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Article abstract

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From Leisure to Study: On the Cultivation and Transmission of an Art

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In the pages to follow, I propose a meditation on the concept of study, its place in our contemporary scene, and its relation to the classical notion of leisure. In general terms, we can define leisure as an extreme disposition or state in which our relation to the world remains indeterminate in some way. In this sense, leisure favours a radical experience of the open and ungraspable characteristics of the human world. This is a nearly intolerable state. Reactions against it tend toward work, diversion, entertainment, or consumption. The hypothesis that I wish to explore in this essay, then, is the idea that study consists, in a singular and properly school-related manner, in inhabiting leisure, a condition which today deserves to be cultivated and protected. This idea of study is a way of being and dwelling in which the existence of a common world is in play and at stake.

1. The School as a Place of Leisure

The distinction between the spheres of work and leisure is at the foundation of the Western philosophical tradition and determines many of its political ideas and pedagogical realities. In the ancient world, work and leisure constituted distinct and clearly separate spheres. A lucid and detailed analysis, in this respect, can be found in Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*:

Aristotle distinguished three ways of life (*bios*) that men could choose freely, that is, with total independence from the needs of life and the relationships derived from it. This precondition of freedom excluded any way of life dedicated above all to preserving life—not just work, which was the way of life of the slave, coerced by the need to stay alive and by the command of his master, but also the free craftsmen's life of manufacturing and the merchant's life of purchasing. In short, it excluded all those who, voluntarily or involuntarily, for their entire lives or temporarily, could no longer freely dispose of their movements and activities. The three remaining ways of life have in common the fact of taking care of the beautiful, that is to say, of things that were not necessary, nor simply useful: the life of the delight of the pleasures of the body, in which the beautiful is consumed as it is given, the life dedicated to the affairs of the *polis*, in which excellence produces beautiful acts; and the life of the philosopher, dedicated to the investigation and contemplation of eternal things, whose perennial beauty cannot be caused by man's productive interference, nor altered by human consumption. (1958/2016, pp. 15–16)

As we have seen, all activities related to vital necessities, such as utility and profit, were found alongside work. Meanwhile, on the side of leisure were those activities unrelated to obligation, done freely for their own sake, for nobility or beauty.

¹ Translated from Spanish into English by Samuel D. Rocha.

Each of these activities had its own proper location. The vital activities took place in the private domain of the home (*oikos*) and their organization defined an environment of *oikonomia* (from which our contemporary term *economy* is derived). On the other side, the community and city constituted the environment of politics, where citizens devoted themselves to the exercise of their freedom through the civic arts. In other words, for the ancients, necessity was born in the natural community of the home whereas the possibility of living together arose from the community of the city, where that which was beautiful and blessed was upheld through the medium of the word. As we can see, the border that separated work from leisure also separated necessity from freedom, political economy, and the very possibility of a properly human life. To realize this superior kind of life required freedom from vital necessities as much as from the commands of others. This liberated condition was classed as *skholé* (leisure) and its opposite was *a-skholia* (business).

However, as Arendt herself maintains, these two spheres have lost their original contours over time. Their extension and meaning have been redefined to the point of constituting a third domain: the social, wherein economic and political rationality end up entirely confusing those earlier borders.

It is safe to say that this movement, described by Arendt at the end of the 1950s, reached its apogee in the 1980s with the constitution of the neoliberal paradigm, in which economic rationality incorporated even the most recondite dimensions of public and private life. The 1980s marked the end of the Cold War and of the public policies that guided the reconstruction of Europe after the Second World War and, with them, the end of the welfare state. Some of the old liberal premises that had been renewed since the 1970s were radicalized in order to build an economic vision that proclaimed the destruction of the welfare state through the privatization of public companies and deregulation of markets. But this new liberalism, inaugurated with the fall of the Berlin Wall, was made universal by the now unipolar world and was much more than an economic doctrine. Neoliberalism implied the construction of a new way of perceiving, understanding, and valuing the common world. In this process, leisure lost its character as a separate dimension and, transformed into fun, entertainment, and consumption, was finally assimilated into the process of capitalist accumulation.

However, it was precisely around the end of the 1980s that the idea of leisure (in the ancient sense) made its reappearance on the political and pedagogical scene. In 1988, in the heat of the discussions provoked in France by new educational reforms, Jacques Rancière published an essay titled “School, Production, Equality” in which he denounced the formation of a new consensus on education. This consensus had emerged among conservative groups, concerned that training be oriented toward productivity and the market, and among progressives, who supported the equitable distribution of knowledge and the social promotion of the less favoured classes. According to this new consensus, the universalization of scientific knowledge and the effectiveness of its applications would guarantee a happy and harmonious transition between school education and economic enterprise—between the promotion of “entrepreneurial” individuals and the well-being of the community.

This supposed identity around principles between the economic enterprise and the school can be clearly summed up, as Rancière himself puts it, in the famous phrase “learn to undertake,” coined by an education minister of the time, in which learning appeared as a first step on the path of economic entrepreneurship. The relationship in the original French—*apprendre à entreprendre*—is by no means arbitrary, since both of the terms share the same Latinate etymology, linking them to the Latin word *apprehendere* (capture or appropriation). In this linguistic orbit we find terms such as apprehension, prehension, prison, prey, and company. In all these cases, the sense of the idea is about taking or seizing something. What gives coherence to the phrase “learn to undertake” is that in both terms an acquisitive logic is presupposed, according to which acquiring knowledge then appears as the first link in a chain that leads to the possibility of acquiring, in the future, another type of knowledge, relating to riches.

The effectiveness of this ideological montage is verified in what Gert Biesta (2010) has called the *learnification* of education, i.e., the progressive substitution of the language of education for the language of learning. It is remarkable how, starting in the 1980s, the idea of learning completely dominated the educational field: the classroom came to be conceived of as a learning environment, the teacher became a facilitator of learning, and the subjects themselves became learning units.

Faced with this vision proposed by neoliberalism, Rancière evokes the old separation between work and leisure, private and public space, economic and political rationality, to make it clear that there is no continuity between the school and the market because they belong to heterogeneous orbits; their difference is not one of degree but of nature. In this sense, he insists that the school is not, nor has ever been, an institution of preparation for the world of work. The opposite: Rancière's school is an institution capable of offering a separate space and time, apart from the demands and urgencies that work imposes. In his own words:

School does not mean learning, but leisure. The Greek *skholé*² separates two uses of time: the use of those from whom the obligation of service and production takes, by definition, time to do something else, and the use of those who have time, that is, those who are exempt from the requirement of work. Among the latter, some increase this availability by sacrificing as much as possible the privileges and duties of their condition for the sheer pleasure of learning. (1988, p. 2)

In the field of education, authors such as Jorge Larrosa (2018), and Jan Masschelein and Marteen Simons (2013) have developed this thesis, emphasizing the idle nature of space and school time. But what exactly does this idle character imply when we refer specifically to school?

Although it is true, as Rancière maintains, that school derives from *skholé*, it is not entirely accurate to say that school simply means leisure. As Arendt points out, already in classical Greece the word *skholé* had both a general and a restricted use, according to which it designated not only liberation from the obligations of work but, above all, liberation from occupations linked to the pleasures of the body and the government of the city, favouring a strictly theoretical use of free time.³

The Greek word *skholé*, as well as the Latin *otium*, means exemption from political activities and not simply free time, although both are also used to indicate exemption from work and the necessities of life. Either way, they always indicate a condition of release from worries and tasks. (1958/2016, p. 18)

According to Arendt, then, the term *skholé* designated, above all, a state of serenity typical of contemplative activities which would allow us to think that perhaps the school is not a place of leisure in general but, rather, an instrument capable of turning leisure into study—a place that permits the sustaining of leisure as such, without giving in to the temptation of transforming it into work, entertainment, or consumption.

2. On the Transformation of Leisure in Study: Leisure and Melancholy

“From the very source of enjoyment arises a slight bitterness that in the midst of flowers produces anguish.” —Lucretius

We have long persisted in thinking that our unhappiness is due to the impossibility of creating and owning the necessary goods for a peaceful subsistence. This is true in part: without the minimum necessary resources, life becomes humiliating and unhappy. However, our lives as human beings belong

² The word *school* is derived from the Greek term *skholé*, which translates into Latin as *otium*, literally meaning “free time.”

³ The word *theory* should not be understood here in the contemporary sense, that is, as an explanatory discourse about reality, but rather as a way, especially attentive and careful, of looking at or examining the world. The Greek expression *theoria* derives from *theoros* (spectator) and is related to the verbs *theoréo* (inspect, examine, observe) and *theaomai* (contemplate, look, vision), all formed from the stem *thea-* (vision). It is important to note that *theoréo*, like *theaomai* or *theoreim*, designates not just any vision but a careful and meticulous way of seeing, a way that we could legitimately consider studious—since to study a subject is nothing more than to examine it carefully.

not only to the realm of necessity but also to possibility, to desires, memories, and illusions. We live with one foot in what is and the other in what was, will be, or could have been. Nothing is more painful than what we possess in the form of an irremediable absence. If leisure is difficult to sustain, it is precisely because it confronts us with this dimension of possibility.

Free time, to be truly free in reality, ought to be presented as an open time, that is, a time of possibility. To have free time implies having severed ties with everything that obliges us, and the world, to behave in a predetermined way. In it, nothing is obligatory, nothing is necessary. Hence, in idle hours we are confronted by the possibility that things will happen one way or another, or that nothing will happen at all. This absence of necessity also entails a certain exposure, given that this extreme vulnerability leaves us without the protection of a necessary cause that directs world events or our own initiative. On a deeper level, free time also confronts us with the possibility that things have one meaning, but also another—and, in the extreme, the possibility that nothing makes sense or has a point. Hence, leisure is always threatened by boredom, melancholy, anguish, and despair. In a famous course titled “The fundamental concepts of metaphysics: World, finitude, solitude,” given at the University of Freiburg in the winter of 1929–30, Martin Heidegger developed a thorough study of the experience of boredom. According to Heidegger (1983/2011), in boredom we are held back and forced to confront nothingness. In the hours of boredom, nothing happens: the world seems to turn its back on us, nothing calls out to us, nothing tells us about itself, nothing makes sense. However, precisely because we can experience this fundamental absence of meaning, we are also capable of giving things one meaning or another. In profound boredom, we experience a kind of suspension between meaning and nonsense, a borderline and at times unbearable experience of sheer possibility. Boredom is, in a certain way, the price we pay for our condition as free, open, and indeterminate beings. The word *boredom* comes from the Latin *abhorre* and refers to the gesture of moving away from something that scares us, makes us tremble, makes our hair stand on end. Perhaps what we are trying to look away from is precisely the abyss of our own potential and power.

The theme of the danger that leisure represents does not begin with Heidegger; his work only collects and deepens an ancient tradition in which the contemplative life always appears surrounded by dark nocturnal clouds. For example, according to an ancient medical and psychological theory, dating back to the time of Hippocrates (c. 460–370 BCE), there are four humours in the human body, which are responsible for physical and spiritual health: blood, phlegm, cholera, and black bile (*melas-kholis*), the originary root of the term *melancholy*. All four humours were considered to be present in all people and good health depended on the balance of these elements. An excess of one or more humours yielded disease. The physiological signs of excess black bile, the most dreaded and dangerous symptom, included blackening of the skin, blood, and urine, heartburn, constipation, flatulence, hemorrhoids, and absurdly gloomy or lustful dreams. Diseases it could induce included hysteria, insomnia, lycanthropy, leprosy, scabies, dementia, and suicidal mania. Temperaments derived from the excessive presence of black bile were presented in a sinister light: the melancholic was envious, greedy, fraudulent, and distrustful but, above all, sad and fearful.

In medieval cosmology, black bile was associated with the element of earth, the qualities of cold and dryness, and the geometric element of depth, as well as with autumn, the colour black, and old age. Its ruling planet was Saturn and medieval iconography depicted the planet’s eponymous deity as old and lame, brandishing the scythe of death. Saturn was an emblem of time, which destroys everything and, in the Greek tradition, corresponded to Chronos, the god who devoured his children. It was especially associated with instruments of cutting and dissection (knives, scythes, machetes, etc.) and of measurement, due to its relationship with time. Hence, the deity Saturn was the patron of butchers, pig slaughterers, and murderers, but also of peasants and grave diggers (recall his relationship with the earth, the dark and cold, the wet and deep). As we can see, in medieval thought, Saturn and melancholy evoked a series of sinister aspects linked to darkness, the depths of the earth, the passage of time, fear, sadness, and death.

However, the origins of melancholy were extremely ambiguous: according to Aristotle, it was also a mood predominant in outstanding men fundamentally dedicated to the contemplative life. Numerous testimonies of the time, collected by the Stagirite, attest that many eminent philosophers and poets were

frequently stalked by the morbidities associated with melancholic suffering. In his famous *Problems* (30.1, 953a10), Aristotle questions why all men of genius are also melancholic. The question opens a discussion which, from classical antiquity to the Romantic era, tenaciously linked the spiritual life and melancholic influence.

In the same tradition, there is an episode about the dangers of leisure and its necessary transformation into study that is especially interesting to consider. In the mid-fifteenth century, the Florentine humanist Marsilio Ficino (1489/1989), inspired by the double polarity of melancholic humour pointed out by Aristotle, explicitly assumed the task of taking Saturn from the gravediggers and the criminals and transforming him into the patron of artisans and scholars. As Ficino understood well, both poetically and conceptually, tools for measurement and cutting are especially important. Aristotle had compared black bile to wine: ingested in small proportions, it enhances our appearance, but consumed in excess, makes us pathetic. So, too, the melancholic mood: properly conducted, it elicits a natural propensity for inner recollection and knowledge. Thus, the material conditions may be created whereby a person's experience of their own power may be sustained without sinking into anguish.

Another humanist of the late fifteenth century, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1531–33/2008), developed a curious theory in this regard. Agrippa maintained that bile is not originally black, but transparent; and that it is a subtle element that allows communication with angels. Under certain conditions, however, this bile burns and the combustion generates the atrabiliar syndrome. For Ficino and Agrippa, avoiding this effect is a question of proper order in directing the melancholic and saturnine influence. Melancholy, then, comes to be understood as a dynamic element, which may be organized and elaborated through a code, a grammar of energy that allows one to sustain a spiritual life and the arts that make such a life possible. The question is to organize the passage carefully, from leisure to study—a study that is at once a mood, a repertoire of techniques, and a way of relating to the world. The goal is to create the conditions that will allow us to inhabit our condition as beings open to what is possible without drowning in anguish.

Let us remember that this symbolic and conceptual turn was concomitant with the development of the first universities and of scholastics. In this respect, we may surmise that the formation of what centuries later would become the modern school was associated, in part, with this subtle metamorphosis of leisure into proper study. As we have noted, the school is not only a place of leisure but, above all, an instrument capable of transforming leisure into study—neither through work nor entertainment, but through study itself.

3. On the Nature of Study

Study, as we understand it here, is not an epistemological problem but an ontological one. In other words, it is not related to the knowledge we have about the world, but to the world itself. Long before humanity became seduced by an individualistic and acquisitive mentality, the term *studium* was associated with the idea of dedication and care. To study was basically to give oneself to something, attentively and carefully. Unlike how it is currently conceived, study was not related to the acquisition of knowledge but comprised a gesture of dedication. It is no coincidence that in a society like ours, based upon property and consumption, the notion of study has been progressively replaced by that of *learning*. Although at first glance they may seem equivalent, there is a major difference between notions of learning and studying. As we noted early on, the French and also the Spanish words for *learn* derive from the Latin *apprehendere* (take or capture). That is why it is said that a policeman *apprehends* a thief. This sense of the term *study* suggests an almost antagonistic meaning. Deriving from the Latin *studium*, as has already been said, meanings emerge such as care, attention, zeal, dedication, and commitment, as does a sense of affection (as *studia habere alicuius* means “to enjoy someone's affection”).

There is a fundamental difference between learning and studying a language; in learning, emphasis is placed on the subject who learns—their concerns, desires, and purposes—while in study, the emphasis rests upon the subject to be studied. You *learn* a language in order to travel, to start a business, to communicate an idea; but a language is *studied* by way of an enchantment that is beyond any usage. The

difference does not refer so much to the activity itself but, rather, to the attitude, the intent, or the sense with which it is carried out. The word *learn* expresses a desire to take something from the world while *study* indicates, above all, the desire to take care of something, to pay attention to it. In this sense, it could be said that scholars do not use what they study but, on the contrary, dedicate their lives to it, spend their lives on it.

This distinction between learning and study allows us to contrast two different modes of being in relationship with the world, one linked to private appropriation and the other to the care of a shared world. The first finds its paradigmatic figure in consumption, the second in the use of a common world.

Signs of this attentive and careful relationship can still be perceived in the different uses that the word *study* conserves. We habitually use *study* to refer to a way of seeing, of listening, of feeling—a “state of mind” that implies a certain attention to the world. In that sense, we say that someone should not be disturbed because they are studying. We also use *study* to designate a certain type of exercise, aimed at the technical improvement of an art. This appears clearly when we consider Dürer’s studies of hands, Leonardo’s studies of horses, or Chopin’s Étude Op. 25 No. 6. In these cases, the term refers to a special type of work, dedicated to the exploration of a theme, in which the artist insists on a technique, experiments with different materials, or investigates variations in form, light, colour, perspective, or composition. Third, we use the term *study* to refer to a place: an arrangement of time, space, and materiality capable of creating a certain atmosphere in which the act of studying becomes possible. In this sense, we refer to a *study* of music, of film, or of architecture—or simply to that quiet and friendly room, to which we can retreat to concentrate on reading, careful listening to music, or contemplation of a painting. Finally, *study* defines a set of habits, that is, the ways in which we sustain this loving inclination to a certain subject on a daily basis, and thereby appropriate and care for a certain part of the world.

4. Technique as a Creative Place in a Common World

Human beings do not inhabit an environment but a *world*. This world is not something given; it is built, using techniques and tools. Houses, temples, monuments, paintings, books, food, clothing: our entire world is the result of material and symbolic elaboration. Therefore, to establish a relationship with the world, with a shared human realm, implies knowledge and intervention in this common world.

In a 1953 lecture, Heidegger (1953/1994) questions the nature of technique and what is truly at stake in it for human beings. He maintains that it is not possible to understand technique as something merely instrumental, that is, as a simple means to achieve a certain end. Were we to do so, we would never achieve an adequate understanding of human action. Even when technique makes use of instruments, it is in no way merely instrumental but a means of revealing possible worlds. Musicians, with their musical arts, unveil a world of timbres, rhythms, and melodies—worlds which, without their art, would not exist for us. In the same way, the carpenter, the filmmaker, and the architect, through their works, shape the world we inhabit. Therefore, technique is not, in its essence, a means to satisfy needs but a way of shaping a potential world and bringing it into presence. When technique is thought of as a means to satisfy needs external to the act itself, we fail to understand the meaning of human action. What is proper to the human being is not merely to survive in a biological sense but to give oneself to a way of life. Human life is determined not only by what is necessary but, above all, by what is possible. When human action (and the techniques that make it effective) is subordinated to the mere satisfaction of needs or resolution of problems, the creative (*poietic* from the Greek etymological sense of creativity or “to make”) character of human action is lost. In this sense, attending to the world is not equivalent to satisfying needs or responding to practical problems. Study, understood as the cultivation and improvement of an art, is not merely an economic question but a profoundly political and existential one, since it is through a particular technique that someone becomes an individual capable of intervening in the formation of a common world. As Richard Sennett (2008/2009, p. 32) reminds us, in archaic Greece artisans were called *demioergos*, a combination of *demios* (public) and *ergon* (production). We can perceive in this nomenclature the recognition of these artisans—roughnecks and carpenters, as well as musicians, messengers, and doctors—as persons engaged, through their art, in creating a common world.

Today, the ability to intervene in the world in a skilful way has mostly been displaced by machines. It no longer seems necessary to learn to do something skilfully because, for every activity, there is a machine that does it more efficiently: faster, cheaper, and with higher standards of quality. The celebration that is usually made of this economy of effort is based on the idea that technology is nothing more than a means to satisfy a need, to make up for a lack, in such a way that, if a machine may save me the work, why bother? However, if we consider for a moment the idea that a technique is not an instrument but the place where our potential for creating the world becomes effective, it becomes clear that giving up the cultivation of a skill diminishes the possibility of producing a fully human way of life. When there are people at a party capable of playing musical instruments and remembering a certain popular songbook, the party gains in richness and uniqueness. When these people do not exist, we settle for recorded music. But the recorded music plays independently of us; the musicians who control the musical progress, attentive to the sadness or enthusiasm they perceive in the singer's gaze, are absent. To sing our sorrows and joys accompanied by friendly musicians is not the same as doing it to a record that spins indifferently. Knowing how to do something means taking the world into one's own hands and thus being able to share it.

5. On the Cultivation and Transmission of Art

A craft presupposes the acquisition of a repertoire; and this is made up of knowledge, skills, and materials related to the craft. For example, a luthier must know the characteristics of the materials to be used in the making of an instrument: wood for the body, guts, nylon, or metal for the strings, etc. In addition, the luthier must know how these materials behave in relation to the sonic matter, since, for an instrument maker, sound is a material no less than wood. It is a sensitive acumen, attained in an embodied relation to things. The luthier knows the names and characteristics of the materials used; but, if they are good at their job, they treat the material itself with attention to the uniqueness of each object, its accidents and roughnesses. The luthier does not work with wood in a general sense but with *that* piece of wood in particular. In addition, one must know one's tools and how to use them correctly, care for them, and sometimes even build them. A carpenter recognizes hard and soft woods, those with splinters and those that allow themselves to be shaped; but they also know the metals in the tools: harder and softer irons, those that can take a lasting edge, and those that cannot. The carpenter understands the incestuous trade that exists between wood and metal, between metal and stone: about sensitivities to heat and cold, or to humidity, the importance of water for sharpening, the properties of oil or wax in relation to metal and wood. The carpenter's world is populated by relationships of love and hate between elements, by attractions and rejections. This is a world of secret resonances.

But it is not just about materials; this is also a world of pure forms and shapes (triangles, rectangles, circles) requiring the use of rulers, squares, a compass. That is why the artisan is attentive to exemplary forms, elucidated in the classic works bequeathed by tradition. The world is ambiguous and obstinate; that is why its tools press, cut, and grind but also measure, straighten, sand, unite, fuse, and separate. So, it is basically a matter of placing matter into form, of determining the indeterminate, of actualizing virtuality. The ancient Greeks called matter *hyle*, which originally meant wood. However, as Vilém Flusser writes in his *Philosophy of Design*:

when the Greek philosophers chose the word *hyle* (for matter) they were not thinking of wood in general, but of a particular type of wood piled up in the carpenter's workshop. Indeed, what moved them was the desire to find a term that could express the opposite of the word "form" (in Greek *morphê*). (1999/2010, p. 15)

The word *matter* was used by the ancient Greeks to designate neither the objective nor the concrete but, rather, the amorphous and its opposite—not the subjective or the unreal, but form itself. Matter and form are two dimensions of the manifestation of the world: the carpenter's art consists in bringing matter to presence through form, because everything that is manifest must become manifest as form.

But the relation between form and matter is not arbitrary, and matter does not admit of any, or every, form; creation moves within this subtle relationship. The central problem at stake in our relationship with the world is not to be sought in the relationship between subject and object, or between abstract and concrete, but rather in the relationship between the amorphous and form. The great difference between the cultivation of an art and mere information is that the latter need not respect the world; it is not in dialogue with it and therefore lacks strength and vitality. Art, on the other hand, is always in relation to something external, something independent and ambiguous. The world is not what we think or say about it; its reality always escapes us. It also does not bend so easily to our will; precisely for this reason, it is the source of all vitality. Possessing a repertoire implies knowledge and this knowledge is at once the knowledge of matter and form; it is also knowledge of the words that give name to matter and form but cannot replace them. Knowing the name and characteristics of oak is not the same as knowing how to deal with a particular piece of oak. An artisan understands, or seeks to understand, the intimate relationship between matter and form in order to intervene in this relationship. When working with a particular piece of wood, the carpenter must respect the direction of the grain and the presence of knots, wielding her tools carefully to transform a natural accident into a utilitarian or aesthetic virtue.

A careful relationship with forms, materials, tools, and procedures will, at length, present reasons for action. No artist or craftsperson does anything without asking why they do it. Many reasons are given by the material itself; good artists know how to obey the material, how to play with it without humiliating it or themselves. Other reasons arise out of circumstance, i.e., from the interaction between the contingent elements of each of the matters at stake. A self-respecting mason knows why he must build a foundation before erecting the walls of a house, why he uses a level and plumb line for this task, and how wet or dry weather influences his work. The surgeon knows why she must sterilize tools before a surgical procedure and a musician knows why he shouldn't leave his instrument exposed to the sun. The reasons come from matter and its dynamics; the world offers us reasons, but we need to know how to listen. This is why a craft requires time, attention, and respect for the materials used. Art requires a certain type of love, which is sustained over time and blends with the activity itself.

6. Skill Acquisition

A repertoire presupposes knowledge, but also the acquisition of a skill. Acquiring a skill is not the same as knowing something, as the skill implies becoming one with what is done, becoming reality through repetition. A good dancer allows himself to be possessed by rhythm, melody, the emotional tone of each note, its colour and timbre; he does this not by chance but by embracing or destroying certain forms. To dance, the dancer has to *become* affected form. A photographer must become one with the light and the shadows, recreate themselves and their subjects in the time and space that their image captures; they must make the lens a part of their body, extending within it and composing a new, photosensitive body. Without this intimacy, they cannot reveal a world to others. To obtain a skill, one must become something; you have to be what you admire, become part of the world and its dynamics. It could almost be said that it is not we who possess an ability; rather, it possesses us, as we build ourselves through the gestures and sensations that a skill presupposes, not vice versa. Perhaps that is what Aristotle evoked in the *Poetics* with the word *mimesis*, which means so much more than simply *to copy*.

Attention is the means by which we become in the world and thus become skilful. Attention changes the scale of the world, and a metamorphosis of space and time operates through it. I remember, as a child, playing with my little soldiers in a pool of water: I remember that world. I remember the wind in my face as I sailed across that immense ocean. I remember the village on the coast, where I had a farm, a wife, and children. That wonderful world still exists for me, and it has the same intensity as the fishing trips I took with my father. It matters little if one world existed in fact and the other in my imagination because, deep down, we live everything by imagining it. My attention to my childhood play had the power to change the scale of the world, and the world on another scale is *another world*; it had the power to multiply the real without betraying it. Mimesis is not a representation of reality but its loving transfiguration. No skill can be achieved without that mimetic force, without that passion which makes

us become what we love. This is what medieval writers referred to as *sympathy*. For them, sympathy was not a feeling but an individual's psychological state; and, more radical yet, a cosmic force that gave the world its consistency and dynamics. A skill is only acquired by the force of a sympathy that leads us to become infected by the world, to participate in its forms, textures, and forces. This has nothing to do with what is currently thought of as a motivational problem; motivation is of a psychological order and its ends have more to do with the administration of other people's desires than with attention to the world.

Sympathy, as a principle of world transfiguration, is not psychological but ontological. It does not refer to the subject but to the world in which the subject participates. It is not a matter of seducing one's conscience but, rather, of the possibility of merging into reality. Acquiring a skill does not depend on a subject's will, motivation, or virtue but on their capacity to let themselves be infected by things and to dissolve in what they do—that is to say, on the subject's capacity to pay attention. Paying attention is different from being enthusiastic about something new. That is what advertising does: it attracts our attention. But to develop a skill, attention must be sustained over time. Its acquisition is not guaranteed by what presents itself as merely novel, exuberant, or surprising but by the ability, to paraphrase Alejandra Pizarnik, to “look at a rose until our eyes are pulverized” (2004, p. 125). There is a profound reciprocity between attention and insistence: only those who are attentive are capable of repeating the same gestures infinitely. Distracted subjects tend to experience repetition as routine because it is precisely attention that makes the difference between ritual and routine. There is no study without ritual, but distraction and impatience turn any ritual into a simple routine, a mechanical and empty gesture, destroying the possibility of developing a skill.

7. To Participate in a Tradition

For us as human beings, our world is not made of simple things but of objects and artifacts, that is, of things brimming with time and labour. For this reason, participating in the world, merging with it, also implies participating in a memory of the world contained in our works, tools, and procedures. All human activity collects in its development a memory of what was done before. It participates in a tradition. Tradition is not something that is known or something that is possessed; a tradition is, rather, something in which one participates. It is a bit foolish to declare a certain activity as the intangible heritage of a people, believing that this will save it from oblivion. For example, the barbecue ritual of the gaucho tradition, and the set of techniques and meanings that constitute it, cannot be preserved like a building or a monument. A barbecue is something that you participate in; likely few Argentines, Uruguayans, or Brazilians believe that they are protecting a cultural heritage when they eat barbecue with their family on a Sunday. If they did, it would be a sign that the ritual no longer formed a part of their culture. For tradition is not something that one possesses, but something in which one is. When a craftsman carries out their work, their hands remember the work of those who preceded them. In a Quechua blanket from Cusco, it is possible to perceive the particular experience of time of the Andean people; and, in the bloody stylings of Cusco pictography, we may still feel the pain of the conquest today.

A repertoire is sediment left behind by human action. This rest is found, without a doubt, in memory: the motor, affective, figurative, and conceptual memories of the one who cultivates an activity. We sometimes use the word *experience* in this sense, and say that an experienced doctor is one who has been in practice for a long time and has the knowledge and mastery of certain medical skills. But, at the same time, these vestiges also hide in the works, in the procedures, even in the doctor's instruments—that is, in the cultural artifacts that we preserve and recreate in each activity. These elements, which we receive from tradition and our own personal experiences, do not constitute an art in or by themselves but only through their remains. For this reason, they must be revived again in each work. An art cannot be possessed but must be cultivated, since what is possessed of an art is only a sleepy remnant. Just as you can own a field and not cultivate it, you can also own a musical instrument and not play it, or live in a library without reading a single book. Cultivation is a relationship to and with things, not the condition of possession. It is worth remembering that the word *culture* derives from the Latin *colere*, the original

meaning of which is cultivation, farming, and labour. What characterizes cultivation is not possession of the land but the attention and care that develops when living in and with it. It can be said, then, that culture is found not in who *owns* but, rather, in who *attends*, that is, who maintains a fruitful and vital relationship with the remains received from the past.

8. On Transmission

One can give and receive tools, materials, and exemplary works, and one can show and know some procedures—the names of things and the general characteristics of the elements used in the work—but one cannot give or receive a sense of oneself or of the unique relationship that unites each subject with the art they cultivate. The repertoire is a vestige and, as such, it is nothing more than a residue that must be updated in a singular, unique, and unrepeatable relationship. Without this vivification of the vestiges received, there will never be cultivation; that is, there will never be culture or art in the full sense. A theory of transmission should be able to distinguish, within the cultivation of an art, what can be possessed and, therefore, given and received: that which can only be known and therefore shown, without ever possessing either it or what is necessary to sustain, follow, care for, or cultivate it (which also cannot be possessed or shown). Finally, let us say that in all art, there is something that cannot be possessed, shown, or produced, and which, therefore, cannot be transmitted, but constitutes nonetheless a kind of compass for any artist. That something can only be summoned in the sense that a spirit is summoned. Its appearance is uncertain and, in the face of this element, it is only possible, in any case, to make oneself worthy of its presence. For lack of better words, let us call it truth or, more simply, beauty.

9. What Cannot Be Appropriated

In a text by Walter Benjamin from 1916, titled “Notes for a work on the category of justice,” an interesting connection is established between the concepts of justice and inappropriability (i.e., the inability of things to be converted into property). “No order of possession,” Benjamin (1921/2021) writes, “however articulated, can therefore lead to justice” (p. 65). The character of property relates to all goods limited in space and time; a prisoner in its own finitude, property is always unjust. Justice consists, above all, in the condition of a good that cannot be appropriated. For his part, Giorgio Agamben (2014/2017) adds that if we remember that justice, as conceived in the preceding passage, coincides with the condition of a good that cannot be appropriated, then to consider the world as a supreme good can only mean experiencing it as absolutely inappropriable.

The public character of the school is at stake precisely in the possibility of presenting the world and offering techniques that give us access to it, preserving it as something inappropriable. The school, in its original form, is an instrument capable of transforming leisure into study—not into work but into study. The school that neoliberalism proposes, on the contrary, seeks to transform study into learning (or research) and learning itself into work and consumption, thus stripping it of its idle character. In this way, it also removes from the school its common character, transforming it into a mechanism of private appropriation, a means for increasing personal wealth. The public school is not defined as common simply because all school institutions work with a common curriculum; it is not common because of its content but because of its form—because in it the world remains inappropriable. If the school defines itself as free, it is not simply because we do not have to pay a monthly fee but because what is done in it is done free of charge, that is, for its own sake and not for the profit to be obtained from it. Gratuity comes from grace, and grace is an ancient idea that belongs to the theological orbit; grace is a divine gift that does not have to be earned or deserved. Perhaps the school is today one of the few institutions still capable of such a gift, wherein life does not have to be earned or deserved but is offered freely, in all its

generosity and abundance. Conceived as preparation for the labour market, however, school not only reduces human beings to a commodity (the labour force) but also impoverishes the world.

It has been a long time since humanity developed the means necessary to satisfy the needs that nature imposes on us. If poverty, hunger, violence, and humiliation persist, it is not for lack of material resources or technological means. The problem is not in the dimension of what is necessary but in what is possible: the dimension of desire, anguish, and illusion. The problem lies in the very possibility of inhabiting a truly common world—that is, of maintaining a just relationship with things, with others, and with ourselves, and of making the world a supreme good, a truly common good, an inappropriable good.

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