

Aesthetic work: A new category for understanding work experiences under capitalism

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Abstract

This article proposes the introduction of a new analytical category in labour studies: *aesthetic work*. Drawing on pragmatist philosopher John Dewey’s notion of aesthetic experience and using in-depth interviews, the study examines the work experiences of software developers. The analysis identifies seven core properties of aesthetic work: unity of the process; the form and rhythm of the activity; the relationship with the materials; the dialectic between doing and undergoing; the subject’s expressiveness; social and communal embeddedness; and consummation. Aesthetic work is defined as an active and productive relationship between the individual and their surroundings, where thought, emotion, perception, sensibility, body, and consciousness are interwoven in an integrated process with form, rhythm, and meaning. This process culminates in a fruitful, meaningful, and fulfilling outcome. The article provides empirical evidence of how aesthetics is experienced within work activities. This novel concept opens up new avenues for qualitative and quantitative research on work. While affirming the legitimate aspiration of all workers to aesthetic experience, the article also cautions against the instrumental appropriation of workers’ subjectivity at the hands of capitalism.

Keywords: aesthetic experience; subjectivity; digital society; digitalisation; sociology of work; social change; experience analysis; emotions; social practices

Resumen. *Trabajo estético: Una nueva categoría para el estudio de las experiencias laborales en el capitalismo*

Este artículo propone introducir una nueva categoría en los estudios del trabajo: el *trabajo estético*. A partir de la noción de experiencia estética del filósofo pragmatista John Dewey, y utilizando entrevistas en profundidad, se investigan las vivencias laborales de los desarrolladores de software. El análisis revela siete propiedades esenciales del trabajo estético: unidad del proceso; forma y ritmo de la actividad; vínculo con los materiales; dialéctica entre hacer y padecer; expresividad del sujeto; inscripción sociorrelacional y comunitaria, y consumación. El trabajo estético se define como una relación activa y productiva entre el sujeto y el mundo, en la que pensamiento y emoción, percepción y sensibilidad, cuerpo y conciencia se entrelazan en un proceso integrado, con forma, ritmo y sentido, que concluye en una consumación fructífera, significativa y plena. El artículo muestra empíricamente cómo es experimentada la estética en la actividad laboral. Este novedoso concepto abre nuevas posibilidades para el abordaje cualitativo y cuantitativo del trabajo. Se asume el legítimo anhelo y derecho de todos los trabajadores a la experiencia estética y, al mismo tiempo, se alerta sobre la utilización interesada y espuria que el capitalismo hace de la subjetividad y del mundo interior del trabajador.

Palabras clave: experiencia estética; subjetividad; sociedad digital; digitalización; sociología del trabajo; cambio social; análisis de experiencias; emociones; prácticas sociales

Summary

- | | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Introduction | 5. Software developers' aesthetic experience of work: Empirical findings |
| 2. Work as an aesthetic experience: Background and related approaches | 6. Discussion: The theoretical-conceptual and normative foundations of aesthetic work |
| 3. Aesthetic experience: Properties and conceptual dimensions for analysing work | 7. Conclusions |
| 4. Methodology | Bibliographic references |

In this intersection of what Professor Dewey has called the technical and the final, this attempted grasping of the consummation of the complex efforts of men in society to infuse meaning into the detail of existence, aesthetic experience may be isolated as a separate phase. What is peculiar to it is its power to catch the enjoyment that belongs to the consummation, the outcome, of an undertaking, and to give to the implements, the objects that are instrumental in the undertaking, and to the acts that compose it something of the joy and satisfaction that suffuse its successful accomplishment.

The Nature of Aesthetic Experience
George Herbert Mead (1926: 384)

1. Introduction

In *The Society of Experience: A Cultural Sociology of the Present* (1992), Gerhard Schulze advances the thesis that our outlook on life in contemporary societies is increasingly oriented towards the inner world of the individual, or subjectivity. This experience-oriented approach has a profound and transformative effect on social phenomena, changing both their nature and their dynamics. At the heart of this thesis lies the idea that the increasingly prominent role of internal factors in all social activity diminishes the influence and explanatory power of external factors. In light of this, Schulze proposes the idea of conceptualising present-day society, from a sociological perspective, as an experience society.

This contemporary shift in focus towards subjectivity, inner life, and individual experience informs everything from minor, everyday events to significant life choices. Jobs, social relationships, travel, and consumption are now valued according to the experiences they provide. Nowadays, people are driven to take action by the desire to “have an experience”, rather than by economic survival, the pursuit of collective goals, or external mandates. According to Schulze (1992), this quest to “experience your life!” has become the defining imperative of our time. Under this new rational framework, lived experiences become an end in themselves, making them susceptible to commodification.

This categorical imperative of contemporary existence also permeates the world of work, which remains a fundamental aspect of life (Prieto, 2024). Various studies in recent decades have identified changes in the way people experience and assign value to their work. Work is no longer seen merely as an economic obligation or source of income; it is increasingly viewed as a space for building identity and relationships. This shift in focus reflects a gradual decoupling of work from stable collective identities in favour of greater alignment with individual life projects (Freyssinet, 2023). The traditional sociological perspective, centred on employment and objective conditions, is broadened by combining it with emotional, symbolic, and existential dimensions to provide greater insight into the nature of work. Seen in this light, the meaning of work goes beyond economic and contractual factors to include the forms of subjective engagement and emotional dynamics that are part of everyday life. These dimensions highlight the need for a broader approach capable of capturing how creativity, belonging, and recognition are constructed in contexts characterised by uncertainty and fragmentation.

Although the sociology of work has explored the expressive, creative, and emotional facets of work, a systematic theoretical framework that can integrate these dimensions into a cohesive understanding of the work experience has yet to be developed. Building on the pragmatist tradition that treats aesthetics as a distinct experiential mode (Dewey, 1934; Shusterman, 2000; McCarthy and Wright, 2004; Berleant, 2015), this article introduces the notion of *aesthetic work* in an attempt to bridge this gap. Informed by Dewey’s concept of aesthetic experience as the “consummatory overcoming of meaningful challenges” (Dewey, 1934), we conducted an empirical case study analysing how software

developers experience their work from this perspective. Whereas classical studies, particularly those concerning labour process theory (Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1982; Thompson, 1990), prioritise the analysis of the organisation, control, and subordination inherent in capitalist structures, this article aims to restore the dimension of “living”. At no point, however, does it negate the decisive role played by structural conditions. Its aim is to use workers’ lived experience at work as a starting point for analysing the socio-productive and socio-economic structures that underpin labour subjectivity today. Marx’s thought evolved from a subjective analysis of alienated labour, as set out in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, to a socio-structural analysis in *Capital*.

In light of the current emphasis on subjectivity and the ever-widening gap between the subjective and the objective (Bericat and Camarero, 2025), it is crucial to distinguish between various types of experience, such as authentic versus empty, and transformative versus routine. Against the backdrop of the degradation of experience in the modern era, as articulated by Benjamin and Agamben, the concepts of aesthetic experience (Dewey, 1934) and resonant experience (Rosa, 2019) offer valuable analytical tools with which to assess the quality of contemporary work experiences.

Previous research (Bericat and Acosta, 2025) into software developers’ work experiences revealed that, despite the instrumental, logical, rational, and practical nature of both the work and those involved in developing the software underpinning our intensely digital societies, clear traces of aesthetic experience were nonetheless evident in their subjective experiences. A detailed analysis of these work experiences has led to the formulation of the fundamental properties and dimensions of a new category: *aesthetic work*. This concept can be applied to all types of jobs or occupations within the productive system. It also equips the sociology of work with a vital and complementary perspective on our experience-based societies. First, aesthetic work differs from alienated work in that it includes normative elements, making it possible to distinguish between “good” and “bad” jobs. Second, its conceptual dimensions possess clear analytical potential, providing a suitable framework for developing a composite index or indicator to measure the quality of work and its variation between occupations and contexts. Finally, examining the uneven distribution of aesthetic work across class structures, status groups, gender, and age may provide more in-depth socio-structural insights.

This article does not focus on these underlying issues, but rather on the conceptual construction of the category of aesthetic work. Section two provides an overview of the conceptual foundations of this category as developed within the sociology of work, while section three defines the properties and dimensions that constitute it. Section four outlines the methodology followed in the study and section five presents empirical evidence of the aesthetic dimension of software developers’ work experience. Section six reflects on the theoretical and practical significance of the concept of aesthetic work. Section seven brings the article to a close by summarising the study’s conclusions.

2. Work as an aesthetic experience: Background and related approaches

2.1. *Lived experiences in the sociology of work*

The relationship between work and aesthetic experience has only been partially explored within the field of sociology of work. No unified theoretical or conceptual framework for aesthetic work exists at present. That said, a number of studies have examined various related aspects, such as expressiveness, creativity, enjoyment, and ownership of the activity, albeit from differing viewpoints.

An initial line of research focuses on artistic, creative, or artisanal occupations, in which work is conceived as an expressive and formative practice. Sennett (2008) emphasises the importance of doing work well and paying attention to materials, portraying the craftsman as someone who derives meaning from the practice itself. Meanwhile, Becker (1982) demonstrates how artistic production is organised within communities of shared meaning.

From both psychological and sociological perspectives, work has been analysed as a source of personal involvement and enjoyment, or “flow” and “engagement”, particularly within sectors such as software development and the cultural industries (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Bain, 2005; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). These studies highlight work environments conducive to highly intense and rewarding experiences. However, the presence of gratification alone is not enough to define aesthetic experience, which involves a unique relationship between the individual and their environment (McCarthy and Wright, 2004: 88).

Pragmatist and phenomenological approaches have emphasised the relational and situated nature of work, as well as its moral, affective, and communicative dimensions (Tronto, 1993; Thuderoz, 2017). Contributions from pragmatic sociology, exemplified by the work of Boltanski and Thévenot (1998), provide alternative interpretations grounded in regimes of justification and moral orders of worth.

Research into affective and emotional labour, pioneered by Hochschild (1983), has highlighted the expressive nature of many work activities, particularly in the service sector. De la Garza (2017) continues this line of enquiry by distinguishing between emotional labour, which focuses on managing emotions, and aesthetic labour, understood as the bodily expression of embodied dispositions inscribed in the habitus (Bourdieu, 1997). This distinction enables us to differentiate between two types of subjective involvement: affective and expressive-formal.

The psychodynamics of work, as developed by Dejours (2000, 2012), are a key point of reference for exploring the lived experience of work. Work is a holistic process that engages individuals cognitively, emotionally, and physically. It can be a source of both suffering and fulfilment. A distinction is drawn between “judgements of beauty”—peer-based and linked to the formal quality of the work—and “judgements of utility”—hierarchical or external in origin—as forms of recognition that the subject converts into “personal achievements”. Similarly, Baudolet and Gollac (2002) emphasise that experiencing pleasure at

work goes hand in hand with carrying out tasks, creating things, and forming connections with others. They also argue that judgements of beauty can provide a sense of meaning, even in precarious situations.

More recently, the concept of “living labour” (*travail vivant*) (Amado et al., 2017) has emphasised its subjectivising nature as a form of self-production. This perspective highlights the situated creativity that arises from the tension between what is “prescribed” and what is “real”, as illustrated by practices such as *bricolage*, *métis*, and *renormalisation*. According to Lallement (2015), the gap between prescribed work and real work can be an opportunity for autonomy, pleasure, or discomfort, depending on the scope for exercising judgement and creativity. His research into hacker and maker communities shows that certain collaborative practices can foster experiences of self-realisation, learning, and the expression of shared values. This provides evidence that work can be understood as a productive practice in its own right, providing an alternative, aesthetic lens through which to understand it.

Bouilloud (2023) argues that judgements about the beauty of work—associated with harmony, commitment, and meaning—are a fundamental part of the work experience. Although he stops short of articulating a theory of aesthetics, he nevertheless establishes a normative framework in which aesthetics serves as a source of dignity and resistance against the logic of productivity.

Other perspectives have helped to establish the notion of work as a situated practice. Ethnomethodology (Garfield, 1967) is the study of the methods used by actors to create order in everyday situations. Meanwhile, the sociology of translation (Latour, 2005) emphasises the role of objects and devices as mediators of action. Practice theory also provides valuable tools for analysing work as a situated activity. Gherardi (2012) highlights the performative nature of practice-based knowledge, while Reckwitz (2002) proposes a cultural theory of practices comprising integrated assemblages of bodies, objects, emotions, and knowledge.

Thanks to these contributions, we are moving towards a more comprehensive understanding of the lived experience of work. However, the sociology of work still lacks a conceptual framework that articulates both the structural conditions of work and the qualities of the experience it generates. For this reason, our research has focused on the conditions under which the experience of work acquires coherence, expressiveness, and meaning.

2.2. *Aesthetic experience as a framework for analysing work*

Contemporary theories of experience challenge the notion that human experience can be separated into discrete dimensions, such as rationality, sensory perception, emotion, and technology. Instead, such theories advocate an integrated, situated, and relational understanding of the act of doing (McCarthy and Wright, 2004; Noë, 2006; Ahmed, 2006; Reckwitz, 2020). Phenomenological, pragmatic, hermeneutic, and narrative perspectives all view experience

as a dynamic whole of relationships with the world, where body, thought, emotion, and perception are meaningfully intertwined.

According to Dewey's pragmatist theory (1948; 1920; 1916; 1938; 1934), experience is an active, structured, and meaningful process (Dewey, 1920). It ceases to be a passive response to the environment and instead becomes a transformative interaction in which the subject shapes the situation (*doing*) while simultaneously being shaped by it (*undergoing*). This interaction is imbued with meaning, form, and rhythm, culminating in a sense of closure or consummation that lends coherence to the lived experience.

Dewey reserves the term *aesthetic experience* for situations in which the various stages of an action—beginning, development, tension, and resolution—flow seamlessly together to form one meaningful and satisfying sequence. From this perspective, aesthetics is not confined to art; rather, it denotes a more general type of holistic experience, where perception, emotion, thought, and action are unified within a practice that holds subjective significance (Dewey, 1934). Although Dewey did not analyse work *per se*, his ideas provide a basis for rethinking work practices as experiences in which aesthetic potential is realised through the act of doing.

In their research on interactive technologies, McCarthy and Wright (2004) expand on this idea by describing experience as an embodied narrative composed of affective, evaluative, sensory, and reflective elements that unfold over time. These authors contend that experience involves anticipation, tension, interpretation, and appropriation, thereby fostering an intense, subjective relationship with the processes and materials involved (2004: 78). This approach is helpful for analysing work practices in digitalised contexts, where collaborative problem-solving and interaction with technical systems can result in an immersive experience.

The following section builds on this conceptual framework to explore the structural properties of aesthetic activity. These properties form the basis of the analytical category of aesthetic work developed in this article.

3. Aesthetic experience: Properties and conceptual dimensions for analysing work

Properties are defined as the conditions that allow work to be articulated as an aesthetic experience. The following properties have been identified:

- a) *Unity of the process*. In an aesthetic experience, thoughts, emotions, and actions are woven together into a meaningful sequence, forming a coherent whole. Each phase derives its value from the whole, enabling the subject to engage fully in the act of doing. In the context of work, this integration becomes apparent when phases such as requirements analysis, design, coding, and review are not experienced as isolated tasks, but as interconnected moments united by a common logic that informs and drives the entire process (Dewey, 1934: 43, 46, 62).

- b) *Internal form and rhythm of the activity.* The unfolding of an aesthetic experience follows a meaningful cadence, guided by an internal form. Its journey begins with initial uncertainty and moves through phases of exploration, struggle, and tension, ultimately reaching a satisfying and complete resolution or consummation (Dewey, 1934: 64-65, 154). Far from hindering the process, the dialectic between tension and resolution enriches it by cultivating commitment and infusing meaning with experiential depth (Dewey, 1934: 17). Working through a complex error, coming up with a challenging technical solution, or arriving at a difficult collective decision can all give rise to moments of pure intensity.
- c) *An active and perceptive connection with materials.* Every aesthetic experience involves focused and heightened attention, understood as sustained perceptual awareness that makes it possible to detect subtle differences, foresee possible outcomes, and maintain concentration (Dewey, 1934: 21, 60, 287). There is a continuous and vital connection with the materials, tools, techniques, and processes central to the work.
- d) *Dialectic between doing and undergoing* (Dewey, 1934: 51, 58, 281; 1916, 1938). This refers not only to the active and agential disposition with which the subject interacts with the environment (*doing*), but also to their permeability and openness to the influences of the outside world, which they then assimilate into their actions (*undergoing*). This interaction fosters heightened awareness and an ongoing openness to the surrounding environment. In this context, emotions guide action by signalling whether they reinforce or undermine the underlying purpose.
- e) *Expressiveness.* In the context of aesthetic experience and work, simply performing a task efficiently is not enough; the task must also be conceived as a personal and unique projection of the *self*; one that leaves a distinctive mark or signature through styles and formats that evoke the work of an author. Individuality is projected through the choice of techniques, characteristic ways of solving problems, or the manner in which care is demonstrated. Expressiveness encompasses visible elements, such as stable architecture and clear coding, as well as emotional dimensions. Emotional expression is evident in the way tasks are resolved, organised, communicated, or handled (Dewey, 1934: 71). The act of doing thus serves as a means of expressing emotions, values, and personal styles.
- f) *Consummation.* The conclusion of the activity extends beyond simply completing a task, as it confers meaning on the subject by allowing them to experience personal fulfilment. This sense of coherent and satisfying closure, laden with meaning, is present from the very beginning in the intentionality of the action. This renders the outcome, the phases of the process leading to it, the tensions experienced and resolved, and the manner in which the activity unfolded wholly comprehensible (Dewey, 1934: 41, 45, 62).
- g) *Socio-relational and communal embeddedness.* The aesthetic experience is not confined to the private, inner world of the individual, existing inde-

Table 1. Properties of aesthetic experience and dimensions of work

Properties	Dimensions of work
Unity of the process	Coherent, well-structured sequence of activities that make sense as a whole.
Internal form and rhythm	Workflow with its own form and rhythm driven by the challenge. Tension and resolution; challenges that encourage engagement and ownership.
Connection with the material environment	Heightened and sustained focus. Engagement and ownership. Transformative interaction with the environment.
Dialectic between doing and undergoing	Capacity for agency, emotional engagement, and assimilation of the outside world.
Expressiveness	Expression of individual singularity through styles, values, and emotions embodied in practical activity.
Consummation	Coherent and satisfying closure that gives meaning to the entire process.
Socio-relational embeddedness	Orientation towards others in doing and serving. Shared recognition.

Source: own elaboration.

pendently of the social fabric. Instead, it is projected onto others—whether real or imagined—thereby opening it up to a shared space (Dewey, 1938: 63-64; 1934). In the context of work, this dimension finds expression in collaborative relationships, recognition, and membership of communities of practice. It is also evident in a vocation for service and in the usefulness of doing things for others. Approaching work with care and building relationships with colleagues, supervisors, and service users enables individuals to subjectively appropriate their work through recognition.

This set of properties (see Table 1) enables *lived work* to be seen beyond a reductionist, purely instrumental, or utilitarian logic. Aesthetic work can function as an analytical category for identifying work configurations based on the extent to which they embody, in various dimensions and degrees, the essential properties of an aesthetic experience. From this perspective, it is important to note that the concept of aesthetic work extends beyond artistic and creative occupations and is applicable more broadly. Any occupation has the potential to be experienced, wholly or in part, as an aesthetic experience, although this is rarely the case. Consequently, it is only through empirical research that we can determine which jobs and which workers experience work aesthetically.

4. Methodology

The overall aim of this study is to use workers' own perspectives to reconstruct how work experiences are shaped when the aesthetic potential of work

is realised in practice. Our starting hypothesis is that all forms of work possess this potential. However, the extent to which this potential becomes a reality is contingent on a variety of organisational, relational, and material factors that can either facilitate or hinder it.

The following questions have been raised in this regard: How do developers perceive the critical moments in their day-to-day work? What conditions make work experiences coherent, meaningful, or fulfilling? What tensions run through these experiences, and what dimensions give them structure?

Consistent with these objectives, the study adopts a qualitative approach informed by pragmatism (Bericat and Acosta, 2025). This strategy is designed to capture both the experiential dimension of work and the processes through which individuals give form and meaning to their activities. We analysed narratives of work experiences in order to examine work from a subjective, lived perspective. The research method used was the in-depth interview. The focus of these interviews was the narrative reconstruction of significant events, covering project initiation, overcoming obstacles, achieving breakthroughs, project completion, interpersonal relationship management, and incident handling. This choice reflects the power of interviews as a tool for exploring lived experiences. Interviews encourage the use of metaphors and analogies and facilitate the reframing of and critical reflection on everyday activities.

The software development sector was selected as an example because it involves creativity, technical expertise, collaboration, and innovation within a highly competitive and flexible environment. The unit of analysis was not a specific organisation, but rather the collection of practices, relationships, and narratives that influence the experience of working in this sector, spanning different career paths, methodologies, technologies, and roles.

The study used theoretical purposive sampling to maximise the diversity of perspectives and narratives included in the sample. The participants were software sector workers in Spain, drawn from a range of roles (e.g. developers, project leaders, and product managers), levels of experience, and organisational types (e.g. start-ups, medium-sized companies, large companies, consultancy firms, and distributed teams). The final sample included 15 young male developers aged between 23 and 40, all of whom had a degree-level or postgraduate education. This composition enabled theoretical saturation to be achieved. This is defined as the point at which further interviews no longer contribute substantially new dimensions to the analytical framework. Given the composition of the sample, this research should be considered an exploratory pilot study, to be corroborated by further research involving a more diverse range of workers. The lived experiences of women doing this type of work will be of particular interest.

Participants were recruited via LinkedIn (Sales Navigator), using advanced filters for location (Andalusia), industry (software development), and job role. Once potential participants had been identified, relationship intelligence was used to verify the suitability of their profiles and organisational connections.

Table 2. Interviewees' and companies' characteristics

Interviewees		Companies	
Educational level	Number	Size	Number
Bachelor's degree	4	Start-up	3
Master's degree	8	Small/medium	5
PhD	3	Large	7
Total	15	Total	15
Discipline	Number	Scope	Number
Engineering	12	Spain	8
Other	3	Abroad	7
Total	15	Total	15

Source: own elaboration.

An invitation to participate in the study was sent to 32 individuals via direct message.

The interviews were conducted via Zoom between 6 and 22 February 2023, with an average duration of 50–75 minutes. With the participants' consent, all interviews were recorded and transcribed in full before being coded. In some cases, the interviews were supplemented with field notes or additional documentation provided by the participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the process.

The analysis involved continuous dialogue between theoretical frameworks and empirical data throughout. The initial categories, which were derived from the theoretical framework, included concepts such as means-end integration, sensitivity to materials, perceptual intensity, expressiveness, collaboration, and consummation. These categories were gradually reformulated using an abductive codification process as new patterns emerged (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). The analysis also considered expressive devices such as metaphors, analogies, and narrative techniques, alongside instances where participants navigated tensions, adopted critical distance, reframed practices, or demonstrated appropriation and transformation. These are all privileged manifestations of the aesthetic dimension of work. The data were processed using Atlas.ti software (version 25).

5. Software developers' aesthetic experience of work: Empirical findings

The developers' experiences are used to reconstruct working modalities that, under certain conditions, acquire the properties of an aesthetic experience when viewed from a situated perspective. The main empirical findings are presented below, organised around three main themes: 1) the internal configuration of the process; 2) connections with materials and ways of working; and 3) the socio-relational and communal embeddedness of the work.

5.1. Work as a structured process: Unity, rhythm, and sense of closure

Software developers experience work as a process oriented towards producing technical solutions that inform actions, establish timeframes, and give meaning to effort. These solutions not only deliver essential operational efficiency, but also fulfil aesthetic aspirations relating to simplicity, clarity, harmony, and consistency of outcomes. All of this echoes Dewey's (1934: 62) notion of *consummation*, understood as the meaningful conclusion of a challenge. There are three interconnected dimensions to this first analytical axis: the solution, seen as a horizon that intentionally orients action; the internal rhythm, an orderly progression towards resolving the problem; and consummation, a meaningful conclusion that unites the individual phases of the process and affirms the coherence of the outcome.

5.1.1. The solution as the organising principle of the process

A key finding is the pivotal role of the “solution” in providing a frame of reference that gives structure to all activities forming part of the work experience.

MJ sums up this mindset by saying that his job involves “tackling problems and finding solutions and such like”, whereas RG derives the most enjoyment from “being presented with a series of requirements or issues by the client and coming up with solutions”. Similarly, the language used shows that the value of a solution lies not only in its functionality, but also in its form. It must be “attractive”, a “good fit”, and “make sense”. In such instances, efficiency, simplicity, and expressiveness converge to reveal an aesthetic dimension in the act of doing.

The solution emerges from a creative process in which means and ends are reformulated in tandem. Activity is organised via an internal sense of direction. Here, Boltanski's (2017) notion of the “project” is relevant: activity is structured around projects that mobilise technical, emotional, and relational skills to form meaningful pathways.

This integration extends to the collaborative dimension. MI vividly describes the alignment that is achieved when working on the same project alongside others: “We've all come to the same conclusion and share the same point of view, which gives you the sense of being a single unit working on the project”. This experience of unity is intensified when different areas work towards shared objectives.

5.1.2. Internal rhythm and problem solving

The experience of work in software development follows an internal rhythm that organises activities, helps maintain focus, and encourages problem solving. This rhythm differs from a linear sequence in that it responds to cycles of exploration, trial and error, and closure, which enable thoughtful and creative progress. Dewey (1934: 16) argues that an aesthetic experience involves oscillating between tension and resolution, and between imbalance and harmony. Developers do not describe difficulties as interruptions, but as forces that pro-

pel the process forward, spurring on the search for alternatives and reinforcing the meaning of the activity.

MJL highlights the appeal of complex challenges—those that others shy away from due to their complexity or ambiguity: “When you’re given a problem, it’s because no one else wants to do it or knows how to”. This type of challenge requires the deployment of technical skills and sustained emotional effort: “Well, you get mad, you blow off steam, you go for a run. And then you do it all over again the next day. And so on until you crack it...”. Frustration is one link in an emotional chain that drives forward the ongoing search for a meaningful resolution.

This dedication and commitment to overcoming the problem—involving cycles of failure, emotional resilience, and achievement—is also reflected in BA’s account: “[...] it’s about failing, getting back up, failing again, getting back up again, over and over until you’ve got it. And once you’ve got it, you realise how important it is to value your own work and the work of others [...]”.

The process is experienced as a journey of trial and error and continual adjustment, rather than as a series of predefined steps to be followed. TD expresses his desire to “create something that didn’t exist before”, while BA and RG value having the freedom to make changes and be creative as the project evolves. The narratives emphasise the journey-like nature of the work experience. Finding solutions involves not only overcoming uncertainty, but also altering the perception of the problem, thereby giving the work itself new meaning.

When implemented flexibly, *agile methodologies* introduce time-based structures, such as *sprints*, to help maintain the pace of work and support interim deliverables, group reviews, and adaptive course corrections. Debugging, for example, is described as a sequential process comprising observation, diagnosis, testing, and validation that transforms seemingly disparate elements into a coherent course of action. MI describes some of these peak moments as “epiphanies”, when the meaning of the chosen path reveals itself.

Effective day-to-day time management is essential. MJL highlights weekly planning and task prioritisation as effective strategies for maintaining consistency throughout the process. GR emphasises the need to adjust schedules to accommodate client requirements and time zone differences within distributed teams. Meanwhile, BA views remote working as an effective way of maintaining a pace that is compatible with personal well-being.

This rhythm also allows learning to be woven into the workflow. GR expresses concern about “falling a bit behind”, highlighting that training is an integral part of the business of doing. Even more mundane tasks, such as record-keeping and face-to-face meetings, become more meaningful when they facilitate process adjustments, quality assurance, and coordination.

In summary, this internal rhythm organises time, focus, and task flow, weaving together challenges, responses, learning, and course corrections. This organisation not only enhances operational efficiency, but also allows work to be experienced as a continuous process.

5.1.3. *Consummation and purposeful effectiveness*

The experience of work reaches its fullest expression when the different phases of the process are arranged into a coherent sequence aimed at overcoming challenges and delivering consistent solutions. This culmination aligns with Dewey's (1934: 41) notion of *consummation*, in which achieving a sense of closure is not limited to mere task completion, but also involves integrating actions and decisions into a meaningful journey.

CC describes this in eloquent terms:

[...] so you've been building an abstract machine, putting pieces here, swapping one piece for another, tweaking, fine-tuning. And there comes a point when you say, "Let's see if this works". And then all the gears start turning, and finally the ball goes in one end and comes out the other, and you're like, "Wow, my circuit works like a charm!" It gives you huge satisfaction and pride: "I did this, and it works". And to get there, I've had to do my research and learn a bit about something else, and that's also what you take away with you, so you grow a bit inside.

Developers stress the importance of finding clear, understandable, and stable solutions capable of providing continuity over time. MI emphasises the importance of "clarity" in order to prevent unnecessary friction, while MJ highlights the need for a forward-looking vision that is focused on stability and reusability. Reusing components, designing generic solutions, and reducing complexity are strategies that reinforce this sense of closure.

Effectiveness, in this context, is determined both by surmounting challenges and by the degree to which the chosen path aligns with the achieved outcome. Satisfaction is derived from the harmony between the path taken and the end result, reflecting the internal logic of the process. The moment of consummation does not arrive simply because a series of steps has been completed; rather, it materialises when those steps have been woven together in a meaningful way. This experience of closure, once realised, is a core prerequisite for work to be perceived as an aesthetic experience.

5.2. *Doing and feeling: Perception, transformation, and expressiveness in the relationship with materials*

The work of software developers centres on maintaining an active relationship with the fundamental elements of their profession: code, programming languages, tools, and system architecture. Workers connect with these elements on a perceptual, reflective, and emotional level. In this context of situated interaction, materials offer resistance, open up possibilities, and encourage exploration. This creates an expressive field that transforms both the objects and those who manipulate them.

Empirical findings reveal three dimensions of this active relationship between the subject and their environment: the integration of perceptual, cognitive, and emotional faculties; the creative transformation of materials and of

the act of doing itself; and expressiveness, understood as embedding technical and ethical meaning in practice.

5.2.1. *The integration of perception, cognition, emotion, and doing*

For an aesthetic experience to take place, the subject's sensory, cognitive, and emotional capacities must be fully integrated and actively engaged (Dewey, 1934: 51). This integration of capacities features prominently in narratives concerning the resolution of complex technical problems or the design of functional yet elegant solutions. For example, fixing an error requires not only the application of technical expertise, but also sustained focus, keen sensitivity, and an emotional disposition geared towards improvement. Far from being an external add-on, emotion is an intrinsic and inherent part of the process.

MJ and GR describe how certain tasks require a level of concentration that combines logical challenges with the desire to accomplish something that is "attractive", "a good fit", and "makes sense". This forward-looking approach is not confined to technical matters; it also applies to relationships. MI observes: "People are the most complex component you can add to any project". This remark underlines the importance of considering the attitudes, expectations, and relationships among interdependent individuals, in addition to technical considerations.

RG adds nuance by fusing technical expertise with insights gained from studying art: "It's the more creative subjects that open our minds to different ways of thinking". This illustrates the fact that technical activity is also underpinned by aesthetic dispositions.

The described experiences align with the notion of *felt experience* proposed by McCarthy and Wright (2004), in which perception, emotion, and reflection are integrated in the relationship with technological devices.

5.2.2. *Creative transformation of materials and resignification of doing*

The aesthetic experience depends on the subject's ability to transform technical materials and reconfigure their understanding of the problem and the act of doing itself. Creative intervention takes place when the subject redefines both means and ends, breaking free from the constraints of predefined rules.

MJ explains his approach to ambiguous requirements, which involves trying out different implementation strategies and tailoring solutions to overcome technical constraints and fit the broader contextual parameters of the project. GR explains that dealing with complex errors involves envisaging different scenarios, rearranging the component parts, and reframing his perception of the problem. There is no predetermined solution; rather, each one emerges from an open-ended sequence that redefines both the object and the professional identity of its creator.

This process aligns with the notion of *travail vivant* proposed by Amado et al. (2017), which conceives of work as a subjectivising practice. Subjects become self-producing through inventive actions that draw on creativity, emotion, and ethical judgement. This transformation is technical, but it also alters the way workers perceive themselves in their professional practice.

From a sociology of practice perspective, Reckwitz (2002) argues that all practices integrate knowledge, objects, and dispositions into situated, modifiable configurations. In software development, these configurations are flexible. They can be fine-tuned, reconfigured, and reinterpreted as the process unfolds. The ability to solve problems or redesign solutions hinges on an openness to change—a fundamental aspect of the aesthetic experience.

5.2.3. Expressiveness and styles of doing

Expressiveness is a key aspect that allows people to put their own personal stamp on their work.

MI highlights the importance of taking the time and care to write readable code for the benefit of those who will continue the project. RG values the active reinterpretation of ambiguous requirements as a way to enrich solutions. BA is keen to stress that his role is to make everyone else's job easier: "to ensure that developers' work is as straightforward and effective as possible", both through technical efficiency and by making decisions that factor in the team's well-being.

These narratives clearly demonstrate that technical choices also have aesthetic and ethical implications. Choosing a stable architecture, writing clear code, and anticipating future requirements all involve exercising personal judgment and leaving a mark on the final solution. Expressiveness allows subjectivity and the value of individuality to shine through in the act of doing (McCarthy and Wright, 2004: 78). In a similar vein, Bouilloud (2023) draws a link between the pursuit of beauty in work and forms of dignity, resilience, and commitment. This expands the parameters by which a practice can be evaluated.

5.3. Relational embeddedness of work: Collaboration, shared meaning, and recognition

The aesthetic dimension of work is also shaped relationally, through the bonds workers form with others, including supervisors, colleagues, service users, groups, communities, and society at large. These bonds form part of a network based on a sense of belonging, collaboration, and recognition. Just as in art, where the creator not only expresses themselves but also seeks to evoke a similar experience in others, the relational dimension is fundamental to experiencing work aesthetically.

According to Dewey (1934: 348), all aesthetic experience is, to a greater or lesser extent, communicative and driven by a sense of otherness—whether present, anticipated, or imagined—through which meanings are shared. In the workplace, this approach is reflected in how others anticipate solutions to technical problems, the various forms of collaboration required by the process, and the social recognition that accompanies a truly meaningful experience.

The relational component of aesthetic work has three clear characteristics. The first is the presence of shared goals or purposes that transcend individua-

lity. The second corresponds to the realm of collaborative practices, such as spaces for deliberation and collective decision-making where different viewpoints are considered and criteria are negotiated. The third relates to forms of recognition, belonging, and gratitude. An aesthetic experience is never consummated through a logic of *one against the other*, but rather through a logic of *one alongside the other*. This forms the basis of a network of affection, trust, shared interests, and mutual validation.

5.3.1. Shared meaning and reference to otherness

Developers understand their work to be a practice oriented towards others. Their goal is to create solutions that are easy to understand, long-lasting, and useful to potential users. In the words of MI, “Code must be readable, as there will inevitably be others who need to read or modify it”. Code is a relational artefact as well as a technical one: it is meant to be circulated, used, understood, and transformed.

For some interviewees, this approach is more driven by ethical and social considerations than technical ones. GOD emphasises that what motivates him most is “being able to contribute something that really helps someone and makes a difference”. There is a close link between aesthetics and ethics because the meaning of work is determined by its potential for real social impact.

5.3.2. Collaborative practices and participatory dynamics

Collaboration is a critical component of aesthetic work. As the narratives demonstrate, collaborative practices provide spaces for deliberation, criteria setting, and shared meaning-making, transcending mere organic and functional coordination.

Techniques such as pair programming, tandem work, code reviews, and group retrospectives give peers the chance to discuss, justify, and refine technical decisions together. MJL places particular value on “forming a unit with others”, noting that his experience is enriched when anchored in a common understanding of the task at hand.

Even in the context of teleworking or remote working, social interaction remains of paramount importance. AR prizes digital tools for their ability to facilitate smooth, open, and warm communication, which is essential for maintaining a baseline level of interactional quality in technical collaborations.

5.3.3. Recognition, belonging, and gratitude

The experiences described demonstrate that without recognition, work is unlikely to be perceived as meaningful or significant. Recognition involves both functional and symbolic validation, affirming not only the work itself, but also the individual’s role within the broader social fabric.

LM says his main motivation is “seeing that my work is useful”, which highlights the importance of feeling that one’s efforts are valued and have an impact. This form of recognition boosts engagement and strengthens workers’ identification with the production process.

Institutional systems also play an important role. LM highlights an internal tool that allows employees to express gratitude and recognise the contributions of their colleagues. Such practices are not considered to be mere superficial gestures, as they strengthen ties, validate working methods, and reinforce mutual trust.

Belonging, meanwhile, goes beyond affiliation with any one company. It also extends to technical communities, collaborative networks, and ritualised spaces, all of which provide opportunities to share experiences and forge collective identities. RA refers to internal meetups between members of different *chapters*, while GA emphasises the open, community-based nature of platforms like *GitHub*, where code is discussed and transformed collectively.

Gratitude emerges as the emotional thread binding the whole experience together as a shared, social endeavour. CC finds great joy in “seeing the smile on someone’s face when you’ve helped them. Sometimes, these are just small, selfless acts. It feels like you’ve lifted a weight off their shoulders, and it didn’t take much effort on your part”. GOD acknowledges that “it’s incredibly rewarding to know that what you did made a difference to someone”.

According to Dejours, recognition of work is achieved through judgements of beauty and utility. The individual “repatriates the recognition of doing to the register of being” (2000: 6), thereby granting themselves a sense of belonging to a community.

The analysed cases show that mutual recognition, a sense of belonging to communities, and gratitude imbue the act of doing with socio-symbolic depth, transforming it into an aesthetically significant experience.

In concluding the empirical analysis, it is important to note that even the purest aesthetic experience is profoundly influenced by considerable tension. Judging by the developers’ accounts, the aesthetic experience does not lead to lasting fulfilment or harmony. Some individuals describe experiencing moments of enthusiasm and flow, followed by periods of overwhelming exhaustion or frustration. This can occur when tight deadlines or rigid customer demands disrupt the natural rhythm of work. Others mention the challenge of maintaining engagement in long-term or repetitive projects. The experiences described reveal that while aesthetic fulfilment brings personal joy and gives meaning and colour to the journey from start to finish, the process of living “an experience” is fragile and forever vulnerable to fragmentation, pain, and meaninglessness. At its core lies an uneasy balance between commitment and engagement, on the one hand, and indifference, exhaustion, tedium, and estrangement, on the other. The possibility of finding meaning coexists with the risk of losing it.

Workers’ experience of their professional duties—as fulfilling and meaningful or degrading, inauthentic, and alienating—is shaped to a large extent by the socio-productive modes through which value is extracted from their labour, as well as by the socio-economic and socio-occupational structures that organise society. In this sense, the properties and dimensions of aesthetic experience can be used as a normative benchmark against which to analyse and compare the existential realities in which people perform their jobs today.

6. Discussion: The theoretical-conceptual and normative foundations of aesthetic work

The introduction of *aesthetic work* as a category within the sociology of work is both an exploratory conceptual proposal and an ethical imperative given the realities of contemporary capitalism. Here, aesthetics is understood as an experience that coherently and meaningfully integrates the *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* of the interaction between subject and world. We have endeavoured to apply the concept to the world of work, an area that has traditionally been examined through material or institutional lenses that tend to be somewhat removed from the subjective lived experience of workers. Such an undertaking presents obvious challenges, not least the need to construct a robust and coherent theoretical and conceptual framework, alongside a normative standard unencumbered by ethical pitfalls.

6.1. Theoretical-conceptual framework

The category of aesthetic work proposed in this research can be developed theoretically and conceptually, bearing in mind various critical considerations. Three fundamental questions need to be addressed: first, the extent to which it mediates between the subjective and the objective, or between the individual and the structural; second, whether the aesthetic and alienated poles of work experience can be unified within a single dimension; and third, whether the category remains valid when applied to the wide diversity of workers and work experiences.

To begin with, the sociology of work has oscillated between perspectives that privilege objective conditions (such as salary, stability, or contractual terms) and those that emphasise subjective experiences (such as autonomy, creativity, or recognition) (Braverman, 1974; Honneth, 2011; Sennett, 2008). However, it has fallen short of providing frameworks capable of integrating both dimensions—the subjective and the objective, or the individual and the structural. In contrast to the traditional tendency to reduce lived experience to a purely subjective, phenomenological reality confined to the individual's inner world, Dewey reaffirms the pragmatic notion of experience as a bridge forged by connections between the inner and outer worlds (Dewey, 1917: 6–8). Similarly, in *The Sociological Imagination*, Wright Mills assigns sociology the task of unearthing the connections between *personal troubles* and *public issues*. Accordingly, while the focus here has been on capturing the subjective dimension of aesthetic work, this by no means excludes structural components from the analysis. Given this, the category of experience can and should serve an epistemological function, mediating between the subjective and the objective.

Second, the precise nature of the relationships between aesthetic and alienated work remains unclear. This article primarily focuses on the former, only making oblique references to the latter. From an epistemological perspective, the key question is whether the realities described by these two

concepts are opposing ends of the same dimension or correspond to separate dimensions of doing. Research into the organisation of work has historically wrestled with a similar issue: the relationship between autonomy and control. The debate concerns whether autonomy is simply the absence of control, or a positive quality of doing in itself, and, conversely, whether control is merely the negation of autonomy, or a specific way of structuring it. The same epistemological challenge emerges in the theoretical and conceptual distinctions between negative and positive freedom, and between suffering and happiness.

Accordingly, the concepts of *alienated work* and *aesthetic work* must be defined in light of their immanent nature and the historical conditions that make them possible. Although the former has received greater attention from social sciences research, the present study focuses on the conceptualisation and empirical analysis of the latter. Nevertheless, the two types of experience are closely related and are therefore often considered to be part of the same dimension. Rosa (2017, 2019), for instance, conceptualises resonant and alienating experiences as opposing ways of relating to the world.

The third critical reflection on the conceptual content of the aesthetic work presented arises from the acknowledgement that it is based on a single case study. There is no empirical basis to suggest that the properties and dimensions of the experience described in this study can be extrapolated perfectly to the myriad work situations and enormous diversity of workers. One might, for example, question the extent to which women experience aesthetic work in the same way as men. A further question concerns whether young people in low-skilled positions and with limited market power have a similar aesthetic experience to software developers, who possess a high level of specialist training and in-demand skills. We would argue that the answer is decidedly no. As such, it is clear that the scope of research on aesthetic work must be widened to include different collectives and types of work. This would provide insight into the diversity of aesthetic experiences, as well as the varied combinations of aesthetic and alienating experiences—of fulfilment and boredom—that individuals encounter depending on their position within the social structure. It is evident in an experience society that aesthetic experience constitutes an important dimension of social inequality.

With a coherent and robust theoretical-conceptual framework in place, the properties and dimensions in Table 1 can be incorporated into qualitative and quantitative methodological designs aimed at studying social inequality in the aesthetic features of work. One example of a qualitative study that applies the analysis of lived experiences is provided by Bericat and Acosta (2025). For quantitative studies, the proposed theoretical framework may serve as the basis for creating an aesthetic experience index (AEI) applicable to occupational activities. While there are many complex methodological issues involved in constructing any composite indicator, as demonstrated by Bericat (2012), this does not preclude the design of an empirically operational model for measuring aesthetic work.

6.2. Normative standard

For the purposes of this study, aesthetic work is regarded *prima facie* as a desirable experience, akin to the notions of good work and a good life. Nevertheless, a second-order reflection, informed by a philosophy of suspicion, invites consideration of whether this normative standard conceals ethical pitfalls or obscures the vital ideological logics through which power exerts subtle and effective control over individuals. The functional demands of contemporary capitalism seem to resonate, albeit ambiguously, with the very essence of aesthetic experience. Since the moralities of work are historically shaped by the socio-structural and cultural conditions of each era (Prieto, 2020), aesthetic work can reasonably be considered to be part of the prevailing work ethics and moralities of our time.

The creative component of aesthetic experience mirrors the continuous innovation demanded by production systems. In the capitalism of singularity (Reckwitz, 2020), in which uniqueness and authenticity are highly valued, the worker's expressive projection becomes a crucial economic and labour resource. The individual's total commitment and engagement align seamlessly with the demands of *greedy institutions*. The productive and consumption-driven logic of capitalism requires access to, and the ability to manipulate and tamper with, individuals' subjectivity, i.e. to penetrate their inner world. All consumption ultimately comes down to the consumption of experiences, or aesthetic consumption. Furthermore, the level of enthusiasm expected of workers in the digital age may be a trap (Zafra, 2017), a ruse of productivist rationality adapted to the parameters of the experience society. According to Boltanski and Chiapello (2002), the new spirit of capitalism appropriates this aesthetic morality to justify performance, transforming creative and autonomous work into an imperative of subjective involvement that shifts the burden of exhaustion onto individuals. Clearly, aesthetics operates in our societies as both a means of control and a productive resource that exploits subjectivity.

However, these observations do not undermine the view of aesthetic work as an ethical and normative standard, reflecting the legitimate human desire to form fruitful, fulfilling, and meaningful relationships with the world. Workers aspire to experience their work as resonant, to find their jobs meaningful and useful, and to feel that they are contributing to something worthwhile. They also want their work to provide opportunities for self-realisation and authentic engagement. Despite the inherent risks, workers seek recognition for their efforts and a sense of purpose. In this way, they feel a sense of ownership over their work, rather than viewing it as an external imposition that breeds indifference, estrangement, and alienation.

Consider the medical and nursing professionals who strive to save lives through acts of precision and humanity despite their exhaustion and lack of resources; the ironmonger who perseveres in finding the exact part needed to repair something broken; the scientists who contend with uncertainty and error to produce meaningful knowledge; the cleaning staff who

transform chaotic spaces into habitable environments; and the bus driver who maintains focus and responsibility for the lives of others in their daily routine. All of them embody, to varying degrees, aesthetic work. Every occupation has the potential to be performed aesthetically, unlocking its various dimensions.

It could be assumed that aesthetic acts are limited to artistic creations and performances, such as a magnificent concert featuring a string quartet performing the masterpieces of one of the great composers. However, this assumption is not only erroneous, but also constitutes an illegitimate delimitation of the concept. The efforts of a team of hospitality professionals setting up a dining room just before lunchtime can also be considered an example of aesthetic work. The meticulous folding and placement of perfectly pressed cotton tablecloths; the painstaking checks to ensure they are completely clean and spotless; the deft hands that smooth out any creases; the careful polishing of each piece of cutlery with a cloth before it is set on the table; and the careful arrangement of the tableware are all unmistakable signs that these professionals are engaging in aesthetic work performed with rhythm, form, and meaning. Once they have finished the task, they pause briefly to admire their work from a distance, a moment of pride that attests to the aesthetic nature of their labour, carried out in anticipation of the pleasure diners will experience upon taking their seats.

All workers should have the right to an aesthetic experience at work. Injustice lies not in workers' desire or ability to experience their occupation aesthetically. Rather, it stems from the fact that they are poorly paid, provided with precarious employment contracts, condemned to occupational and personal insecurity, and subjected to personal humiliation. The *right to aesthetics* at work has yet to be recognised, but it ought to be. Social measures that promote professional equality should be introduced to eliminate the obstacles and working conditions that prevent workers from enjoying aesthetic experiences. At the same time, steps should be taken to ensure that workers' legitimate aesthetic aspirations are not exploited by capitalist production organisations for the purpose of extracting economic value through the manipulation and control of their employees' subjectivity.

7. Conclusions

This article proposes the introduction of a new category to the field of work studies: *aesthetic work*. Moving beyond the objective and institutional parameters of work, the argument here is that sociology should analyse workers' subjectivity to gain insight into contemporary socio-structural conditions of production and evaluate the quality, meaning, and real-life consequences of work. In an *experience society*, it is essential to have an understanding of people's lived experiences from their own perspective.

The sociology of work explores its many subjective dimensions, including creativity, expressiveness, professional satisfaction, emotional content,

standards of beauty, and ownership of one's work. However, an overarching framework capable of integrating all these contributions has yet to be established. Drawing on *lived experience* offers an alternative approach to understanding work, one that avoids reductionist phenomenologies and subjectivities. In the relationship between subject and world, experience serves to bridge the gap between the subjective and the objective, and the individual and the structural.

This study of software developers has revealed seven inherent properties of aesthetic work: unity of the process; form and rhythm of the activity; connection with materials; dialectic between doing and undergoing; expressiveness; socio-relational and communal embeddedness; and consummation. These properties lay the foundations for both qualitative and quantitative research on aesthetic work and its social distribution.

Aesthetic work is defined as an active and productive relationship between the individual and the world. In this relationship, thought, emotion, perception, sensitivity, the body, and consciousness are all intertwined in an integrated process involving form, rhythm, and meaning. This process culminates in a fruitful, meaningful, and fully realised consummation.

Capitalism is reliant on aesthetic work as a key productive resource for extracting value and controlling the subjectivity of workers. Nevertheless, the human desire for aesthetic experience is not something that workers should have to forego. All types of work have the potential to be aesthetic, and all workers have the *right to an aesthetic experience*. There is a need for measures that will create conditions conducive to having an aesthetic experience at work, while also placing constraints on the illegitimate and heteronomous appropriation of aesthetic work by the capitalist production system.

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Statement on the use of artificial intelligence

ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-4) was used to make minor stylistic edits and improve argumentative clarity, but not for idea generation, theoretical analysis, or data interpretation. All decisions relating to content, structure, and final writing style were made solely by the authors.

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