

MARCUSE'S AESTHETIC POLITICS: IDEOLOGY-CRITIQUE AND SOCIALIST ONTOLOGY

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A. TOWARDS AN AESTHETIC SOCIALISM

Hegel suggested, in his aesthetic theory, that art contains the sensuous appearance of the Idea, the symbol of a rationality of reason that is beyond words [1]. Art was not language for Hegel because it is non-discursive; it gave form to hidden, ineffable content. Marcuse in his later work came to regard art as the last refuge of critical insights in a totally mobilized society. In his last book, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978), he rejoins themes from his earliest *Zeitschrift* essays on the problems of truth and happiness [2]. Marcuse in the 1930s originally sought a materialist concept of reason with which to overcome philosophical dualisms, a theme he later pursued in his dialectical investigation of Eros. What he called a "rationality of gratification" in 1955 joined intellect and instinct and overcame the mind-body dualism that he felt served to cement social bondage by relegating the ideal of freedom to the spiritual heavens, leaving earth to the expropriated [3]. In this essay I want to trace the contours of Marcuse's mature aesthetic theory, focussing on his view of art's dual role as ideology-critique and as socialist ontology. Marcuse ended with art because he felt he could no longer talk about a rationality of gratification, or give it comprehensible political form, in the context of late 1970s American capitalism. The cracks around the edges of one-dimensional society that emerged faintly in the late 1960s were once again being sealed up, leaving critical theory with no language other than poetry.

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In one sense, then, Marcuse finishes with a discussion of art because he concludes that a traditional politics of class is hopeless, following the short-lived exuberance of the 1960s. Yet in another sense he maintains his internal dialogue with the Marxist tradition and uses art, as he had used psychoanalysis earlier, to ensure that subject and object, individual and class, particular and general, could never gain complete identity thus preserving the non-identical relation between person and collectivity. Marcuse uses art both as a transcendent ideology-critical force that evokes the dream of freedom and as a vehicle for projecting the image of a humane socialism that refuses to separate process and product. He suggests that every social order, no matter how free of internal contradictions, will need media through which individuals can confront their own mortality. *Art both rescues the dream and memory of freedom in a one-dimensional social order and allows us to confront our own mortality once we – and as we – are liberated.* An almost *aesthetic socialism* preserves the ineradicable distance between a non-identical subject and object and thus opposes a *literal socialism* – that of Leninists and economic determinists – which dispenses with ambiguity in favor of apodictic knowledge and thus political inflexibility.

B. THE LIBERATING AUTONOMY OF ART

The Aesthetic Dimension is phrased as a challenge to orthodox Marxist aesthetics that reduces art to a vehicle of socialist counter-propaganda, "socialist realism."

The political potential of art lies only in its own aesthetic dimension. Its relation to praxis is inexorably indirect, mediated, and frustrating. The more immediately political the work of art, the more it reduces the power of estrangement and the radical, transcendent goals of change. In this sense, there may be more subversive potential in the poetry of Baudelaire and Rimbaud than in the didactic plays of Brecht [4].

Marcuse suggests that it is in its autonomy that art remains a repository of radical hopes for social improvement. By refusing to succumb to the appearance of the given, art is “permanent subversion,” giving form to hidden content that amplifies the inherently dialectical – malleable – character of the social world. The content is hidden, he contends, in *la prose du monde*, the attitude of one-dimensional commonsense where things “are” as they appear to be. Marcuse suggests that art transforms our conventional perception and that it is *more* realistic than the attitude of what Hegel called *Verstand* uncomprehending commonsense, instead grasping the occluded possibility of a qualitatively different reality. And it is because total mobilization in advanced capitalism distorts and falsifies our immediate experience that we must resort to the aesthetic transcendence in order to keep alive our dreams and memories of freedom and happiness.

Inasmuch as art preserves, with the promise of happiness, the memory of the goals that failed, it can enter, as a “regulative idea,” the desperate struggle for changing the world. Against all fetishism of the productive forces, against the continued enslavement of individuals by the objective conditions (which remain those of domination), art represents the ultimate goal of all revolutions: the freedom of happiness of the individual [5].

The overt theme of the 1978 book is to argue that art is a proper revolutionary vehicle only in the distance it keeps from organized politics. Marcuse mistrusts socialist realism because it requires that art subordinate its own internal necessity to a crudely conceived model of class-struggle, thus cancelling the vital autonomy and hence flexibility of ideology-critical ideas. Art is valuable precisely because it prods conscious-

ness, sensibility and imagination in an era where they are virtually defunct, a recurring motif in Marcuse’s work. He makes art thematic in his final book because he feels that the 1960s represented the last viable historical moment when the dialectic of individual and class might have been creatively activated and mediations developed between individual change of consciousness and reorganized class-struggle. Art remains a political topic for Marcuse because he regards it as the last repository of imagination, a theme strikingly reminiscent of his writings in the mid-1930s on the affirmative character of culture [6]. Where the early essays on culture and philosophy from the 1930s were written on the lengthening shadow of Hitler’s authoritarian state, so his last book on art was conceived during the dawn of neoconservatism, with its glorification of pseudo-inwardness. Marcuse acknowledges his growing despair early in the 1978 book:

In a situation where the miserable reality can be changed only through radical political praxis, the concern with aesthetics demands justification. It would be senseless to deny the element of despair inherent in this concern: the retreat into a world of fiction where existing conditions are changed and overcome only in the realm of the imagination [7].

However he rejects the orthodox Marxist view that art must mechanically represent the interests of the “ascending class.” Marcuse, here, with other western Marxists since early Lukacs, rebels against the mechanical schemata of base and superstructure imposed by “scientific” Marxists of the Second International (including, ironically, Engels himself) on a few passages lifted out of context from *The German Ideology* and other later writings of Marx. Art, like religion and philosophy, is improperly relegated to the realm of the merely derivative and becomes a mirror, albeit of the proletariat’s “true” interests [8].

The contradiction in orthodox Marxism, which Marcuse notes but does not explore in enough depth, is that art is restricted by economic determinists to faithfully reproducing

the proletariat's class interest but that according to determinism art can have no independent constitutive function. Thus socialist realism is an empty category for art merely reflects class conflicts and cannot energize the revolutionary process. Indeed socialist realism was conceived in the context of post-revolutionary Russia not as a prod to the class-struggle but as a form of ideological self-advertisement and self-justification. The portrayal of dutiful thick-muscled Soviet workers – Heroes of Labor – reinforced the nearly Kantian sense of duty that the Communist vanguard tried to instill in workers. Thus socialist realism was actually socialist idealism, justifying the real no matter how corrupt. So the orthodox Marxist discussion of art is a rough equivalent of the Scholastic disputes about angels on pins; the denial of art's autonomy, indeed of the autonomy of consciousness, makes art's content irrelevant except as an index of "substructural" conditions.

In more general terms, Marcuse suggests that this mechanical base-superstructure model has the same effect in the state-socialist world as one-dimensionality does in the capitalist west. It devalues consciousness, subjectivity and imagination in the name of transpersonal developmental imperatives. The person matters only inasmuch as he or she is a cipher of surrounding social forces, notably as a representative of one or the other of the warring classes. The denial of art's autonomy thus goes hand in hand with the denial of the autonomy of subjectivity.

Ideology becomes mere ideology, in spite of Engels' emphatic qualifications, and a devaluation of the entire realm of subjectivity takes place, a devaluation not only of the subject as *ego cogito*, the rational subject, but also of inwardness, emotions, and imagination. The subjectivity of individuals, their own consciousness and unconscious, tends to be dissolved into class consciousness. Thereby, a major prerequisite of revolution is minimized, namely, the fact that the need for radical change must be rooted in the subjectivity of individuals themselves, in their intelligence and their passions, their drives and their goals. Marxist theory succumbed to that very reification which it had exposed and combated in society as a whole. Subjectivity became an atom of

objectivity; even in its rebellious form it was surrendered to a collective consciousness. The deterministic component of Marxist theory does not lie in its concept of the relationship between social existence and consciousness, but in the reductionistic concept of consciousness which brackets the particular content of individual consciousness and, with it, the subjective potential for revolution [9].

Marcuse in 1978 defines the project of critical theory in exactly the same way he defined it in the early 1930s: it was to rescue bourgeois *Innerlichkeit* from the forces of one-dimensionality [10]. What had changed by the late 1970s in his perspective was the critical medium through which to restore critical inwardness. In the 1930s he and his Frankfurt colleagues attempted to register the truth about the demise of interiority through a direct language of theory; in the late 1970s Marcuse despairs of didactically intoning the name of domination as a spur to counter-hegemonic action but instead tries to evoke its sinister reality through illusion (*Schein*). Art according to him is still autonomous and can reconstitute reality beyond the media of everyday communication. Like Adorno, Marcuse suggests that critical theory might itself become a metalanguage that is more evocative than the straightforward analytic theory of Marx (although there are differences between Marcuse and Adorno that I will explore below).

Marcuse here rejoins his discussion of the "aesthetic ethos" in *An Essay on Liberation* [11]. But where in 1969 he suggested that the "new sensibility" of the New Left was already an incipient positive force for social reconstruction, in the late 1970s he feels that this sensibility itself is under siege. Indeed the spontaneism of the New Left may well have been its undoing, as he argued in *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1973) [12]. By attempting to collapse the distinctions between art and reality and between theory and action New Leftists did not protect their own irreducible interiority. The forces of one-dimensionality could thus integrate the counter-revolution and make it its own.

An autonomous art only superficially appears

to abandon politics; actually art is most political where it provokes in us memory and dream that liberate us from the flattened horizon of one-dimensional perception. In this sense art is vitally anti-positivist for it suggests that things are *not* what they appear to be but possess hidden dialectical motion. Marcuse explicitly suggests that art as a form of dialectical imagination in this way has political content and is not merely spiritual or emotive. The second dimension can thus affect the first dimension as artistic autonomy issues in directly political sensibility. Here Marcuse, in the midst of political pessimism, rejoins the dialectic of individual and class [13]. His criticism of early affirmative culture was precisely that it remained separate from political economy and the material base [14]. Marcuse indicts socialist realism because it subordinates art, ideology and consciousness to the first dimension of material reproduction. Bourgeois culture, in the opposite way, keeps art on lofty heights and denies its contact with material reproduction. Marcuse suggests that both are false: he believes that artistic illusion can prepare the way for the fusion, through concerted revolutionary practice, of the first and second dimensions. Art begins on the level of “mere” consciousness in order, one day, to subvert the very distinction between consciousness and practice. Art will be “mere” art only when socialism has been brought into being and “permanent aesthetic subversion” can be relaxed as art becomes a way of dealing with our individuated mortality, itself a vital humanizing aim of a non-authoritarian socialist ontology. While every social order requires art as perpetual witness to the inexorable tension between Eros and Thanatos and particular and general, only corrupted social orders need art to remain autonomous as a way of preserving the memory and dream of political liberation.

C. THE FORCE OF TRANSCENDENT ILLUSION

Marcuse alone among the Frankfurt theorists had patience for the stoned sensibility of the counter-culture for he felt it augured a rupture in the continuum of repressive experience that keeps dialectical imagination in perpetual check. But the new sensibility of the 1960s was not sufficiently dialectical and did not achieve those mediations between thought and sensibility that open onto the plateau of social reconstruction. Instead the drug high is an end in itself, the triumph of immediacy over mediacy – momentarily liberating but not able to sustain itself, via non-repressive sublimation, in new institutions constructed with purpose and plan.

Art partakes of Brecht’s estrangement-effect by using materials at hand to it. It is of this world, but also above it; it can see the given in new and liberating ways.

... the encounter with the fictitious world restructures consciousness and gives sensual representation to a counter-societal experience. The aesthetic sublimation thus liberates and validates childhood and adult dreams of happiness and sorrow [15].

Art is both celebration and mourning, comedy and tragedy; either way it can liberate the imagination so that it is able to distinguish between what is “surplus” and what is “basic” in the human condition. Surplus is needless suffering, tyranny, injustice and domination. Basic is our mortality, our existential aloneness, lovers’ quarrels and brokenheartedness, alongside the “promesse de bonheur” of true socialism [16]. Great art does not make tragedy a timeless universal but sets up the profound counterpoint between happiness and tragedy, joy being the penumbra around the grey cloud of death and finitude. Marcuse clearly believes that socialism will not efface all human suffering but only that suffering which is produced by a repressive reality principle in the service of private interests [17].

Art for Marcuse works through illusion

(*Schein*) that affords us greater realism than is offered in ordinary experience shackled by the constraints of positivism. Art is an alternative mode of cognition to positivism in that it deals with images, symbols and shadows and not simply unmediated experience that refers directly to given objects in the world. Art aims at a "subversion of experience" that restores inwardness, sensibility and imagination: "rebirth of the rebellious subjectivity [18]." Marcuse characterizes the process of aesthetic presentation as "sublimation," where ordinary experiences and data are stylized in accord with the inner requirements of the form itself. Thus ordinary content is presented in an extraordinary way, shattering our preconceptions and clearing our perception of tired habits and the gravitational pull of the merely apparent. We see behind the given appearances with the help of the artistic sublimation; we see death where it haunts life and joy where it holds out against unhappiness. All is not rosy in the work of art, of course; as we just noted, artistic consciousness helps us to distinguish between what is essential and superfluous in the human condition.

Artistic illusion calls up a deeper cosmos than we can experience in everyday life, especially under advanced capitalism. The rhythms of nature as of life itself are evoked in their majesty and sorrow; all things pass, and yet with that passage comes the renewal of hope. Marcuse here is not a sloppy sentimentalist, whose critical theory has grown senile with advancing age. Rather he is more concerned than ever to rescue authentic experience – of hope and sorrow – from the Muzak of popular culture. Writing in the late 1970s, Marcuse is aware that artificial negativity [19], carefully cultivated by the system in order to provide itself with pockets of creative subjectivity, takes the form of "lifestyle," becoming a fetish of immediate experience, personal authenticity and interpersonal sincerity. Of course the "jargon of authenticity," as Adorno scornfully referred to Heidegger's *existenz*-philosophy (that easily became a justification of fascism), buttresses a

totally administered society [20]. The estranging experiences communicated in a great work of art are obliterated under the tyranny of popular thinking; lifestyle in the 1980s requires that people not subject themselves to the alarming truths of Schoenberg or Kafka lest their "personal growth" be disrupted. All of this cultural baggage is dismissed as "heavy," an archaic remnant of early bourgeois society when the first and second dimensions were still to some extent distinct. Lifestyle has no patience for the estranging lessons of art because it is concerned with "self" and not with the world in which self is historically anchored. In a totally administered society the preponderance of the object ultimately forces the subject to make a fetish of its own "needs" – really its *wants* – and to dismiss the public sphere and indeed the entire objective cosmos as irrelevant.

The culture of narcissism perfects a bland positivism and has no use for illusion; the requirements of authenticity cancel the dialectical echoes of the double entendre, irony and subtlety. Narcissistic personalities speak in the transparent chatter of gossip, which is the opposite of aesthetic illusion: the soul of the world is bared under the trivializing eye of the television-watcher, fad-follower and voyeur of the lives of the powerful. The narcissist accepts at face value whatever is given and relates it to his or her own impoverished experience. The foreign, the unordinary, is dismissed with the lament – "I can't deal with it." The subject acquiesces to the object precisely in order to experience the indubitability of "commonsense" that is a comfort in a world gone mad. Perpetual uncertainty becomes itself a type of certainty; total administration administers everyone equally and, as Adorno and Horkheimer noted in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, enlightenment is democratic for everything is demystified equally [21].

Marcuse's aesthetic theory is a challenge to this jargon of authenticity translated into lifestyle as well as to socialist realism. It opposes the realism of *Verstand* with the

idealism of transcendent knowledge and of critique. It questions the possible grounds of human existence and the modalities of freedom in society. This is not an ungrounded questioning for, as Marcuse notes, art works with the given materials at hand – colors, words, sound. In the dialectic of form and content is contained the dialectic of the possible and the real.

In its very elements (word, color, tone) art depends on the transmitted cultural material; art shares it with the existing society. And no matter how much art overturns the ordinary meanings of words and images, the transfiguration is still that of a given material. This is the case even when the words are broken, when new ones are invented – otherwise all communication would be severed. This limitation of aesthetic autonomy is the condition under which art can become a social factor.

In this sense art is inevitably part of that which is and only as part of that which is does it speak against that which is. This contradiction is preserved and resolved (*aufgehoben*) in the aesthetic form which gives the familiar content and the familiar experience the power of estrangement – and which leads to the emergence of a new consciousness and a new perception [22].

Only by being of this world can art indict it and at the same time reveal the promise of an undistorted order where beauty and tragedy, Eros and Thanatos are in harmony. Art is not pure idealism but, in a phrase of Merleau-Ponty, dialectical idealism; it uses the given material in order to point out its latent potential. And the vehicle of its critical capacity, in this Kantian sense, is its power of illusion.

The indictment does not exhaust itself in the recognition of evil; art is also the promise of liberation. This promise, too, is a quality of aesthetic form, or more precisely, of the beautiful as a quality of aesthetic form. The promise is wrested from established reality. It invokes an image of the end of power, the appearance (*Schein*) of freedom. But only the appearance; clearly, the fulfillment of this promise is not within the domain of art [23].

Marcuse opposes an anti-art that collapses the distinction between form and content and between art and reality. Art cannot become reality precisely because it is sublimated

activity, channeling given material at hand into an *oeuvre*. Art is vital precisely where it preserves its autonomy and rises above the suction-like forces of the one-dimensional; anti-art would cancel this autonomy and would require art to do battle for its very survival with politics. As Marcuse noted in *An Essay on Liberation* poetry never wins in its contest with politics and he suggests that it can be most political precisely where it rises above the fray [24]. This argument resembles his discussion of psychoanalysis in 1955, where he suggested that libido must always be repressed and sublimated in order to enter the world as socially useful activity [25]. An unsublimated art would lose its aesthetic appeal as illusion and, like unmediated libido, would fail to inhibit its aims. The lack of aim-inhibition in art results in the dissolution of form and the unmediated merging of artistic content with the stuff of the “real” world. Art must sublimate itself in order to achieve an epistemological status in reality that prevents it from being swallowed up in the maelstrom of a positivist culture which has no use for illusion, irony or indirection. This sublimation, as Marcuse recognizes, is highly threatening to the dominant reality precisely because it maintains a high standard of maturity, autonomy and rationality. An art that attempts to erase the boundaries between itself and reality descends to infantilism, just as do those who practice promiscuous sexuality as a way out of bourgeois asceticism.

Marcuse here addresses the erotic character of art, against those orthodox Marxists who “sharply reject the idea of the Beautiful, the central category of ‘bourgeois’ aesthetics [26].” Instead Marcuse argues:

Appertaining to the domain of Eros, the Beautiful represents the pleasure principle. Thus, it rebels against the prevailing reality principle of domination. The work of art speaks the liberating language, invokes the liberating images of the subordination of death and destruction to the will to live. This is the emancipatory element in aesthetic affirmation [27].

Art objectifies the life-instincts, which through

their sensuous representation take the form of the Beautiful. Marcuse is not suggesting that ugliness as such will please us but what the internal necessity of a work like Picasso's *Guernica*, depicting fascist dive-bombers killing peasants, allows the *oeuvre* as a whole to rise above the reductionist forces of one-dimensional consciousness. Brecht agonized over the proper political role of the artist; he wrote a poem about how only the horrors of politics and not the sensation of natural beauty moved him to his desk to write in protest. But Brecht's message is itself poetic, as is Picasso's in the example of *Guernica*. Some of the most moving evocations of humanity struggling against fascism came from children in concentration camps; these were among the most powerful protests against the total horror of genocide because they challenged the grim imagery and reality of the camps with an alternative imagery of joy – the "promesse de bonheur" fascism could not entirely stifle. Art does not have to have a superficial beauty to partake of Eros and, in this sense, to remind the living that they are still alive and have much to live for.

Indeed beauty and tragedy merge under the artistic eye; is the inevitability of death any less beautiful than the inevitability of life and hope? In this sense, Marcuse presents not only an ideology-critique of late capitalist domination – the explicit theme of his work since the early 1930s – but also a philosophy of socialist existence that is designed to be timeless. Art in this way fulfills a second important function: it reconciles us to our own mortality, defusing revolutionary arrogance, and prevents the inevitability of death from cancelling liberatory projects in the present. In this regard, art as ideology-critique promises a politics of non-identity, the basis of a socialist ontology.

D. AN ART AND POLITICS OF NON-IDENTITY

In other work I have addressed Marcuse's speculations about the interrelationship of life-

instinct and death instinct [28]. His final book on art completes his thinking about the relationship of mortality to Marxism, this time in the explicit context of art.

The institutions of a socialist society, even in their most democratic form, could never resolve all the conflicts between the universal and the particular, between human beings and nature, between individual and individual. Socialism does not and cannot liberate Eros from Thanatos. Here is the limit which drives the revolution beyond any accomplished stage of freedom: it is the struggle for the impossible, against the unconquerable whose domain can perhaps nevertheless be reduced [29].

It is death that is "the unconquerable." It is hard to deny that this issue of the inevitability of death must have preoccupied Marcuse when in his late 70s he composed his final book. Here Marcuse takes his greatest risk in the composition of his critical theory: while even the most obdurate of Marxists can "forgive" his Freudianism, few have any patience for what seem to be maudlin reflections in existentialism. What on earth does the dialectic of particularity and universality, our mortality and the infinity of time and the universe, have to do with revolutionary struggle? Marcuse in the last sections of *The Aesthetic Dimension* confronts this problem directly, sketching the outline of a socialist ontology based on non-identity.

The need for such an ontology is both in the present and the future. Unless Marxism is made mortal it will retain a self-defeating arrogance, supposing that class-struggle will resolve all dilemmas, solve all problems. Such a prospect will not only prove to be impossible in an as yet unseen socialist future; it dangerously distorts the struggle for that order in the present.

The universality of art cannot be grounded in the world and world outlook of a particular class, for art envisions a concrete universal, humanity (*Menschlichkeit*), which no particular class can incorporate, not even the proletariat, Marx's "universal class." The inexorable entanglement of joy and sorrow, celebration and despair, Eros and Thanatos cannot be dissolved into problems of class struggle. History is also grounded in nature. And Marxist theory has the least justification to

ignore the metabolism between the human being and nature, and to denounce the insistence of this natural soil of society as an aggressive ideological conception [30].

This metabolism between humanity and nature indeed takes place within each of us, in the clash of mind and body, life- and death-instinct. Marcuse here offers a deep meditation on the relationship between human and non-human nature that is at the core of Freudian and existential Marxism. These reflections are remarkably similar to those of the late Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who wedded existential-phenomenological and Marxian concerns in unique synthesis, itself in perpetual dialogue with the existential Marxism of Sartre. Merleau-Ponty, like Marcuse, sought that metabolism between reason and instinct that is the riddle of existence and cannot be surpassed by any understanding [31]. I read Marcuse together with Merleau-Ponty as authors of a mortal Marxism that takes as its resource the contingency of human existence. The dialectic of celebration and despair will outlast every ideology. And Merleau-Ponty like Marcuse lived under the cloud of Stalinism, which spoiled forever his optimism about social transformation. But like Marcuse this did not cause Merleau-Ponty to lose all hope. The fact of death does not refute the possibility of “final liberation” – at least from the constraints of domination, if not of mortality.

Art is thus a sign system through which we come to grips with our own stake in the revolutionary movement. As mature adults we are not self-sacrificing without regard for our own happiness; and yet our happiness cannot be sought without reference to the terrible suffering of others. Marcuse in the last pages of his 1978 book again evokes the memory of those who have already died and cannot be redeemed, except in memory.

Art declares its *caveat* to the thesis according to which the time has come to change the world. While art bears witness to the necessity of liberation, it also testifies to its limits. What has been done cannot be undone; what

has passed cannot be recaptured. History is guilt but not redemption. Eros and Thanatos are lovers as well as adversaries. Destructive energy may be brought into the service of life to an ever higher degree – Eros itself lives under the sign of finitude, of pain. The “eternity of joy” constitutes itself through the death of individuals. For them, this eternity is an abstract universal. And, perhaps, the eternity does not last very long. The world was not made for the sake of the human being and it has not become more human [32].

In suggesting that the world is not our creation (although as passengers we can leave our mark, not indelible) Marcuse opposes all idealisms that put “man” at the center and thus commit the sin of pride. Instead, we can only find ourselves in the metabolism between subjective constitution and creation and what is objectively given (the world, instinct, the body). It is through our body that we become truly human, by mastering it and making it our own. We cannot change everything, only particular things like the organization of material reproduction and the distribution of wealth and power. What we cannot change is the subject-matter of philosophy, poetry and painting: the relationship between our mortality and the universality of the world and cosmos. By suggesting falsely that we can transform all things – the Hegelian totality – we commit the sin of pride and thereby infect the socialist struggle with a dangerous arrogance.

Here Marcuse’s thought is carefully post-Hegelian. He individuates the concept of reason to divest it of its totalizing overtones; the whole is neither the false nor the true: neither Adorno nor Hegel were correct, the one in despair and the other in faith. Marcuse endorses the principle of non-identity according to which we can never erase the metabolism between ourselves and the world, the particular and the general, Eros and Thanatos. Philosophies of identity end up either in utopianism or tyranny, where the subject vainly tries to rise above the distorted reality in pure contemplation – the *theoria* of the Greeks – or to impose his own authoritarian solutions upon it. In this sense Marcuse did not retain Lukacs’ Marxian version of Hegel’s concept of totality – the identical subject-object of world

history, the collective subjectivity of the world proletariat – but wrote a Marxism of non-identity that related individual and group dialectically, denying the possibility of a final synthesis [33]. Marcuse's Marxism in this way is rooted in mortality and mediation.

Art is to capture this ontology of non-identity through its creative sublimation of the given reality. Where political theory soars above the details of the particular in making a case for the possibility of a new universality – social freedom, in Marx's sense – art descends to the particular in setting up counterpoints between the given and the possible. Theory asserts, where art evokes. Both Adorno and Marcuse in their later work embraced this attitude of non-identity that attempted to probe the nature of the universal through a deciphering and representation of the particular; they differed, however, in that Adorno attempted directly through theoretical language to achieve the evocative echo of art, while Marcuse felt that theory must remain discursive. This explains their differences of cultural sensibility: Adorno thought the most revolutionary art was that which immanently exploded the dialectic of form and content, such as that of Beckett and Schoenberg, while Marcuse could embrace the great bourgeois art of Beethoven as well as the carnal rock of the Rolling Stones. Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* is incomprehensible without knowing Adorno's attempt in *Philosophy of Modern Music* to make theory speak a metalanguage of non-identity [34].

Adorno in his post-war pessimism had no theory of the political, no positive image of mediations between art and politics [35]. Marcuse by contrast attempted to theorize positively about the "new sensibility," his central conceptual contribution to neo-Marxism. While he remained disappointed about the ensuing lack of practical mediations between the new sensibility of the late 1960s and the possibility of a new council communism, he gives us crucial hints in his last book about how non-identity could be developed into a veritable

principle of political praxis.

The struggle to humanize our existence never ends; the very principle of non-identity suggests that synthesis and solutions must be continually renewed. There are no eternal guarantees of perpetual peace, although certainly, as a Marxist, Marcuse knows that things can be greatly improved over what they are today. But he acknowledges that the liberation of imagination may not lead to Nirvana. Instead the imagination, once freed from the fetters of the reality principle, may become melancholic and sad with wisdom. The moments of play and joy will be set against a darker background of life and earth, of historical guilt and unrequited love. Socialism, after all, will only make us *truly* human – not superhuman. As a Freudian, Marcuse recognizes that there is much of a turbulent and volcanic sort in our interiors that must be mastered, painfully and haltingly, before we are fit to associate with our fellow human beings.

His argument about the function of art is usually read one-dimensionally to imply that art's only utility ought to be in the here and now. But I want to suggest that Marcuse also argues that art retrieves an essential aspect of the human condition, our particularity and mortality, and uses this as a revolutionary resource. Here he is different from those existentialists who infer that the awareness of our mortality means that to struggle in the short-run is strictly useless. It is rather because of our all-too-human mortality and individuality that we must effect radical social change – to let our true humanity emerge. Again, whether "repression" in a genuine socialist society will still be repressive is an open question, answerable only in practice and through experiment. Our humanness cannot be grasped in what Marx called "pre-history"; it will only emerge in the process of genuine liberation and in the metabolism of history and nature, subject and object.

Marcuse's Marxism is often dismissed for its existentialist overtones; the reduction of liberation to personal choice would seem to imply an

untoward optimism and idealism about social change unwarranted by historical circumstances. But Marcuse never forgets that liberation, which indeed must begin with a choice, can never compensate for past suffering, nor eliminate all future anxieties and social conflicts. On the final page of his 1978 book, he issues a necessary corrective to an unbalanced reading of his work on idealism:

Art fights reification by making the petrified world speak, sing, perhaps dance. Forgetting past suffering and past joy alleviates life under a repressive reality principle. In contrast, remembrance spurs the drive for the conquest of suffering and the permanence of joy. But the force of remembrance is frustrated: joy itself is over-shadowed by pain. Inexorably so? The horizon of history is still open. If the remembrance of things past would become a motive power in the struggle for changing the world, the struggle would be waged for a revolution hitherto suppressed in the previous historical revolutions [36].

It is too easy to dismiss Marcuse's aesthetic theory as utopian; passages like the one just quoted remind us that the liberating force of remembrance, culled from Freud's psychoanalysis, contains a retrospection on the tragedy that is by now millennial in its duration. While we can avoid this man-made tragedy in future social orders – if not the elemental tragedy of life-and-death – we cannot and should not undo our memory of it. Revolutionary humility is bestowed on those who in their present struggle recognize that they have only come lately to the emancipatory task; the slave revolts are no different from the revolt of modern “new sensibilities.” Marcuse cautions against amnesia on the left, suggesting that it is *hubris* to think that reconstruction can ever redeem those who perished, anonymously, in past darkness. Adorno's persistent metaphor of modern society as a concentration-camp is less an exaggeration than meets the eye; in the camps victims perished with the anonymity of their tattooed-on prison numbers. Scientism, as he reminded us, wishes the death of uncertainty and particularity; the perfect identity of subject and object is

contained in the authoritarian state.

Art thus serves to particularize suffering by giving it a shape and a name. Not all art contains explicit joy. But even the remembrance of an ugliness portrayed in art can be beautiful, even joyful, transcending both the beautiful and the ugly [37], if it evokes the fallen hopes of those who have hoped in vain. Remembrance restores the brutality of the past and shows how it made way for the society of the present; it no longer allows us to live in benign neglect of the anonymous martyrs of the past. It creates what one commentator has called “anamnestic solidarity,” reminding us that we are by no means the first to invoke the names of liberation and justice [38].

Indeed I suggest that much of Marcuse's effort to develop an aesthetic theory was in response to the arrogance of those orthodox Marxists who forget the past in the spirit of naive progressivism and who reduce consciousness to a mere reflex of the iron law of socialist development. This arrogance leads at once to tyranny of the vanguard and to a fatalism that passively awaits an “inevitable” revolution. Marcuse's writings on art can be read as a direct counterpoint to the growth of Marxian scientism in the past ten years, exemplified in the passionless structuralism of Althusser and others [39]. The revolution is not guaranteed in the concepts we use to analyze capitalism, as the Frankfurt critique of science has reminded us often [40]. Indeed scientism becomes an ideology both in capitalist and socialist spheres [41]. In socialist theory scientism legitimizes that tyranny of an ideologically “correct” minority and it cancels the need for subjective liberation.

Marcuse does not intend in the 1978 book that the new sensibility of the future must be an “artist” by profession; rather he or she will be alive to the non-identity of individual and group, Eros and Thanatos and particular and general interest. Only if the new sensibility keeps non-identity in sight can it avoid the false totalizations of authoritarian socialism and a utopianism which degenerates into tyranny. Art for Marcuse

is merely one of the vehicles for keeping this guiding perception of non-identity alive; it sublimates present reality in order to show the possibility of a future in which individual and group can be in harmony, if not identical. Art in this sense promises a social setting in which the truly human – tragedy as well as beauty – can gain lucid outline.

In this sense I contend that Marcuse's last speculations about the radical role of art help him create a Marxism based on non-identity that is alive to the contingencies of life and revolution as well as to their promises. The resource of mortal Marxism is at once its limitation: Eros promises liberation, but it also remains mortal, libidinal, and cannot be eradicated. Marcuse in all his work has sketched a grounded rationality that is not Promethean precisely because it dwells within the "metabolism" between history and nature. After all, history is situated in nature and must return to it. The life-instincts contained in our libidinal nature are a remainder and resource of our opaque mortality. Thus Marcuse's Marxism is captured in his final reflections on aesthetic theory and is not overcome, as so many commentators contend, in his last phase of political pessimism.

It is false to read Marcuse as having moved from early optimism to mature pessimism; he has always been skeptical about the possibilities of liberation. By avoiding both cynicism and utopianism, however, Marcuse's skepticism has been suitably humble in face of the massive task of social reconstruction. His Marxism is mortal precisely because it does not attempt to change all things or to reduce change only to issues of class-structure. On the one hand, Marcuse knows that our mastery of inner and outer nature is always painful (although how painful is a question that can be answered only when surplus restraints have been removed); on the other hand, Marcuse knows that the deformations of class-society penetrate deep into our libidinal core and are not merely manifestations of economic exploitation. Both of these realizations distance him from orthodox Marxists who

reduce domination to purely economic issues and fail to see its subjective manifestations, and the subjective struggle required to overcome it. Just here, Marcuse's mortal Marxism takes on its final form.

He reminds us that the class-struggle cannot be carried on without coming to grips with, and attempt to reverse, the deformations of subjectivity that prevent class-consciousness today. He contends that the mechanical repetition of Marx's objective categories does not do justice to the dialectical method, which continually reassesses the modalities and depths of domination. The objective character of subjectivity in late capitalism cannot be ignored simply because Marxists wish to retain Marx's political-economic orientation. Indeed a Marxist political economy today must necessarily grapple with the *political economy of desire*, the deep penetration of formerly objective institutional forces into the substratum of the individual – into need, morality, psyche. His aesthetic theory confronts the nearly total absorption of desire into political economy; while art is not adequate politics, it is at least a beginning towards the creation of viable counter-institutions grounded in a genuinely new sensibility.

Art is pre-political for Marcuse, opening the way of ideological change of consciousness and self-liberation. While critics dismiss this pre-political moment of liberation, Marcuse remained convinced that the class-struggle would be fought on the battleground of *Innerlichkeit*. Without preserving bourgeois inwardness the class-struggle would stagnate, as early 20th century Marxists like Lukacs and Korsch quickly learned. A critic of Marcuse avers:

The proposal of the principle of a "definite choice," the "great refusal," has a quasi-accidental and arbitrary quality. It is a decision. By limiting the focus to the here and now, this once again brackets out from his critical theory of society the problem of historical continuity; the standpoint of the existentialist "choice" is reproduced anew. Ironically, this position has a curious affinity to that which he sharply criticized in the same essay of 1934. His theory of a "definite choice" – which

presupposes the total negation of the prevailing order – stands in striking parallel to the repressive tendencies of “decisionism” which in 1934 he had not hesitated to describe as fascist [42].

But Marcuse contends that self-liberation is a choice – which people can only make once they have been liberated from the tyranny of the one-dimensional. This liberation comes both as a result of education and self-education. And one of the prods to self-education is the development of an aesthetic sensibility that peers behind the appearances of late bourgeois society and instead searches for dialectical essence.

Critics like Connerton, quoted directly above, indict Marcuse for reducing class-struggle to existentialist choice; in the same vein they dismiss Marcuse’s preoccupation with Eros and with art. But Marcuse is interested in instinct and the aesthetic only as they have an objective dimension and open from interiority to the external world. After all, his early criticism of the affirmative culture of German idealism was that it locked its truths inside pure mind and ignored the possible synthesis of materialism and idealism in “sensibility.” Marcuse’s critics do not understand what he means by the objectivity of subjectivity; they mistake it for subjective idealism when in fact it is dialectical realism, indeed more dialectical than the crude reductionism which reduces subjective consciousness to a mere epiphenomenon of the material base [43].

What I call the art and politics of non-identity is the guiding principle of Marcuse’s search for a materialist concept of reason. Art is the great testimonial to non-identity, preserving as it does the tension between itself and reality, between subject and object and between particular and general. Marcuse’s thought is profound, I contend, because he could accept what Merleau-Ponty called ambiguity. Our embeddedness in nature, our biological inheritances and constitutions, did not daunt Marcuse but instead challenged him to conceive new forms of subjective rebellion adequate to the task of overthrowing the one-dimensional. Art evokes a liberating

non-identity in its sublimation of a reality with no apparent exit.

NOTES

1. See G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art I* (London: Bell, 1920).
2. See the essays collected in Herbert Marcuse, *Negations* (Boston: Beacon, 1969).
3. For Marcuse’s discussion of a “rationality of gratification,” see *Eros and Civilization* (New York: Vintage, 1955), pp. 205–206.
4. Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Boston: Beacon, 1978), pp. xii–xiii.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
6. See Marcuse’s 1937 essay, “The Affirmative Character of Culture,” in his *Negations*, *op. cit.*, pp. 88–133.
7. *The Aesthetic Dimension*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.
8. For a useful discussion of orthodox Marxist aesthetics, see Ernst Fischer, *The Necessity of Art* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963).
9. *The Aesthetic Dimension*, *op. cit.*, pp. 3–4.
10. For discussions of Marcuse’s concept of inwardness (*Innerlichkeit*), see *The Aesthetic Dimension*, *op. cit.*, pp. 38–39; and see his essay on “The Affirmative Character of Culture,” *op. cit.*, pp. 107–110.
11. For Marcuse’s discussion of the “aesthetic ethos,” see his *An Essay on Liberation*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969, pp. 31–32.
12. For Marcuse’s thoughts on the New Left’s fatal collapsing of mediations between theory and action, see his *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon, 1972), pp. 29–35.
13. On the subject of the dialectic between individual and class, especially as it is treated by Marcuse, see my “The Growing Relevance of Marcuse’s Dialectic of Individual and Class,” *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 135–145; also see my *Western Marxism: An Introduction* (Santa Monica: Goodyear, 1979), pp. 230–237, for a more general discussion of the dialectic of individual and class in recent western Marxism.
14. See Marcuse’s “The Affirmative Character of Culture,” *op. cit.*, pp. 95–101, for a discussion of his views on the split between economics (“first dimension”) and culture (“second dimension”).
15. *The Aesthetic Dimension*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
16. On problems of social ontology in a genuinely socialist order, see Adam Schaff, *Marxism and the Human Individual* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970).
17. For Marcuse’s discussion of the life- and death-instincts, see *Eros and Civilization*, *op. cit.*, pp.

- 211–216; also see Gad Horowitz's *Repression: Basic and Surplus Repression in Psychoanalytic Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).
18. *The Aesthetic Dimension*, *op. cit.*, pp. 6–7.
 19. For a discussion of the concept of "artificial negativity," see Paul Piccone, "Artificial Negativity," *Telos*, 35 (1978), pp. 53–54.
 20. See Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).
 21. See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), especially these passages: "The principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, that the Enlightenment upholds against mythic imagination, is the principle of myth itself. That arid wisdom that holds there is nothing new under the sun, because all the pieces in the meaningless game have been played, and all the great thoughts have already been thought, and because all possible discoveries can be construed in advance and all men are decided on adaptation as the means to self-preservation – that dry sagacity merely reproduces the fantastic wisdom that it supposedly rejects: the sanction of fate that in retribution relentlessly remakes what has already been (p. 12)."; "Abstraction, the tool of enlightenment, treats its objects as did fate, the notion of which it rejects: it liquidates them. Under the leveling domination of abstraction (which makes everything in nature repeatable), and of industry (for which abstraction ordains repetition), the freedom themselves finally came to form that "herd" which Hegel has declared to be the result of the Enlightenment (p. 13)."
 22. *The Aesthetic Dimension*, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
 23. *Ibid.*
 24. For Marcuse's discussion of the relation between poetry and politics, see *An Essay on Liberation*, *op. cit.*, especially this passage: "It seems that the poems and the songs of protest and liberation are always too late or too early: memory or dream. Their time is not the present; they preserve their truth in their hope, in their refusal of the actual. The distance between the universe of poetry and that of politics is so great, the mediations which validate the poetic truth and the rationality of imagination are so complex, that any short cut between the two realities seems fatal to poetry. There is no way in which we can envisage a historical change in the relation between the cultural and the revolutionary movement which could bridge the gap between the everyday and the poetic language and abrogate the dominance of the former. The latter seems to draw all its power and all its truth from its otherness, its transcendence (pp. 40–41)."
 25. For Marcuse's discussion of the possibility of a non-surplus repressive mode of repression and sublimation, see *Eros and Civilization*, *op. cit.*, pp. 190–202.
 26. *The Aesthetic Dimension*, *op. cit.*, p. 62.
 27. *Ibid.*, pp. 62–63.
 28. See my "Marcuse's Freudian Marxism," *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 6, no. 4, pp. 319–336.
 29. *The Aesthetic Dimension*, *op. cit.*, pp. 71–72.
 30. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
 31. See, for example, John O'Neill, *Perception, Expression and History* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970) on the social phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. O'Neill develops Merleau-Ponty's views on the ambiguity of politics and social life on pp. 78–79.
 32. *The Aesthetic Dimension*, *op. cit.*, pp. 68–69.
 33. On the subject of a phenomenological Marxism, see Paul Piccone, "Phenomenological Marxism," *Telos*, 9 (1970), pp. 3–31. For Piccone's later views on a Marxism based on non-identity see his "Beyond Identity Theory," in John O'Neill's edited *On Critical Theory* (New York: Seabury, 1976), pp. 129–144.
 34. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Seabury, 1973); also see his *Philosophy of Modern Music* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1973).
 35. Yet as Susan Buck-Morss notes in passing in her book on Adorno, *The Origins of Negative Dialectics* (New York: Free Press, 1977), he implied a political theory of sorts in his principle of non-identity.
 36. *The Aesthetic Dimension*, *op. cit.*, p. 73.
 37. See Stanley Diamond, "The Beautiful and the Ugly are One Thing, the Sublime Another: A Reflection on Culture," *Cultural Anthropology* vol. 2, no. 2, May 1987, pp. 268–271.
 38. See Christian Lenhardt, "Anamnestic Solidarity," *Telos*, 25.
 39. See, for example, Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: Allen Lane, 1969); and Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London: New Left Books, 1970).
 40. See my "Marcuse and Habermas on New Science," *Polity*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1976), pp. 153–181.
 41. See Jurgen Habermas' "Technology and Science as 'Ideology'" in his *Toward a Rational Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), pp. 81–122.
 42. Paul Connerton, *The Tragedy of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 89–90.
 43. For a discussion of the orthodox Marxist critique of Marcuse's aesthetic theory (and indeed of critical theory as a whole) see my "Marxism 'or' the Frankfurt School?," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol. 14, March 1983.