most protective medium for envy. Not by chance, Melanie Klein wrote in her famous essay that the deepest cause of envy is creativity, proposing as an example Satan who attempts to destroy what is created by God, opposing life as a creative force with all that bears destructive power. A good illustration of this is Giotto’s painting of Envy, represented as

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<sup>12</sup> St. Jerome, *Letters*, Paulist Press, 1963, Mahwah, New Jersey.



a woman of sinister appearance, with a snake coming out of her mouth and immediately turning against her, re-entering her body through her eyes: words of envy boomerang against subjects, poisoning their gaze (like the snake) and transforming it into the evil eye. That which is poisoned, dries up.

### 3. Learning and creativity

Remaining with this metaphor and transferring it to the sphere of learning, whatever is touched by an envious gaze transforms novelty (the learning object) into something that dries out, that is inhibited as though poisoned and therefore impoverished. Melanie Klein reached similar conclusions, reporting that in her psychoanalytical experience, envy of creativity played a key part in disrupting the creative process. Thus, otherness is not tolerated given that, like being, to borrow the terms of Merleau-Ponty<sup>13</sup>, it demands a creative attitude on our part so that it may be transformed into experience. Similarly, creativity allows us to transform our experience into learning, and its workings follow a logic that invites rationality and sensibility to merge and make contact with one another.

Learning is therefore a human activity, which to quote Deleuze<sup>14</sup>, resists death because it realizes in itself its own nature as a privileged cultural drive that creates connections, links and narratives, which have never been formed before. Learning is therefore the most radical expression of creativity, mediated by feelings of admiration, wonder and awe.

Envy instead originates as a vice that may be defined as unusual compared to its “fellow” weaknesses; while the other sins all involve some element of pleasure, envy is fuelled by the need to defend a threatened identity. People that envy perceive the beauty or good fortune of others as a threat to their own affirmation of self. The envious tend to be disturbed by an excess of “beauty”, which prompts a comparison with their own beauty, which in consequence must be defended<sup>15</sup>. In defending the self, envy tends to compress its object in an attempt to limit its growth and expansion. Thus, envy patrols the borders, mounting guard over the difficult coexistence of limits and change. Nietzsche reminds us<sup>16</sup> that the ancient Greeks interpreted human success as a divine gift and envy as the consequence of impiety (leaving aside for now the fact that many of the Greek gods admitted to being envious of fellow divinities on Mount Olympus or of common mortals): greatness and beauty were usually venerated. Veneration was an act of recognition and appreciation and it allowed the ancients to identify greatness and beauty and adopt them as models, goals and future horizons. In contrast, envy is a form of impotence that undermines the self-esteem of the people experiencing it, preventing them from coping with their limits – which would “simply” require being accepted, embraced or even just acknowledged – and therefore from contemplating beauty serenely.

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<sup>13</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible, Followed by Working Notes* trans. by Alphonso Lingis, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

<sup>14</sup> G. Deleuze, “What is the Creative Act?” in *Two Regimes of Madness*, Cambridge MA: Semiotext(e), 317-329.

<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, we could link this assumption with the possibility that such a defence, obviously unconscious, aims to protect the self from a sense of painful inferiority fuelled by comparison.

<sup>16</sup> F. Nietzsche, *The birth of tragedy*, Penguin Classics, London, 1997.

In some cases, envy may provoke change and questioning. From an ethical perspective, envy could also mean – as noted by Natoli<sup>17</sup> – inhabiting the space of the demand for justice and assessing the legitimacy of beauty (or success), not just by observing the effects on the envied party of having reached these conditions but also by seeking to trace out the paths that led to the attainment of this enviable beauty.

However, one rarely manages to transform envy into a virtue. On the contrary, its evil eye tends to become increasingly more obstructive, blocking both the envious and the envied and bringing about a state of fixity. Its aim is to halt the other's production of beauty and to remove the opportunity to act. Thus, envy immobilizes and fixates both the envied and the envious.

According to Schoeck<sup>18</sup>, envy is born of the inequality that emerges from social comparison: the fear that one person may have more than others, along with the concern that all objects, innate qualities and desires should be levelled to meet the demands of socially prescribed equality and justice, implying that justice and equality are one and the same thing. From this perspective, it seems clear that even naturally arising differences among subjects should be eliminated upon entry into the society of culture. However, Lévy-Strauss offers an alternative view, explaining that the primitive societies he studied were actually constantly engaged in producing difference, in that their greatest fear was undifferentiation.

Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of a 'higher justice', envy can produce learning when it generates reflection. Envy also features inner development. In fact, Dante punishes the envious with an agonizing blindness. Their souls are dressed in coarse haircloth. They huddle together against a rocky backdrop, with the colour of their clothing merging with the colour of stone making it difficult to make them out. Their eyelids are sewn up. They cannot see the light of the sun nor cry. They are *invidiosi* [envious] because they have envied and cast the evil eye on others. They are also being punished because they cannot see, which helps them to learn about and expiate their sin.

It is interesting that Dante placed the envious in Purgatory and not in Hell. In particular, pride and envy are punished in Purgatory not as precise faults or capital sins, but as general character traits, which clearly distinguish the two otherworld kingdoms. Dante here plays on the intuitive etymological connection between "*in-videre*" [envying] and "*non videre*" [not seeing]. The link between looking and learning provides rich grounds for exploration in terms of the connection between knowledge and its beauty on the one hand and actually acquiring knowledge and entering into contact with it on the other.

The act of looking of itself already generates a sort of wondrous sign, or enigma, in the words of M. Merleau-Ponty. The body that contemplates itself is both seeing and visible. "It looks at everything, but may also look at itself, recognizing in what it sees 'the other side' of its visual power. It sees itself as seeing; it feels itself as touching; it is visible and tangible to itself"<sup>19</sup>.

This reflexive property of looking, through the medium of what Aristotle defined as the most theoretical of the senses<sup>20</sup>, presupposes the availability of a third object that

<sup>17</sup> S. Natoli, *Dizionario dei vizi e delle virtù*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1996.

<sup>18</sup> H. Schoeck, *ENVY: A Theory of Social Behaviour*, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 1970.

<sup>19</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *L'occhio e lo spirito*, SE, Milano, 1989, page 18

<sup>20</sup> It is interesting to note that in many languages (not only in English, but also in Italian, French...) "to see"

allows us to observe ourselves as observers. This may be a medium or – to introduce the myth that above all others illustrates how envy is able to affect the knowledge acquisition process – a screen. The word screen has Anglo-Saxon roots, coming from the Germanic term for shelter and defence (*skerm, skirm*). It was used to refer to shields and to the fact that shields often displayed the warring history of the people carrying them into battle. Looking at and protecting oneself are therefore present together on the same surface, along with the acts of telling, revealing and hiding...

The act of looking, especially through a medium (which may be writing or the projection of cinematographic images) makes visible the extent to which interior and exterior are inseparable. In looking, the subject reveals this link as though to say, in the words of Merleau-Ponty: “the world is entirely inside of me and I am entirely outside of myself”<sup>21</sup>. This continual coming and going implicit in this state of affairs mirrors an extremely interesting characteristic of learning, here applied to the observation of beauty. This is the fact that learning cannot but come about through exchange, movement and dialectics. Outside and inside are continuously both merging and differentiating themselves from one another. And this process brings us to the dangers of envy within the dimension of learning. While gaining knowledge is intrinsically a dynamic and dialogic process, a gaze that envies and paralyzes can petrify the experience of knowledge acquisition itself.

In order to better focus on these ideas, it might be useful to take a step back here. If we contemplate envy from within an existentialist philosophical paradigm, our starting point must inevitably be a definition of the subject as a living self and, even more so, as potential to exist. Aristotle spoke of ‘substance’ in terms of *enérgeia*, or energy. Spinoza espoused a similar vision, referring to *conatus existendi*, that is to say an innate tendency of being to persevere, or as Nietzsche would have it, to expand. It is not possible to conceive of being and of the subject other than in relation to development.

Our reflections here may also be informed by systems or systemic theory, based on the pioneering studies of Ludwig von Bertalanffy and currently an area of interdisciplinary study on the formation and properties of systems (sets of elements in interaction with one another), which offers valuable tools<sup>22</sup> for addressing particularly complex themes and provides a framework for examining phenomena made up of essentially indefinite and indefinable variables, such as educational phenomena: the entities implicated only exist insofar as they exchange energy with the environment as they take energy and redistribute it.

Given that the subject is part of a play of energy, each singularity exists in a form of intensity, or a given quantity of force. This force is only conserved if it is capable of expansion, but at the same time, it is also true that every force is limited. When we become frustrated with whatever is limiting us (whether internal or originating in others), it is possible for envy to develop. If the subject is intensity, the onset of envy occurs when the perception of this force generates, within the exchange with the system and the environment, feelings or experiences of impotence, wherein a conflict is generated between the need to expand and the obstacle represented by the limit. If the subject’s energy,

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means “to understand”, “to be aware”, “to recognize”.

<sup>21</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *Fenomenologia della percezione*, Il Saggiatore, Milano, 1965, page 19

<sup>22</sup> Cfr: Bateson G., (1972). *Verso un’ ecologia della mente*. Adelphi, Milano, Bateson G., (1979). *Mente e natura: un’unità necessaria*. Adelphi, Milano, Foerster von, H., (1987). *Sistemi che osservano*. Astrolabio, Roma.

during a critical phase such as the conflict among forces just described, is not directed at growth and efforts to overcome the limit, negative emotions will be generated that compromise self-cognitive capacity, with the result of further limiting growth-directed processes. These difficulties can be perceived as strongly relational in origin. They can blind our vision of the successes of others or even of their mere existence, thereby accentuating not only our impotence, but also the torment that accompanies it.

When consumed by envy, the subject “wears himself or herself out, with no benefit, and is devoured by the inextinguishable desire for the other to be destroyed. Even if the other is destroyed, satisfaction cannot be attained because the end of the other can in no way contribute to the growth of the self”<sup>23</sup>. Envy may involve the desire to improve the envious person’s own position (this would be a sort of emulative envy), or to corrupt the other’s elevation or beauty, in a malicious form of envy or “evil eye”. I do not want to see (to know, to recognize, to admire, to take as an example, or even to admire) the beauty and the position of the other, and so I try to destroy, to render invisible (or inexistent) that which causes envy in me. Therefore, the supposed (and defensive) supremacy of a gaze that strives always to remain identical to itself ultimately makes the world that it observes invariably identical to itself. Experience is then cancelled and the looker cannot tolerate diversity. Envy immobilizes all opportunities to learn, grow and be transformed.

#### 4. Learning with the eyes

Learning can encounter surprising and potent opportunities for questioning and wondering, when it is able to remain faithful to the becoming of its gaze. Thus, the act of learning may involve different modes of looking. By moving away from the “conventional” and powerful solid link between seeing and knowing, looking can also be a matter of observing, defending, contemplating, longing for, lingering, being amazed by and meeting. In looking, the world becomes a text and the exchanges between the subject and the world make the gaze into transformation and desire for change (Cambi, 1986). The world and the other become textual or discursive events, to be read and rewritten.

Unfortunately the envious gaze is unable to reflect or change its “viewpoint”, because it does not realize that looking must be lived above all in relation to experience, to one’s own life path. We have learned to look as we look, in the way that we look. We have transformed the way in which we initially looked at the world into the way in which we experience it. Subjects who look from the perspective of envy fail to see either others or their own action of seeing. This looking is not only ethically charged but is regulated by a pedagogical or relational principle. Looking at our own gaze and making it limpid enough to reflect the beauty, and even the success, of others, is a way of accepting them, and of becoming capable of beauty ourselves. This means drawing out the full creative force of the peculiarly human capacity to invent, to find ever new ways of approaching the fundamental questions, which, though unsolvable, represent the basis of our freedom as human beings.

The learning available to us from our own looking, if based on wonder and awe, intersects with the themes of finiteness and freedom. As finite beings, we humans can

<sup>23</sup> S. Natoli, *Dizionario dei vizi e delle virtù*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1996, page 74.

choose infinity and embody freedom, but only on condition that we forgo any aspirations to possess and accept that we are bound by our own limits while loving the basic facts of our own condition. To be looked at, with fondness, or rather, with care is the objective of our learning.

In order to explore the visual dimensions of looking with “envy” in the educational relationship in greater depth, we will start from the link between beauty and learning. Now, we will draw on mythology by defining the myth as a set of ever-germinating and ever-fertile images that never lose their dynamism or readiness to meet a gaze that does not imprison them. Not only does mythological thought reflect the power and roles of aesthetics in attributing meaning to reality, but the myth is primarily a set of discursive utterances and narrative practices (“or even simply of tales and stories”<sup>24</sup>). Therefore, the myth is not experienced and interpreted statically, but as a symbol of what may be imagined, as a narrative possibility. Indeed, within the pedagogical perspective developed in my own research over several years<sup>25</sup>, the myth is a “possibility” for learning, underpinned by the aesthetic relationship with learning.

The procedural value of the myth (in its general connotation) lies in its significance as “essence in verbal form”. A myth is the symbol of creative knowledge that transcends the narrative. In other words, although a myth is a situated or locatable story its effect is necessarily indeterminable. Our relationship with mythical tales is dual in nature because it involves both an intellectual and a perceptive-imaginary approach. We do not merely “take in” the myth, but we learn it, identify its form, overtake its limits and we push beyond it. When we learn, or learn from, a myth we must inevitably take on its problematic, indeterminate and dynamic nature (the opposite of learning the behaviour of envy), so we can enhance the creative potential of learning itself. Learning is transformation and myth is metamorphosis, which gives us access to the dialogic relationship inherent in our attention. Our attention is at once demanded and constructed. The myth, as an image that narrates itself, is movement and dynamism that pushes our thinking towards ‘no thought’, which broadens our very capacity to think.

Learning to think through myths is a way of training our reasoning in order to cultivate and restore wonder and awe as a healthy alternative and antidote to envy. Indeed, as Nietzsche teaches us, envy can be seen as a feeling that does not know how to emulate the ancients in terms of their ability to wonder, which the German philosopher refers to as “veneration”. If we once more learn to venerate that which is great, we will realize that our thinking too has gained the capacity to contain greatness. Envy is a feeling that deprives the subject of this capacity, even in physical terms: envy leaves no room for anything else.

## 5. Learning and impossible transformation: Medusa

In particular, we will scrutinize the myth of Medusa. The most famous of the Gorgons is an icon of highly volatile and complex envy. First, however, it would be useful to recall the ancients’ perspective on envy, which was considerably more tolerated in the

<sup>24</sup> M. Detienne, *L'invenzione della mitologia*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2000, page 12

<sup>25</sup> cfr.: E. Mancino, *Cambiamenti incantevoli, Farsi tramite, A perdita d'occhio*, op. cit.

gods, while amongst humans, envy was manifested as a part of the sin of hubris. The ancient Greek divinities often displayed jealousy, hostility or malevolence towards mortals, over whom, we might add, they enjoyed unlimited power. Considering the devastating effects of divine envy through myths, humans would have to learn to live with envy within the terms of admiration and learning. Coming back to Medusa, let us first examine the dimension of nature. Medusa is a daughter of the sea. Her environment is liquid, impermanent and unpredictable. She lives in a place that is far from anywhere that could be precisely located in an indefinable time, with the only coordinates provided being “*on the border between day and night*”. Her myth, chosen here to illustrate envy as the inability to live within limits, contains the key characteristics required for an incursion into excess or for going beyond any limits.

The degree to which limits are violated in this myth may be measured in relation to the events preceding the metamorphosis of a young and very beautiful woman with long and silky hair. She was too beautiful. She was so beautiful that she attracted the envy of Athena and the passion of Poseidon. The latter tried to seduce her but Medusa sought refuge in the Athena’s temple, where she was a guardian. Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom, lost all semblance of stately demeanour and transformed the maiden, Medusa, into a monster. The maiden’s hands lost their harmony of movement and softness, turning into bronze. Her young, supple body was covered in scales and became rigid. Her beautiful teeth that made her smile so captivating became the tusks of a wild boar and her hair a mass of hissing serpents. However, the goddess’ truly envious action was to transform Medusa’s gaze into the look for which the Gorgon became sadly famous through the representations of artists, painters, sculptors and poets. Nobody can fail to remember that those who encountered the gaze of Medusa were turned into stone.

Attraction and seduction, which are dynamic learning processes, produced too much beauty in Medusa. Looking at her it was possible to share in the idea of beauty. However, the category of excess<sup>26</sup> gave rise to envy and Medusa’s beauty became unbearably overabundant. Athena’s envy of her originated in this concept: normal beauty creates a universe of harmony but an excess of beauty requires effort and exertion. This overabundance must be managed. In the transitions from attraction to organization to participation, there are obscure and uphill paths to be undertaken. The effort may be too much. So thinking stops, along with looking.

Medusa was no longer allowed on known territory, but was confined – or rather unconfined<sup>27</sup> – in another place, which was difficult to pin down. It was Perseus who found her eventually, in a rite of passage, which is a type of liminal initiation into adulthood.

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<sup>26</sup> Perhaps the category of excess complicates our line of reasoning here, but it is relevant to observe that talking about excess is a way of talking about inter-subjectivity: excess is always an excess of reading, of sensing, of perceiving, it is not a matter of a thing or a person in and of itself: meanings are always more than interpretations. Two important consequences arise from this. What I do with my perception is the work of my representation/learning of the world. The meaning that it carries is an emergent meaning. The excess of beauty is, in the myth, the monstrous aspect of beauty, which is what can be seen. The same thing could be beautiful in the meaning of seduction, fascinating or also of passion or fear.

<sup>27</sup> If Medusa lived where the night ends and where the day begins, her boundaries were undefined. The way she was exiled from what was known (because it could be seen) corresponds to a non-place and a non-time, that is, an unsuitable dimension to which we can send those things that are frightening.

*While beauty and learning have a common link with form, monstrosity – caused by an excess of beauty – has to do with the outline of a form, or a perimeter. Along the line of the trans-formation of learning, the distance is short: Medusa moves from the form of beauty to the de-form-ation of monstrosity. She has lost a form. Perseus has acquired one, because it has been developed and pursued through a process of change.<sup>28</sup>*

Between a form that is lost and one that is gained, we find the act of looking. In order to meet and defeat (although not wholly) Medusa's gaze, Perseus had to change his own way of looking, including the reflexive aspect of observing the other. He had to look at himself and realized that vision and movement are key elements of his pursuit of Medusa, or of monstrous beauty, the gaze that had itself been turned into stone (and not just turns to stone) by Athena's envy.

Young Perseus had to deceive and strike the Gorgon. To do so he had to become aware that not only was it impossible to look at her, but that she herself was incapable of looking. Her fixed gaze had been stripped of its dynamism and of its ability to acquire knowledge. Medusa was not able to see herself looking. Perseus had this advantage over her. She was condemned to a sort of fixity of knowledge and experience, while he was supple, impermanent and above all, he was able to find a way to look at her. He did that by creating the possibility for the reciprocal mobility of their gazes to coexist in a third instrument: a shield or screen. The shield created another place where the encounter could take place and knowledge could be acquired.

The shield is a good metaphor for the need to learn even by looking at things indirectly or, even better, by not using only linear logic. We are talking about a learning ground that is a milieu of an organic, non-linear, complex, self-organizing, dynamic and emergent structure, which combines, both surprise and regularity in its learning system. In this metaphorical view, this concept should avoid *reductionism* in the methodological sense that a phenomenon of interest is best addressed by breaking it down into its constituents or considering only one of its aspects or definitions<sup>29</sup>. The indirect approach allows us to consider the possibility of mental constructs in their totality, with all of their complexity and dynamics.

Knowledge about education appears to be ever more characterized by the dialectics between practice and theory and to be permeated by two different requirements, one that is critical and reflective in nature and one that is critical and emancipatory (having adopted, as its horizon and goal, the multidimensional formation of the person in the social context). In particular, a fertile space for thinking may be opened up if the classical dimensions of pedagogical knowledge, often thought of and experienced in opposition to one another, are viewed in relation with one another and analysed from an interactional perspective. Examples include classic dichotomies or antinomies such as nature and culture, body and mind, subjectivity and inter-subjectivity.

However, dualities and dichotomies do not necessarily always lead to rigidity and fixity, because they are not always a form of unbridgeable polarity. They may also con-

<sup>28</sup> E. Mancino, G.M. Zapelli, *Cambiamenti incantevoli. Bellezza e possibilità di apprendimento*, Cortina, Milano, 2010, p. 83.

<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, this aspect comes from the verb "*aspicio*", which means: "to see/look intently" while "definition" means "to limit and circumscribe", that is to say, both a visual and physical action.

tain and allow the expression of the creative potency of changingness, while affording useful means for reframing our mental constructs. Instead of viewing fixity and dichotomies as simple systems, taking a look that could learn to be thoughtful and then to look at itself, may reveal complex systems of research, learning and knowledge in which complexity lies. With complexity, somewhat between order and disorder, we might find something predictable and something surprising.

Every move that Perseus made in pursuit of Medusa involved learning to look at beauty or at its excesses. Each stage required him to examine his own ability to look. From the Graeae to the Nymphs, the hero was constantly required to reconfigure his aesthetic relationship with the other, specifically in relation to the concept of beauty. Though Medusa was never described as “ugly”, she was, instead viewed as terrible or monstrous. She was not horrible in herself, but she demonstrated that truly terrifying ugliness lies in the act of looking. Instead, it was her appearance, or rather, the act of looking at her, that provoked shock and fatal fixity. Medusa was frightening because she annihilated the ability to know in the other.

Perseus had to learn a new way. He could not avoid looking at Medusa altogether but his indirect gaze on her provided a means of training Medusa’s eyes. The two could then alternate their looks at one another. Medusa did not expose Perseus to an impossible gaze. She did not undermine his ability to know her or himself. The shield allowed Perseus to avoid completely objectifying Medusa, and helped him to grasp her invisible, indeterminate and unstable nature.

Through the shield, Perseus encountered the language and the gaze of Medusa, without receiving the evil eye<sup>30</sup> and without casting it in his turn. On the contrary, he successfully entered into this looking, which could be potentially disorientating for him, just as Ulysses entered into the listening that, thanks to the Sirens, could have made him lose his senses and his way. The disorientation associated with a lack of reference points, whether acoustic or visual, was overcome by running the risk of getting to know the other party in their own dimension<sup>31</sup>.

The act of learning inherently involves violating boundaries and challenging limits (one’s own and those of others). Medusa’s monstrosity lay in her power to petrify those unable to acquire awareness of themselves as seeing, learning about and entering into contact with beauty. And beauty, in the complex whole of its composite nature (as represented by Medusa’s multiple and multiform body), is knowledge that frightens, intimidates and inhibits. The beauty of learning prompts a feeling of attraction mixed with a sense of inadequacy and fear. Comprehending excess requires courage. It is much easier to take the short cut of fragmenting the other, analysing and parcelling what is different to us into disharmonic parts and identifying its defects. Envy tends to disconnect and break up what it fears in order to rid it of its complexity. Medusa is the myth of detail where an excess becomes more manageable when taken apart.

And so Perseus put Medusa’s decapitated head in a bag, yet the power of her gaze did not cease: Pegasus, the winged horse was born of her blood; from a blow of Pegasus’ hooves, the fountain drunk from by the Muses sprang up. Finally, Medusa herself

<sup>30</sup> In Italian, “*malocchio*”.

<sup>31</sup> And, from this perspective, we could imagine envy, also as a barrier against this risk of knowing “in their own dimension” one’s own obscure, defective or vulnerable side.



was transformed into the grass of the sea floor and wonderful corals, showing that her gaze still had the power to transmute and make beautiful. Medusa was unable to remain within the bounds of Athena's envy of her and so she committed her act of hubris and arrogance by continuing to be active in her beauty through a process of transformation and knowledge-acquisition. However, this required mediation and exchange, that is to say, a terrain that offers the actors in the learning process a place for dialogue and mutual gaze.

Perseus, instead, was able to observe the Medusa in himself, that is to say, his own capacity to stare at others and immobilize them. He chose to allow his own usual abilities – in terms of learning and relating to the world – to be unsettled by dropping the demand to recognize things and just trying to get to know them by encountering them beyond or before the evil eye.

## 6. Fixing the other

When we look with envy, we are unable to appreciate beauty in its entirety<sup>32</sup>: an envious gaze denotes a sense of strain, of inability to contain what appears to be “too much” (too big, too beautiful...). Knowledge, as a generalization of learning, is by its nature a complex set of components that we can find intimidating and inhibiting: taken as a whole it is unmanageable. Knowledge is both about the object of our learning and the person that we are relating to: the other to be learned. Differences attract, provoking feelings of inadequacy and desire, if the difference is felt to be a projection of inferiority. For those who approach knowledge by seeking to attain complete comprehension of the other can be a frustrating experience. Comprehending in this sense is a predatory act that does not fit well with the excess of meaning intrinsic to all phenomena, both natural and relational (especially the latter)<sup>33</sup>. It is at this point that envy comes into play: an inhibiting emotion for the person experiencing it as well as for its object. Envy is an emotion that tries to “arrest” and take apart. That which we have been unable to master is dissected into details, which are then analyzed with a critical spirit (of disconnection), which breaks down the original unity and its fear potential<sup>34</sup>.

When we are unable to reach others, we wish to immobilize them, blocking their growth and transformation and thereby also blocking our own, like Medusa who was unable to take part in any transforming relationship on account of her “gift” of freezing. Medusa's gaze not only immobilized whoever encountered it, but it also isolated

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<sup>32</sup> In a certain sense, it is possible to equate beauty to “reality”, and argue that envy also prevents us from looking at or tolerating reality (if, in the idea of learning from experience, in Bion's terms, our thoughts were always directed at performing the function to be carried out through projective identification, which may be oriented towards escaping from (expelling) or changing reality).

<sup>33</sup> “Understanding” may have the meanings “to incorporate”, “to take”, deriving from the Latin verb “*cum-prehendere*”, that is “to grasp”, “to apprehend”, “to penetrate”.

<sup>34</sup> In pedagogical or learning terms, the “fragmentation of knowledge” very easily becomes an excessive insistence on teaching and learning of large quantities of notions within separate sectors; that is, it is based on an abnormally exaggerated baggage of notions, which are characterized by and transmit the presumption of complete knowledge. On the other hand, complex thought is animated by a permanent tension between the aspiration to know in a non-fragmented, non-sectoral, non-restrictive way, remembering that knowledge can correspond to the recognition of incompleteness of every kind of knowledge.

the woman herself, who before becoming the monster (as evident from her appearance) of the myth – a composite made up of diverse and deformed parts – was a beautiful maiden, both as a whole and in terms of the harmonious relationship between her parts. Her immobilizing gaze was, metaphor aside, a vision that transformed the other into a mental object, into a stereotype.

This gaze corresponds to a lack of dynamism in approaching the other. It is a relationship based on preconception, on what is already thought or imagined about the other. Medusa, given that she could not meet the gaze of others, could not engage in an exchange with anyone. Her own personality was condemned to remain fixed. Deprived of relations with others, she experienced an identity that had never undergone any relational exchange and which remained undifferentiated.

It was not a coincidence that it was only when her invisible gaze was transformed into matter, that this matter could be attributed a name and a form and was subject to control. Her gaze was threatening because it was intangible. It could only be experienced at the expense of losing one's life. A mirror is the instrument through which a child's archaic identity may be formed, giving structure to imaginary insecurities and making them manageable. It is only through reflection that we can come to know ourselves. And Medusa came to know Perseus and to know herself precisely in the gaze reflected in the shield alongside that of her executioner. Medusa did not grow; she could not measure herself against others. Only in the gaze of Perseus, he who decapitated her, did she experience, through the shield, the dynamism of curiosity, comprehension and encounter.

When viewed in the light of ethics, in particular the dimension of justice, envy can look with envy but also philosophically and interrogatively. Specifically, envy may enquire into the processes leading to success (what we would like to emulate) rather than the effects of having attained it.

More often, however, the destructive power of looking with envy is directed at controlling<sup>35</sup> (in or through the visual field) the action of the other's beauty, whether the other is a subject in the educational relationship or a learning object.

## **7. The pedagogy of suspended meaning. Ethics and aesthetics for a civic education**

Relational envy is based on a sense of inter-individual injustice and on the inability to overcome this. It generally arises in homogeneous settings (for example, amongst professionals in the same field) but in any case, it is usually caused by a sort of "syndrome of the other". When the other is not seen as fulfilling a positive role of mediation (within a social or learning context), this is viewed as limiting self-fulfilment. This often leads people experiencing envy to seek solitude<sup>36</sup> (Medusa is isolated, living at the boundary of the known world and of possible measure) rather than reflect on their own potential.

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<sup>35</sup> It may be interesting to note here that among the organizational behaviours considered reliable indicators of workplace envy, we find the tendency to wander about and check on what one's workmates are doing. Visible people are to be feared, from this perspective, as much as people that are not visible. Those who are visible earn success and visibility. The invisible ones are to be feared because they are probably "plotting in the shadows".

<sup>36</sup> This may have to do with a "passive" form of envious behaviour leading people to withdraw from relating to others and from experience in order to avoid social comparison and feelings of inferiority.

Reflecting on the risks of the fixity of our gaze in learning also means proposing a vision of education and learning based on a less rapacious and more delicate sight. We have decided to call this perspective the “pedagogy of the suspended sense and meaning”<sup>37</sup>. The safeguard represented by this educational proposal, insofar as it encourages attitudes of vigilance, concentration<sup>38</sup> and attention, also has to do with resisting the temptation to interpret, to listen to the other in the strong (and designative) sense of the term.

It is difficult to remain in a condition of suspended meaning, such as that imposed by the other’s silence, secret or invisible dimension. When we look at the other, learning to go beyond the fixity or blocking power of a gaze that defines and circumscribes is not easy. This requires adjusting to a different time frame from that normally practiced and experienced in educational relationships, often marked by haste. Envy presupposes certainty about the identity of the other. A fixating that allows us to block the other, while at the same time our own image of him or her is frozen. It is more challenging to become used to, or find time for, stopping and caring for the relationship, thereby creating the necessary preconditions for “*discerning a hidden meaning in an apparent meaning*”<sup>39</sup>.

The gaze that does not distance itself from the hazardous dimensions of envy is a gaze that implies pre-comprehension and the anticipation of meaning: we project onto the other our own desire to see, stepping in ahead of him or her. In a certain sense, this means cancelling the other out to some degree.

Reflecting on the educational dimensions of the envious gaze can enable us to engage in a way of thinking and experiencing relationships (not only educational ones) that trains our gaze to be respectful of what we hear (including with our eyes): we enter a dimension which helps us to discover that the ways in which we look and listen, to a great extent, “regard” ourselves.

Envy is not just a “sin” or negative attitude, it also prevents us from acquiring knowledge of the world, given that it is based on and confined to a paradigm of confirmation of our own presuppositions. Of course, it is difficult to live with that which is changeable, dynamic, variable, and indefinable. It is far easier to keep a tight hold on our certainties. Otherwise we will constantly find ourselves being caught unprepared, feeling disoriented, and experiencing the difficulties associated with the knowledge-acquisition process itself.

Interpreting envy within a pedagogical and theoretical perspective of learning therefore implies shedding new light on both the fixity implicated in envy, and its opposite, that is to say the risk of constantly shifting meaning. The prospect of a gaze that looks outside of pre-constituted categories or interpretative standards, to acquire knowledge of the world, makes subjects feel uncomfortable. It challenges us because it worries us: it questions our usual ways of seeking comprehension, explanation, and comfort in relation to that which we find disturbing. To help us more clearly grasp the difficulties associated with the process of acquiring knowledge, let us transfer the metaphor of learning into the relational dimension. After all, learning *is* entering into a relationship.

<sup>37</sup> E. Mancino, *A perdita d'occhio*, op. cit.

<sup>38</sup> cfr: E. Mancino, *Il silenzio. Per un'altra forma di dialogo*, in D. Demetrio (with contributions by E. Biffi, E. Mancino) *Educare è narrare. Le teorie, le pratiche, la cura*, Mimesis, Milano, 2012.

<sup>39</sup> P. Ricoeur, *The conflict of interpretations*, Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1974

(*fr. trans.*) *Il conflitto delle interpretazioni*, Jaka Book, Milano, 1995, p. 279.

The other person trains us to expect predictable behaviour. The familiarity characterizing the relationship allows us to claim that we know the other because we know his or her actions, words, horizon of meaning and desires. We know how he or she stands in relation to us. But the other, like we are, is constantly changing and developing. And the other is able to move, including with respect to his or her relationship with us.

Let us think of what happens in a relationship between friends, lovers or colleagues, when the other remains silent. Our imagination runs wild: we see the other move within his or her silence and signify him or herself in the most eloquent and meaningful ways that we are able to conjure up. What is denied to us lacerates our security of vision. This is in line with Ricoeur's idea of proceeding towards comprehension without coming to a standstill at the first break in explanation, but treats "understanding the other" as "a horizon, an aim"<sup>40</sup> rather than an ontological fact<sup>41</sup>. A perspective that explores the relationship of envy with education provides an excellent basis for a true pedagogy of suspended meaning<sup>42</sup>.

Not only does this facilitate a practice of caring for the other based on respect, listening, and the attitudes of authentic intimacy advocated by the philosopher Maria Zambrano, but educating ourselves in the pedagogy of suspended meaning will also lead us to focus on our own approach to giving meaning. Discovering how to wait as suggested by our reflection on Medusa's story and her way of learning about the world and herself can teach us to take pause with our interpretations, and to contemplate the fact that all hermeneutic approaches have the potential to uncover and gradually reveal the aspects of existence that constitute our gazes as a method, which transforms them into a lens, a filter, desires and expectations.

Our lingering on this "longer way" will be enhanced if we consider how much *comfort* we usually derive from our expectations about what we are going to see. We are troubled when meaning eludes us, when the information available to us is incomplete, when we are confronted by a possible enigma. It is interesting to observe how our gaze reacts when it encounters a photograph, image or definition that does not designate but attracts our attention precisely because of its failure to do so, insinuating, allowing us to glimpse, its lack of completeness. We become aware that in these cases we feel the urge to recover the missing part for our own sakes, to get away from the questions and interpretations that immediately stir within us. In contrast, it is possible to explore, in light of the dynamics of looking and the emotion of envy, the affective characteristics of our own learning. This involves a certain degree of self-reflectivity, which, in turn demands development of the cognitive ability to identify our own implicit theories of learning.

Exploring the act of looking as an educational theme has the aims, amongst others, of promoting learning awareness and contributing to our understanding of how we may educate looking, judging, listening, receiving, accepting and mirroring in the context of the pedagogical relationship, understood as an exchange between subjects and as the interaction between subject and learning "object".

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<sup>40</sup> P. Ricoeur, *The conflict of interpretations*, Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1974. Page 9.

<sup>41</sup> P. Ricoeur, *ivi*, p. 38.

<sup>42</sup> Cfr. E. Mancino, *Il segreto all'opera*, op. cit., and *A perdita d'occhio*, op. cit.

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