

Regenerating imagination: Steps Towards a Pedagogy of Desire

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In the society of hyper-consumption, the lack that lies at the heart of desire has been manipulated by capitalist rhetoric, reframing it as a void to be filled. Processes of seduction and standardisation of desire contribute to a pervasive condition of dissatisfaction and incompleteness, subjecting younger generations to the imperatives of perfectionism, the constraints of anxiety, and the compulsions of consumerism. At the root of this phenomenon lie the mechanisms of construction and saturation of the imaginary, which cause the atrophy of the imaginative faculty and the deterioration of the relationship with otherness. These dynamics particularly affect teenagers, whose horizons of meaning and future-oriented projects appear weakened by narcissistic retreat and existential uncertainty. From a pedagogical perspective, the relationship between desire and the imaginary is of crucial importance: the imaginary constitutes the core of meaning upon which desire is anchored and takes form. It is therefore urgent to develop educational pathways aimed at regenerating the imaginative faculty, with the goal of reigniting desire and restoring passion, creativity, and authenticity in the lives of adolescents and youth.

Keywords: desire, imaginary, aestheticization, aesthetic education, adolescents.

Liberare il desiderio. Dalla saturazione dell'immaginario alla rigenerazione della facoltà immaginativa

Nella società dell'iperconsumo, la mancanza originaria che caratterizza il desiderio è stata manipolata dalla retorica capitalistica, trasformando-

la in un'assenza da colmare. I processi di seduzione e omologazione del desiderio sono responsabili del clima di insoddisfazione e incompiutezza che assoggetta le nuove generazioni all'imperativo del perfezionismo, alla schiavitù dell'ansia e al consumo compulsivo. Alla base di questo fenomeno agiscono i processi di costruzione e saturazione dell'immaginario, che causano l'atrofizzazione della facoltà immaginativa e il deterioramento della relazione con l'alterità. A soffrirne sono soprattutto le nuove generazioni, i cui orizzonti progettuali oggi sembrano affaticati dal ripiegamento narcisistico e dall'incertezza. Il legame fra desiderio e immaginario appare decisivo dal punto di vista pedagogico: l'immaginario rappresenta infatti il nucleo di senso su cui il desiderio si radica e prende forma. Urgente diviene allora approntare itinerari educativi volti a rigenerare la facoltà immaginativa, al fine di riaccendere la fiamma del desiderio e restituire passione, creatività e autenticità alle esistenze di adolescenti e giovani.

Parole-chiave: desiderio, immaginario, estetizzazione, educazione estetica, adolescenti.

The essence of desire: From lack to mystery

Desire is a structural dimension and an essential resource of human beings. It acts as the fundamental device that catalyzes intentionality, defines the meaning of existence, and guides personal action and choices. Desire is thus the “essential reality” (Petrosino, 2019, p. 16) of the human being, its “exclusive way of being” (*ibidem*, p. 48), which distinguishes it from other living beings and elevates it beyond the utilitarian, egoistic, and self-referential logic of need:

fulfilling desire (as opposed to satisfying need) implies delay and postponement, and the ability to forgo an immediate good for the sake of a further value (Bruzzzone, 2012, p. 89).

Desire enables the person to resist conformity, move beyond impersonality and banality, and live a unique, authentic, and meaningful existence. As Jacques Lacan argues, desire originates from that existential core typical of human, which he defines as *manque-à-être*, a “lack of being” (Lacan, 1973, p.

30). This lack should be considered not as an absence to be filled and satisfied, but rather as an “anticipating” and “promising” thirst (Cusinato, 2012, p. 33). From this thirst arises the inexhaustible tension that expresses and shapes the constant incompleteness of the human being, his orientation towards his most proper potentialities (Heidegger, 1976, p. 284).

However, this conception of incompleteness and lack has ended up being misrepresented and distorted, being understood mostly as defect and imperfection. In this way, it has shaped the contemporary social imaginary, especially among young people, instilling the fear and conviction of not being up to par, of “never being good enough” (Benasayag, Cohen, 2023, p. 70), generating feelings of distress and anxiety. The society of performance and optimisation produces a pervasive sense of fatigue and “weariness” (Han, 2020), undermining self-esteem and self-efficacy. We are driven to exist frenetically in function of the future, thereby cancelling the present and living every moment as a mere instrument for achieving something better tomorrow. Benasayag and Cohen’s words on this matter are clear and direct when they state that “the feeling of being wrong and of always having to aspire to become someone else, so deeply rooted and widespread among young people, stems precisely from this dominant conception based on the incompleteness of existence” (Benasayag, Cohen, 2023, p. 60).

It is therefore necessary to rethink this idea, identifying at the origin of desire a personal, inner and profound core, not a void but a sort of enigma, an implicit quest for meaning: in this perspective, we should move from the concept of *lack* to that of *mystery*. The intuition that a “profound, unknowable core” (*ivi*, p. 103) dwells within humans leads us to overcome the view that identifies absence as the source of desire. In its place, we recognise the existence of an enigmatic core that is impossible to predict or fully know, a *mystery* about the self that is revealed in experience and encounter, in the adventure that opens onto discovery. A core to be questioned and cultivated through research. It corresponds to that original essence characterised by restlessness and nonsense that constitutes the fundamental premise for the birth of desire. It is that thirst that moves towards the search for meaning, which leads to the discovery of one’s vocation, orienting and structuring one’s entire existence.

Ugo Volli offers a double definition of desire as “lack and project”, emphasising that “planning and lack in some way reflect and motivate each other in humans, they form a circuit” (Volli, 2002, p. 342). Without desire, without

a circular movement of *mystery* and *discovery*, authentic projectuality cannot arise. The education of desire should therefore cultivate in young people the pleasure of research, revitalize the curiosity of exploration and adventure, counteracting and alleviating the climate of anxiety today associated with the idea of incompleteness and imperfection.

Desire is therefore not deprivation of being, absence or incompleteness, on the contrary: it is what allows man to be continuously alive and fulfilled in the present, while aspiring to “be more” (*ser mais*: Freire, 2008, p. 121). The *mystery* from which desire arises allows a person to never be crystallised and trapped in their current state, but instead to remain constantly open to possibility. It is an area of the self that is still unsaturated, unexpressed and unrealised, which manifests itself in unforeseen and unprecedented ways. It is therefore important not to suffocate or extinguish this *mystery*, not to try at all costs to resolve it as quickly as possible, to reveal it, to translate it immediately into objectives and results. Instead, we must support that mystery “so that it takes us further, so that it constitutes a call to be” (Ternynck, 2012, p. 81).

However, this is not merely a search for one’s self, but one’s fulfilment through self-transcendence (Frankl, 2013). This core of desire drives the individual to cross the threshold of the self, to emerge from their individualistic and self-referential closure, to encounter others and venture out on a journey of discovery. It is an erratic, disinterested movement unafraid to leave the safe path and lose itself in the clearings of existence, unhurried to project itself into the future. Desire is a tension (lat. *tendere*) that exceeds the rationalistic logic of planning and opens up to the unexpected. Its fulfillment can only be found beyond the self, overcoming sterile monadic and solipsistic closures. We cannot choose what fascinates us, determine what calls out to us or motivates us, nor can these be imposed. Desire is an encounter of value, an unexpected discovery that animates the present and springs from otherness and mystery. “Desire is a power that overwhelms and decentralises the self”, “it upsets me, captivates me, excites me, unsettles me, animates me, torments me, empowers me” (Recalcati, 2018, p. 19): it is the experience of a force in excess that transcends the self. This force, which illuminates the present and disposes us to the future, enamours and attracts the person, pushing them to open up, to set out, to *decide* (Jaspers, 1932): in this sense, “feeling determines action” (Bruzzone, 2022, p. 82).

Anxiety and conformism in the age of hyperconsumption: The manipulation of desire

Contemporary capitalist society has thoroughly grasped this dynamic, intuiting the centrality of desire in human life and the enormous political-economic potential inherent in its subjugation and exploitation. The force of desire, being the origin and source of an endless animation, has become the main target of the manipulation processes of neoliberal society, redirected to serve as the engine of consumer impulse. The original and generative *mystery* dwelling within each of us, which would constitute the matrix and condition of authentic desire, is instead distorted and transformed into vacuity, into a void to be satisfied or frenetically saturated. This narrative is deliberately constructed, in order to be conveyed and rooted within the social imaginary, especially among young people and adolescents, establishing it as an illusory promise of fulfillment and happiness. It is a “hypertrophic” and “delirious” desire (Prini, 2017, p. 8) which “ends up killing desire itself” (Recalcati, 2018, p. 65), namely its authentic and generative power. Desire has thus become the “raw material” of the economy and of the “capitalist ideology” (Volli, 2002, pp. 7-8), which exploits it to turn individuals in on themselves, and to orient them towards compulsive and spasmodic consumption. These processes produce a “colonisation and homogenisation of the field of desire” (Benasayag, Cohen, 2023, p. 64), delineating a “catalogue of possible desires” (Volli, 2002, p. 11), that is a repertoire that establishes and regulates what one should desire, what is appropriate to pursue, and what should be considered socially valuable.

The fertile and fruitful desire of young people is thus depersonalised and homogenised, shaped and “alienated” (Girard, 1999), and then oriented towards what is established as the highest aspiration of the human: the ideology of the attainment of happiness, which has now become the most advanced front of the society of efficiency and hyperconsumption. Happiness has been commodified and standardised, opening the way to a business and an economy centered on it, to a veritable “happiness industry”. It is no longer presented as a vague, distant and perhaps unattainable promise, but as an “objective and universal concept that can be measured impartially and precisely” (Cabanas, Illouz, 2019, p. 36), defined by fixed standards and absolute criteria. Happiness itself becomes a “commodity-fetish”, a product directly purchasable, available and instantly consumable on the market: “self-help manuals,

therapies, coaching and counselling services, apps and self-improvement advice packages” (*ivi*, p. 13) provide people with the illusion of possessing it.

But happiness, at the same time, is always ahead. The entire system relies on an imaginary of constant incompleteness of the present, spreading the perception of being in a state of perpetual lack. Existence is thus transformed into an unceasing process of self-improvement, a frenetic and uninterrupted race, with an increasingly pressing and unsustainable pace. We are constantly subjected to a pervasive and hammering message: just one more effort, you are still not enough. One must continually redesign oneself, in a perpetual movement of growth and self-transformation, to efficiently achieve objectives, trophies, and victories. The watchword is *efficiency*: we are pushed to function and perform like machine algorithms, to obtain the best possible results in the shortest possible time. Misled by false promises and blinded by the “imperative of performance” (Amadini, 2021, p. 48), we produce and consume to reach the standards and criteria that define success and happiness.

This ideology is not without consequences for psychological and emotional balance: “panic attacks, generalised anxiety, the feeling of never being good enough and the perception of not having enough time, so typical of our contemporary world, are the consequence of this conception of life” (Benasayag, Cohen, 2023, pp. 70-78). A vision of existence supported by a neurotic and perverse desire that generates discomfort and dissatisfaction, betraying the illusory promises of fulfilment and well-being. In this scenario, loneliness and individualism become structural pillars of happiness: the other becomes an obstacle, a competitor, an adversary with whom one must compete, compare and clash to obtain the coveted result. Sometimes, the other becomes a resource to exploit, use, and bend to one’s advantage, a means functional to one’s own ends. Everyone tries to improve themselves, to achieve self-realization: happiness becomes an individual aim, the outcome of an intranscendence that excludes alterity.

Desire and imagination: An inextricable nexus

In this complex and critical social scenario, “the bodies of young people are once again sending out a cry for help” (*ivi*, p. 70), a plea for help impossible to ignore, evade, or trivialize. Data on the psychological and emotional

distress of adolescents and young adults have shown a worrying increase in recent years. Anxiety, in particular, seems to have become the dominant emotional condition, even among the younger ones. This is not so much the anxiety related to specific and circumscribed situations, but rather a generalised form of anxiety that characterises the society in which we live (Costa, 2024). More urgent than ever, therefore, is the attempt to understand the hidden and profound dynamics underlying this system of exploitation and homogenization of desire, which continually intensifies the climate of anxiety, anguish, and powerlessness.

Recent aesthetic studies have identified, beneath this scenario, subterranean processes of saturation and “construction of our imaginary” (Diodato, Aimò, 2021, p. 17), implemented through practices of seduction and aestheticization, involving the affective and emotional sphere. The imaginary emerges as central and decisive because it has the power to define the pattern of social, cultural, and personal meanings that instructs us and “teaches us how to desire” (Žižek, 1997, p. 18). It mediates between *mystery*, reality-alterity, and desire. The imaginary constitutes the ground of meaning, of visions, interpretations and conceptions of the world in which desire is rooted, the raw material that provides the coordinates and characteristics of its nature and substance. And even more trivially, it represents the fabric from which one’s understanding of society, politics, relationships and of existence itself takes shape. “The relationship between image and desire is essential. Without the former, there would be no sense, the only thing that truly seduces the latter” (Ciaramelli, 2000, p. 59).

In principle, the sources that shape the imaginary are varied and multiple, involving numerous actors operating in various spheres. Yet foundational remains that mysterious and unsaturated nucleus dwelling in the interiority of the person, which secures a privileged place for the singular, unique, and unrepeatably contribution of one’s imaginative faculty, a creative and innovative source of meaning. Imagination plays a decisive role in the structuring of the imaginary: it holds a creative and subversive power that, in the encounter with the other, generates the vision and the “construction of other worlds, different from ours and yet possible [...]. Worlds different from the present that our imagination is capable of designing” (Diodato, Aimò, 2021, p. 13). Once again, it is a matter of allowing to unfold that *mystery-lack* without suffocating it. In fact, this dimension opens the possibility of escaping self-referentiality and homologation, guaranteeing the conditions for a fertile

intertwining between the self, the other, the world and that disruptive and unforeseen factor generated in the encounter. Yet this alterity and this unsaturated, mysterious zone are today exiled and expelled from the processes of generating the imaginary, becoming an endangered reality, if not already completely excluded and nullified. “Creative imagination” now appears to be a faculty that is “strongly marginalised and forgotten” (Mottana, 2015, p. 94), or colonised and conditioned by external factors not always explicit or recognisable.

These processes of construction and saturation of the imaginary operate with such effectiveness and capillarity thanks to the strategies of a “seductive”, “enchanted” and “aesthetic” capitalism (Lipovetsky, 2019, p. 18), which, by exploiting the logic of seduction, activates mechanisms of aestheticization, affective manipulation, and subjugation of the emotional sphere. It

acts and is realised through the control, management and even formation of our ‘feelings’, of *aisthesis*: of our taste, of what we like and dislike; of our imagination, [...] of our feelings and emotions, of our desires: [...] ultimately, it nullifies our freedom (Diodato, Aimo, 2021, pp. 16-17).

There is thus no longer any need to force or coerce, to rely on oppressive mechanisms to influence people’s lives or manipulate their imaginaries and desires. The principle of *seduction* becomes the fundamental strategy of the consumer society, which reveals its nature, scope, and its “productive power of desires, passions and imaginaries” (Lipovetsky, 2019, p. 24).

In the technocracy of “mass media breeding” (Cusinato, 2012, p. 41) and hyperconsumption, the tools that construct our imaginary have become increasingly pervasive and invasive, capable of reaching us in a targeted manner, with surgical and infallible precision. Just think to neuromarketing techniques and the growing power of algorithms governing social media, social networks, streaming platforms, and online shopping. They are able to intercept every detail, to grasp and exploit every slightest clue, and then tailor content so that it appears maximally seductive and irresistible. Through the “manipulation of feelings”, the aesthetic and emotional spheres have become “commodities for consumption and exchange, as the gurus of industry and emotional marketing have well understood” (Bruzzone, 2022, p. 22). In this way, they

gather valuable information, which they then use to influence not only the most trivial aspects of our lives, [...] but also the major behavioural patterns of the community, changing the list of what contributes or does not contribute to the creation of happiness (Cabanas, Illouz, 2019, pp. 38-39).

Hypnotized and alienated by the excessive, uncontrolled and compulsive consumption, we consent to and actively participate in the saturation of our imaginary. We feed those processes that dispossess us of creative production of meaning, depriving us of the subversive power of imagination and suffocating that uncertain and mysterious space capable of welcoming the new and the authentic. Blinded and deceived by the seemingly perfect and golden lives of influencers, we develop expectations of unrealistic, impersonal, inauthentic, and ultimately unattainable projects. “The iconic-oral culture thus pushes the younger generations to fly towards the sun, but with wings held together by wax joints” so that “the sun of appearance attracts the new Icarus to lose themselves and fall into the existential void” (Prini, 2017, p. 129).

The collective imaginary is constructed so invasively and pervasively, so thoroughly across the various dimensions of existence, as to produce a veritable saturation: no space remains for anything else: for creativity, imagination, personal desires and authentic passions. Young people become “sleepwalkers” (McLuhan, 1964), finding themselves “trapped in a deleterious and destructive imaginary” (Benasayag, Cohen, 2023, p. 77), unable to intuit alternative perspectives, to dream revolutionary scenarios, to pursue subversive visions, alternative logics, different paths. This narrative is leading to a growing and gradual atrophy of the imaginative faculty, a paralysis in the processes of identity structuring, determining the phenomenology of the “minimal self” already theorised by Christopher Lasch (1987). It enforces the belief that reality consists solely of the imaginary of competition, excess and success, where is left no space for fragility, limits, uncertainty and suffering; where only the positive (youth, health, success...) must be cultivated and valued as the only way to self-actualization.

We find ourselves in an analgesic and “palliative society” (Han, 2021), governed by the imperative of positivity. It feeds on itself by spreading an anaesthetic performance culture that silences pain, stigmatises suffering and conceals any other form of negativity. “The new formula of domination reads: Be happy. The positivity of contentment drives away the negativity

of pain” (*ivi*, p. 16). This narrative disseminates and normalises an illusory and fictitious idea of happiness, grounded solely in well-being. It is a perverse form of desire, fuelled and spread by a narcissistic and individualistic culture.

Han interprets pain as a manifestation of the presence of diversity, as an irruption of the completely other, as a possibility to discover unprecedented visions of the world: new perspectives, alternative imaginaries. Denying and stigmatising suffering and limitation means excluding otherness and closing oneself off solipsistically. Pain associated with the presence and irruption of alterity can be understood as the “mourning” (Thanopoulos, 2016, p. 71) occasioned by the disappearance of the narcissistic and self-referential ego. It is a painful yet necessary and generative mourning. It prevents the subject from drowning in the self, from suffocating in narcissistic closures, in sterile and destructive forms of intranscendence. It is the key that avoids one’s gaze from collapsing inward, enabling it instead to reach farther, to encounter the other, to open up to the world. Authentic desire then “loves mourning because it is mourning that gives birth to it and keeps it alive” (*ivi*, p. 78), opening the way to self-transcendence.

Unleashing desire: Pathways of aesthetic education

Pedagogical reflection is called to intervene in this dramatic and complex scenario, in order to develop lines of action capable of triggering concrete and transformative changes. Its task consists especially in educating the heart to overcome narcissism and achieve self-transcendence (Bruzzone, 2024). The central knot to be addressed and resolved concerns the standardisation and impersonality of desire, which must be liberated and revived. The path toward this goal lies in the imaginary, that terrain of meaning in which authentic desire arises, capable of opening life to what is new, unexpected, and original. It is therefore necessary to revitalise and regenerate the imaginative faculty. In contemporary society, this faculty has been completely excluded from the processes of aesthetisation. “If the current form of the era, through the excited anaesthetisation of *aisthesis*, forecloses freedom, then aesthetic education is essential to open up that dimension of experience” (Diodato, Aimo, 2021, p. 37).

To pedagogically promote a liberation of the imaginary and rebirth of desire, it is necessary to act indirectly, in order to avoid an “authoritarian

pedagogy of desire” (Volli, 2002, p. 137). In other words, education must help unmasking, deconstructing, and destroying the power dynamics and manipulative processes that condition our feeling, and at the same time it must propose meaningful alternatives to the mainstream. The goal

is not so much to reach some control tower to overturn capitalism by applying a “good programme”, but to act in the cracks and crevices that already exist within it, creating viable alternatives and thus developing the multidirectional power of the base (Benasayag, Cohen, 2023, p. 127).

Education should therefore make people more aware of the conditioning mechanisms, in order to emancipate them, and help them to recognize possible and concrete alternative way of living. It’s not a matter of imposing them as innovative paradigms or models to imitate, but of proposing them as existential testimonies that it is indeed possible to live otherwise, differently than the dominant logic of efficiency, functioning and perpetual improvement.

The society of seduction does not need to be completely revolutionised, but it does need to be ‘repaired’ and reoriented by developing ambitious counterbalances that are capable of offering richer seductions than those that govern us at present. [...] A society of seduction that is somehow enhanced or enriched, offering all its opportunities to culture, knowledge and creativity, and proposing to future generations attractions other than those of the market cosmos (Lipovetsky, 2019, pp. 29-30).

From this perspective, aesthetic education could represent a meaningful answer to their deepest needs. The aesthetic dimension and the deep affective sphere of young people are neither absent nor compromised, but rather anesthetised, numbed and temporarily atrophied, since it has not been educated, activated and exercised. It is therefore important to prepare experiences of aesthetic education capable of appealing and developing these dimensions.

The quality of our access to meaning depends on the exercise of *feeling* (Bruzzone, 2016). The task, then, is to ignite teenagers, revitalizing their imaginative faculty. It’s a seduction, so to speak, of another kind. As Lipovetsky states, “seduction is first and foremost a power that produces desiring and imaginary forces, the instance of real actions in the world” and not merely a tool for deception or manipulation (Lipovetsky, 2019, p. 24). In this regard, Riccardo Massa focused on the relationship between education and seduction:

to educate means to lead aside in order to “take elsewhere, to another place, to confront the new, the unheard of, the unexpected, the unusual, the rare, the different” (Massa, 2010, pp. 48-54). This represents a pedagogical action potentially capable of reviving the aesthetic and affective sphere, opening up to new imaginaries and authentic desires. *Seducere* also means *to bewitch*: “to attract, enchant, fascinate, influence, induce surprise and amazement, make people dream, propose utopias, activate a certain imaginary by settling in that of others, fuel desire” (*ivi*, p. 54).

It is therefore necessary to identify the ways in which educational itineraries aimed at liberating desire may be designed. Three closely intertwined key points seem to emerge as possible paths to follow: *experience, limit, encounter*.

Experience can be identified as the main tool of such an educational approach. John Dewey (2014) highlighted the centrality of the aesthetic nucleus of experience, arguing that its outcome is the refinement of *insight*, the ability to penetrate and deeply understand the world in its intimate connection with oneself. For Dewey (2020), aesthetic experience is the way through which one can refine deep knowledge of reality, identity and alterity. Phenomenological pedagogy seeks to foreground the “expansion of the experiential field” (Bertolini, Caronia, 2015), setting up unusual situations and adventures, opposite to those already encountered and experienced. Particularly interesting is the approach of the “pedagogy of beauty” (*ivi*, pp. 135-138), aimed at constructing or reconstructing an authentic aesthetic sense and enabling profound and decisive *insight* in the subjects of the experience, in order to disclose unexpected existential possibilities.

A second point of attention is the resignification of limit. In today’s performance society, uncertainty and precariousness are no longer considered as generative spaces, fertile grounds for the birth of desire and the foundation of a free imagination. They have become a pathological symptom to be hidden, silenced, and denied. Fragility, uncertainty, mistake, failure and suffering are transformed from learning and growth opportunities into obstacles and threats. And yet, as Monica Amadini reminds us, desire is rooted in fragility and restlessness: “it is risk and gives us the strength to lean out into life. Embarking on new paths and encountering the unknown subjects us to the risk of leaving safe ground for the unknown” (Amadini, 2021, p. 84). It is therefore necessary to revalue negativity as an important source of knowledge and wisdom. These are not obstacles but potentially generative spaces;

if denied or suppressed, they become destructive and toxic. “Pedagogical discourse cannot miss the opportunity to re-name fragility as a structural condition of existence” (*ivi*, p. 31). Education must restore value to suffering, limits and vulnerabilities. It must establish it as a generative mystery, as a part of ourselves that is still incomprehensible and unknowable, from which, nevertheless, unimagined and unforeseen opportunities for learning and growth arise. This requires listening to, welcoming and accepting young people in their thrownness, in their fragility, in their growing sense of invisibility to others and to themselves, and in their fear of not being good enough: “It is essential that they do not feel wrong, that they do not think that suffering, discomfort and disorientation are the result of a personal failing, of not being as they should be” (Benasayag, Cohen, 2023, p. 60). It is therefore a matter of welcoming and accompanying adolescents’ fears, struggles, sufferings and doubts without judging them or seeking to change them immediately. Only in this way can fragility flourish, stimulating desire and channeling it toward passionate and creative action, converting anxiety into a positive and fertile passion for discovery.

This renewal can occur only through authentic encounters with the others. Bonds and relationships are opportunities to migrate from narcissistic individualism to self-transcendence, fostering a new gaze on oneself and the world. When a profound encounter with otherness takes place, the self is torn away from its closure and its solipsistic withdrawal. This event may cause laceration and suffering, but it allows to displace one’s point of view and to grasp new perspectives. Educating toward the encounter with alterity, toward *relationship* and *connection* as generative experiences, represents another essential nucleus for a regeneration of the imaginative faculty. In the current imaginary, dominated by individualism, competition, and utilitarianism, this constitutes somehow a challenge against the grain. “The pole of desire is not properly the ego, but *beyond the ego* and *other than the ego*. [...] Desire, in other words, resides in the encounter” (Amadini, 2021, pp. 118-119).

The encounter with the other is essential because the diversity and irreducibility of the other can offer us his “existential heritage” (Rossini, Zanni, 2011): his life story, his testimony, his example. From authentic meeting between lives and stories, an unanticipated imaginary and an authentic desire can sprout: “a kind of contagion takes place: the development of alternative theories and ways of life must contribute to the emergence of an alternative imaginary” (Benasayag, Cohen, 2023, p. 135). From this perspective, what

educates above all is the encounter with someone capable of embodying a meaningful existence, which can inspire others to discover meaning in their own lives. This is what Guido Cusinato defines as the “power of exemplarity”, that vital energy capable of “leveraging a person’s experiences and emotional sphere”, “capable of captivating the individual and tearing them away from their own insignificance” (Cusinato, 2012, p. 127). Exemplariness, then, is not a model to conform to, to emulate or reproduce, but a life story imbued with desire. A story capable of inspiring and maybe opening up new horizons of meaning.

Conclusions

Desire is the force that inspires and animates each person’s existence, granting it authenticity and generativity, moving it beyond self-enclosure and orienting it toward self-transcendence. Given its centrality, it is urgently necessary to liberate and reawaken desire in an era in which everything conspires to profit from its manipulation. The key to this operation lies in its connection with the imaginary, the field of meaning in which desire takes root and form, a field that, today, is constructed and saturated to shape and exploit it. Education can begin precisely here, by developing pathways of aesthetic pedagogy aimed at revitalizing authentic feeling and regenerating the imaginative faculty: dispositifs capable of releasing desire from the flow of impersonality and conformism in which it is channeled. We need to educate toward encounters with alternative and subversive imaginaries, capable of stimulating imagination and reawakening creativity. Meaningful existences, works of art, and new experiences can free desire from the constraints that hold it hostage. Because desire can be educated only through contagion, by drawing on the affective and aesthetic sphere; it cannot be merely transmitted through methods, techniques, or discourse. It is therefore essential to promote encounters with authentic witnesses of desire, who in their existential journey have not feared taking risks, following their intuitions and transcending themselves in order to finally realize who they are.

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