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INQUIRY

The Journal of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture

Volume 2 / 2021

**DRUGSWORLD: ALTERED  
PERCEPTION OF AESTHETIC  
DIMENSION IN EVERYDAY LIFE**

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# DRUGSWORLD: ALTERED PERCEPTION OF AESTHETIC DIMENSION IN EVERYDAY LIFE

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## **Abstract**

The consumption of illegal drugs is steadily increasing. As it is connected to eliciting the feeling of pleasure, whose rationale is found in phylogenetic evolution and its key contribution to the survival of human beings, this worrying phenomenon can be assessed as an important, although neglected, part of the field of study labeled as negative aesthetics of everyday life. In the name of pleasure, drugs introduce a dangerous as much as misleading misperception of the aesthetic dimension, mistaking alteration for reality. In this respect, several common aspects pertaining to Everyday Aesthetics can be identified, namely, the awe, the extraordinary, the aura, and more. This essay points to the complex issue of the false values defining contemporary societies and to the lack of internal subjective balance. An attempt is therefore made to suggest a pathway for the restoration of true ethical and aesthetic values understood as the key to living a meaningful life.

## **Keywords**

Drugs, everyday life, pleasure, altered perception, negative aesthetics.

*Buying drugs is like buying a ticket to a fantastic world, but the price of this ticket is life.*

*Jim Morrison*

## **1. Introduction**

The consumption of recreational drugs is a global issue of the utmost seriousness. Statistical data confirm each year a continuous increase in this disquieting phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the current distress—especially on the psyche—caused by the COVID-19 pandemic could not but emphasize said state of affairs.<sup>2</sup> One might well wonder what drives each year millions of people around the world to consume psychoactive drugs despite being well aware of their destructive power. Is social and psychological discomfort enough to justify the proportions of this phenomenon? What exactly makes drugs so attractive that they become in many cases a loyal companion of everyday life?

Drug addiction has been investigated within the framework of several fields of study. In psychology, for instance, important contributions have been offered by Freud, Stanton, Todd, and Bergeret<sup>3</sup>, which emphasized the conflict-ridden internal background of subjects suffering from addiction; in the field of sociology, interesting aspects have been pointed out by Bourdieu, Bourgois, Duprez, and Kokoreff<sup>4</sup> in relation to urban subcultures, and the alteration of consciousness and perception resulting from drug consumption has been investigated from the

viewpoint of philosophy by Benjamin, Derrida, and Foucault<sup>5</sup>. In this essay, I will focus on a closely connected, yet somehow neglected, aspect of drug consumption, namely pleasure. This allows an aesthetic investigation which takes into account the social and psychological backdrop favoring the fast spreading of the phenomenon of drug addiction.

Drugs appear in fact to be a fast, easy, and effective dispenser of immediate happiness. Their rock-solid success is based upon their ability to generate feelings of pleasure and gratification, which are identical to those phylogenetically functional to the evolution of human beings on the planet. Is it therefore legit, in this respect, to account for the drug experience in terms of everyday aesthetics?

In the wake of the Everyday Aesthetics line of inquiry, the realm of aesthetics has significantly expanded to include topics which, just a few years earlier, used to be taken as not relevant within the philosophical range of interest. The scrutiny of everyday life and its countless situations has shown that not only the elitist art sphere is pervaded by an aesthetic dimension, but also, notably, aspects of our daily life often seen as trivial and routinary. According to the theorists of Everyday Aesthetics, the aesthetic dimension has a key role in each individual life and covers most of our existence. A shift in interest from the object to the experience—here understood as a dynamic process performed by the subject in relation to the surrounding world—has paved the way to a reassessment of what pertains to everyday life from a philosophical point of view. Everyday Aesthetics extends its roots, in fact, in the theory of experience developed by John Dewey in order to outline anew the realm of aesthetics.

While aesthetics of everyday life used to sound like an oxymoron, inasmuch as it seemed to evade the canonical topics of aesthetics, an even greater challenge is to talk about a negative aesthetics of everyday life, inasmuch as aesthetics is traditionally understood—exception made for few rare instances—as having to do not only with art but also with beauty, pleasure, harmony, that is to say, prevalingly positive values. However, whenever a sense-based experience, although pleasurable at the beginning, later turns out to be stressful, harmful or even detrimental for the individual, there is no doubt that the context can be qualified as negative. As Arnold Berleant puts it, “we can speak of negative aesthetic values, of negative aesthetics when, in the primacy of perceptual experience, the experience as a whole is in some sense unsatisfying, distressing, or harmful. Aesthetic experience is not always benign. [...] The very complexity of the aesthetics contributes to obscuring the negative, but once we recognize its presence in aesthetic experience, we can begin to explore the often-unacknowledged value.”<sup>6</sup> These experiences might not be easy to identify inasmuch as “Aesthetic negativity is widespread in daily life but its presence is often obscure and hidden, in part because it is commonplace and unremarked. Negative aesthetic experience occurs in many guises, from the offensive environmental conditions that

shadow daily life to the drama of terrorist attacks, but perhaps the most egregious instances of negative experience are those that inflict physical or emotional pain.”<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, only a marginal attention is often given to the realm of negative aesthetics. This is mainly due to its implicit negative essence, which somehow defies research, or, to say it better, establishes a refusal, which “amounts to negating, in the most varied and deceiving ways, the existence of what exists and we even have knowledge of.”<sup>8</sup> Clearly, this does not refute the existence of several aspects connected to the negative aesthetics of everyday life within our contemporary societies, as affected by globalization, alienation, anonymization, individualism, and precariousness. These features of our world provide an undoubtedly fertile ground for an increasingly faster spreading of negative aesthetic experiences.

Some scholars—among others, Joseph H. Kupfer,<sup>9</sup> Arnold Berleant,<sup>10</sup> Katya Mandoki<sup>11</sup>—can be mentioned here, who have pointed out some inconvenient truths in relation to uneasy topics, such as deliberate violence, perversion, the manipulation of emotions by politics, the visual overstimulation of urban areas, and so on. These aspects of society, on which the negative aesthetics of everyday life insists, expose our contemporary world to an open criticism, reinforced by the disquieting continuous increase in numbers [of certain phenomena]. The negative aesthetics of everyday life raises a red flag while connecting aesthetic and moral values to social and cultural aspects.<sup>12</sup>

To the areas explored by the authors mentioned above, one can add a silent but extremely widespread phenomenon, namely that of the consumption of psychoactive drugs. The very topic of drug consumption inevitably entails a certain reluctance or refusal to include it as an aspect of everyday life. This is so because it is commonly seen not only as something illegal and forbidden but also as deplorable, degrading, dirty, and therefore as very far from the well-reputed aesthetic dimension of beauty and its countless declinations. This approach disregards, however, the fact that drug consumption is based upon the experience of pleasure and gratification. It is in fact nothing but a perceptual and emotional overstimulation connected to an insatiable quest for pleasure. In the name of pleasure a progressive and deliberate destruction of one’s body and personality can be observed, which Kupfer and Berleant have detected in other contexts as the defining trait of the negative aesthetics of everyday life.

According to both scholars in fact a deliberate and harmful act does not need to be aimed externally in order to generate in the transgressing individual a feeling of satisfaction, but it can be aimed also toward oneself. It is furthermore worth remarking that in relation to this complex issue a significant shift in aesthetic and moral values at individual, cultural, and social level can be observed as pointing in the direction of the distorted and altered. In this respect, granted that “all perception and every condition can have an aesthetic dimension, at times invisible or

unnoticed, at other times minor, but sometimes dominant,”<sup>13</sup> as pointed out by Arnold Berleant in one of his contributions, then also the experience of taking drugs belongs to the aesthetic dimension in its dominant, although altered, dimension.

## **2. The dangerous power of pleasure**

The consumption of psychoactive substances is not a prerogative of modernity. Early drugs did not necessarily have a negative connotation. Some of them had a sacred or healing function, while others would be used to enhance the flavor of food in culinary recipes. The adverse effects on health have been detected relatively recently thanks to the advances of scientific research proving that regular consumption of some drugs provokes irreversible damages on the central nervous system and the rest of the body.

In the first half of the 20th century many drugs could be purchased in pharmacies as remedies against several ailments caused by stress, fatigue, nervousness, or even as pain killers, tranquilizers, invigorating and energizing supplements. Based on advertisements from the ‘30s, ‘40s and ‘50s it can be inferred that many already known and new drugs, such as methadone, amphetamines, methamphetamines, barbiturates and LSD would be prescribed by doctors to cope with daily fatigue, to enhance students' and soldiers' performances, to ease pregnancy-related discomfort, and to alleviate the frustration of housewives.<sup>14</sup> In the ‘60s and ‘70s drugs experienced great popularity and were employed in psychotherapeutic settings. Some psychologists, such as Timothy Leary, Ralf Metzner, and Richard Alpert, spoke in favor of employing psychoactive substances in order to better explore human minds and expand them toward the Universal Mind.<sup>15</sup> At about the same time, the first studies on the damages to the central nervous system, other damages to the organism, and malformations in newborns progressively started to emerge.<sup>16</sup> With the widespread use of heroin, cocaine, hashish, marijuana, LSD, and crack, the number of deaths for overdose stalked. In the ‘80s HIV infection spread rapidly among drug addicted subjects. Since then, a clear fight against drug addiction was conducted through innovative therapeutic programs. The black market has nevertheless always been able to satisfy the demand. At present, although the therapeutic value of some drugs is recognized, most of them are known for their devastating effects on human organisms.

Nowadays, drugs are categorized based on their level of danger in legal (e.g., tea, coffee, alcohol, nicotine, light cannabis) and illegal drugs; within the latter group one distinguishes between natural drugs, (e.g. In Italy cannabis with a higher than 0.6% THC content, opium, cocaine, and psilocybin mushrooms) and synthetic drugs (e.g. amphetamines, heroin, LSD, etc.) as well as between soft drugs and heavy drugs.

Legal drugs are not seen as hazardous and are commonly accepted. As they belong to cultural traditions, they are not even seen as drugs in the negative sense of the word, but rather as exciting and energizing substances or as euphorizing and relaxing. They are widely in use and belong to everyday life in most cultures around the world. Some theorists of Everyday Aesthetics, among whom Yuriko Saito and Sherry Irvin, have even identified the consumption of tea and coffee as one distinctive aspect of the aesthetics of everyday life. With reference to Japanese culture, Yuriko Saito sees in the time devoted to tea drinking an experience filled with spirituality. The ceremony of tea is a true collective rite made of meditative moments and moments of sharing. One can therefore claim that it indeed makes display of the features of a ceremony in its own right<sup>17</sup> devoted to tea, inasmuch as aesthetic and moral values interpenetrate. As remarked by Elisabetta Di Stefano, “the tea ceremony is both a moment of meditation and a form of art, inasmuch as every small action is full of meaning.”<sup>18</sup> Sherry Irvin also presents the consumption of coffee as a “quietly exquisite and even strangely foreign (experience), when done with full attention.”<sup>19</sup> In this regard, Di Stefano writes that “nowadays making a cup of coffee, when foam decorated, has reached the fame of art, “Latte Art.” [...] Latte Art requires creativity and, like Fine Arts, causes emotion and gives pleasure. In our daily routine, foam drawings always make us smile and start us off on a good day.”<sup>20</sup> These two typical routines of everyday life perfectly exemplify everyday aesthetics if performed “in full awareness of the moment we experience.”<sup>21</sup>

In this essay, a shift is performed in the direction of the negative aesthetics of everyday life, and the experience of illegal drugs is scrutinized. Although this kind of experience has been overlooked by the inquiries on everyday life, several aspects can be elucidated that are common to the paradigms of Everyday Aesthetics. Furthermore, the hazardousness of this phenomenon as based upon the experience of pleasure can be suitably pinpointed within this framework. The consumption of illegal drugs—henceforth only drugs—in today’s consumerist societies is no longer an isolated and sporadic event. On the contrary, it is widely common, transversal, and encompassing all social groups and almost all ages, starting in some cases already in the pre-adolescence. Progressively spreading from the high society to the poorest suburbs, drug consumption has become part of a full-fledged lifestyle. Far from its early connections with initiations and sacred rituals, on the back of curiosity and of the insatiable desire for aprioristic happiness, drugs replicate “on the level of emotions the same values defining contemporary societies as developed around forms of illusion, artifice, and consumption. As philosopher Umberto Galimberti remarks, within consumerist societies, consumption comprehends not only objects—already obsolete from the beginning—but also, thanks to the contribution of drugs, life itself.”<sup>22</sup> Authentic emotions are simply replaced by the more intense ones artificially produced by drugs.<sup>23</sup>

Featuring crumbling apart families, leveled down school systems, subverted symbolic values, solitude, existential precariousness, and on the opposite corner, vast wealth, fame, and the star system, contemporary societies, as Galimberti puts it, push many to alleviate their feelings of boredom and emptiness typical of everyday life with the spellbinding pleasure of drugs. The consumption of vivid and strong emotions has one precise goal: to feel alive. Di Stefano aptly captures the fact that we have been long living in a potentiated reality, where increasingly more sophisticated technologies and an unstoppable flow of information provide “more intense and captivating experiences compared to the dullness of ordinary life”, which lead to an “ecstasy of hyperreality”.<sup>24</sup> The side effect of all this is that it also “reduces the emotional impact and ends up producing indifference,”<sup>25</sup> in other words, a collective dulling swamping our daily lives.

Already Susanne K. Langer deals with the topic of the social distress caused by the stressful proliferation of symbols, and emphasizes that human beings inevitably feel the need to flee toward more reassuring and stable worlds, away from daily reality. On the one hand, people try then to restore their psycho-physical balance through highly introspective practices such as yoga, meditation, spiritual retreats, as pointed out by Richard Shusterman in his *Somaesthetics*; on the other hand, people try to reach illusory and fake worlds through the consumption of drugs. With regard to these latter, an implicit, as much as inevitable, shift is recorded from constructive values to destructive ones. Langer insists that every culture in history brings about a change in style and values due to changes in the *Weltanschauung* of that given society.<sup>26</sup> The data about drug consumption nevertheless show the true colors of our society of nothingness.<sup>27</sup> People take drugs because they like it, because they can momentarily fill in the void left by boredom and emotional dullness, or even just for fun, for the sake of a strong emotion, for the high. In the jargon of drug consumers, the high stands for “the particular, temporary effect of excitement and psychological and physical wellbeing following the consumption of drugs as well as the period of time during which someone is under the influence of drugs.”<sup>28</sup> In the so-called drug culture,<sup>29</sup> the consumption of drugs is seen as an *extraordinary* event, a special moment, almost a party in the party, which can be repeated cyclically in those places of weekly socialization to evade everyday dullness. A black market with affordable prices offers every kind of out of the ordinary experience to be shared with friends for relatively little money. Soon one is floating on air without a care in the world, wrapped in loud euphoria, sinking in fascinating relaxation, experiencing vivid and strong emotions, seeing colorful hallucinations, or reaching an artificial orgasm. The collective co-participation intensifies even more this kind of over-the-top experience.

The pleasantness of the effects of drugs is confirmed also by the eloquent testimony of Walter Benjamin, who, within the framework of his studies on the perception of the world with wide-open senses, tested the effects of hashish on himself, and wrote: “I experience this as poetic

evidence. [...] I would draw a connection between the laughter and the extraordinary mental vacillation. [...] Admit positively splendid.”<sup>30</sup> Drugs are therefore, in some respects, not only a synonym of pastime or of pleasure pervading the whole body, but they also imply an extraordinary moment experienced in the present, that is to say, in the widely acclaimed *hic et nunc*. Clearly, what is at stake is a moment as extraordinary as it is misleading and deeply connected with an objectively pathological component.

Although very different from taking drugs, also the mindfulness method allows us to experience the present moment and savor the tiniest feeling connected to the mind and the body. A state of bliss can even be reached once said technique is mastered. Psychoactive drugs make it easier to get to that greatly coveted happiness. The mental state obtained by meditation can indeed be compared to what is produced by some drugs.<sup>31</sup> These can in fact increase the activity of some neurotransmitters naturally present in the organism, such as serotonin, also known as the mood regulating hormone, dopamine, the feel-good hormone, oxytocin, the love hormone, and endorphins, the hormone of satisfaction. The production of these neurotransmitters forced by drugs is certainly effective in noticeably increasing their levels. Ecstasy for instance is proven to be able to increase serotonin by 900%.<sup>32</sup> However, it also inhibits the natural ability of the body to produce the same hormone.<sup>33</sup> Numerous scientific studies show that also meditation is able to increase levels of serotonin, melatonin,<sup>34</sup> endorphins, dopamine,<sup>35</sup> and noticeably lower the levels of cortisol, the stress hormone. The organism is in fact able to naturally produce the well-being substances it requires or can be helped by physiological stimulus through several bodily or meditative techniques. However, physical activity and meditation require effort, dedication, discipline, self-control, whereas dropping a pill produces, effortlessly, an extremely pleasurable alteration of one’s consciousness. This mirrors the paradigmatic must of contemporary societies: everything right now with the smallest possible effort.

An authentic report on the ambiguity of the world of drugs is available in the book *Zoo Station: The Story of Christiane F.*. Published in 1978 and based on the true story of a teenager from Berlin, this book offers a crude testimony on the relationship young people entertain with drugs. Nested within a daily life made of family conflicts, skipped classes, the environmental degradation of the suburbs, and broken hearts, drugs are seen as a coveted object of desire. They are put on a pedestal, from which they irradiate some sort of aura, what the ancient Greeks called “breath” or “glow,” and “which can be extended figuratively to the atmosphere around a person, thing or place.”<sup>36</sup> This pseudo *aura* is justified by the implicit promise of pleasure, happiness, and fulfilment of desired emotions on the backdrop of something prohibited. In other words, drugs are simultaneously an object of veneration and something to be rejected in reaction to a certain unspoken fear. These features equally pertain to the concept of awe, as accounted for by Thomas



Leddy concerning everyday life. In just three letters, awe describes a complex condition, implying admiration, astonishment, and overwhelming fear when facing someone or something. In this regard, the aura is, in Monroe Beardsley's words, an "idea of intensity" and a "concentration of experience."<sup>37</sup> As matter of fact, the experience of drugs is often described by the insiders with the adjectives fun, amazing, extraordinary, awe-inspiring, marvellous; all these terms are also included in the "bestiary of aesthetics terms for everyday contexts"<sup>38</sup> put together by Thomas Leddy under the category "terms of very high valuation."<sup>39</sup> Drugs therefore distinguish themselves for their ability to increase and intensify the ordinary experience of everyday life.

On the backdrop of a pseudo-sacrality, the consumption of drugs is a true collective rite<sup>40</sup> performed within a community. People gather in a secluded place in anxious expectation for the moment leading to ecstasy. The object of desire is amiably shared among all members of the community who are invited to partake in peaceful conviviality. This kind of gathering usually features a relaxed atmosphere and lively conversations on shared topics, accompanied by a general drug-induced amiability. Among members a strong sense of belonging is felt, which is emphasized also by a peculiar style in their clothes and accessories. Membership to such a community is perceived as a true privilege.

As reported by Christiane F. concerning the group who facilitated her first encounters with drugs: "The whole group was super cool. They gave the impression that they were different from the other teenagers who hung out at the club. They wore skin-tight jeans, big, crazy boots, and their jackets were all either denim or else these crazy things [...] but they looked amazing."<sup>41</sup> Entry to such a group is reserved to few chosen ones upon direct invitation from established members of the group. Their bond is formed, namely, by drugs, the sharing of moments of artificially produced sensorial experiences, and mutual respect. Christiane F. does not hide her disbelief in being accepted into the group, which seen from the outside appears worthy of great respect: "The people in this clique were cool in a way that was completely new to me. They weren't loud, they didn't get into fights, and they didn't show off. They were pretty quiet. They just kind of exuded superiority."<sup>42</sup> Contacts become increasingly more frequent; doses gradually increase. This state of things, if not timely blocked, foreshadows a one-way journey toward drug addiction, with all its negative consequences on the general decay of the individual.

Christiane Vera Felscherinow's story was documented by two journalists, Kai Hermann and Horst Rieck. They relied on recordings of Christiane's autobiographical narration, and the use of real names and photos was authorized also by the other members of Christiane's groups of drug users. Prosecutor documents presented to court, the final sentence of the court in Neumünster, the statements of consulted psychologists and rehab supervisors, and the painful testimony of her mother, in short, every deposition offered during trial was also included in the

documentary report. In 1981 a movie was shot by director Uli Edel under the title *Christiane F. – We Children from Zoo Station*. Both the book and the movie have been contributing to the fight against youth drug addiction.

As a matter of fact, under the false pretense of pleasure, drugs make thousands of young people each year sink into an abyss. The source for this behavior can be found namely in the altered perception of reality and of the values connected to it. As remarked by Amber Sanders, John M. Stogner and Bryan Lee Miller, mostly teenagers get more easily duped, as “they are potentially influenced more by what they think their friends do [...] This relationship may arise from a youth’s desire to avoid standing out, to be a more attractive peer to their friends, to gain acceptance.”<sup>43</sup> This is where the firm belief is formed that a behaviour, although wrong, might be normal. As a result, a shift can be registered in the symbolic values allowing people to identify with a group. In the era of the global village, as emphasized by Langer, people escape into exotic cults prospecting a new world of salvation.<sup>44</sup> In the worst case scenario, based on widespread false values, young people “go down that one-way road, which is supposed to make up for a lack of identity through the security of belonging to a tribe, outside of which there is only the solitude of social anonymity.”<sup>45</sup> Another disquieting element emerges here: solitude is experienced even amidst a crowd. And this is what leads to looking for a friend in drugs. These latter are able to fill in the void caused by lack of real and long-term interpersonal relations, and suddenly lead to a better, more welcoming, less hostile, more friendly world. Drugs develop into some sort of alter ego, namely, an inseparable companion of everyday life.

### 3. Altered perception of reality

Concerning drugs and the field of aesthetics, important contributions have been made also by Monroe Beardsley. He points for instance to “the LSD problem”<sup>46</sup> in reference to the experience generated by that hallucinatory drug. Under LSD people report feeling “exquisite aesthetic gratification.”<sup>47</sup> According to Beardsley, however, said experience is only illusory. He quotes for instance the experience of Dr. Lloyd A. Brumbles, a Philadelphia psychiatrist, who “said that while listening to Beethoven’s *Eroica*, particularly the third movement, he felt simultaneously insatiable longing and total gratification.”<sup>48</sup> As this is exactly what happens also when he sees a painting by Picasso and one by Renoir, it is clear, Beardsley concludes, that “he was under the influence of something.”<sup>49</sup> It should be noted that Beardsley’s institutional field of research does not include everyday experience and relies only on the canonical notions of the discipline. As he emphasizes, aesthetic gratification is closely linked to the concept of aesthetic value. And this latter can be, in his view, appropriately condensed in the formula:

The aesthetic value of X is the value that X possesses in virtue of its capacity to provide aesthetic gratification *when correctly and completely experienced*.<sup>50</sup>

However, in a false society, ruled by excesses out-of-proportion in each realm of life, to the detriment of primary needs phylogenetically codified to allow people to “[mature] into balanced, even happy people”<sup>51</sup> authentic feelings are slyly silenced. Deprived of references well rooted in culture,<sup>52</sup> reality tends in fact to generate in people what Konrad Lorenz defines as “illness of the spirit.”<sup>53</sup> Human beings are forced to come to terms, in the words of Jean Baudrillard, with pseudo-realities, where truth is hidden, not behind consumerist alluring slogans and images reproduced in series, deified “simulacra”<sup>54</sup> and n-dimensional virtual realities, but rather behind the “unhappy non-distinction between true and false, between the real and its signs.”<sup>55</sup> Within this fleeting and unstable context, Beardsley’s formula is then replaced by the following one:

The aesthetic value of X is the value that X possesses in virtue of its capacity to provide aesthetic gratification *when highly and extremely experienced*.

Based on this notion one can also understand the popularity of so-called chemsex, new psychoactive substances such as *salvia divinorum*, bath salts, etc. No taboo is left standing; all kinds of experiences have become common, with a resulting lowering in the threshold of perceptual sensitivity and a striving for extreme experiences. A shake or intense shiver of pleasure needs to be felt in order to have fun. Otherwise, one struggles to feel alive. This is how romantic intimacy between lovers becomes a chemsex party, where to make display of highly performant and long-lasting sexual virtuosity; the primordial desires for flesh and cannibalism are awakened by bath salts; and a total rapture is experienced with *salvia divinorum*<sup>56</sup>.

Besides the above-mentioned extreme experiences and the distortion of reality triggered by hallucinatory substances and mentioned by Beardsley, there is no doubt that drugs in general can produce an intense pleasure. The drug-induced experience is however altered, since, despite being felt as a real experience of pleasure and gratification, it is artificially produced and its intensity differs from that of physiological pleasure. These altered feelings are stored in one’s memory and somehow integrated in the individual neuronal networks, so that they are eventually experienced as authentic. As a result, people are no longer able to tell the difference between alteration and reality, and their “ability to feel pleasure in normal conditions is significantly reduced. Drugs become then, little by little, the only source of pleasure.”<sup>57</sup>

#### **4. Scientific data**

From an evolutionary viewpoint, pleasure plays a role of great importance in the life of an individual. It is in fact a key factor facilitating the evolution and survival of the *Homo* species. Studies

in neurosciences have shed light on the neurophysiological processes driving people to the constant search for pleasure, which translates into behaviours leading to feeding oneself, having sexual intercourse, engaging in relations with peers, etc. These actions are connected to the release of dopamine in several brain areas, among which also the orbitofrontal cortex, the anterior cingulate cortex, which communicates with the limbic system and oversees emotions, with the prefrontal cortex, the nucleus accumbens and the tegmental ventral area. This complex neurobiological system is (also) responsible for gratification.

Scientists argue that “all drugs act on this important cerebral system, triggering the release of great quantities of dopamine, hence a temporary feeling of intense pleasure.”<sup>58</sup> Although diverse, the pleasure stimuli produced by artificial—as much as damaging—neurochemical hyperstimulation encourage the organism to reiterate the experience. As a result, the brain activates a protective mechanism which lowers the production of endogenous dopamine and decreases the number of associated receptors. Therefore, “only drugs, in ever increasing doses, will be able to have brain synapses release the amount of dopamine required to have a feeling of wellbeing.”<sup>59</sup> While simplifying things to an extent, this is how an addiction starts and develops its well-known destructive consequences on the organism. Loosely paraphrasing Ivan Severi, one can claim that from the paradise of drugs people transition to the hell of drug addiction.<sup>60</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Although one might wonder whether some passages of this essay end up praising the use of drugs, its main goal is exactly the opposite. The aim was in fact to emphasize a highly ambiguous, self-contradictory, and very dangerous phenomenon. On the back of the promise of an artificially-induced pseudo-happiness, a destructive and destabilizing deceit is lurking. In the very moment of the perception of intentionally sought pleasure—efficiently sweeping away any boredom and insignificant daily life—life itself is slowly burnt away. Here lies the contradictory core of drug consumption and its devious deceit. Although thanks to intrinsic chemical properties drugs are associated with pleasure, which is a condition developed and matured along evolution to guarantee the survival of human beings and ultimately their life, instead of turning life on, they tend to progressively switch life off. Sometimes even in full awareness of their destructive power, but arrogantly enticed by the idea of being able to have the upper hand, people give in to the charming smile of drugs and venture on a journey whose destination is, to say the least, undetermined. This is how drugs win. First they seduce and then swallow up those dissatisfied lives with no consideration whatsoever.

After all, our society being based upon the extreme proliferation of false values, of disposable depersonalized relations, upon consumerism with no boundaries, on early sexuality, and on

emotional dulling, a distorted perception of reality is no surprise. This leads inevitably, according to Konrad Lorenz, to “dangerous disturbances of the pleasure-unpleasure experience economy,”<sup>61</sup> which can be expressed in several ways, among which the tendency to mix up the aesthetic and moral values developed and consolidated in time with those illusory and faulty ones propounded by contemporary societies and mirroring the authentic ones. Through drugs, authentic pleasure is replaced by artificial pleasure, whose sole function is to anesthetize the widespread collective distress.<sup>62</sup> Here we don’t speak about the classical problem of illusion as presented by Plato, but rather about a true misperception of the value system, inasmuch as the experience “is molded by shared historical, cultural, and material conditions” and provides “a basis for judgment.”<sup>63</sup>

In this sense, a red flag is inevitably raised. A stable and solid system of values needs to be urgently reestablished, in order to provide people, especially young people, with a comforting and stimulating place. *Everyday Aesthetics*, together with other studies and activities capable of identifying the positive values of life, are well equipped, if included in educational programs developed to this aim, to provide the tools and keys required to read everyday life, re-educate effectively to values,<sup>64</sup> fill in the void in the education concerning feelings, support us in retrieving the pleasure of small things in life, credit the rightful value to life, and fostering a constructive and stimulating engagement with the future. Also, the inclusion in school curricular reading lists of texts connected to the issue (see the above-mentioned *Zoo Station: The Story of Christiane F.*, the anonymous drug addict report *Go ask Alice*,<sup>65</sup> Luigi Galimberti's *Morire di piacere*,<sup>66</sup> and Radek John's *Memento*<sup>67</sup>) would prove effective in increasing youth awareness. In Italy, the Ministry for Education has released online the brochure *Cervello, mente e droghe*<sup>68</sup>, which is meant to inform young people about the most up-to-date research findings on drug addiction and lay emphasis on life itself. To conclude, a strong need is felt to reactivate the original “feeling of life”<sup>69</sup> which allows to live fully and meaningfully.

<sup>1</sup> European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, *Statistical Bulletin 2020*.

<https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/data/stats2020-en>.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, Office on Drugs and Crime, *UNODC World Drug Report 2020: Global drug use rising; while COVID-19 has far reaching impact on global drug markets*, <https://unodc.org/unodc/press/releases/2020/June/media-advisory---global-launch-of-the-2020-world-drug-report.html>.

<sup>3</sup> S. Freud, *Cocaine Papers* (Stonehill, New York, 1975). M. D. Staton, T. B. Todd, *The Family Therapy of Drug Abuse and Addiction* (Guilford Press, New York, 1982). J. Bergeret, *Lo psicoanalista in ascolto del tossicomane*, Borla, Milano, 1983.

<sup>4</sup> P. Bourgois, *In Search of Respect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). D. Duprez, M. Kokoreff, *Les mondes de la drogue* (Paris: Editions Odile Jakob, 2000).

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- <sup>37</sup> On M. Beardsley, see Leddy, *The Extraordinary in the ordinary*, 135.
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- <sup>39</sup> Leddy, *The Extraordinary in the ordinary*, 174.
- <sup>40</sup> In reference to Emile Durkheim's contributions, by rite one is to understand each action or set of actions, performed live in connection to codified verbal forms and according to rules of conduct, which are normative for all participants. Cf. E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New Orleans: Quid Pro, 2015).
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- <sup>42</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>45</sup> Galimberti, *L'ospite inquietante*, 129 (my transl.).
- <sup>46</sup> M. C. Beardsley, *The Aesthetic Point of View* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1982), Chapter IV, point 2, p. 22.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>50</sup> Beardsley, *The Aesthetic Point of View*, 21.
- <sup>51</sup> K. Lorenz, *Civilized Man's Eight Deadly Sins* (New York: Kurt Wolff, 1974), 42.
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- <sup>53</sup> K. Lorenz, *Behind the Mirror* (London: Methuen, London, 1977), 45.
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<sup>60</sup> I. Severi, *Incollocabili. Antropologia applicata in contesti di droga e cronicità*, tesi di dottorato (Milano: Università degli Studi di Milano, dipartimento di Filosofia, Ciclo XXX, A.A. 2016/2017).

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<sup>63</sup> Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense*, 157.

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<sup>65</sup> Anonymous, *Go ask Alice* (New York: Simon & Shuster Books for young readers, 1999).

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<sup>69</sup> See S. K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1953, 67.