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Mário de Andrade's Thinking on Aesthetics

Abstract: This article presents Mário de Andrade's thinking on aesthetics in the period from the Modern Art Week of 1922, when he read the essay "A escrava que não é Isaura", to his final writings in the 1940s. Andrade's aesthetics points to two directions. The first is the need for a renewal of artistic production in Brazil. The second is a consideration of art and its forms in their social dimension. These two directions appear both combined and in a rather tense opposition, in consonance with the distinctive traits of Andrade's personality. A key aspect in this regard is his critical review of Modernism in his final years, in writings such as "O artista e o artesão", of 1938, and in his 1942 conference entitled "O movimento modernista".

Keywords: Mário de Andrade; Brazilian modernism; aesthetics; modern art.

Mário de Andrade was born in Sao Paulo on October 9, 1893, and died in the same city on February 25^t, 1945. Born into a middle-class family, he received Catholic education and drew inspiration from his childhood into his poems and short narratives. He intended to become a musician and studied at the Performing Arts and Music Conservatory of Sao Paulo, where he was invited to teach Theory and History of Music. He taught at the Conservatory until his death, except for an interval in 1935–41, when he directed the Department of Culture of the Sao Paulo City Hall and lived in Rio de Janeiro.

His contact with modern art began in 1917 at an exhibit of Anita Malfatti's expressionist paintings. He then drew closer to Oswald de Andrade and the group that organized the Modern Art Week of February 1922. His first book with modernist poems, *Pauliceia desvairada*, was published in the same year.

During the 1920s, de Andrade stood out as the leading representative of the modernist group and a literary spokesperson of its program of renewal. Over the decade, Modernism experienced two high points. In an initial period in 1917–24, it set out to update the production of art in the country by incorporating the modern artistic languages adopted by some modernist currents, particularly in France. That was the time when modernists traveled abroad and import foreign books and magazines. It was expected that the adoption of modern languages would ensure Brazil's entrance

into the “concert of cultivated nations”. In a letter to his friend Manuel Bandeira, de Andrade expressed the purpose of joining a universal order in the following terms:

I know people say that I imitate Cocteau and Papini. It will be meritorious already to connect these two extremely different men, as distinct from each other as a gracious lake is from an impetuous sea. It is true that I put in motion, as well as they do, the same tides of modernity. But this is no imitation; it is to follow the spirit of an epoch.¹

The second high point of Modernism was its revision of the means of incorporation in the modern scene. Starting in 1924, Brazil's participation in the modern context hinged on the assertion of nationalist streaks of the country's art. This nationalistic turn involved the group of participants of the modernist movement and prompted a debate on how to define a national entity. De Andrade outlined this change of course in a letter:

Please note: the brazilianization of Brazilians means neither regionalism, nor nationalism itself = Brazil for Brazilians. Such is not the case. It only means that Brazil, in order to be artistically civilized and join the concert of nations that currently drive Civilization on Earth, must contribute to this concert with its own share, i.e., with what makes it unique and singles it out, in the form of a unique lot that may enrich and enlarge Civilization itself.²

Three principal works resulted from the nationalist turn: *Macunaíma* (1928), *Ensaio sobre música brasileira* (1928) and the book of poems *Clã do Jabuti* (1927). From these three works, *Macunaíma* stood out and has been appreciated as the most successful achievement of Modernism.

De Andrade's initial incursions in the field of aesthetics date back to the early Modernist period. He dedicated two texts, in particular, to the topic: the preface of *Pau-liceia Desvairada*, “Prefácio Interessantíssimo”; and the text *A escrava que não é Isaura*.

The main theses proposed during this first moment were resumed and revised along their author's intellectual trajectory as different versions. The first of these theses proposes a distinction between natural beauty and beauty in art. According to it, art does not have an intrinsic task of imitating nature, but has its own criteria. This idea appears in the “Prefácio Interessantíssimo” via assertions such as “art is not capable of reproducing nature, nor does it have the aim of doing so”. It would be necessary to escape nature, since “only thus will art not resent the ridiculous feebleness of color [...] photography”. The same idea appears in “A escrava que não é Isaura”: “a poet does not take pictures; he creates”. To expect a poet to reproduce nature would mean to

¹ Mário de Andrade and Manuel Bandeira, *Correspondência*. (São Paulo: Edusp, 2000): 62.

² Joaquim Inojosa, *O movimento modernista em Pernambuco*. (Rio de Janeiro: Gráfica Tupy): 340.

distort his vocation, “mechanizing and downgrading him”. A passage by Goethe then inspired de Andrade’s formulations: “an artist must not be consciously with nature; he must be consciously with art”.

Another thesis from these initial texts regards the relation between the content to be conveyed by a work of art and the formal aspects such work involves. De Andrade’s view was that all poetry proceeds from a longing to express and impart a feeling or an idea, that is, a certain content. To do so, it must resort to some formal or technical procedures. Artistic realization is based on the relation between a yearning to express and communicate, on the one hand, and, on the other, the resources mobilized by the artist’s work. Another way of presenting this thesis is by affirming that beauty is not in itself the aim of art but, instead, only a consequence. This means to say that the formal resources adopted by an artist must submit to the requirements of expressing some sort of content.

Another aspect of art underscored by de Andrade – namely, poetry – contains a play of dualities. Poetry is the result, on the one hand, of lyricism, and, on the other, of intelligence. Every poem is, from the outset, lyrical only. Lyricism is “a sublime affective state – close to sublime madness”. De Andrade personally experienced such a state as an extremely strong impulse, which led him to write, in one single stroke, *Pauliceia desvairada* and *Macunaíma*. At the same time, critical intelligence is summoned. A work of art will not make sense if it is reduced to an amalgam of the artist’s emotions. Likewise, poetic realization also depends on a maximum level of criticism. Andrade playfully remarks, at one point: “*Don* Lyricism, disembarking from the unconscious Eldorado at the docks of landed consciousness, undergoes a medical inspection by Intelligence, which sets it clean from the little monkeys and from each and every malady that could spread confusion [...]”³

The recognition of the tensions between distinct poles of dualities, such as content and form, lyricism and criticism, matter and technique, is the basis of de Andrade’s view of art. His attention to these aspects certainly reflects his personality as a writer. He confessed in a letter to his friend Oneyda Alvarenga that he was endowed with a certain ‘bi-vitality’. With this expression, he meant to say that he coexisted with the tensions between the “life from above” – i.e., intelligent, critical and socially committed life – and the “life from below” – sensual, anarchic and egotistic. Such traits did not pass unnoticed by Bandeira, who affirmed that de Andrade was “a fellow in whom poetic commotion flounders within the iron encirclement of a perpetually unsatisfied intelligence”⁴.

Since de Andrade’s first writings, topics of aesthetics are accompanied by a panoramic view of the history of art. He identifies three characteristic phases in the course of history. In the first phase, the aesthetic dimension has not yet been established as a value in itself. Art depends then either on social or religious needs, and has not yet revealed a disinterested character. In a second moment, the aesthetic dimension

³ Mário de Andrade. *Poesias Completas* (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 2013): 72.

⁴ de Andrade and Bandeira, *Correspondência*, 81.

attains autonomy and the search for beauty becomes the aim of art. Western art, according to de Andrade, had largely evolved in this direction, and its modern period expressed the highest point of its trajectory. As he saw it, a reaction to this trend had taken place through the purpose of divesting art from formal excesses. In *A escrava que não é Isaura*, poetry is represented by the figure of Eve, covered by increasingly sophisticated garb: “Every new generation and the new races, without removing the previous garments from the Ararat slave-woman, deposited upon her their new apparel with its refinements”, until, at last, an errant genius – Rimbaud, a 20-year-old man – kicked away that heterogeneous clothing” and “found the naked, anguished and unpolished woman” that is poetry. For de Andrade, it was this ‘woman’, stripped of her ornaments, that modernist poets began to worship.⁵

As we will see below, de Andrade’s view of this period underwent a change over time. In his maturity texts, Modernism was challenged under the accusation of excessive formalism.

In the 1930s, de Andrade firmly adhered to a vindication of art with a social dimension. His viewpoint ripened in the contact with the folkloric expressions to which he had resorted in order to define the national entity in the nationalistic period. He noticed that in traditional societies, art performed an aggregating function for the existing groups, in the emergence of sociability. This inspired him into a strongly anti-individualistic view of art. He stressed this perspective in his 1935 speech at the Conservatory, titled “Musical Culture”, and denounced the presence of a “downright and deep-seated” musical teaching that prioritized the virtuosity of musicians in detriment to a social criterion. For de Andrade, instead of encouraging the egotism of the virtuosi, a premium should be set on educating musicians with a comprehensive and collective view of their art. It would be preferable, as he saw it, to prioritize the swarm of musicians spread out across the state and the anonymous teachers from popular neighborhoods such as Bixiga or Mooça in Sao Paulo, instead of stimulating individualistic values.

The belief in the idea that art has a socializing-dimension guided de Andrade’s work as director of the Department of Culture of the City Hall of Sao Paulo in 1935–38. The concept of cultural expansion played then a decisive role. It was conceived by taking into account a two-pronged course of action. On the one hand, it was necessary to make culture available to the entire population of the city. In fulfillment of this objective, access to the Municipal Theater was expanded to the public at large, exhibits were taken to the streets and a moving library was set up on a pickup truck. On the other hand, this expansion meant that cultural producers would have access to the goods of popular culture. This proposal had already been part of the nationalist solution in the second half of the 1920s, based on the assumption that the nationalization of national artistic production depended on contact with popular culture and, particularly, with folkloric forms. Yet, the Department’s work was no longer aiming at nationalization; instead, it sought to ensure interchange among the distinct layers of society.

⁵ Mário de Andrade, *Obra Imatura*. (Rio de Janeiro: Agir, 2009): 232.

His experience in the direction of the Department of Culture was abruptly brought to an end by the *coup d'Etat* that established the *Estado Novo* regime in late 1937. It was a truly traumatic moment for de Andrade, who experienced it as a wound that could not be fully healed. In mid-1938, he moved to Rio de Janeiro, where he was appointed to the positions of director of the Institute of Arts and professor of Philosophy and History of Art at the University of the Federal District (UDF).

Also in the 1930s, de Andrade realized the need to explore the links between the two directions that guided his art concerns: on the one hand, his criticism of individualism; and, on the other, his criticism of formalism in contemporary art. His 1938 inaugural lesson at the UDF Philosophy and History of Art course, “The artist and the artisan”, conveys a quite pessimistic view of that period in the history of art, identifying that individualism and formalism had then become the characteristic features of art. Asked about which of the two trends – individualism or formalism – was the first to emerge, he points that modern art had lost its collective relevance and began to be experienced as the manifestation of individual personalities since the Renaissance, in the case of visual arts, and since Romanticism in the case of music. From that point on, artistic technique became virtuosistic and self-indulgent, to the point of detaching itself from the requirements of the substance involved in each art. In de Andrade's view, this is the cause of the current self-indulgent experimentalisms.

It was therefore necessary to convert art into its true vocation. To attain this aim, a new *aesthetic attitude* – a concept that had, at that point in time, a precise meaning – would be needed. The concept of aesthetic attitude emerged in German philosophy in the late 18th century, in the works of authors such as Kant and Schiller, to account for the disinterested attitude that characterizes the appreciation of beauty. In de Andrade's view, the disinterested attitude is reached when an artist submits his creation to the requirements of the materials involved in its art-making. In so doing, an approximation takes place between the artist and the artisan.

De Andrade had already resorted to this criterion in his appraisal of Aleijadinho's works in a study of 1928. He affirmed that Aleijadinho “was a formidable technique practitioner who could perfectly adjust himself to the materials he was employing, while knowing as well the limit to which he could submit them to his expressive imagination”⁶. The same criterion would guide de Andrade's criticism of Romanticism and his praise of Scarlatti and Chopin as musicians who conformed their technique to the material requirements.

Romanticism would have then experienced an ‘inflation of the individual-man’ when the personality of the artist stepped ahead of the functionality of one's work. This led to all sorts of virtuosity, whereas technique became fully oblivious of its artisan basis.

In contrast to Romantic aesthetics, Scarlatti and Chopin are valued by de Andrade. In regard to Scarlatti's harpsichord music, he noted:

⁶ Mário de Andrade, *Aspectos das artes plásticas no Brasil* (São Paulo: Livraria Martins, 1975): 41.

The foremost essence of his music, of its artisan basis, resides in the fact that he did not intend the instrument to give the sound that he, Scarlatti, “wanted to give”, but he obeyed the sound that the instrument “could” give.⁷

In regard to Chopin, de Andrade observed:

Since by remaining entirely musical and in music only – by not wasting his sounds, his melodies, his formidable bass-lines in the literary flights of an itinerant program – this genius lived his life in music without ever forgetting that music has a life of its own and a material that is particular to it.⁸

In “The artist and the artisan”, de Andrade began questioning Modernism and its deviations. In his 1938 lesson, this questioning approached individualism and the ensuing formalism of its achievements. In 1942, his commemorative conference on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Modern Art Week, delivered in Rio de Janeiro with the title “The Modernist movement”, became an opportunity for revising the movement of which he had been the leading representative. He resorted to three criteria in this revision. The first of them regarded the conquest of freedom of aesthetic research; the second criterion was the nationalization of artistic manifestations; and the third criterion regarded their actuality, understood as art’s commitment with its time. Considering the standpoint of the first two criteria, Modernism was successful. Nobody can deny that it overcame all forms of academicism and ensured the permanent right to aesthetic research. For de Andrade, the “normalization of the spirit of aesthetic research took place with Modernism”⁹.

He also recognized the success of the “radicalization of our artistic culture towards the Brazilian entity”¹⁰. An evidence of such success is that no one would then ask whether an author was writing in the language of Brazil. Thus, Modernism was “the greatest expression of independence and national stability ever conquered by the Brazilian intelligentsia”. As to the movement’s commitment with its time, his evaluation was negative. He considered his time to be a time of politics. For this reason, de Andrade’s view was that he and his generation had failed to tackle it. As he stated, “we should have flooded the utilitarian caducity of our discourse with an increased anguish at the times, with an increased revolt at life as it is”¹¹. At this point, the 1942 conference acquires a confessional tone. What was previously meant to be a dedicated and assertive anti-individualism pursued in the course of a lifetime appeared now to

⁷ de Andrade, “Scarlatti”, *Revista Brasileira de Música*, Vol. IX, 1944.

⁸ de Andrade, *O baile das quatro artes*, 150.

⁹ de Andrade, *Aspectos da Literatura Brasileira* (São Paulo: Martins, 1974), 249.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 249.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 253.

be but a form of “implacable hyper-individualism”¹². If the times were times of politics, it would be then necessary to respond to them politically. Hence, his final plea:

If there should be any worth in my own disgust, in the dissatisfaction that I am causing myself, may the others not find themselves sitting by the wayside in this manner, to spy on the passing crowd. Let yourselves do or refuse to do art, sciences and crafts. But do not restrict yourself to this, as spies of life under the camouflage of technicians of life, spying on the crowd as it passes by. Let yourselves march with the crowd.¹³

The vindication of a combat art is also present in the chronicle series entitled “The banquet” in the newspaper *Folha da Manhã*. One of their characters, the composer Janjão, is convinced of the “social servitude of the arts” and can only find meaning in unwholesome art, in combat art, containing “destructive and intoxicating germs that sicken the current life and help bring down the decaying forms of society”¹⁴.

In his inaugural lesson “The artist and the artisan”, the aesthetic attitude characterizes the artist’s procedure as he submits the creative act to the material requirements of his art-making. But in other moments, it represents a meaning more similar to the tradition of aesthetic thinking since Kant. In this case, the point at hand is the disinterested standing of the spectator who appreciates the beauty of a work.

A work note of 1938, titled “The aesthetic pleasure”, from the period when de Andrade taught Philosophy of Art at UDE, addresses this theme. This short note contains two ideas. The first of them regards the disinterested, immediate and contemplative character of the relation between a spectator and a work of art. The suspension of all interest is a precondition of aesthetic pleasure. The second idea, in turn, affirms that it is the very integrity of a thing – its splendor, as de Andrade beautifully calls it – that reveals itself to the spectator capable of relinquishing all interest, including self-interest.

In September 1940, de Andrade sent a long letter to Oneyda Alvarenga in reply to the questions of his former student and esteemed friend. Alvarenga had doubts about her capacity to become an art critic without possessing technical knowledge regarding the works she was about to comment on. The reply of her former teacher, in the longest of all his letters, is clearly that technical knowledge is not only unnecessary for the enjoyment of a work, but is even harmful.

De Andrade wants to differentiate between two distinct experiences – namely, the production of a work of art, and its enjoyment and grasping. In the first experience, it is clear that technical knowledge is indispensable. An artist uses it in the making of his work. In turn, the ability to grasp and enjoy such work depends basically on a disinterested approach. De Andrade identifies this experience with the Catholic *caritas* and with an act of love.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Mário de Andrade. *O banquete*. (São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1989), 65.

Since the enjoyment of art does not depend on technical knowledge but, instead, on the adoption of an aesthetic attitude, one may state that it stands at the reach of every man. In a letter written to Guilherme Figueiredo, whose concerns were similar to those of Alvarenga, de Andrade asserts: “in art (which is an expression, and not exclusively a technique, as is the case of science) all – absolutely all – have the right to appreciate or not, to like or to repudiate, and to give opinion, pointing at what pleased oneself or not, and why it pleased oneself or not”. And so art also acquires a collective dimension in this way.

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