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Application of Enrique Dussel's aesthetics of liberation in the analysis of illustrations from Mexico's free textbooks

Aplicación de la estética de la liberación de Enrique Dussel en el análisis de las ilustraciones de los libros de texto gratuitos de México

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Abstract

The so-called Fourth Transformation, driven during the presidency of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018–2024), promoted a profound renewal of Mexico's Free Textbooks, shifting from a model based on outsourcing to international publishing houses toward one centered on national pedagogical design. This article presents a critical self-evaluation based on image analysis dimensions grounded in Enrique Dussel's Aesthetics of Liberation (2018). We applied these dimensions to the self-analysis of a selected group of my most representative illustrations created for the new family of Free Textbooks. Through the analysis of five key images, it becomes evident how those incorporating symbolic elements related to local identity, ethnic diversity, collective memory, community creativity, and the reuse of everyday objects succeed in aligning with the fundamental principles of the Aesthetics of Liberation. These dimensions include visual narrative, symbolism, body representation, geographic space, landscape, and articulating culture and knowledge from a decolonial and liberating perspective.

Keywords: aesthetics of liberation, Mexico, aesthetic dimensions, aesthetic analysis, free textbooks.

Resumen

La llamada Cuarta Transformación, impulsada durante la presidencia de Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018–2024), promovió una renovación profunda de los Libros de Texto Gratuitos en México, pasando de un modelo basado en la subcontratación a editoriales internacionales hacia uno centrado en el diseño pedagógico nacional. Este artículo presenta una autoevaluación crítica basada en dimensiones de análisis de imágenes sustentadas en la Estética de la Liberación de Enrique Dussel (2018). Aplicamos estas dimensiones al autoanálisis de un conjunto seleccionado de mis ilustraciones más representativas realizadas para la nueva familia de Libros de Texto Gratuitos. A través del análisis de cinco imágenes clave, se pone de manifiesto cómo aquellas que integran elementos simbólicos relacionados con la identidad local, la diversidad étnica, la memoria colectiva, la creatividad comunitaria y la reutilización de objetos cotidianos logran alinearse con los principios fundamentales de la Estética de la Liberación. Estas dimensiones incluyen: narrativa visual, simbolismo, representación del cuerpo, espacio geográfico, paisaje, así como la articulación de la cultura y el conocimiento desde una perspectiva decolonial y liberadora.

Palabras clave: estética de la liberación, México, dimensiones estéticas, análisis estético, libros de texto gratuitos.





1. INTRODUCTION

The so-called Fourth Transformation, driven during the presidency of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018–2024), promoted a profound renewal of Mexico's Free Textbooks, shifting from a model based on outsourcing to international publishing houses toward one centered on national pedagogical design. This article presents a critical self-evaluation based on image analysis dimensions grounded in Enrique Dussel's Aesthetics of Liberation (2018). We applied these dimensions to the self-analysis of a selected group of my most representative illustrations created for the new family of Free Textbooks. Through the analysis of five key images, it becomes evident how those incorporating symbolic elements related to local identity, ethnic diversity, collective memory, community creativity, and the reuse of everyday objects succeed in aligning with the fundamental principles of the Aesthetics of Liberation. These dimensions include visual narrative, symbolism, body representation, geographic space, landscape, and articulating culture and knowledge from a decolonial and liberating perspective:

Education will only be free when, in addition to teacher instruction, students also receive at no cost the books essential for their studies and schoolwork. (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 1959. p.1).

This push toward a more autonomous and participatory production reflects an inclusive vision of education, where students are not merely passive recipients of knowledge but active subjects in constructing their learning and shaping their school culture. In this sense, the new family of Free Textbooks (LTG) introduced an open call that allows participation from artists, writers, and diverse educational communities—particularly teachers in active service and interested students who collaborate in creating content and illustrations. This democratizing approach of the academic policy explicitly recognizes the pluricultural composition of the country and promotes the involvement of Indigenous peoples and communities in shaping relevant educational models. As MEJOREDU (2022) notes, this alternative, locally conceived model—designed from and for Mexico—is committed to social justice and prioritizes historically excluded ethnic minorities, rural communities, and vulnerable sectors. The Nueva Escuela Mexicana (New Mexican School, NEM) thus proposes an education recognizing cultural diversity as a fundamental value and encouraging community participation in civic formation (SEP, 2019).

This pedagogical approach also has profound implications in the aesthetic realm. By incorporating new vernacular aesthetics—drawn from artists, children, and local communities—the new LTG series seeks to challenge dominant modes of visual representation, often shaped by Eurocentric, colonial, or commercial logic.

Understanding that diversity is a form of wealth and that identity is a source of pride represents an important step toward dismantling discrimination





based on language, race, ethnicity, or culture throughout Mexican society. (SEP, 2024).

These emerging aesthetics offer a different perspective on History, nature, and society and relate to expressions of symbolic resistance and tools for cultural emancipation. However, they are valuable materials: "Children get excited when you give them their materials. They start flipping through the pages, and not receiving them would affect them even emotionally." Regarding representation, school textbooks carry a social responsibility in shaping collective imaginaries. Illustrations must reflect the cultural, ethnic, gender, and functional diversity of society, promoting values of equity, respect, and "belonging to our nation and the world" (Candela, 2022, p.19). The purpose of this reflection is to explore how these new vernacular aesthetics—proposed by artists, girls, and boys in Mexico in harmony with the Nueva Escuela Mexicana through the new family of Free Textbooks—challenge dominant, Eurocentric, or colonial aesthetics present in current commercial illustration trends.

Philosopher Enrique Dussel proposed the need for an educational transformation within the framework of what has been called the Fourth Transformation in Mexico. Such transformation involves questioning the so-called "sacred cow" that represents the traditional educational system (Illich, 2006), aiming to rethink the method and content of an education historically rooted in Eurocentrism and the banking model (Alam, 2013). For example, the classical periodization of History—divided into Ancient, Medieval, and Modern Ages—excludes fundamental narratives from non-Western civilizations such as those of China, India, Mexico, or Peru (Dussel, 2023). This critique points to the urgent need to decolonize education—from History to Aesthetics—to "think with our minds" (Dussel, 2024).

In this context, it is essential to understand the notions of aesthetics, art, and beauty and recognize the cultural biases inherited from the Western canon to decolonize aesthetics (Khan, 2023).

The Fourth Transformation, initiated by the government of President López Obrador (2018–2024), promoted in Mexico a renewal of Free Textbooks, shifting from outsourcing services to international publishing houses toward a national pedagogical design model developed by active teachers. This new approach includes creating picture books (Libros álbum) in Preschool Education and through Primary and Secondary Education projects. The contents and illustrations were developed through open calls, allowing greater citizen and professional participation in their creation.

This article proposes a self-evaluation based on image analysis dimensions grounded in the Aesthetics of Liberation. It aims to apply these dimensions to self-analyze the most relevant illustrations we created for the new family of free textbooks. The goal is to assess whether these illustrations align with the principles of this decolonizing aesthetic, in agreement with Marcuse





(1979) when he states that art subverts the dominant consciousness, the ordinary experience.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It is important to distinguish between what Dussel (2018) calls the aesthetic and the artistic, even though both concepts are related. Aesthetics proper refers to the emotion and commotion we experience before the beauty of reality. The emotional response arises when we come into contact with what inspires us and affirms life. It is not limited to classical canons or universal standards but is rooted in the concrete experience of human existence. According to Dussel, this is the "anti-entropic"—that which opposes evil (an ethical category) and ugliness (an aesthetic category) in order to promote life (Pansarelli & Lima, 2017).

On the other hand, artistic production implies an *ars*, a technique or skill to create something new in honor of what we have found beautiful. Art does not simply reproduce the beautiful; it interprets, reinterprets, and reinvents it (Bolaños, 2024). In this sense, art can be a tool for affirming life. This phenomenon reminds us that aesthetics does not reside solely in the finished work but in the prior experience that gives rise to it. In this regard, as Enrique Dussel suggests, first comes "aisthesis," the sensitive perception of life, and only afterward comes "poiesis," the artistic production that emerges from that experience—first sensation, then creation.

A cinematic example that illustrates this distinction is the film *Amélie* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001), in which the protagonist describes small actions that generate sensory and emotional pleasure; one of the most memorable is the experience of placing her hand inside a sack full of beans. This scene portrays an intimate and deeply aesthetic moment: It is a sensitive perception of the world, a connection between the body and the environment that transcends the rational to dwell in emotion and sensitivity. It is an experience that viewers can recognize and mentally recreate, producing an effect known as "insight" (Rubin, 2016; Kandel, 2012): a feeling of immediate identification, as if something within us lights up upon contact with the experience. The film (poiesis) evokes a vital sensation (aesthesis) (Villegas, 2007; Peña, 1996).

Dussel distinguishes between two major aesthetic-political traditions that shape ways of seeing and feeling the world. On the one hand, the Aesthetics of Dominance relate to artistic expressions tied to hegemonic interests and ideological reproductions of power. This type of aesthetics often privileges Eurocentric beauty standards and white male figures associated with symbols of authority and control and prioritizes market logic and consumption.

On the other hand, the Aesthetics of Liberation emerges from subaltern and excluded realities, proposing new forms of beauty, expression, and sensibility. It is an aesthetic that breaks away from dominant models to give voice and





visibility to those historically silenced, valuing the local, the communal, and the Andean (Odone, 2007) as legitimate sources of beauty and meaning.

A comparison between these two aesthetics reveals apparent differences in both content and intention. While the Aesthetics of Domination appreciates beauty in the European and "classical" in uniformed bodies—male, white, or Western (Arcella, 2017)—and in the commodification of beauty, the Aesthetics of Liberation finds inspiration in everyday, communal, and racial, geographic, and cultural diversity. In Domination, whiteness equates to goodness and beauty, while non-whiteness becomes "villainous" (Fuentefría Rodríguez, 2022). We may later explore whether it is possible to draw connections between the main artistic traditions of 20th-century Mexican art and the aesthetics mentioned above: on one side, Mexican Muralism, Estridentismo, and Vasconcelista nationalism; on the other, the Ruptura generation, the Contemporáneos group, and the magazine *Vuelta*, with their cosmopolitan and elitist views of art and culture. That, however, will be another topic for another time.

The contrast between Domination and Liberation also has profound implications in the educational realm (Mora, 2009; Giroux, 1999). School images are not merely didactic tools but representational devices that construct social imaginaries, identities, and power relations. Textbook illustrations convey explicit and implicit messages about who belongs and deserves exposure and how the official textbooks present knowledge and human experience.

3. METHODOLOGY

We self-evaluated by analyzing the most relevant images designed for the new family of Free Textbooks, using a qualitative methodology based on the principles of the Aesthetics of Liberation.

This evaluation assesses whether the illustrations produced are consistent with such an aesthetic. The process began with selecting five representative illustrations, chosen according to their thematic focus, cultural context, and diversity of characters. We described each image in detail, including its visual content, the subjects portrayed, the setting, the use of color, and other relevant symbolic elements.

To guide the analysis, we used a comparative framework structured around the following categories (see Table 1):





Table 1. Analysis Dimensions: Domination – Liberation

Category	Aesthetics of Domination	Aesthetics of Liberation
Visual Narrative	Linear format, chronological linearity, single structure	Circular narrative, multiple voices, intertextuality
Symbolism	Modernity, brand logos, stereotyped or "trendy" designs/colors	Communal elements, hand-drawn strokes, natural pigments
Text-Image Relationship	Image serves the text, decorative illustration	Dialogue between text and image, image that questions and complicates
Body Representation	Individual, Western beauty standards	Collective, diverse forms of beauty
Geographic Space and Landscape	Focus on big cities, and folklorization	Rural territories, communities
Culture and Knowledge	Source of knowledge: scientific, academic, Eurocentric	Recognition of oral, ancestral, and community-based practices

Source: Own elaboration.

4. RESULTS

The five analyzed images reflect a pedagogical and cultural effort to integrate diversity, creativity, identity, and community-based knowledge—predominantly Mexican and Latin American—into educational materials. Each image contributes to a liberating vision of education, where the local, the communal, and the symbolic are respected and celebrated as essential sources of learning and social transformation.

The first figure from the book *Nooki ka imi jomeme. Projects and Readings. First Grade* presents a visually rich and symbolic scene that evokes multiple cultural, historical, and aesthetic dimensions. Rendered in a cartoon style with pastel and earthy tones, it includes a travel notebook, an illustrated map of Puebla, a Mexican girl holding a gourd cup of traditional chocolate, motifs from the Tonantzintla church, and a dark-skinned man holding an Aztec figurine atop a pyramid.

These elements construct a layered narrative that reclaims ancestral identities, cultural practices, and syncretic religious symbols rooted in the collective memory of the Mexican people. The image blends linearity with multiplicity, inviting diverse interpretations and strengthening connections between territory, culture, and ancestral knowledge. In doing so, it aligns with the principles of the Aesthetics of Liberation by recognizing cultural diversity, valuing hidden beauty, and promoting an educational vision that honors indigenous knowledge.





Figure 1. Illustration for *Nooki ka imi jomeme*. *Projects and Readings*. First Grade.



Source: DGME (2024c).

The second figure, associated with the song "Reino del revés" by María Elena Walsh for the book *Nuestros saberes: Libro para alumnos, maestros y familia. Primer Grado* explores a dreamlike and subversive aesthetic through surreal characters: a small man with a tiny body and oversized head pushes a stroller carrying a bearded baby and holds a floating dog like a balloon on a leash. This playful universe breaks from established conventions and offers a critical and creative perspective on the world. The cartoon style depicts a distorted reality that questions social norms and fosters children's imagination.

Although there is no explicit connection to community or territorial elements, the image strongly engages with the song's poetic text, creating a bridge between the visual and verbal, inviting reflection on cultural and pedagogical alternatives. From the Aesthetics of Liberation perspective, this image is helpful for its ability to challenge dominant structures and stimulate creativity as a form of cultural resistance.

Figure 2. Illustration in *Nuestros saberes: Libro para alumnos, maestros y familia. Primer grado*.



Source: DGME (2024b).



In the third figure, used in the Preschool teachers' book "Las artes desde la mirada de la NEM," a brown-skinned teacher is depicted wearing a white huipil while holding a sign that symbolizes musical rhythms and leading an activity in which three children play instruments they made themselves: bottles with stones, buckets covered with balloon fabric, among others. Beside her are another boy wearing glasses and two girls, all portrayed with features reflecting Mexico's ethnic and cultural diversity.

Figure 3. Illustration in the book *Las artes desde la mirada de la NEM* (The Arts from the Perspective of the NEM).



Source: DGME (Forthcoming).

This image emphasizes active student participation, the use of everyday materials, and the incorporation of symbolic elements such as the huipil—a reference to Indigenous identity and the recovery of traditions. The visual narrative is organized around collaboration and collective learning, highlighting the importance of inclusive and contextualized education. In this sense, the image fully aligns with the principles of the Aesthetics of Liberation by integrating diversity, promoting community creativity (Sannino, & Ellis, 2015), and recognizing culture as a source of ancestral knowledge.

The fourth figure, from the book "Múltiples Lenguajes," Primer Grado, portrays a dark-skinned man rocking a baby. At the same time, from his voice, get out three elephants hanging from a spider's web—a reference to the traditional children's song "Un elefante se columpiaba sobre la tela de una araña." (Garcia, 2010). The more realistic visual style adds emotional closeness, while the dreamlike symbolism contributes a playful and creative dimension.

This scene depicts an intimate moment of care and affection and recovers a shared cultural practice in many communities, where lullabies serve as vehicles for oral and emotional transmission. The figure of the bearded man in a red shirt cradling the baby wrapped in a blanket symbolizes generational continuity and the active role of adults in shaping new generations. From the Aesthetics of Liberation perspective, this image is significant for its human-centered focus, connection to tradition, and ability to re-signify the every day as a space for learning and cultural resistance.

Figure 4. Illustration in the book *Múltiples Lenguajes, Primer grado* (Multiple Languages, First Grade).



Source: DGME (2024).

Finally, the fifth figure —included in the same Preschool teachers' book "Las artes desde la mirada de la NEM" — depicts a 1990s-model van repainted in two colors and loaded with old, used objects, such as mattresses, a washing machine, a television set, and Lotzo, the bear from Toy Story. A megaphone on top plays the characteristic announcement of "ropavejeros" (scrap collectors): "Se compran colchones, fierro viejo que vendaaaa..." ("We buy mattresses, old scrap metal for sale...").

Figure 5. Illustration in the Preschool teachers' book *Las artes desde la mirada de la NEM* (The Arts from the Perspective of the NEM).



Source: DGME (Forthcoming).

This illustration directly references an urban cultural practice widespread in Mexico. Scrap collectors drive through neighborhoods announcing the purchase of discarded materials, becoming key agents in the informal economy and practices of reuse. The image recovers an integral part of local communities sonic and visual landscape, connecting with the notion of collective memory mentioned in the accompanying text. Furthermore, by including commercial objects such as *Lotzo* within the context of reuse, the image questions the commodification of culture. It highlights popular creativity in the face of consumerism. This approach is consistent with the principles of the Aesthetics of Liberation, as it revalues local practices, recognizes the dignity of informal labor (Leonard & Leonard, 1998), and makes visible the beauty found in the every day and marginalized.

6. CONCLUSION



This exercise concludes by recognizing that the Aesthetics of Liberation is a powerful critical and theoretical tool and an ethical and aesthetic orientation that can guide artistic creation—particularly in educational contexts such as textbooks. This approach allows us to rethink art—or "poiesis," understood as the act of making or creating—not as a mere aesthetic or decorative product but as a political, cultural, and pedagogical act with the potential to transform subjectivities and social realities.

Through the analysis of the five images, it becomes evident how those illustrations incorporating symbolic elements of local identity, ethnic diversity, collective memory, community creativity, and the reuse of everyday objects align with the fundamental principles of the Aesthetics of Liberation: decolonizing the gaze, making the marginalized visible, recovering ancestral knowledge, and building alternative imaginaries. These images teach content and transmit cultural, emotional, and critical values beyond technical or disciplinary expertise. This approach to textbook illustration offers a way to think about education from a more just and inclusive perspective. Images are not merely visual accompaniments; they are active participants in learning and constructing cultural identity. Therefore, when illustrations are selected or designed with a liberating gaze, we promote an education that does not reproduce homogenized, colonial, or commodified models but recognizes and values the country's cultural and social plurality.

In terms of its usefulness for artists, this way of thinking can be deeply inspiring and guiding. Although many artists may not have explicitly used the term "Aesthetics of Liberation," many have worked from related practices: the recovery of local myths and symbols, the use of everyday materials, critique of consumerism, and reinterpretation of the popular and cultural resistance through image-making. The Aesthetics of Liberation thus provides them with a solid conceptual framework to reflect on their practice, give it political meaning, and situate it within a collective project of social transformation.

Moreover, for artists working in educational, editorial, or community-based settings, this approach can help make conscious decisions about what images to create, how to narrate them, and what impact they wish to have on their audience. In this sense, the Aesthetics of Liberation is not only relevant—it is necessary for those who want their art not to reproduce injustice but to contribute to imagining a different, possible world. Ultimately, this exercise has found that the Aesthetics of Liberation is not merely an academic theory but a commitment to engaged, conscious, and transformative art.

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