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## LITERACY AS AN AESTHETIC OF RESISTANCE: THE SILENT REVOLUTION FROM THE MARGINS TO THE CENTER

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*Alfredo César da Veiga*

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**Abstract:** This article investigates how literacy can also be seen and understood aesthetically. Adopting a qualitative approach, centered on a narrative case study of a 65-year-old man participating in a literacy program, interviews were carried out in the context of an adult literacy course. The article first discusses the historical evolution of philosophical aesthetics, highlighting its limitation in considering some actions as aesthetic. In this sense, the research appropriates the ideas of contemporary artists, such as Marcel Duchamp, with his ready-mades, to show how the notion of aesthetics can be expanded, thus inaugurating a true revolution not only in aesthetic judgment, but also in subjective perception of the artist, who ultimately decides what art is. Duchamp, therefore, by challenging traditional concepts of art, proposes that choice and context are sufficient to transform common objects into artistic expressions. In this context, the ability to read and write represents an artistic act, as it redefines identity, similar to the transformation of common objects into art. Furthermore, the article emphasizes the importance of including marginalized voices in academic research and promoting an interdisciplinary vision that values subjectivity and lived experience. It is highlighted how literacy can elevate the common to a status of dignity and recognition, transforming lives through education as a true artistic expression.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics; Adult Literacy; Life's history; Awareness

## INTRODUCTION

Aesthetics, as a philosophical discipline, has its main systematizer in Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-1762). His work *Aesthetica* was presented by him as a "doctrine of sensitive knowledge" (Abbagnano, 2000, p. 367). Until Baumgarten, philosophers, in general, drew on Platonic sources in order to find definitions that could penetrate the nature

and function of beauty, in a way that did little to distinguish, in the work of art, a singularity, something that set it apart from others. simple objects of common use, except for concepts such as harmony, truth and manifestation of the Idea of Beauty. Baumgarten brings the Beauty of the World of Ideas to the sensitive, to what can be felt with the hands, admired with the eyes or savored with the palate.

Perhaps such an expanded conception that brings the aesthetic into the field of the sensible influenced the aesthetic revolution that was observed in the 20th century by valuing the concept instead of the beautiful, as in Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) who displayed a urinal in the middle of the hall. arts of New York, in 1917 or the German Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) when he covered his face with honey and gold leaves, carrying a dead rabbit in his hands and, not by chance, he called this performative action *How to explain pictures to a dead hare* (how to explain figures to a dead hare). Such manifestations rebelled against a univocal and unquestionable notion of art, but, above all, they brought human experience into the museum.

Returning to Marcel Duchamp, he would have left the museum, crossed the street where there was a building products store, bought the urinal and named it *The Fountain*. He signed the work with the pseudonym R. Mutt, probably the name of the person who sold him the object. Duchamp, with this act, wanted to show that any object can be transformed into a work of art, even those considered unworthy, such as a urinal. The person capable of creating an object for common use, but so necessary, therefore deserved to be elevated to the height of an artist.

This is the conception behind this text. When an adult comes home exhausted from a whole day spent commuting to work only to start all over again the next day and still find time to learn how to read and write, one could, without a doubt, give that worker

the nickname of an artist, of someone who manages to transform a miserable life into an artistic life.

The article basically aims to answer the question: How can the life story narrative reveal the transformation of everyday experiences into artistic expressions, giving new meaning to the value of the common in the context of an adult literacy group?

Thus, the objectives are to investigate how the life story narratives of participants in an adult literacy group reveal the ability to transform everyday experiences into forms of artistic expression and, mainly, to understand how the report of these experiences gives a new meaning and aesthetic value to situations considered common or ordinary. With this, the aim is, finally, to give new meaning to the value of the common, elevating it to a status of dignity and recognition.

It is believed that this study, by exploring the life story narrative as a method in Social Psychology, contributes to a better understanding of how subjects construct meanings through their everyday experiences. This approach, which goes beyond the limits of simple data collection through interviews, inspires new forms of investigation that place greater value on subjectivity and lived experience. Furthermore, by highlighting the aesthetic and symbolic value of personal narratives, the study paves the way for promoting an interdisciplinary vision in approaching more complex everyday themes.

Finally, the focus on vulnerable populations, such as workers participating in adult literacy programs, highlights the importance of including marginalized voices in academic research, as well as offering some elements in future investigations that seek to explore the intersection between narrative, identity and art in varied contexts.

## METHODOLOGY

The research adopts a qualitative approach with a focus on understanding personal experiences and the construction of meaning. A narrative case study will be carried out, focusing on the life story of a 65-year-old man, participant of an adult literacy group. The life narrative is used as a method to explore this subject's experience, highlighting how he transforms his everyday reality into an artistic expression. Data collection was carried out through interviews at the beginning of each class, where participants were encouraged to tell their life stories. The study respected the ethical principles of research with human beings, including informed consent. All participants signed the Free and Informed Consent Form, ensuring that they were aware of the research objectives and their implications. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of *Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo*, ensuring that all ethical procedures were strictly followed.

## READING AND WRITING AS AESTHETIC ATTITUDES

When discussing whether reading and writing can be considered aesthetic actions, two main questions arise: one that denies and another that validates this statement. The first, which we can call evolutionary in the traditional sense, includes only those means recognized by a philosophical discipline under the category of aesthetic actions. The second, which we can call revolutionary, challenges and subverts previously accepted values, suggesting a broader and more inclusive vision of what can be considered aesthetic.

Aesthetics, in the traditional sense and in the historical evolution of the philosophical discipline, was formally established by Alexander Baumgarten (1714-1762), who proposed the study of the work of art as an object of rational knowledge. Throughout

the 18th century, the discipline developed significantly. David Hume (1711-1776), for example, introduced the idea of standards for taste in his 1757 work, arguing that although taste is subjective, it can be evaluated and discussed rationally.

In this context, Hume, in the work *On the Standard of Taste and Other Essays on the Arts and Beauty* (2023), suggested that some people have a more refined sensitivity to the aesthetic than others, due to their experiences or aesthetic education.

Immanuel Kant made a significant contribution to the studies of Aesthetics, especially in his work *Critique of the Faculty of Judgment*, published in 1790. In this work, Kant argues that there is no objective rule of taste that determines what is beautiful, since every aesthetic judgment it's subjective. He defines aesthetics as an intuition based on the faculty of imagination, whose judgment cannot be converted into knowledge or concept about an object, but rather into a criterion of sensation. This sensation criterion is based on the feeling of pleasure and displeasure, and is therefore entirely subjective. Unlike this, other human sensations can be used to acquire knowledge (Kant, 2017, p. 40).

In Hegel, in his *Course on Aesthetics*, aesthetics is understood as the science of artistic beauty, which differs from natural beauty. Hegelian aesthetics goes through a historical and dialectical development of art, which starts from symbolic art, characterized by a disjunction between form and content, classical art that achieves perfect harmony between form and content and romantic art, represented by the tension between the ideal and reality. Hegel opposes previous aesthetic theories that were based on the subjectivist feeling of taste and proposes the possibility of its rational and objective recognition and that it is expressed in a determined form of truth (Ferreira, 2011).

Despite many efforts, including those by philosophers such as Schopenhauer, Heidegger, Adorno, Benjamin, Dewey, among others, to address the problem of aesthetics, philosophy has not yet managed to fully understand the complex aspects and challenges involved. Issues such as aesthetic attitude, elements of art, form, expression, symbol and truth have proven insufficient to explain the complexity of aesthetic experience. This experience, according to John Dewey, carries an "impulsion that seethes like a commotion, demanding to be announced" (Dewey, 2010, p. 169).

The actions of contemporary artists, such as Marcel Duchamp, were fundamental in challenging the ancient axioms of art. Duchamp, with his ready-mades, defended the idea that utilitarian objects can also be considered art. Arthur Danto (2000) argues that, after Duchamp, anything could be transformed into art, and the traditional definition of art, based on aesthetic pleasure, was overcome. In line with this new perspective, esthete and art critic Clement Greenberg (2002, p. 39) stated that "anything that is capable of experience, anything and everything that enters the field of attention, can be intuited and experienced aesthetically".

In this context, considering the act of literacy as an aesthetic attitude can be compared to the transgression of artists who integrated engagement and even the spirit of revolt into everyday art. Thus, the act of an illiterate person learning to read and write represents a form of revolt against the oppressive control of any system that, a priori, determines a place for the marginalized and excluded, denying them the right to speech and expression. expression of themselves, in a creative and innovative way.

Literacy can be seen as an aesthetic attitude that combines cognitive knowledge and an emotional component, configuring itself as

an aesthetic of resistance. Learning to read and write is not only a gesture of overcoming individual disability, but also the beginning of a broader reading of the world and its intricate relationships. This process represents a metamorphosis, transforming a person who previously felt like a passive object, subject to circumstances, into someone who takes on an active role, like a key piece in a game of chess.

Furthermore, the aesthetic attitude is always related to decision-making that involves the desire to no longer be a mere spectator, but to become the main actor of one's own story, as is the artist who, by touching the world, He plays with his own hands, engaging all his affections in transforming the experience.

There is, however, a type of literacy that is non-libertarian, non-contestatory and, therefore, devoid of an aesthetic attitude, which Paulo Freire (2016, p. 127) called banking, with its emphasis on permanence, immobility and a perpetual present, no future perspective. It is in the interest of a regime that depends on labor to simply manufacture, without the need to think, that the working classes only have access to the basics, sufficient to maintain the functioning of the current economic system.

Between the 1950s and 1960s, the OECD, the World Bank and the World Economic Forum began to promote skills-based school curricula to meet the demands of corporations, which resulted

[...] in conformist workers who do not question the companies' internal orders and who do not act to defend their own economic rights. In fact, there is no objective in the skills-based teaching proposal to teach students how governments regulate business activities, in order to guarantee justice for consumers or protect workers from economic exploitation or dictatorial political actions (Spring, 2018, p. 133)

Large corporations and new business models generally do not oppose the cultural development of their employees. In fact, they recognize that illiteracy is a significant factor in economic and social backwardness, which is not advantageous for companies. However, there is another perspective to consider.

No large businessman encourages the studies of his employees, or "collaborators" (a term that sometimes hides a veiled form of oppression), to the point where they become aware of being treated merely as disposable parts in a machine that supports the system.

This awareness is closely linked to art and creativity, since a good work of art must always suggest the unsaid, that which goes beyond immediate perception. In other words, the art of thinking for oneself promotes the formation of autonomous individuals, something that systems that subjugate bodies and minds seek to avoid, preferring the conformity of automaton subjects.

To adequately serve capital, we try to promote the idea of autonomy, a word often used in neoliberal societies that encourage free enterprise and competition. However, what is hidden is that these supposedly autonomous agents are the only ones responsible for any failure and frustration. Furthermore, by not encouraging creativity and personal expression, these individuals remain at the mercy of the market, which shapes their interests to such an extent that they can no longer discern whether their desires are truly their own or whether they have been implanted by the system that feeds them and sustains. An economic system that relies on social inequality robs the subject of his signature on the work he does. Marcel Duchamp allowed workers to be given back their right to sign the work they made or earn their livelihood. Commenting on his revolutionary aesthetic attitude, he stated:



[...] whether or not Mr. Mutt made The Fountain with his own hands doesn't matter. He chose her. He took a common article of ordinary life, placed it in such a way that its useful importance disappeared beneath the new title and point of view – he created a new thought for that object (Duchamp, 1996, p. 817)

The worker just doesn't see his signature on the fruit of his labor because his time is stolen. The majority of workers in Brazil, especially those who live on the outskirts of large cities, see work as a necessary punishment, due to the many hours spent commuting on public transport, low wages and excessively long working hours. Stolen time erases in man "the border between illusion and reality, between art and everyday life" (Lasch, 1986, p. 128).

### ANTÔNIO'S STORY

In one of the literacy classes for adults, the song: ``*Cidadão*`, composed by Lúcio Barbosa, was proposed for study. The song tells the story of a poor bricklayer, forced to leave his hometown and try to make a better living in a big city. A part of the lyrics particularly struck a chord with one of the literacy students. The lyrics said:

See that building, young man?  
I helped to get up  
It was a time of distress, it was four driving  
Two to go, two to return  
Today after it's ready  
I look up and I get dizzy  
But a citizen comes to me  
And he tells me suspiciously  
"Are you there in awe or are you trying to steal"  
My Sunday is lost, I'm going home sad  
It makes you want to drink  
And to increase my boredom  
I can't even look at the building I helped build

Using the Paulo Freire method, which aims not only to learn the morphological meaning

of words, but above all their political and social implications, the students were asked whether they thought the character in the song felt like a citizen. The answers were:

Conceição: No, he cannot feel like a citizen, because he is humiliated. A citizen cannot be humiliated.

Prof.: The guy in the song seems to feel humiliated because he can't enter a building he built himself, isn't that right? Can anyone who does not have access to a place he built be considered a citizen? And why can't he enter?

Antônio: Because he's poor, he's poorly dressed.

Teacher: And his daughter? Was she able to enroll in the school that her father built?

Conceição: No.

Prof.: And why?

Geralda: Because she is the daughter of a poor person and was not well enough to enter that place

Prof.: In your opinion, does this story happen or is it just a song?

Miriam: It's true. Just look at the buildings. There are two elevators, one for employees and one for employees.

Antônio: This story is true. You know, near that school in the neighborhood? I built a 700-meter house there for a very rich family. One day I was nearby and stopped to look at that beautiful house I built. It didn't take long for the maid to call the owner of the house and ask what I was looking at so much. I know they thought I wanted to rob the house, I just wanted to look. We can't look at someone coming who thinks we want to steal.

Antônio built the building, but he could only admire it from the outside. Like Leonardo da Vinci or Michelangelo, he observes his work and recognizes himself in it. However, unlike these Renaissance artists, Antônio does not have the right to sign his own work. Even if he could, he wouldn't know how to write his name, as he was never literate. No

one, however, could steal from Antônio his dream and his imagination. All they could do was treat him like a second-class citizen and mistake him for a thief.

However, Antônio, who had already been attending literacy classes for some time, was slowly opening his eyes to reality. He learned to resist and face situations of humiliation or subordination. He refused to accept disrespect, like when the bank security guard wouldn't let him in because of his plain appearance and the color of his skin. Without hesitation, he called the police and forced the bank to apologize. Antônio understood not only the concept of citizenship as equal rights, but also the role of education in promoting citizenship (Prokhovnik, 1998).

Antônio shows, therefore, that a work of art is not so much that which critics recognize as such, but that in which the artist recognizes himself in it. According to Duchamp (1996, p. 818), "it is the subjective mechanism that produces art in its raw state". In the Duchampian context, therefore, there is a strong connection to discovering oneself capable of reading and writing as one of the artistic expressions par excellence.

Most members of a society with a colonial history, like Brazil, do not perceive themselves as an important part of that society. They are seen only as employees or carrying out orders, which constitutes an effective strategy by the ruling classes to discourage them from seeing themselves as equal in rights, in addition to the duties that they are constantly reminded of. Thus, they internalize the idea that working is an obligation and that doing their job well is something that is simply expected of them.

Our citizens are deprived of all creativity and inventiveness, typical characteristics of an aesthetic work, due to forces that operate to depersonalize subjects, making them easy targets of instrumental policies (Habermas, 2018, p. 243) that destabilize their identity

process. This reduces them to individuals, rather than people with the right to be effective and participatory members of a community (Habermas, 2018, p. 401).

Antônio was so depersonalized that he came to disbelieve his own judgment; Moscovici (2011, p. 109) reminds us that conflict is always an intrapersonal conflict because "it will mean that (the person) submits to another person and therefore suffers a loss in terms of identity and self-esteem".

Not every act of reading and writing, therefore, is, in itself, an aesthetic action in the sense that we have given to this expression. Most literate people in Brazil learned to read and write as an act of tireless repetition of letters, syllables and words. The student was overcome by fatigue and the emptying of the ability to think for himself. Repression and punishment were the most adopted methodology, the respect that students had for the teacher (the position was mostly occupied by women, with the exception of the management position, which was almost always occupied by a male figure) was imposed by fear.

Paulo Freire, still in the 1960s, realized that this education-fear relationship would never lead to liberation, but rather constituted instruments of domination (Freire, 2011, p. 109). The method that Freire proposes is, in its origin, aesthetic in nature, if one considers that in the teaching-learning relationship, not only the body participates in this process, but also emotion, curiosity, desire (Freire, 2011, p. 126). In a word, to feel aesthetically is to feel viscerally, like a pain that can only be alleviated if it is allowed to spill out, placed outside, in the world, in relationships, in community life.

For one to learn to read and write in order to "stop being the shadow of others" (Freire, 2015, p. 143), as expressed by one of Paulo Freire's literacy students on the outskirts of Recife, a northeastern region of Brazil

punished by poverty and abandonment of public authorities, it is necessary, first of all, to reflect on oneself and the world; This, according to Freire, is what will gradually increase the field of perception and, as a result, it will be possible to see further and further, to the point of being able to perceive the unperceived, that which, At first glance, it does not stand out (Freire, 2016, p. 124). Literacy without an artistic touch, therefore, can never allow the oppressed to become aware “of the reasons for their state of oppression”, in such a way that they will always “fatalistically accept their exploitation (Freire, 2016, p. 94).

Antônio, after the discussion about citizenship, recognized that he was not treated as a citizen. But that, according to him, would not stop him. Sometimes, all a person needs are to become aware of their situation, because only then can they allow righteous indignation to grow within themselves.

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals how literacy can be understood as an aesthetic of resistance, mainly due to its results, that is, when it contributes to marginalized people becoming aware of a situation that they perceive as unfair and oppressive. On the other hand, as Antônio's life story demonstrates, it was possible to observe how access to education and the ability to read and write have the power to redefine previously fixed identity roles and promote personal dignity. Literacy, in this sense, is not limited to the development of cognitive skills, but involves an emotional and subjective component that enables resistance against oppressive and depersonalizing forces, enabling subjects to fight relentlessly for recognition and equal rights.

The comparison between Marcel Duchamp's artistic transgression and the act of learning to read and write illustrates the ability to redefine the common and the

ordinary, giving them new meaning and value. Thus, literacy emerges not only as a tool for social inclusion, but also as an art form that challenges and subverts established norms.

The inclusion of marginalized voices in academic research is increasingly urgent. Marcel Duchamp, with an irreverent attitude, made this happen in the concepts that were previously held regarding the classification of a work of art simply by crossing the street and talking to a seller, who gave him the idea of what an artistic production would be. This shows that, without contact with suffering populations, our science will be nothing more than beautiful ideas, however, without support in reality.

This article also aims to highlight the gaps that still persist in educational practice in the country. Far-right governments have promoted a tireless fight against all Paulo Freire heritage and, with this, promoted the banking model of education, criticized by the educator. As a result, such forces promote permanence and immobility, stifling all types of creativity and innovation. Unless literacy is seen as a liberating practice that empowers individuals to become protagonists of their own history, we will never be able to build a more just and egalitarian society, as the common and ordinary will always be classified and treated as inferior.

Treating literacy, therefore, as an aesthetic of resistance is, above all, promoting a silent but essential revolution, especially due to the understanding that education will always be the most powerful tool for social transformation. Such aesthetics naturally promotes not only the valorization of lived experiences, but also the inclusion of marginalized voices, suffocated by those who cling to power and who, therefore, need the subaltern classes to be as silent as possible.



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