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Loris Malaguzzi, John Dewey and the Bauhaus: similarities and influences in aesthetic education in the Reggio Emilia Approach

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ABSTRACT: *The following essay aims to highlight some cultural references that have influenced the Reggio Emilia Approach and its aesthetic education practices. We will examine two of them specifically, which seem to play a substantial role. These are the cardinal principles of the Bauhaus and, above all, the theories of the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. A debt that is exposed, in a 1988 interview, by Loris Malaguzzi, the pedagogue and teacher who played the main guiding role in the educational experience of Reggio Emilia kindergartens.*

However, considering the complexity of the history of the Reggio schools, an in-depth examination is necessary. We must try to understand if there has been a tout-court application of the theories or, as we suggest, a more critical and analytical integration.

The focus will be on two fundamental issues. The first is the relationship between art and everyday life. The second will be a discussion of the issues surrounding the idea of process and the value it takes on in the different phenomena studied. We will see how these questions, argued differently by Dewey and Bauhaus, will play a role in the schools of Reggio. In particular, in the design of spaces dedicated to education in visual languages - the ateliers - and in activities related to visual communication - documentation and exhibitions.

KEYWORDS: *Malaguzzi; Dewey; Bauhaus; Aesthetic Education; Visual language.*

INTRODUCTION

Loris Malaguzzi was one of the most interesting figures in Italian educational history. His greatest legacy lies in his contribution to the foundation of the Reggio Emilia Approach¹. An educational philosophy outlined by him and the large community of educators, pedagogues and *atelieristi* who serve the cities kindergartens. Malaguzzi's role, more than that of theoretical guide or philosophical reference, it was that of creator of a circumstance in which this approach could be created collectively.

A context that is still alive and continues to grow even twenty-seven years after the death of its head.

“Much more than many philosophers of education, he devoted his life to building and animating an educational community: a remarkable group of teachers of various types and specialisations who worked together for years, even decades, together with parents, community members and thousands of children, to create a system that works” (Gardner, 2017, p.21).

The resulting philosophical approach began to be based on a certain image of a child with, one strong developmental potential, great expressive abilities and a bearer of rights.

“A child already at birth so eager to feel part of the world, to actively use a complex (and not yet fully validated) network of skills and learning and to organize relationships and maps of personal, interpersonal, social, cognitive, affective and even symbolic orientation” (L. Malaguzzi, in Gandini et al., 2017, p.57).

Malaguzzi summarized this concept of children's expressive and thinking possibilities with the metaphor of 100 languages. Children, as human being, have a great potential for communication, which does not lie only in verbal language. As a result, REA has placed great emphasis on teaching other communication systems, since the 1960s. Among them, visual language education stands out. The practices that arose in dealing with such issues were extremely brilliant, and Malaguzzi and the teachers in Reggio proved to be very up-to-date with the latest developments in aesthetic education. Nevertheless, what are the main sources of inspiration for these experiences? And how were they 'used'?

Therefore, the aim of this article is to highlight some important cultural references in the REA in relation to aesthetic education practices. We would like to focus in particular on the relationship between Malaguzzi and two key figures in the latest history of art education. On the one hand, the German School of Bauhaus. It was best known for its role in avant-garde art, architecture and design, but it also played a crucial part in rethinking the practices of art education. On the other hand, the theories of the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, who was famous for pedagogical writings and essays on aesthetics.

What I propose is to compare the philosophical framework of these three subjects on the relationship between art and education. Then, try to see if there are any similarities that might suggest further influence.

However, this essay does not pretend to be a detailed philological reconstruction of the dependencies and influences present in Loris Malaguzzi's thought, nor in the practices of the schools of Reggio Emilia. Such an operation would certainly require more time and space than that provided by this paper. An operation that would try to highlight one source of inspiration over another runs the risk of giving a simplified view of these relationships of dependence.

However, we believe that knowledge of both Bauhaus and Dewey played an important role in shaping Reggio's practices. In order to discuss this, some important preliminary remarks must be made.

Firstly, we must express that Malaguzzi was immersed in a lively and practical environment, which included many individuals, teachers, *atelieristi* and pedagogists, with whom Malaguzzi discussed, analysed and applied ideas and theories.

This implies that, within an active multi-voice community, a reconstruction of the theoretical references may be particularly complex because: a) these are seen and perceived first and foremost as tools for solving living problems; b) their introduction and implementation may not come univocally from Malaguzzi and his personal experience.

It should be emphasised that in such a situation the theoretical source is actually practiced, not just followed blindly. Reflection on a text can be seen as a way of solving some practical problems in one's own context. It was felt that this freedom, true to such a pragmatic context, was also a particular vitalistic element of it. It goes without saying that this does not imply that these influences were not recognised or that no trace of such uses was kept. In fact, in the interviews and writings left by Malaguzzi, as in those of the pedagogues and atelieristas of Reggio, the recognition of these dependencies is not at all absent.

Moreover, it should be noted that aspects and practices of the Reggio Emilia schools may not have originated from the experience of its greatest exponent, but from someone who was part of this community. Especially in such a context where dialogue is given so much value. However, this does not exclude the fact that Malaguzzi did not cite them as sources when, assuming his role as representative, he spoke on behalf of the entire Reggio Emilia experience.

These premises are necessary in order to draw a methodological line in which to move for an examination of the sources of inspiration. Given the elements of complexity, we have tried to stay in the area of aesthetic education and what is related to the visual world. This implies, as far as Reggio Emilia's experiences are concerned, a primary focus on the spaces dedicated to this type of teaching and secondarily on all those activities linked to visual communication, such as exhibitions or documentation.

ART AND EVERYDAY LIFE

We want to address the manifest element of influence. The one Loris Malaguzzi explicitly mentions.

In an interview conducted in 1988 by Enzo Catini, Malaguzzi lists his main models for the atelier idea. The atelier is a space included in all nursery schools in the city of Reggio since the 1960s, with the aim of educating using non-verbal languages, especially visual ones.

Therefore, this testimony is essential to understand the influences that guided Malaguzzi's thinking and practices on the subject.

«The models? A multiple inspiration from readings and experiences that, in short, comes from many sides. From Dewey, from the Bauhaus with its repudiation of the sublime myths of art and its separation from life experience, from Peirce, Wertheimer, Bruner, Piaget, Arnheim, Gombrich, Read, Lowenfeld, Klee, Mondrian, Magritte but also Luria, Vigotsky, Wallon, Freinet, and activism, Ada Gobetti, Mario Lodi, Gianni Rodari and from critical reflection on the lessons of Rousseau, Froebel, Montessori and Agazzi".» (Malaguzzi, 1988,p.27)

As we can see, Malaguzzi mentions Dewey and the Bauhaus first in this dizzying list. Even just by mentioning them first, they seem to play a relevant role. As admitted, there is no doubt that they were a source of inspiration. What Malaguzzi does not explain are the references one owes to one or the other, probably because of the issues discussed in the introduction.

Except for one point. Malaguzzi talks about the *«repudiation of the sublime myths of art and its separation from life experience»* (1988).

It is not clear, in the Italian original version, whether this passage refers exclusively to the Bauhaus or also to Dewey. However, it is a fact that this is the strongest common denominator between these two subjects. In fact, their respective researches are similar in trying to reconnect artistic practices to daily life. On Dewey's side, they are conducted through an aesthetic-philosophical study, while on the Bauhaus side through an educational-experimental action.

In both cases, it will take the form of an in-depth reflection on the aesthetic and educational processes and categories. We will see that based on this structural reasoning, Malaguzzi would create his own vision.

John Dewey – Art as Experience

As is well known, Dewey systematically address the topic of aesthetics for the first time in 1934, with the publication of his thoughts in *Art as Experiences*. This was a new theme for the American philosopher, but one that ties in with his earlier reflections on human experience.

He manages to do this through an approach that is new for the history of aesthetics. In fact, Dewey does not start from works of art, investigating their essence or visitor enjoyment. He adopts instead a pragmatic and anthropological point of view. What differentiates it from previous reflections on aesthetics is that in Dewey's theory there are only contingent links to the phenomena of artistic production and fruition.

Dewey's first proposal is to reconnect from below the aesthetic with everyday life and everybody life. Dewey, in his theory of experience, identifies the aesthetic factor as part of human nature, independently of certain cultural artefacts, i.e. works of art. The initial act of

Deweyan aesthetics is aimed at such a bottom-up reconnection of the aesthetic with the everyday life.

For Dewey, the task of the philosopher of art is in fact to « *restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience* » (Dewey, 1980,p.3).

So, based on a radical critique of the oppositions inherited from modern philosophy - of I-world, sense-intellect and emotion-reason - Dewey identifies the aesthetic factor as the natural human need to enrich his own existence. An instinct that, according to him, is slightly less important than nourishment. Which, we will see, is also a fundamental stimulus for personal growth.

From this derives a theory of experience, where Dewey classifies the possibility of relationship between each human being and his environment. In this arrangement, the aesthetic factor is an element of categorical distinction.

These are: a) the *ordinary flow*; b) having *an experience*; c) and having a *purely aesthetic experience*. The distinction between the first form and the second is certainly the clearest, and perhaps more significant, than that between the second and the third.

Ordinary flows are exclusively routine relationships with the world, in which there is no transition between them except mechanical. In addition, they lead to no vital growth.

Whereas, having *an experience* means carrying out a well-defined action. This means that there is an emotional element that characterizes it and that, in the end, it is delimited by a self-contained act. This distinction from the ordinary flow constructs meaning and enriches the existence of the person who realizes it. It therefore has, according to Dewey, an aesthetic character.

In the end, the difference between having an experience and having a purely aesthetic experience is more subtle. It is a matter of where the emphasis will fall in the process. In other words, an aesthetic experience, in the proper sense, will be enjoyed emotionally for its journey, and for its moment of consummation, rather than for its goals.

Such distinction between different types of experience leads to considerations about the art world that are quite innovative for an aesthetic theory. That is, that in Dewey's thought there is a surprising asynchrony between aesthetic experience and art.

That is, on the one hand, having an experience - which has reached its perfection, which is enjoyed in itself and which satisfies one's aesthetic needs - is not necessarily a realization or enjoyment of a work of art. According to Dewey's definition, a walk, a special dinner with some friends, a heated discussion or even writing an academic paper can provide an aesthetic experience.

On the other hand, an object defined as artistic may have arisen from the author's work routine, the realization of which may not have brought any enrichment in the artist's life. Few people would deny that Tiziano's Penitent Magdalene at the Hermitage is a work of art, but it is doubtful that the artist had a genuine aesthetic experience in painting it after having already made three or more very similar versions. Similarly, the viewing of the work may also be exclusively mechanical - and anyone who has been in the Louvre for more than two hours knows that - where the audience performs more of a recognition rather than a profound observation.

Dewey's proposal for a reunion between art and life thus goes to the ethno-anthropological origins of art. He does not merely propose solutions that overlap two cultural categories, as if they had to be stitched together, but seeks to find the structures of artisticity in everyday experience as a new starting point.

This structural action leads Dewey to reason about the processes of experience. This makes it possible to identify in his works interesting analogies between what he called aesthetic experiences and formative experiences.

We have seen that an experience is a becoming, in which there is a distinctive element and the perception of a conclusion. The American philosopher often emphasizes this aspect of experience as a fluid but finite element, distancing himself from much of the empirical philosophical tradition that identified experience with the generic flow of sensory relations between the self and the world.

«we have an experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is an experience» (Dewey, 1980,p.35)

Experience for Dewey is a continuous process, but marked by different constitutive phases. In his theory he focuses on the conclusive act that separates one experience from another. He calls it *consummation*.

This is not a mechanical conclusion - whereby one action ends and another consequently begins - but it is the refinement of a process of maturation, knowledge and emotional enjoyment. Therefore, consummation is not the result of such a journey, which can have a greater or lesser value, but which in itself does not characterize *an* experience. *«The time of consummation is also one of beginning anew» (Dewey, 1980,p.17).*

Just as Dewey's theory of experience is the basis for his aesthetic thinking, so it is for his pedagogical one. Where, in experience and education of 1938, we can find similarities between an aesthetic experience and an educational experience.

If the act of *consummation* took on a conclusive value for the aesthetic experience, in the case of education, more emphasis is placed on how this passage can be generative for the experiences that follow it. Indeed, this becomes a measure of what is or is not formative.

«Experience and education cannot be the same. In fact, there are some experiences that are diseducational. Every experience that has the aspect of stopping or misleading the development of further experience is diseducative» (Dewey, 2014,p11).

In other words, we could say that a good educational experience is such if it provides a constructive basis for the experiences that come later. In conclusion, the act of *consummation* assumes an important role for both aesthetic and formative experience. Assuming the role of meta-reflection for what has been and starting point for what will be.

The Bauhaus - Teaching an attitude

In a parallel and autonomous way, the Bauhaus carried out a reflection on the same theme of the reconnection between art and everyday life.

In this case, a similar structural action brings the discussion to the level of creative working.

The school's first manifestos, posed the problem in the term of reconnection between art, craft and industry. That's mean the three major categories of creative work at the beginning of the 20th century. Many in the same period had addressed the issue. However, usually in a superficial way. On the contrary, the Bauhaus stood out for a deep and structural intervention, in which the educational factor plays a crucial role.

The Bauhaus would begin to address the problem without the concern to present a style, considered better or more appropriate to its time. On the contrary, he progressively proposed a teaching method, a way of making art, architecture or crafts that would not adhere to any formal style, but would start from the function of the object and the optimal use of the means used to make it.

However, the school's initial objectives are strongly influenced by late 19th century ideas. Starting with the Wagnerian idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art. The school's first manifesto of 1919, accompanied by a famous woodcut by Lyonel Feininger of a Gothic cathedral - a metaphor for this idea of unitary art -, declaims:

«The Bauhaus proposed to unite all forms of artistic creation, to reunite in a new architecture, as inseparable parts, all the practical-artistic disciplines: sculpture, painting, applied art and craftsmanship. The ultimate, albeit remote, aim of the Bauhaus is the unitary work of art – the

great architecture - in which there is no dividing line between monumental and decorative art» (Gropius, 2007,p.64).

The Bauhaus was therefore born as a place of experiential learning where, as in a medieval building site, things are in progress, and one learns through practice and observation of the work of the more experienced masters. What is avoided is the uncritical transmission of historical traditions. Expedients such as mimesis or allegorical constructions are considered relics of something that served a certain purpose at a certain time, but in modernity remain only as a perpetuation of a past tradition. Gropius, on the other hand, proposes a progressive school based on a new flexible *attitude* to any creative work. This would allow students to get to know their own means of working and to make the best possible use of them, regardless of their artistic, craft or industrial purpose.

«I do not intend to offer a ready-made "modern style", so to speak, but rather to suggest an approach that allows each problem to be tackled according to its specific factors. [...] I do not wish to teach dogma, but an open, original and flexible attitude towards the problems of our time. [...] My intention is to encourage young people to understand how inexhaustible the means of creation made available by the modern age are, and to encourage them to find their own personal expressive solutions» (Gropius, 2007,p25)

This *attitude* will increasingly establish itself as a characteristic design methodology of the Bauhaus. A more pragmatic solution evolving from the utopian idea of the total work of art. We can describe this attitude as a transversal method that goes from an in-depth knowledge of the characteristics of materials to their efficient use. A method summarized from the famous formula of the school's last director, Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe: *Less is more*.

What can interest us in the history of the Bauhaus is the educational problem of how to teach students this working attitude.

The school's preliminary course played a crucial role in that. Each student had to follow these lessons in the first semesters, before choosing a path linked to a specific work material. However, in addition to student orientation, the most important goal was to present and actively experience this method of working.

One of the most influential teachers who led him was the painter Josef Albers. Beside his artistic career, he was trained as a teacher and studied pedagogy. And in his life he contributed a lot to the revitalization of the idea of art education, not only with the Bauhaus experience. For the preliminary course, he designed a series of active practices completely far from traditional art teaching. In these lessons, Albers asked his students not to create a surrogate work of art, but to work on certain specific tasks. He designed them to develop those skills and competences related to the attitude described above by Gropiusⁱⁱ.

An example was the so-called *Materialstudie* exercises. Where a common material, such as paper, was used efficiently and in an unusual way according to his structural characteristic. The focus for the students was the research process of new and efficient solutions. Rather than applying a-critically some traditional rules or creating a surrogate of a work of art. This gave the opportunity to develop transversal skills, such as divergent and creative thinking, which Gropius was looking for.

Art and everyday life in Reggio Children Approach

As we can see, both the Bauhaus and Dewey addressed the question of the separation between art and everyday life in a non-superficial way. In both cases, although in different ways, a radical approach was taken. On one hand, Dewey with his intention to rediscover the key element of aesthetics in the needs of the human being. In the other, the Bauhaus which dropped the categories of craft, art and industry to propose a method that can guide any creative work.

Thanks to the attention to these profound reflections, Malaguzzi was able to address the problem of art and daily life. Therefore, he developed it in an autonomous way in relation to the issues closest to childhood education. This allowed him to think about the teaching of non-verbal languages outside the idealistic or romantic visions in which art education was taught.

We can certainly see the greatest evidence of this influence in the *ateliers*.

Since the late 1960s, schools in Reggio Emilia have all had a space in the school building for aesthetic education activities; managed by an educator with a strictly artistic background, called *atelierista*.

From the outset, they presented themselves as the opposite of the traditional spaces linked to art education. The atelier is a space for stitching together all the dichotomies denounced by Dewey and Bauhaus. In fact, it is not intended to be an isolated environment for ancillary activities, but a place that is fully part of an elaborate educational project. Perfectly integrated with other school activities. «*The atelier could only take shape as a subject-intermediary of a polyvalent practice, provocative of specific and interconnected events: transferring forms and contents into the daily educational proposal*» (Malaguzzi, 1988,p.27).

So the atelier is far from being a place for learning historical techniques, as the Bauhaus too, nor is it an escape from serious work. For Malaguzzi his goal was to:

«*sink and train the hand and the mind, refine the eye, the graphic and pictorial application, raise awareness of good taste and aesthetic sense, decentralize in joint projects with the disciplinary activities of the section, search for motivations and theories of children from doodle upwards, vary tools, techniques and working materials, encourage logical and creative plots, familiarize with the harmonies and discrepancies of verbal and non-verbal languages*» (Malaguzzi, 1988,p.27).

One could venture to say that the atelier is a structurally conceived and designed environment for carrying out and perfecting aesthetic and formative experiences in the Deweyan sense. A space that permits the creation of formative experiences through the potential of non-verbal

media. Their peculiarity, compared to the normal classroom environment, is that every means is available to allow the child to find the expressive medium most suited to him.

In this way, it is possible to give the child the chance to have experiences that can enrich his or her existence. The role of the *atelierista* is also conceived in this sense. Just as the Bauhaus masters were not, the *atelierista* is not a bearer of knowledge to be transmitted. He is, rather, a figure who is first and foremost able to listen to and understand non-verbal expressions and, consequently, to be able to guide the experience towards a satisfying and formative conclusion for the child.

However, the ateliers are not the only result of a profound reflection on the relationship between art and life inspired by Dewey and the Bauhaus.

There are some further considerations on documentation and exhibitions in kindergartens. These have a contingent relationship with art education. However, they are bound to a conscious understanding of visual communication. In the REA, reflection on art and everyday life was in fact also useful in giving form to phenomena not directly related.

Both belong to a long tradition of ordinary research in Reggio Emilia schools from the very beginning.

Alongside their more classical purposes (data collection and communication), we can also read them in the light of Dewey's aesthetic experience. In fact, in the peculiar use of the educational community of Reggio, they get some important characteristics.

Which are, first, the capacity to *make learning visible*. That is, to follow and show the learning process. In other words, to indicate that constancy that should characterize an experience, according to Dewey.

Thereafter, they use *dialogue as metacognition*. The discussion with the different members of the community plays a crucial role in the documentation and exhibitions. It works as a moment of meta-reflection about the path taken. A properly moment of *consummation* of the experience.

Finally, the capacity to *trigger further experiences*. In fact, neither documentation nor exhibitions are self-contained, they are able to stimulate and encourage new experiences. Focusing on action rather than results helps never to find a real stopping point; but only steps of meta-reflection.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there is a clear and explicit reference to the Bauhaus and to John Dewey. However, not in a way of just re-proposing activities or putting theories into practice. In the REA, a philosophical reasoning on the categories of art and education allowed the creation of strong and generative experiences. References were a key “tool” in generating discussions and seeing everyday problems in a different aesthetic light.

It's believe that this essay can be useful first to get an idea of the possible, multifaceted and complex possibilities of exchange that may exist in a three-way relationship such as the one presented. Furthermore, we hope that it has been demonstrated that in the work of the schools

of Reggio Emilia there has been, and still is, an attention to and critical use of this diversity of ideas coming from very different sources.

It was also made clear that these ideas were not used with a view to application *tout court*, but rather within an ongoing dialogue where one reflection led to another and another. In this way, a completely autonomous, self-sufficient and equally valuable thought was constructed - or rather co-constructed - in Reggio Emilia.

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ⁱ Hereinafter referred to as REA.

ⁱⁱ For an in-depth look at Albers' teaching practices see (Horowitz et al., 2006)