Lessing's Laocoon: Aesthetics, Affects and Embodiment

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ABSTRACT Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon* (1766) saw that the signification of art cannot be dissociated from its media. A visual work of art and a literary work originates in different spatial and temporal conditions, Lessing argued, serving thereby to liberate art from the tradition of *ut pictura poesis*. Lessing's impact has been discussed in the tradition of modernism through Babbitt, Eisenstein and Greenberg, and there been associated with the notion that the work of art is autonomous. In Lessing's own text, however, there is no clear conception of a work of art "an sich". Instead, the work of art is characterized in an indirect manner, through the sense perception of the reader or viewer. Lessing's *Laocoon* can be rethought from the perspective of affect. In his text, the human body has a central place, and Lessing's investigation into the signification of the Laocoon can be formulated as the question: How does the embodied mind respond to the image of a human body? Departing from this concern, Lessing's text does not only look at the object of aesthetics; it constructs an aesthetic subject, in which the embodied conditioning of sense perception and the question of affect is central. Making the statue of *Laocoon* a primary example in his study, Lessing inserts himself in a long tradition of the study of affects where *Laocoon* represents the most pain that a human can bear, whether that pain is corporeal or emotional.
KEYWORDS Lessing, Laocoon, affects, history of aesthetics

Between Signsystems and Affects

In *Laokoon* (1766), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing offers a study of Laocoon, the Roman sculpture where a Trojan priest is strangled to death with his sons by an enormous snake. Lessing grapples with the question of how an expression irreducible to linguistic meaning may still achieve signification; we experience the scream coming out of the hollow mouth of Laocoon with extraordinary nuance. Lessing's analysis has had an immense impact. It recognized the possibilities and limits that condition works of art of different genres. As Goethe describes it, it meant a liberation from the old *ut pictura poesis*: "[T]his work swept us away from the region of a meagre gaze to the free fields of thought."[1] Lessing's *Laokoon* has mainly been associated with reflections on the signification of an autonomous work of art, not least through the resurrection of his name in the modernist debate through Babbitt, Eisenstein, Greenberg etc.

But to Lessing there is no work of art "an sich". The discipline of Ästhetik is the study of sense perception, tied in with psychology. The work of art is characterized in an indirect manner, through the effects it has on the reader or the viewer. The perspective on Lessing, therefore, can be

shifted from discussing how he perceives the work of art, and the semiotic issues attached to it, to how he perceives the viewer. Here, the human body has a specific place. How does the embodied mind respond to the image of a human body? In my reading, this is a central question that has been overshadowed by other concerns in the reception of Lessing's *Laokoon*. Lessing's text does not only look at the object of aesthetics; it constructs an aesthetic subject.

At the turn of the 20th century, Babbitt revived Lessing's text with *The New Laocoon: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts* in 1910, where he applauded Lessing's critical genius but questioned his lingering appreciation of mimetic ideals in art.[2] Clement Greenberg's surge towards abstract expressionism came in the 1940s with "Towards a Newer Laocoon", where he sought to develop Lessing's thought that each genre within the arts develops as a consequence of its own medium, and that abstract expressionism, therefore, is a proper form for modernism in painting: "It is by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and strictly itself [...] For the visual arts the medium is discovered to be physical; hence pure painting and pure sculpture seek above all to affect the spectator physically."[3] Greenberg saw the physical aspect of Lessing's text, but surpassed the questioned of embodiment in favour of a stress on the autonomy of the medium. David Wellbery, author of one of the most famous studies on Lessing, asserts Lessing to be a semiotician *avant la letter*, continuing to read Lessing in the vein of art's autonomy.[4]

The reverence for art's autonomy as a foundation for modernism has been questioned by, for instance Yve-Alain Dubois and Rosalind Krauss, who criticized the idea that modernism has its roots in the formalist abstractions. They were more interested in, for instance, the surrealist interrogations into the *l'informe*, the formless, which gives us another perspective on how physicality is involved in the rise of modernism.[5]

There is thus a flood of writings, positions and claims to deal with as we look at the legacy of the text. Conversely, as we approach it from the other end, we encounter another kind of abundance. As Dilthey has shown a century ago, the text is extraordinary for creating a new kind of discourse in the humanities, detaching aesthetics from psychology.[6] There is reason to return this claim. Why, and how, must aesthetics be detached? What kind of legacies does it derive from? Among the sources to Lessing's text we find works on psychology, such as his own translation of the renaissance Spanish psychologist Huarte. We find the tradition of *ut pictura poesis*, transposing works of art into language. We find also, of course the theory of affects forwarded by Spinoza, the British

tradition of sensibility represented by Hutcheson and Shaftesbury, the Roman tradition of rhetoric etc., We find the practice of imitation that took place at the Belvedere Court in the Vatican, training artists in drawing the body of Laocoon during the time of Michelangelo, who was present at the excavation of the statue. And we find the emergence of the public sphere, the debates with contemporaries that took place in the journals in which Lessing himself was engaging. These are only a few of the sources to the aesthetics of Lessing.

It is perhaps also from this point of view that we should consider Lessing's text. Lessing is not so much concerned with judgment or theories of beauty. He takes for granted that beauty is the essence of art, but talks a lot more about ugliness, disgust and the horrible. His study opens the gates to a pre-Kantian universe where embodiment and visual stimuli are studied through the grid of affects. The corporeality of the figure of Laocoon is always in focus; less with regard to judgment and more with regard to the observation of affects.

To Lessing the question of affects has to do with corporeality, both the embodiment of the viewer and the way in which the body is depicted or invoked in a work of art. In this way, he forebodes contemporary discussions on affects and corporeality. Affects, to Lessing, are a primary motive in the mimesis of art. It is something that you both see and experience. Certainly the Laocoon group is particularly pertinent in the study of affects. As I will argue below, Lessing inserts himself in a tradition where the pain of Laocoon is being studied, depicted, mimicked and transposed into various media.

The History of the Group

Mimesis, as Babbitt remarked, is a structuring principle in Lessing's analysis of the work, a fact that Babbitt deplores. One would perhaps have to qualify this. Mimesis becomes the structuring principle of the bodies with specific regard to affects.[7] Looking closer at the tradition on mimesis and Laocoon, one notices that the question of embodiment must be a primary interest of Lessing. Indeed, affect has been the object of imitation in all the versions of Laocoon that we have at hand, from Sophocles to Sadoletos, from Virgil to Michelangelo's school of art at the Belvedere court. These works of art differ as to how they tell the story. In some of them, Laocoon dies, in others his sons die. Winckelmann, with whom Lessing engages in a debate over the statue, asks: how should a body in pain be depicted? But Lessing's question is: how do we, as embodied beings, respond to a depiction of a body in pain? This is a question of affect.

Laocoon is also a figure of debate, not least when it comes to the versions of mimesis of affect. The various versions tend to differ on the way Laocoon represent various ways of depicting and enduring pain. What is tolerable and what crosses the barrier into the intolerable? In all versions, he represents the unbearable injustice that comes with his fate: attempting to warn his own people the Trojans of the death that awaits them in the Trojan horse. Not only is he not heard, in some versions he is also killed. And in some versions Athena sends two snakes to kill not only him, but also his two sons. Thus the myth of Laocoon is about unbearable pain: It can be looked at in various dimensions. First, it is about corporeal pain, the pain that tortures the muscles, and makes the body twinge. The bite of the poisonous snake is torturous. Secondly, it is about the pain of being quieted despite all the knowledge that one has of events, and knowing that one's people is about to die. Thirdly, it is about knowing that one's sons are also dying. In some versions, the sons are dying before the father, in others, at the same time. As we will see, literature and art vary in their account of this. There are also different versions cast of how Laocoon's body is depicted: naked or with clothing, and different versions of how he holds his arms.

The episode with the sons dying as well as the priest, has to do with divine fury and punishment. In older versions of the myth, Laocoon is sleeping with his wife Antiope in front of the image of Apollo. Apollo sends snakes to take away the fruit of that union. One of the sons escape however. There is also a tragic version to be found in a fragment by Sophocles, who lets both of the sons die, and Laocoon live. In the *Fall of Troy*, or the so called Posthomerica from the 4th century by Quintus Smyrnaeus, Laocoon is described in ghastly terms as trembling with horror: "round his head horror of darkness poured; a sharp pang thrilled his eyelids; swam his eyes beneath his brows; his eyeballs, stabbed with bitter anguish, throbbed even from the roots, and rolled in frenzy of pain. Clear through his brain the bitter torment pierced even to the filmy inner veil thereof; now bloodshot were his eyes, now ghastly green; anon with rheum they ran, as pours a stream down from a rugged crag, with thawing snow made turbid."[8] The physiological details of this text give witness to what is at stake here: a description of ultimate pain. This is what is being transmitted in the tradition of Laocoon-interpretations, whether in visual arts or literature. Virgil is also very graphic as he depicts the death of Laocoon in book II of *The Aenid*: the snakes tower, they are large and terrifying, and they always do things doubly, strangle two boys, roll around the waist and around the throat. The father gasps,

Virgil says, then he roars. This is a both horrifying and enigmatic: how can he roar after gasping? And why does he roar, over pain, over the sons?

In 1506 the sculpture group Laocoon was found under the palace of Titan. It was made by sculptures from Rhodes and placed in the Belvedere court in what is now the museum of the Vatican in the 16th century. Michelangelo was involved in the discovery. The garden of sculptures at the Belvedere court was created during the 16th century and is an early example of how art was consciously, architecturally displayed. The garden was created not just for the display of art. It was also created as an academic arena, gathering musicians, poets and artists alike, where poetry was declared and music composed and the works themselves made the object of imitation. Poetry was composed to the sculptures, just like the sculptures were imitated by training artists. As Peter Gillgren has put it, the sculptures were regarded as performative forces that produced a cooperation between the arts in different medias such as drawings, paintings, poetry and music.[9] Sadoletus interprets the whole scene as a father's shriek to his sons, after he has been attacked himself.[10] Now the pain expressed by the statue has become a central theme, replacing the imaginary images surrounding the myth.[11]

Gradually, the pain of mythical Laocoon merged with that of the statue. In the period of the baroque, and in the work of Bernini for instance, what was most interesting was the way in which the muscles of the group were depicting a tormented soul. Here, Laocoon's pain is not the suffering of a bereaved father, but a corporeal suffering which has to do with the attacks of the snake. This is also what Lessing appears to be most interested in; not the moral aspects of the story but the agony of the body.

The Relation Between Literature and Art

So what does Lessing's text actually state? Laocoon is perceived through the strong emotions aroused through the opening of the mouth, the pain, and the scream that is never heard. Painting uses figures and colours in space, he argues, poetry articulates tones in time. Poetry imitates sensible aspects of bodies too, in a sustained figure of imitation, but since poetry uses signs, there is more freedom to literature or poetry than painting. Poetry sparks the imagination.[12] This is crucial to Lessing, since it makes the question of affect tie in with imagination rather than mere physical reaction. Signs, precisely because they are arbitrary, can express all possible things in all their possible combinations.[13] In the visual art, space imposes limits to the possibilities of combination.[14] We may perceive many things at once in a picture, but not in an unlimited

number of combinations. At the same time, Lessing is extremely sensitive to the way the arts interact, in particular, with regard to the depiction of human bodies. Mimesis structures not just the action of bodies, but the sensible aspects of bodies. It is on this question that he engages in his debate with Winckelmann.

It is interesting to consider what version of the statue they saw. When they found the statue in 1506, the arms of the Laocoon and the younger son was missing. The arms were replaced, but in a different version than in the original. In the 18th century, viewers saw Laocoon with his hand held high. Winckelmann saw the statue in poor light, since it was not fully exposed, it was kept in a box and could only be seen with a candle. Goethe, in turn, saw the statue in 1786 when it was in daylight. He deplored it greatly since he thought it would have been much more beautiful if he had seen it only in candlelight. The statue was brought to Paris by Napoleon, and returned to Rome in 1815.[15]

There is no evidence that Lessing ever saw the sculpture himself. In his own text he mentions the graphics of Montfauçon. He appears to have been influenced by art historian Jonathan Richardson, whose book on Roman art was widely read describing the statues in Rome in detail, but without any pictures. Richardson describes how an arm has been lost, and how therefore one of terracotta has been substituted in its place. Richardson describes also how Michelangelo has started on another arm and how that arm lies in front of the piece, but it has never been placed on it.[16] There is no mention of this in Lessing, perhaps since it would have disturbed his idea of the mimetic depiction of affects.

Winckelmann and Lessing

Winckelmann argued for a moral reading. What was important was not the way in which the cause of pain was depicted, but rather the way in which we experience the figure of Laocoon as dignified. In this he draws not so much on the myth of Laocoon, as on the Sophocles tragedy on Philoctetes.[17] To Lessing, however, Winckelmann makes the suffering too dignified: it is quite clear that Philoctetes screams and whines loudly on the island. His fellow soldiers cannot stand his heavy groans and complaints, and they cannot stand his odors either. Where is the dignity?

The reason for not depicting the scream of Laocoon is not a moral one. It is aesthetic: "The simple opening of the mouth, apart from the violent and repulsive contortions it causes in the other parts of the face, is a blot on a painting and a cavity in a statue productive of the worst possible effect."[18] What we see is movement, and the presupposition of a scream,

the moments of anticipation before it will actually occur, thus the sequence taking place in which the scream can be previsaged but not quite disclosed. Here, Lessing performs the analysis in terms of a new kind of discourse, which does not reduce the figure of Laocoon to an ideal body. Instead, Lessing wishes to loosen the reflections from moral concerns to aesthetic concerns. When he does this, the regard to affects play an extraordinary role. Lessing shows that sense-perceptions can be analysed with specific regard to a viewer in terms of physical affects.

This is perhaps what is so strange and familiar with Lessing's text at the same time. After Greenberg and Wellbery, he has been read in a post-Kantian universe, where the limits of mediality construe art as autonomous. But to Lessing, the work of art is primarily characterized in an indirect manner, through the effects it has on the reader or the viewer. What we see produced in Lessing's text, then, is a subject who reflects on himself through the affects figured in another body. His study also opens the gates to a pre-Kantian universe where embodiment and visual stimuli are studied through the grid of affects. The corporeality of the figure of Laocoon is always in focus; less with regard to judgment and more with regard to the observation of affects, the impact of the body of Laocoon, and the ways in which the sensory system of the onlooker responds. Therefore, we may also take the text of Lessing with us as we look at more recent theories of art, not least the theories of affects used in cinema studies.

Lessing and the Imitation of Affect

So what are affects? Descartes, who was read by Lessing, argues in *The Passions of the Soul* that the passions have something to do with the physiological body. But passions are not simply responses to the sensible afflictions of the body. The senses respond to outer stimuli, and these outer stimuli affect the mind. But there is also something in the mind that acts independently of external bodies. We can have emotions or passions such as sadness, gladness etcetera when we think about events, passions can arise from dreams etc.[19] Descartes also sometimes uses the word affectus to describe the passions. Other than Descartes, Lessing also read Spinoza, who had a mimetic theory of affect through which bodies affect one another: "If we imagine a thing like us, toward which we have had no affect, to be affected with some affect, we are thereby affected with a like affect."[20] Both Descartes and Spinoza, therefore, see the creative side of affect; it is not simply a physiological response to a stimuli. In this way, the creative aspect of affect could have been enforced also in Lessing's

encounter with Juan Huarte. Lessing was the translator of *Examen de ingenios para les ciencias* (1575) a work that was widely spread through Europe until around 1800, Huarte connects psychology and physiology, arguing that the mind creates its own conceptions using the resources of space and time, as well as concepts of causality and figurability. This gives us internal conceptions of phenomena that are not simply reflections of the outer world.[21] These ideas may help us understand Lessing's notion that affects are not necessarily produced out of a direct contact with another body, but through an aesthetic elaboration of a body.

This would put Lessing at odds with Burke, for instance, and representatives of the the contemporary school of neuro-aesthetics. Edmund Burke in *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, argues that beauty is a "quality in bodies acting mechanically upon the human mind by the intervention of the senses."[22] This brings us straight into the concerns of contemporary neuro-aesthetics, where the perception of art is being studied through various methods of measurement with regard to its affectation of the brain.[23] To Lessing, however, an affect is not a straightforward response to outer stimuli. Affects act both on the body of the viewer of the work of art and on the mind; and it is linked to the faculty of the imagination. We feel the terror of Laocoon because we can imagine the scream we never hear. In our perception of the sculpture, our senses act together in a mutual linking of sensible apprehension and temporal and spatial understanding.

Kant, who responded to Burke's rather crude empiricism, does not give much attention to affect. The ugly may be disgusting, and colours may produce an unsuitable amount of emotions. The most dignified expression of art is that of the sketch. The "taste" for the pleasurable becomes compromised in seeking *Reize* of explosions of colour or movement. Pure judgements of taste are posited with regards to the composition before the music, or the sketch before the painting, the "form".[24] A judgment of taste is a mental operation detached from the sensible apprehension of an object. An object, or an example, may be the source of a reflective judgment in an indirect manner, but a not a direct cause. If we experience pleasure in a reflective judgment of taste, it is not the object that causes the pleasure we experience. It is produced by the freeplay of the faculties, in the purposeless contemplation of an object. What is universal in a judgment of taste, to Kant, is the inbuilt conviction that everyone will judge in the same way as me. At the same time this prediction is based on the conviction that they are as disinterested as myself.

Lessing, as was mentioned above, is often mistakenly placed in a post-

Kantian perspective and perceived as a predecessor to modernism and the idea of the artwork as autonomous (by Greenberg for instance). However, although he bears little resemblance to Burke's "phycisist" aesthetician or today's neuro-aesthetic, an aesthetic experience is intimately linked to affect to Lessing. Reading Laocoon, one may certainly get the impression that his fascination with affect comes from an intellectual pre-occupation with the problem of affect, like Descartes in *Passions of the Soul*. But it may also be the case that his interest in affect is linked to an intellectual and aesthetic appreciation of the human body, an appreciation that has to do with the kind of works that he was assessing: sculptures, theatrical characters, tragic figures. Lessing appears as an Aristotelian in discussing art as imitation of action.[25] But what is being imitated in Lessing's reflections in the text on Laocoon is, primarily, not the action of characters, as in Aristotle's *Poetics*, but the action of bodies. Painting uses figures and colours in space, poetry articulates tones in time. Bodies, this time regarded both as human bodies and objects, exist next to each other. Action becomes body, and poetry becomes painting.[26] The way Virgil describes the beauty of Helen of Troy, for instance, is also an example of an imitation of a body. But the mere description of her limbs are not in themselves enough. He needs to describe it indirectly, through the effect she has on her onlookers: "What Homer could not describe in its details, he shows us by its effects."[27] Beauty becomes sensuous and corporeal through the way in which the body is made palpable in the poem. Literature, contrary to art, can suggest "charm", a term that Lessing defines as "beauty in motion".[28] The motion of a living body, as depicted in literature, affects us more deeply than the statuesque beauty of a picture. Visual arts can only suggest movement.

Imitation, to Lessing, is far from copying. Imitation, whether in the visual arts or in literature, make affects appear. The affects of the body are observed as being corporeal, palpable and tangible. Just like Michelangelo made his pupils put great emphasis in depicting the twitching of the muscles, so Lessing pits great emphasis in finding the right expression to explain the experience of the body through the eyes of the viewer. Here much is made of Laocoon's nudity: Lessing explains well why the torn body is more interesting without clothes. He explains the sensation not only of the beauty of the work of art but of the body as such. His observations do not merely describe in the passive sense of the word, but brings forth a human body, less in the way it may be seen as beautiful at an imaginary level and more in the way it may be touched and felt. Lessing describes Laocoon's pain in detail: the way in which the head is

tilted, the mouth half open, the arms held high, the body twitching; all of these details serve to underline his agony. The arms, Lessing writes, are the most active where the pain is the hardest to bear. The action of the hands are particularly important for "representations of passion".[29]

Had the arms and hands not been moving we would not have experienced pain. The figure would have lacked movement and appeared uninteresting if Laocoon had appeared with his arms straight down tied to his body, as if he was already dead. Lessing demonstrates its movement and indicates the horrible aspect of the immobility of the statue at the same time – there is something inhuman and monstrous over the way in which it appears fixed, and yet at the same time attempting to escape, situated in a moment of time, and a state of affect, from which it will never be released.[30]

As we have seen, Lessing argues that vision and affect are tightly linked. This applies also to the other senses. Disgust is not only an affect produced by taste, smell and touch. Disgust can also be produced by vision. For instance, if we had seen Laocoon with his mouth wide open, we would have found the statue disgusting. We would have found it physically repellent, and not just ugly. Ugliness is symbolic; to Lessing, what we find horrifying is nothing but a terrible fate that has been rendered disgusting.[31] In other words, affects are commuted in the diverse media of the arts, they are not just straightforwardly depicted. We cannot dissociate the affect from the frame, narrative or mythos into which it has been inserted. A certain light may be cast upon that idea as we look upon the question of how different various medias can be used with regard to affect. For, instance the literary and tragic image of the lonely Philoctetes in a cave, with the rags from his infected foot drenched in blood and puss is horrible. In the same way there are scenes in the Iliad full of disgust, such as when Hektor is dragged by Achilles with his face in the dust, full of blood. This means that the horrible is a corporeal and graphic expression of a terrible fate, it is a form of embodiment of a human fate that is made to signify all the horror of the fate through the disgusting suffering of a human body. The body of a hero or heroine is used to express how terrible their fate is, and we are supposed to feel it in ourselves.

We must conclude that to Lessing, the affects produced by human bodies should be symbolic of the fate of the protagonists. But the way in which the arts signify at an affective level differ with different genres of art. In literature, that which affects us as disgusting can be commuted into pity. This means that the worst kind of image we can conceive of is the potentially visceral and graphic image of a human body, that has

suffered the worst of fates, such as in the case of Laocoon. The horrible is corporeal and disgusting, therefore some kind of aesthetic elaboration is needed for us to be able to perceive it at all. The horrible can be subdued, elaborated in our minds, held at distance, be put in perspective through a literary text. In the case of a statue, however, we cannot be presented with the disgusting in the same way. Although it is the same terrible fate that is presented, and although the horror affects us in the same way, it needs another kind of presentation. However, the fact that the arts signify differently, and the fact that we may well see through the means of how affects are produced, does nothing to do away with the force and power of those affects. Our sensibility, Lessing notes, is still wounded. As Aristotle noted, disgusting things such as dead bodies can be made beautiful through the art of "imitation", mimesis.[32] To Lessing, however, the question is not if the arts make bodies beautiful. It is rather how the arts are capable of transposing affects. In his discussing of the difference between poetry and painting, Lessing makes it clear that the affects of human bodies are made perceptible trough different means in the diverse art forms.

Literature is more free, and appeals to imagination in releasing the affects. Visual arts have a direct impact than can be described in terms similar to Spinoza: bodies affect bodies. Lessing's belief in the power of the visual arts may well be compared to more recent developments in film theory. Vivian Sobchack, for instance, has shown the perception of the eye to involve us in aesthetic forms of experience that are multisensorial. Film affects us not just at the level of consciousness, but at a sensorial level where the senses interact.[33] Lessing, also, conceives of sensorial forms of interaction. In his work, the interaction is framed through affects. It is the pain of Laocoon that makes visual, haptic and tactile impulses come together. Works of art interact with the viewer at the level of affect, in ways that are similar to living bodies and live situations. If a representation is real or not real does not matter, Lessing argues. The affect does not become less overwhelming if is produced through a work of art, rather than an actual living body. In fact, an affect like disgust may double as it resonates in art. Disgust becomes even more disagreeable with time as it is re-produced over and over again in the viewer.[34] This explains also why Lessing gives so much attention to the perception of the "real" body in visual arts, or the affects that transpires through the work. In painting, he says, affects become more crude. This means that visual arts have other affective qualities than literature for instance. Given that the object of art, to Lessing, was primarily that of human

bodies, it means that he is particularly concerned with the effect that the depiction of human bodies have on the human mind.

We also see an unwanted effect of this reasoning in that we need to face the relation between aesthetics and racism in his text, a relation that comes to the fore in his depiction of the bodies of the "Hottentots".[35] One may excuse this remark as being typical for his time. But more interestingly perhaps, we can also use his own less prejudiced engagement with the affectivity of the barbarians against his racism. As we read Lessing, the barbarians come alive, they suffer and feel, page after page, whereas the restrained and refined Europeans are given but a couple of sections of self-congratulatory pats. In fact, the "hottentots" have more in common with the barbarians that Lessing admires – Laocoon is a barbarian – than with the restrained Europeans, that appear less human.

We may now begin to discern a possible definition of Lessing's definition of affect: an affect is an affliction that acts on a body as well as the mind. It binds the senses together, and it is deeply embedded in aesthetic experience as such. An affect can be made visible in a work of art in such a way that it is also experienced by the onlooker or interlocutor. It is to be separated from private feelings or emotions, that do not manifest themselves physically, and that do not have any affect on others.

In his seminal text on the Body/Body Problem, Arthur Danto has reflected on the fact that we have internalized a relation of alterity in our conception of the body. This problematizes on the kind of commonality we perceive in our encounter with the Greeks, it is as if we have the same kind of thoughts and feelings: "the body is the emblem of our common humanity."[36] At one level, human emotions are always the same. And yet, at another level, they are always different. And so we can now look at a work that represents what the artist calls "the loudest scream I have ever recorded", perhaps just to illustrate that Lessing was right: the visual arts and tonality stand in contrast to one another, and yet they produce an affect in which we experience the sound through our eyes. The description of Laocoon engages us in a kind of self-affectation. No matter how many times we see a human body, and no matter how many times we see the body of Laocoon, and believe me, aesthetics students have seen it many times. It is always as if we see it for the first time. And this is the power of "the aesthetic".

This is why Lessing's text still does not lose its power. We may take it straight into the Greenberg conception of abstract art, or we may take it into a tradition of performance, and cinematic art where it is often described in terms of embodiment rather than autonomous media. If

we are to continue on the line of Sobchak, we may bring Lessing with us also as we reflect on visual stimuli that claims our perception precisely through the presentation of affects. How do we respond?

As all the versions of the story of Laocoon shows, there is no original, present. All Laocoons are a re-production of what has already been produced, a repetition of what has already emerged, although in a new way.[37] The figure of Laocoon figures the greatest pain, an affect that appears to be the very object of imitation all the versions that we have at hand. In responding to this aspect of imitation, the sensational aspect of movement and affect, the aesthetic subject is born. It is a subject that is less talked about in terms of taste, or pleasure, and more in terms of affectivity and sensibility. Lessing's discussion of Laocoon is just as much a discussion about the reflective capacities of the embodied being, as a discussion of imitation.

This is also the reason why in Lessing, we do not find ourselves studying a work of art. What we reflect on is ourselves. The imitated body, then, is not so much a product of art, as it is a bundle of affects produced through the eyes and the sensibility of the spectator. The birth of the aesthetic subject is not so much produced through the work of art, as it is produced through the process of imitation. The birth of aesthetics is tied up with observations of a human body caught in emotions and affects.

In many ways, Lessing does the same thing as art historian Richardson: describing an object that is not there. But Lessing, through his insights into the true nature, offers us something that is much more than a description which has to do with the fact that the objects are not easily available, and hard to find. Lessing's text gives us an acute sense of bereavement: the magnificent shape and body of the statue is forever absent, but the experience remains, through the process of imitation. The experience that comes to the fore is not the beauty but the physical presence of the work, arising before one's eyes. The best way to make a work appear is through the aesthetic experience of an onlooker. What we see produced in Lessing's text, then, is a subject who reflects on himself through the passions figured in another body, it is a subject that is expecting the sensation being explored through the impressive figure of works of art, whether one sees them or not. And it is, above all, a subject through which works of art can teach us something about the way in which a human body experiences pain, grief, joy, tenderness and other affects.

Notes

1. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke nach Eopchen seines Schaffens*, ad Karl Richter et all, München Hanser 1985-1998, vol 16, 341. Transl in A Companion to the Works of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Beate Allert.

2. Babbitt asserts that the most important aspect of Laokoon is when he asserts the value of criticism, speaking against those who say it "kills genius. " Irving Babbitt , *The New Laokoon* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press, 1910), 35.

3. Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon", *The Partisan Review* 7 (1940), no. 4, 296–310.

4. David Wellbery, *Lessing's Laocoon: Aesthetics and Semiotic in the Age of Reason*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Cf also Göran Sonesson: *Pictorial concepts: Inquiries into the Semiotic Heritage and its Relevance to the Interpretation of the Visual World* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1989).

5. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *L'Informe: Mode d'Emploi* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1996).

6. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Das Erleben und die Dichtung: Lessing, Goethe, Novalis, Hölderlin*, (Leipzig 1906), 30–35.

7. This is the definition of mimesis as offered by Hans-Georg Gadamer in *The Relevance of the Beautiful* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 104.

8. Quintus Smyrnus, *The Fall of Troy* ,translated by Arthur S. Way, Loeb Classical Library, 19 (London: William Heinemann, 1913), book 12.

9. See Peter Gillgren, "Klassicism och antiklassicism i Michelangelos konst", in *Barocken och antiken*, ed. Margaretha Rossholm Lagerlöf (Stockholm: Barockakademien, forthcoming), and Sylvie Deswarte-Rosa, "Francisco de Holanda et le *Cortile del Belvedere*", in *Il cortile delle statue: Der Statuenhof des Belvedere im Vatikan* (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1998), 394–95.

10. Bieber 1969, see note 14.

11. We have the first mention of the sculpture group in Pliny: "Out of one block of stone the consummate artists, Hagesandros, Polydoros, and Athenodors of Rhodes made, after careful planning, Laocoon, his sons, and the snakes marvellously entwined about them." *Natural history* XXXVI 37, through Margarete Bieber, *Laocoon: The Influence of the Group since its Rediscovery* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), 12. Margarethe Bieber shows that there is both a literary and a pictorial tradition of Laocoon, she also shows how they differ.

12. Lessing never went through with his plans to look at dance and music as well.

13. Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Poetry and Painting*, translated by Ellen Frothingham (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1887), 91.

14. Lessing, 1887, 91.

15. Simon Richter, *Laocoon's Body and the Aesthetics of Pain* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 23–25.

16. Jonathan Richardson, *An Account of Some of the Statues, Bas-reliefs, Drawings and Pictures in Italy* (London, 1728).

17. Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *"Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture"*, translated by Henry Fusseli (London: Millar & Caddell, 1767), 31.

18. Lessing 1887, 14.

19. See René Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, translated by Stephen Voss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), articles 19–21, 29–30.

20. Spinoza, *Ethics*, 3p27. See *Spinoza's Ethics: A Collective Commentary* ed Michael Hampe, Ursula Renz and Robert Schnepf (Amsterdam: Brill, 2011), 169. For a discussion of Lessing's Spinoza-reception, see Willi Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

21. Huarte then shows that there are different dispositions or different "geniuses" in human beings and points to a creative aspect in humans that cannot be assessed in a schematic way. Lessing wrote a short foreword to his own translation, expressing both his frustration with the paradoxes inherent in the text and his admiration of it, see Lessing, *Sämmtliche Shriften* (Berlin: Karl Lachmann, 1838), vol. 3, 260.

22. See footnote below.

23. Ishizu and Zeki uses the quote of Burke to argue that the experience of beauty can be associated with a specific region in the brain, independent on what the source of the object is, whether visual or auditory, art or music for instance. Tomohiro Ishizu and Semir Zeki, "Toward A Brain-Based Theory of Beauty" (2011). PLoS ONE 6(7): e21852. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0021852

24. See § 14 in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5: 225.

25. Babbitt 1910, 44. Babbitt sees no difference between imitation and mimesis; however, as Sam Ijsseling has argued, mimesis is to be regarded as a form of displacement rather than imitation proper. Ijsseling 1997.

26. Lessing 1887, 91. In the English translation, Lessing uses the word "body" to connote "object" as well as corporeal bodies; the primary motive of painting, Lessing argues, is bodies.

27. Lessing 1887, 136.

28. Lessing 1887, 137.

29. Lessing 1887, 37

30. Here we must ask ourselves if Lessing had come to another conclusion had he seen the "real" version of Laocoon, with the arms intact.

31. Lessing 1887, 156.

32. Lessing 1887, 155.

33. See for instance Vivan Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 57–97, and Vivian Sobchak, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 53–83.

34. Lessing 1887, 158.

35. Lessing 1887, 161.

36. Arthur C. Danto, *The Body/Body Problem* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 198.

37. Sam Ijsseling has argued for an ontological understanding of mimesis which makes it a presupposition of difference rather than a rendering of a difference; mimesis as the displacement of representation? with regard to ontological difference, *Mimesis: on appearing and being* Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1997, 20-21.