

# Marcuse's *Aesthetics and the Displacement of Critical Theory*

in: *New German Critique* 8(Spring 1976), pp. 54-79.

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Junction of art and revolution in the  
aesthetic dimension, in art itself.

—Herbert Marcuse,  
*Counter-Revolution and Revolt*

Marcuse's initial concern with the relationship between art and politics, as set forth in "Affirmative Character of Culture,"<sup>1</sup> originated during the years which witnessed the efforts of the fascists to consolidate their political interests by means of a total mobilization of all social strata in German society. Whereas the major thrust of the article was directed towards an exposition of the decline and redefinition of the bourgeois culture under National Socialism, also present in this early essay is the inclination to see art as the victim of similar pressures in *advanced industrial society*, since Marcuse believes fascism to be but one, and the most primitive technologically and politically, of many forms of authoritarianism that serve to preserve monopoly capitalism.<sup>2</sup> The parallel trends of the debilitation of art in pre-World War II Germany and in postwar democracies serve Marcuse as the basic motive for imparting a (non-violent) authoritarianism to liberal political systems. Though western democracies operate according to principles of tolerance, because they appear to share many of the ebbing cultural traits that colored fascist society, the historical analogy between the fate and future of art in fascist and liberal democratic regimes means that we will be exploring changes in the nature and function of art—relative to its general historical character—as a response to tendencies endemic to 19th-century capitalism and not merely in response to the conflicts proceeding from a Soviet-modeled suppression of art as part of a vulgar political curtailment of free expression. Significantly, therefore, Marcuse's "Affirmative Character of Culture" possesses many of the same ideas and motifs which distinguish his subsequent writings on art and aesthetics.

The concept "affirmative culture" denotes those dimensions of the

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1. Herbert Marcuse, "Der affirmative Charakter der Kultur," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, VI (Berlin, 1937), translated as "The Affirmative Character of Culture," *Negations* (Boston, 1968).

2. Cf. Herbert Marcuse, "The Struggle Against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State," *Ibid.*, pp. 3-42.

intellectual and spiritual world, such as art, philosophy and religion which are held to be intrinsically higher and more valuable than interests which contribute directly and more immediately to earning a living. Culture articulated, albeit in many different forms, consists of ideals expressive of hopes, desires, and aspirations which generate a tension between the world of the spirit and the mind and the sphere of necessary labor. The cultural universe is decisively positive in that it maintains the ideas of beauty, pleasure and harmony, of virtue, forgiveness and love, truth and justice. Thus a notion of human happiness is protected as a presumably attainable ideal, though an ideal, nevertheless. The realm of culture assumes critical qualities, for by sustaining the idea of a better life it implicitly indicts society for its lassitude in fulfilling the promises of affirmative culture.

In contradistinction to religion and philosophy, art plays a uniquely critical cultural role. Religion sacrifices human happiness in the here and now, reserving it for an after life and fostering a worldly stoicism. Philosophy, too, seems to have relinquished its claim to an ideal of happiness half-way through the modern era. Marxism "takes seriously the concern for happiness and fights for its realization in history,"<sup>3</sup> though other post-idealism philosophical systems such as positivism, utilitarianism and existentialism betrayed the belief in an ideal conception of felicity. In general, by concerning itself concretely with the poverty of material existence, philosophy (after Hegel) took on a character of theoretical realism and became more inclined to rationalize than criticize. Philosophy appeared infected by a latent and subtle positivist reification as the traditional idealist distance from the social and political world was overcome.

The normative and practical value of art lay precisely in its "critical distance" from societal exigencies, expressed by a remote and eccentric aesthetic language in contrast to the pedestrian lucidity of the familiar universe of ordinary discourse. The comedy and tragedy of art universalized the drama of existence, while at the same time this universal is dramatized and is subjected to the play and fancy of imagination which prescribes its own rules and procedures. Art permits deeds, exploits and achievements to transpire according to wishes, dreams and desires that are left unfulfilled in reality. Thus, art introduces a qualitatively different content to life by preserving the image and memory of an alternative truth, the truth of fulfillment. With this image of a radically different social reality, art functions as a transcendent ideational mode of thought and as the conscience of society, constantly reminding it of a higher purpose.

3. "The Affirmative Character of Culture," *Negations*, p. 100.

The progressive characteristics of art are not restricted to its critical and transcendent nature. Whereas the transcendent and critical functions of art lie in its ability to serve as the vehicle for fantastic creations and recreations of the social and political universe, in addition to its capacity to generalize about argues that the idea of future happiness is linked to an *immediate* experience of gratification. As a form of thought, as an outlet for fantasies and active imaginings normally repelled by society, all forms of art have traditionally laid claim to the quality of beauty. The normal response to the beautiful is a peculiar gratification that might be crudely described as a synthesis of sensuous and intellectual pleasure—rapture, perhaps. Marcuse is suggesting that the critical character of art as a form of thought is intimately associated with the pleasure-giving qualities of beauty as the form of art, an association binding together truth and beauty, future and present in a single moment. The enjoyment, musing, contemplation and appreciation of art breeds pleasure, delight and happiness in such a way that the normative truths of art are momentarily *experienced*. Marcuse expresses this unique normative and critical nature of art: "If the individual is ever to come under the power of the ideal to the extent of believing that his concrete longings and needs are to be found in it—found moreover in a state of fulfillment and gratification, then the ideal must give the illusion of granting present satisfaction. It is this illusory reality that neither philosophy nor religion can attain. Only art achieves it—in the medium of beauty."<sup>4</sup>

Upon further examination, we discover that the so-called critical, transcendent and revolutionary traits of art are more than counter-balanced by its regressive tendencies, and it is here that we encounter the affirmative character of art. It should be clear from our discussion thus far that the critical disposition Marcuse ascribes to art is applied in a highly restrictive sense. As we have noted, art sensitizes the individual to an ideal of happiness. It stimulates a cognitive operation, though paradoxically its method of cognition is ostensibly affective. Art itself, though, is ineffectual, it does not, indeed cannot by virtue of its being art, transform the ideal into the real. The social and political world is tacitly affirmed and remains intact, coextensive with an aesthetic universe content simply to mention, point out, or recollect, its antithesis. Furthermore, the elemental substance or content of a work of art, reflective of the real problems and concerns of society, undergoes a transfiguration in the artistic effort to portray the subject as partaking of the qualities of the beautiful. This transfiguration is also an idealization,

4. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

meaning that the promise for a felicitous existence held up by art is illusory, mere appearance. Here, the affirmative aspects of art are expressed as chimera and mirage. Lastly, beauty, the presumptive form of all art, by stimulating pleasure and thereby transforming the notion of future permanent happiness into immediate present gratification, reduces the aesthetic promise of lasting fulfillment to one that guarantees momentary satiation, thus "pacifying rebellious desire." Moreover, the aesthetic experience is intensely personal which tends to isolate the individual, socially as well as temporally, and such isolation is particularly regressive for the individual enjoys his isolation as it is pleasurable. The temporary uplifting that art provides may certainly exacerbate the alienation which the individual feels, but the termination of the aesthetic experience may also intensify the dolor of his existence, encouraging him to frequently recapitulate the experience of art instead of forcing a consideration of its normative significance relative to the predominant and unsatisfying facticity of his existential situation. In summary, Marcuse's "Affirmative Character of Culture" stresses that an *inner* freedom must suffice through art, for art's compensatory happiness and pleasure recognize, in light of its purely *formal* presentation of normative alternatives, the impossibility of actual "external fulfillment." At the very least, however, Marcuse submits that art sustains a private sphere which until recently has been safe from the exigencies of labor and social and political influence.

Within the context of fascist politics the nature of this inner freedom takes on an added significance for Marcuse. His contention that the pleasure-giving qualities of art prevail over its sublimated critical function was directed towards associating the individual's inner spiritual freedom with his instinctual make-up and the role of the pleasure principle. In brief, Marcuse is generally interested in the soulful and passionate nature of the aesthetic response. Fascism is able to utilize these same instinctual drives normally reserved for art. In a fascist society, the inner spiritual realm, having its basis in the instincts, is externalized and finds novel expression through dissolution in a social collectivity. "The festivals and celebrations of the authoritarian state, its parades, physiognomy, and the speeches of its leaders are all addressed to the soul. They go to the heart, even when their intent is power."<sup>5</sup> Marcuse refers to this phenomenon as the "total mobilization" of the individual, intimately related to the mass psychology of fascism. Whereas the immediate relation of the individual to the world of art fostered a critical distance from the requisites of social order, fascist authoritarianism is able to

5. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

eliminate the alienating effects of art by exploiting the emotive content of the inner realm of instinctual freedom.

What, in 1937, Marcuse had believed to be a distinctive trait of fascism, that is, its tendency to eliminate ideologically critical forms of transcendent discourse, of which art is a singular illustration, is elevated in his later work to the status of a dynamic and defining characteristic of modern authoritarian regimes. In *Soviet Marxism* we encounter the identical phenomenon being explored, though the anti-cultural mechanics are different in that the focus is on the Soviet Union.

The abstract proclamation that Soviet communism has realized universal emancipation does not obviate the reality of concrete (relative) immiseration. The conflict between theory and practice is exacerbated insofar as productive relations in the Soviet Union lag behind the progressive development of the mode of production. Consequently, "there is a *need* for ideological transcendence beyond the repressive [Soviet] reality,"<sup>6</sup> which would demand a reorganization of the social organization of production, allowing the fullest benefits from the new technology. Because the nationalization of socio-economic interests precludes the emergence of effective political opposition to the state, "the more the ideological sphere which is remotest from reality (art, philosophy), precisely because of its remoteness, becomes the last refuge for the opposition to this order."<sup>7</sup>

Soviet ideological disputes, therefore, operate at an extremely high level of abstraction. By virtue of its institutional nature, philosophy is easily accessible to political coercion and absorption. Metaphysics must progress in line with the constraints of dialectical materialism, itself subject to constant reinterpretation. The threat of suppression forced Soviet dialecticians to overcome any temptation to resist the vicissitudes of Marxist "orthodoxy," though the official Soviet party line consistently denounces revisionism as bourgeois and makes a pretense to pure and unchanging Marxist *Weltanschauung*. Ethical philosophy has been "transformed into a pragmatic system of rules and standards of behavior [and] has become an integral part of state policy."<sup>8</sup> All other philosophical trends, which eventually threaten the Soviet system are "disproved" and "disapproved." The remaining battlefield for ideological contention becomes art.

Realism is the sanctioned art form within the Soviet Union. Soviet realism is, however, a potentially critical artistic method, for it is easily able to

6. Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism* (New York, 1961), p. 112.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

illuminate systematically and conscientiously the contradiction between the way reality appears to the artist and the way it is supposed to appear in terms of the official theoretical interpretations by Soviet ideologues. For this reason, realism must, of necessity, acquiesce in the identical manner after philosophy. Realism assumes an otherworldly, enchanting, illusory or magical character to the extent that it succumbs to the behavioral and operational rationality of Soviet Marxism, which demands the false presentation of the real.

The development of Soviet realism was originally intended to perform a dual function. In opposition to western "formalism" which, as we have noted above and shortly will consider further, maintains that beauty is the universal quality of all art, upholding the ideal of human happiness as a goal always to be realized in some future time, realism was to reflect objectively the materialization of the ideal in Soviet society. Realism, after 1917, asserted that the "Bolshevik Revolution has created the [social and political] basis for the translation"<sup>9</sup> of socialist ideals into reality. Marcuse contends, provisionally, at least, that the Soviet attack on formalism is predestined to failure. It is in the nature of formalism that the artistic "languages," artistic forms that express the real ideas of the artist, are susceptible to the variety of organizational frameworks which proceed from the union and imagination of the artist. The more the effects of political coercion impinge on the artistic form, the more does the form of art become abstract and surrealistic in an attempt to escape the reification and operationalism of Soviet realism. The sole end of artistic enterprise becomes the very creation of forms that, by virtue of their abstruse character, make political retranslation impossible. Marcuse concludes that the "works of the great 'bourgeois' antirealists and 'formalists' are far deeper committed to freedom than is socialist and Soviet realism."<sup>10</sup> He holds out the possibility, however, that formalism may one day be forced to submit to an increasingly effective development of totalitarian constraints. Within the Soviet Union, "in its societal function, art shares the growing impotence of individual autonomy and cognition."<sup>11</sup> At this point in our discussion we may see certain patterns emerging in Marcuse's thinking. Artistic form appears to be the single most important critical element of art, and its critical function is preserved unless some social and political dynamic, such as we encountered in Marcuse's analysis of fascism, is used to manipulate the instinctual (metapsychological) basis of art, or if political pressures are

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9. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

brought to bear as they have been in the Soviet Union, which may eventually make artistic form into a conformist element in the society after the example of metaphysics and ethics.

The line of thought Marcuse pursues in *One-Dimensional Man* is quite similar to the reasoning of "The Affirmative Character of Culture" and of *Soviet Marxism*. Art is the final refuge for meaningful two-dimensional criticism and is jeopardized by practices which threaten to coordinate the critically normative dimension of art with the established universe of discourse. In this work Marcuse's analysis is focused on western advanced industrial societies, though curiously the type of authoritarianism described combines the characteristics of the previously considered fascist and Soviet totalitarian models. The reified tendency of the cultural and intellectual universe to contract in political systems, which would be judged unequivocally totalitarian, even if the compression tendency were absent, has led its existence in the West to provoke Marcuse to label supposedly democratic and liberal regimes as authoritarian. Unlike social scientists, Marcuse considers changes in the cultural sphere to be the most telling indices of totalitarian politics.

Though the attack on art within western advanced industrial society is non-coercive, it is infinitely more effective than its German and Soviet counterparts. In the West, artistic enterprise occurs within a tolerant societal framework. The social order, however, is not without well-defined standards, and it is precisely the universal acceptance of these standards that renders the artistic universe irrelevant to that which transpires according to a serious commitment to prevailing norms. Art is permitted its own truths and may proceed on its own terms, but its norms are unfamiliar, strange, and meaningless for that very reason. Whereas the Soviet political system can claim to have a far less socially and economically integrated society than in the advanced West, which means that many of its sectors would be highly receptive to the critical and transcendent qualities of art, it is the extent of socio-economic integration in advanced industrial society which tends to make it impervious to the ideals represented by art. By virtue of a comfortable indifference to the lofty grandeur of art, the values of art and those of society do not relate dialectically nor even as simple antitheses, but rather as detached contraries.

The contentment and satisfaction of those who live and work in advanced industrial society not only contribute to the lack of impact and impotency of art by creating an apathetic public, but they also nurture ignorance of its meaning and purpose. In a society where all cultural and material artifacts

are reduced to equivalency in the commodity form, only art will be produced which has an exchange value that easily satisfies the demand of mediocrity. Art must necessarily incorporate the value attributed to it by a society exclusively bent on increasing its affluence. The result is that the ideals of art are assimilated by a non-idealistic reality, "which testifies to the extent to which the ideal has been surpassed. It is brought down from the sublimated realm of the soul or the spirit or the inner man, and translated into operational terms and problems."<sup>12</sup>

Marcuse indulges in a periodic optimism when he endeavors to defend and resuscitate an aesthetic that tenaciously clings to a critical function by continuing to suggest a normative order different from that which the individual most intimately experiences. He turns to the art of the pre-technological era which forcefully expressed a real antagonism between the aesthetic and social universe. Then art projected an infinitely more pleasant reality than even the most privileged experienced. A genuine material basis for contrast permeated the existence of each individual who was naturally receptive to the alluring and seductive images of dream-like poetic visions. Marcuse recognizes the anachronistic character of the art of a pre-technological culture and dwells on it, not for the sake of nostalgia, but in order to recapture what he believes to be repressed and sublimated possibilities of a technological society. The fantasies of a pre-technological era could become a modern reality principle; its art lines its past with our present and future. By reminding us of the traditional concept of beauty, Marcuse plays the role of therapist intent upon recalling certain memories. The truth function of art is once more made to depend on the revitalization of unconscious life processes.

Marcuse praises the outrageous and eccentric figures who were the legendary heroes of much great traditional art. He explains his admiration for the Don Juans and Fausts who, in spite of the social order's reluctance to permit their real-life counterparts to perpetrate transgressions with impunity, are acclaimed for their refusal to obey the moral constraints of social order in their quest for a life and experience guided by a transvaluation of values. They are progressive forces in a social milieu that secretly envies their frantic attempts (behind the safety of a proscenium arch) to realize unfulfilled longings, but which openly and hypocritically condemned their arrogance, irony, insolent mockery and self-righteous egoism which, if in any other form than art, would breed havoc, disorder, and confusion in a world that in the interest of survival relies on obedience to other standards for reward and punishment. Technological society, on the other hand, smugly ignores the

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12. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston, 1964), pp. 57-58.



unproductive romanticism of these seemingly pre-historic positive and negative forces of a pre-technological culture. Indeed, it is the *anti-hero* of pre-technological society who has become the modern hero—the politician, military and police official who secures the system's continued ability to deliver the goods, whose satisfaction has made obsolete the aesthetic ideals of a bygone era. And what has become of the heroes born in a feudal and early industrial age? Where they have survived in the art of the present, they have been transfigured, for "they are no longer images of another way of life but rather freaks or types of the same life, serving as an affirmation rather than negation of the established order."<sup>13</sup>

Technological society invalidates the ideals of traditional art in another significant way. The socio-historical basis of pre-technological art played a decisive role in its formation. The manifest content of traditional art, as opposed to its form (beauty), derived many of its norms from the politically and economically advantaged social classes. It is these social and political freedoms which the present societies have realized and in many instances surpassed through democratization and modernization. Traditional art, then, is critically meaningful only in its most *abstract* dimensions, as form or beauty, as the "promesse de bonheur."

Additional and, perhaps, more sophisticated reasons exist that explain how the images of conventional art have been subverted by the achievements of the modern era. The pristine world of nature, once providing not only the imagery for the work of art, but the model processes upon which the concepts of form and beauty had been based, has been invaded by the noise and pollution of industrial progress. Nature, whose simple realistic portrayal constituted the representation of the ideal in itself, has been purged of those qualities which made it ideal. Marcuse expresses this change by saying that "when cities and highways and National Parks replace the villages, valleys and forests; when motorboats race over the lakes and planes cut through the skies—then these areas lose their character as a qualitatively different reality, as areas of contradiction."<sup>14</sup>

This last concern of Marcuse's raises the question as to the relation between art, beauty, pleasurable satisfaction and sublimation, and in so doing, aids in qualifying the characteristics associated with the normative dimension that the aesthetic experience and art supposedly represent. "Artistic alienation is sublimation," Marcuse contends; yet, it is also proper to speak of the sublimation of aggressive instincts and their satisfaction which would yield

13. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

pleasurable experience. Is it possible that the pleasure which art tenders is the experience of aggressive satisfaction? On the contrary, art appears to allow for the sublimation of libidinal drives in three ways: first, where aggressive drives are normally exempt from demands for their repression in that they are socially useful, artistic creativity and appreciation provides an outlet for the expression of repressed erotic instincts; secondly, the form of the *oeuvre*, as beauty, is itself a mediated (sublimated) form of the drive for unsublimated gratification in that it "suspends," for the life of the art work, the drive for immediate gratification, postponing it indefinitely; and lastly, the pleasure generated by the aesthetic experience, the appreciation of art work, is fundamentally opposed to a reality principle, which is self-perpetuating to the extent that aggressive impulses are cultivated and satisfied. Insofar as all aspects of art seem to be related to Eros and its sublimation, society's ability to modify its reality principle to expand its use of unsublimated Eros (diminishing the social necessity for its repression) would contribute to the successful technological subversion of art's instinctual reservoir from which it draws its critical power. At this point, Marcuse introduces a concept, which has far-reaching consequences, the concept of "repressive desublimation."

Sexual liberation contributes to the destruction of culture and the instinctual dynamics of art and the aesthetic experience by reducing the need for the repression and sublimation of Eros, if not eliminating it entirely where sexual freedom reaches its most expressive limits. Mechanization has eliminated many forms of traditional labor which utilized aggressive instincts and required the repression of erotic drives. It has "saved" libido, the energy of the Life Instincts," but Eros is again exploited in its genital formation as unsublimated sexuality and becomes again a positive force in the work world. Sexuality is given a market and promoted as exchange value in the form of clothing, faddish "looks," sexy office women, sexy office men, the new levity and licentiousness attached to promiscuity and infidelity, "swinging," and so forth. The intermingling of sexuality and the business world makes work pleasurable, and lends it a desirable quality. As long as labor continues to be pleasurable, it will be more subject to control and progress in the interest of technological rationality; "pleasure, thus adjusted, generates submission."<sup>15</sup> Unsublimated drives, instincts that were previously repressed, now serve the interests of political oppression: the seriousness with which Marcuse approaches this phenomenon is indicated by his implicit willingness to sanction the continued psychological repression of Eros, at the expense of the release of aggressive-destructive drives, in place of its socially useful but

15. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

unsublimated deployment.

The consequences and implications of the relaxation of sexual morality are manifold. Consistent with the standard exposition of Freud's theory concerning the relationship between the development of individual social norms and experiences with sexual repression, hypothesizing that the demand for the suppression of specific instinctual impulses leading to the creation of the superego means that the internalization of societal morality is intimately related to sexuality, Marcuse contends that the liberalization of sexual morality prepares the psychological groundwork for a corresponding liberalization of social morality. The absence of a psychologically based moral faculty essentially broadens the range of permissible actions which the individual is able to sanction morally unburdened by guilt, which is instrumental as a factor in moral judgments. The individual, once freed from the restrictions imposed by conscience, is less able to make moral valuations about the functioning of social and political systems. Marcuse refers to this "loss of conscience" as a "happy consciousness," meaning that since the individual is ostensibly incapable of differentiating between truth and falsehood, justice and injustice, good and evil, his ignorance is a passive contentment. The "happy consciousness" is meant to illustrate again the way in which liberated sexuality is an element fostering political control. In *An Essay on Liberation* he recapitulates his ideas on the parallel changes in sexual, social and political morality included in *One-Dimensional Man*. "The term obscenity belongs to the sexual sphere; shame and the sense of guilt arise in the Oedipal situation. If in this respect social morality is rooted in sexual morality, then the shamelessness of the affluent society and its effective repression of the sense of guilt would indicate a decline of shame and guilt feeling in the sexual sphere. . . . Thus we are faced with the contradiction that the liberalization of sexuality provides an instinctual basis for the repressive and aggressive power of the affluent society."<sup>16</sup>

Repressive desublimation contributes to the demise of the critical power of art. Contemporary literature, film, and popular music openly and profitably exploit the sexual revolution and in so doing affirm rather than contradict the prevailing culture. If the cultural sphere that traditionally maintained ideals whose norms assumed a critical distance from, as well as a critical stance towards, the society from which culture emerged, now reverses its strategy by taking the perverse form of desublimation and presenting it as the ideal (Marcuse refers to the "O'Neill's alcoholics and Faulkner's savages," the "Streetcar Named Desire," "Lolita," and so on), the repressive social reality

16. Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston, 1969), p. 9.

takes on a legitimacy and authority denied it by conventional art. Art, by portraying and galvanizing desublimated modes of sexual expression, entertains its own negation. By capitulating to one-dimensional thought and by encouraging one-dimensional behavior by celebrating its obscene and pornographic aspects, art, the last effective sphere of criticism, directly contributes to authoritarianism.

Marcuse makes every effort to analyze thoroughly the supposedly wizened, normatively critical character of art. He suggests that the affirmative character of contemporary art may also be indicative of changes in that most essential aesthetic faculty, the imagination. In *Eros and Civilization* we encounter the belief that the realm of freedom could be measured by the "free play of the faculties," whose logic and inspiration consisted of the unfettered imagination committed to a truth that opposed the repressive rationality of the reality principle by insisting on the pacification of existence and the restoration of a pure form of nature and human nature released from the domination of technological reason. However, in the modern age the achievements of technological society merge the powers of the imagination with the productivity of science. Imagination as dormant constituent faculty seems now to belong to a post-technological age. The imagination bends to the rationality of science, to its values, designs, and objectives and, since the rationality of science, as defined by advanced industrial society, necessarily presupposes domination and destructive-aggressivity, the creative intelligence of an imagination following such a sinister path would be truly Faustian. Marcuse portentously concludes that "imagination has not remained immune to the process of reification. We are possessed by our images. . . Rational is the imagination which can become the *a priori* of the reconstruction and redirection of the productive apparatus towards a pacified existence, a life without fear. And this can never be the imagination of those who are possessed by the images of domination and death."<sup>17</sup>

In "Art in the One-Dimensional Society,"<sup>18</sup> appearing a few years after the foreboding conclusions and prognosis concerning the disabled critical faculties of art in *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse, quite to our surprise, discovers progressive aspects of those same tendencies which he claimed in the latter work all but permanently and irrevocably emasculated the critically normative powers of art. Today the artist seems "incapable of finding the transfiguring and transubstantiating Form which seizes things and frees them

17. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 250.

18. Herbert Marcuse, "Art in the One-Dimensional Society," *Radical Perspectives in the Arts*, ed. Lee Baxandall (Baltimore, 1972).

from their bondage in an ugly and destructive reality."<sup>19</sup> In what way are these developments to be construed as positive?

Central to Marcuse's critical theory has been the belief that art is the "form" of imagination. The imagination or the realm of fantasy is the unconscious expression of repressed instinctual drives and wishes, and art is the formal expression of the imagination's psychological contents. At is the sublimated expression of fantasy, and, at the same time, it mediates between the unconscious and the social universe.<sup>20</sup> The shape of this mediation changes, that is, artistic forms change historically and are denoted by appropriately descriptive categories. Marcuse argued in *One-Dimensional Man* that the mediating, sublimated nature of art had broken down. This phenomenon transpired according to a process of "reification," where the images of the imagination were identified with the rational design of the social and political world to which it had historically been opposed by virtue of its erotic content. As art is translated into one-dimensional language, the drives of the repressed instincts are translated into one-dimensional behavior. The normative truths associated with unconscious Eros are forfeited. This

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19. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

20. In light of the somewhat more technical nature of many of the subsequent considerations in this article, it is useful at this time to underscore the precise theoretical relationship between Freud's metaphychology and Marcuse's aesthetics. Freud argued that there is a biological and psychological link between the repressed instinctual drives, the pleasure principle which continues to rule the instincts in their repressed state after the reality principle established hegemony, the pleasure principle and the realm of phantasy, phantasy and art [Cf. Sigmund Freud, "Formulations Regarding the Two Principles in Mental Functioning" (1911), *Collected Papers*, 4 (New York, 1959), pp. 13-21]. Phantasy expresses the wish for immediate gratification, and within the realm of phantasy the individual conceives of the unrepressed satisfaction of needs, and thus phantasy maintains the primacy of the pleasure principle. The relationship between suppressed instinctual drives and the possibility for a "non-repressive instinctual constellation" appears "to envisage non-repressive aims" [Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (New York, 1962), p. 77]. Art is the manifestation of the biological-psychological content of the imagination which is itself the expression of the form of instinctual proclivities in this repressed mode, and within the context of the "aesthetic sensibility," the "aesthetic dimension," Marcuse's second dimension, is the fulfillment of unrepressed instinctual impulses that in their repressed state appear in a transfigured form as art. When Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* refers to the realm of freedom and the realm of pleasure as the aesthetic dimension, and when in *An Essay on Liberation* he speaks about a "biological foundation for socialism," both are one and the same. As art is made possible through the repressive organization of the instincts, it becomes a modified aesthetic dimension for Marcuse, the alienated expression of the utopian elements in his critical theory (utopian is not being used in the sense of its traditional meaning, but rather in the manner appropriate to critical theory. Cf. e.g., Herbert Marcuse, "The End of Utopia," *Five Lectures* (Boston, 1970), pp. 62-69; and *An Essay on Liberation*, pp. 3-6. Since the realization of the aesthetic dimension would mean the absolute reduction of repression and alienation, it also presupposes the disappearance of the repressive and alienated forms of the aesthetic dimension or, in other words, art would become the "form of reality" [Herbert Marcuse, "Art as Form of Reality," *New Left Review*, 74 (July-August, 1972), 51-58].

decline of art has serious implications for critical theory, for the success with which positivism (as reification) asserts its authority over all language, which now includes the language, that is, form, of art, testifies to the far more significant triumph of one-dimensional behavior over the dimension of Eros, Marcuse's 'second dimension.' Subsequent to *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse appears to have reconsidered this position. It is not art and the imagination which subserves the social universe, but society which becomes the *direct* and unmediated expression of the imagination. Evidence for this reversal lies in the recent trend of art increasingly to become technique. For example, when geometrical shapes are used as the basis for a new cubist form of painting, where the familiar noise and sounds of the communications media become the substance of electronic music, or where the rhythms of everyday existence are harnessed to the cadence of modern poetry, the content of reality begins to become subjected to the form of art, subject to the motive force of the imagination. Marcuse inquires whether "these creations perhaps foreshadow the possibility of the artistic Form [the imagination, Eros, beauty] becoming a 'reality principle'?"<sup>21</sup> Yet, it still follows from Marcuse's analysis of "art in the One-Dimensional Society" that this technical transformation of art and the imagination into reality remain confined within the art world.

It is evident that the concept of "form" is indispensable to Marcuse's critical theory, and, although it is used frequently and imprecisely, we are able to identify the following usages: (1) art is the expressive form of the imagination or fantasy, which is the psychological equivalent and articulation of unconscious processes; (2) beauty is the universal form or quality of all art; (3) various historical art forms; (4) reality as the form of art, which pertains to the reification of artistic imagery and the enfeeblement of art as a normatively critical dimension of experience; (5) art as the form of reality, referring to the abolition of art as a sublimated refuge for Eros and the tendency of art to become technique, that is, to be realized. This last notion of form roughly corresponds to the "aesthetic dimension" in *Eros and Civilization* where Marcuse is preoccupied with the shape that the social universe would assume if repressed libidinal drives were permitted to become the dominant social drives. On the basis of his interpretation of Freud's metapsychological theory in *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse explained how radical changes in social relations must proceed from the non-repressive *immediate* translation of Eros into a new reality principle. Here art was related to the "aesthetic dimension" in a twofold manner: first, as the sublimated and

21. "Art in the One-Dimensional Society," *Radical Perspectives in the Arts*, p. 65.

mediated expression of Eros, from which it derives its critical and normative aspects, and secondly, as the potential form of reality, which in the final analysis—since art is constituted as the sublimated expression of erotic drives—can throw additional light on the definitive characteristics of the “aesthetic dimension.” Much of the work focused on thus far will now be very briefly reexamined in order to elucidate Marcuse’s conception of art as the form of reality, to discover more about the “aesthetic dimension,” and to comprehend better its relationship to Marcuse’s other notions of form.

An exclusively functional theory of artistic form views it as an organizational device. Tones, colors, images of objects taken from reality, are made to conform to an objective framework of some sort which imposes order on disorderly, random elements. Beauty seems to derive from form’s ability to master and organize reality. Marcuse gives depth to the functional notion of form by establishing its psychological basis. Matter, Marcuse argues, “comes to rest within the limits of accomplishment and fulfillment” established by form. Form eliminates movement, tension, aggressiveness and violence. Thus, “narcissistic Eros, [the] primary stage of all erotic and aesthetic energy, [which] seeks above all, tranquility,”<sup>22</sup> is gratified. The sublimated gratification of repressed drives yields pleasure, and pleasure is dynamically related to the notion and experience of the beautiful. Art, particularly as regards the concept of form, is a potential dimension of reality in that it represents the (sublimated) satisfaction of unfulfilled biological and instinctual needs. Therefore, it is most fitting that Marcuse’s realm of freedom is termed the “aesthetic dimension,” as the term aesthetic applies to (artistic) beauty and biological sensibility. This sensibility, moreover, carries political and normative connotations in that it suggests a biological basis for a new mode of existence defined by qualitatively different social and political relationships.

Marcuse’s adeptness at identifying positive tendencies within a social and political morass that, according to another side of his analysis, labors overtime to prohibit general awareness of systemic contradictions, is again illustrated by his contention that the fascist desublimation of affirmative culture “contains a dynamic, progressive element,” in that it serves as an example of the elimination of the distance which marked the separation of the articulation of social and political ideals from practice.

Marcuse does not mean to imply that these ideals have been realized by fascism, though a casual reading of his argument could lead one to conclude that the same needs and desires which were sublimated in the art of the

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

affirmative culture, and which were traditionally represented by the Christian concept of "soul," symbolic of the "unexpressed, unfulfilled life of the individual . . . which absorbed in a false form those forces and wants which could find no place in everyday life,"<sup>23</sup> is the self-same soul to which Marcuse argues fascism had appealed. It is clear, though, that the phenomenon Marcuse is describing is an exact parallel to the process of the reification of art and the imagination adduced in *One-Dimensional Man*. In "The Affirmative Character of Culture," Marcuse explains how the conventional ideals of bourgeois culture could be perverted because their instinctual basis could find a substitute means of expression in the aim-inhibited libidinal social ties described by Freud in such works as *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. The progressive element that Marcuse wants to extract from the instinctual, psychological, cultural and political interrelationships in fascist society is that fascism can serve as one illustration of the desublimation of cultural ideals, although the psychodynamics of the German case is inextricably bound to fascist authoritarianism. Ironically, the fascist subversion of *Kultur* is suggestive, albeit in a perverse form, of the idea of unsublimated modes of instinctual expression, of the "aesthetic dimension" that Marcuse later developed in *Eros and Civilization* and which has received elaboration in all subsequent work. If the artistic images of freedom and fulfillment, which could be translated into practice without being transmuted as they were under fascism, remain in Soviet Marxism, and seem to be in advanced industrial society (reification), then "beauty [instinctual proclivities] will find a new embodiment when it no longer is represented as a real [artistic] illusion but, instead, expresses reality and joy in reality."<sup>24</sup> Art would then have no purpose or function. The end of art would mark the beginning of the "aesthetic dimension," of a new sensibility.

The idea reappears in *One-Dimensional Man* as the concept of "aesthetic reduction." The essential dynamic of advanced industrial society is its ability to expand the realm of socially necessary labor through the artificial creation of needs and through a quantitative extension of the goods and services which the society must produce in order to sustain itself economically and politically. This quantitative extension of the productive apparatus is the decisive factor in the determination of the aggressive and destructive form of man's relationship to man and to nature. The libidinal pacification of social existence presupposes a significant redefinition and shrinkage of the realm of necessity. Eros excludes the hyper-aggressive and destructive orientation basic

23. "The Affirmative Character of Culture," *Negations*, p. 114.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 131.



to a repressive society that nurtures, and is nourished by, the aggressive instinctual drives. Since the realm of freedom projected by the "aesthetic dimension" requires for its realization a reduction in the amount of repression exacted from the individual by his labor, which in turn depends upon a reduction of an artificially expanded social necessity, then the total automation becomes either an irrelevant concern in serious discussions about the realistic expectations of Marcuse's political theory, or the number of tasks to be automated is considerably smaller than would otherwise be indicated if our standards for measuring social needs were those of the affluent society at its present rate of growth. Consequently, Marcuse concludes that "qualitative change seems to presuppose a *quantitative* change in the advanced standard of living, namely, reduction of overdevelopment."<sup>25</sup> Marcuse borrows his concept of "aesthetic reduction" from Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, and parenthetically explicated in order to accentuate its dialectical and psychological dimensions, it can be elaborated in this way: "Art is able to reduce the [quantitative extension of the productive] apparatus which the external appearance [socially and politically] requires in order to preserve itself [necessity in the form of surplus labor and surplus value]—reduction to the limits in which the external [forms of social intercourse] may become the manifestation of spirit [Eros] and [instinctual and psychological] freedom."<sup>26</sup>

Though the sensuous and erotic components of art, which yield to art the quality or element of beauty, are alienating by removing the individual temporarily from an environment attentive to the satisfaction of aggressive instinctual drives, such alienation is still highly sublimated. It provokes discontent, but only of a passive variety. Marcuse describes the passivity of aesthetic response in terms with which we are now quite familiar: the "character of this aesthetic sublimation, essential to Art and inseparable from its history as part of affirmative culture, has found its perhaps most striking formulation in Kant's concept of *interesseloses Wohlgefallen*: delight, pleasure divorced from all interest, desire, inclination. The aesthetic object [the art work or *oeuvre*] is, as it were, without a particular Subject, or rather without any relation to a Subject other than that of pure contemplation—pure eye, pure ear, pure mind . . . the precondition for art is a radical looking into reality and a radical looking away from it—a repression of its immediacy, and of the immediate response to it."<sup>27</sup> Art penetrates deeply into reality by

25. *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 242.

26. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik in Sämtliche Werke*, ed. H. Glockner, Vol. 12 (Stuttgart, 1929), p. 217f. Quoted in *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 239.

27. "Art as a Form of Reality," *New Left Review*, 55.

identifying that which is absent: pleasure and the idea of happiness. Form imposes beauty on the content of art, and illuminates the inadequacy of the social universe by maintaining the idea of happiness. But though art does indeed play a critical function, its political thrust is cancelled out. Because the aesthetic response to art is passive enjoyment the political dimension recedes. Paradoxically, however, as we shall discover—and this point is decisive—Marcuse's pronouncement on the politically quiescent quality of art *supports* his claim for the intimate and dynamic relation of art to the imagination and libidinal drives, and is consistent with his prior claim that "eros and [economic and political] power may well be contraries."<sup>28</sup>

Here we find the basis for Marcuse's indictment of modern avant-garde art. The express purpose of the avant-garde to transform art into an effective political force seems to define a tendency for art to become the form of reality to the extent that traditional aesthetic form is undermined. Marcuse underscores the regressive character of this tendency. Avant-garde theater reposes within the theater, that is, it remains art, advertises itself as art, even where it is opposed to conventional art. Moreover, modern avant-garde art may also be affirmative. Its willingness to debunk form sacrifices the normative dimension that beauty represents. Art ceases to point to the need for qualitative change. It may raise comprehension and consciousness, but only by sacrificing the critical aspirations and normative values which should be the goals of political consciousness. It seems that art can be political only in so far as it retains form.

In Marcuse's critical theory, the politics of art must remain separate from political action. Genuine aesthetic reduction must *follow* political change, which establishes the preconditions for art as form of reality. Art points to alternative norms, other truths, as these norms and truths are contained within art *qua* art. The "aesthetic dimension" is the new sensibility incarnate in art, and which politics and its elements of power, compulsion, aggression and domination can only mutilate.

In *An Essay on Liberation* Marcuse returns to a problem frequently explored in his other works. The "affirmative character of culture" is described in this work as the "reconciling" power of the aesthetic form, which reflects the "internal ambivalence of art," represented by its ability to indict the established social and political universe for its inadequacy but at the same time to cancel the indictment. Marcuse's analysis of this conservative and redemptive function of art provides additional insight into the meaning of the

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28. *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 235.

expression "art as form of reality," such that we also gain a clearer understanding of the significant place that art occupies in Marcuse's critical theory and a more certain grasp of the latter generally.

After having considered Marcuse's proposals on the supposed relation of the libidinal instincts to the imagination and to art, the unique sublimated form of expression which the libidinal instincts assume in a social and political universe hostile to Eros (which in its naturally unsublimated and sublimated disposition binds and tames the aggressive instincts rendering them unsuitable for many kinds of labor), we can say that art appears to be dependent upon the repression of Eros. This last point figured as a decisive factor in theories on the origin and meaning of art, beginning with Kant and Baumgarten, who argued that beauty, the refractive quality of all art, was a quality of pleasurable experience having roots in an affective sensibility or sense perceptiveness judged to be a method of cognition inferior to reason and intellect precisely because of its emotive character. Thus classical German aesthetics considered such sensibility "aesthetic" as it pertained to art, to the senses, and to pleasure. Marcuse falls in this German tradition, though his distinctiveness derives from his redefinition, in psychological terms, of aesthetic sensibility as libidinal sensibility and from his attempt to account for the inferior epistemological status of this sensibility as resulting from the social and political demand for the repression of Eros. To work out the analogy still further, the ethical and moral truth ascribed to the lower, sensuous sphere of human knowledge by Kant and Baumgarten now finds a normative articulation in Marcuse's "aesthetic dimension." With respect to the concept of "beauty," however, the analogy abruptly ends. For Kant and Baumgarten, beauty was a metaphysical quality, that is, it was something which belonged "essentially" to an object. For Marcuse, beauty is a "pleasurable sensation" accompanying the gratification of repressed instinctual, libidinal drives. In Marcuse's theory beauty retains its link to art, as it does with Kant and Baumgarten, but by virtue of its instinctual foundation, beauty is derived from biological processes and has biological value. Because of these complex and intricate ties between beauty, pleasure, repressed Eros, art and the imagination, Marcuse asserts that "the aesthetic dimension can serve as sort of a gauge for a free society."<sup>29</sup>

We can presently detect a fascinating parallel between the vicissitudes of the instincts in the artistic sphere and the dynamics of instinctual processes in the social and political sphere. Whereas to this point we have considered

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29. *An Essay on Liberation*, p. 29.

Marcuse's aesthetic theory from the standpoint of the dialectics of metapsychology in relation to the phenomenon of repression, here we can acquire insight into the manner in which metapsychological processes enter into the *oeuvre* and determine the nature of the relationship between form and content. We begin by noting the hypothesis of instinctual fusion—prior to the demand for repression, mature Eros is fused with the aggressive instincts, and the destructive tendencies of Thanatos are eliminated. After the libidinal component of the instinctual drive has been repressed, the component instinct regresses to its original primary narcissistic form.<sup>30</sup> It appears that it is this primary narcissistic Eros which finds eventual expression in the work of art.<sup>31</sup>

There is a startling resemblance between the biological characteristics of the primary narcissistic libidinal drives and the psychological attitudes associated with the aesthetic experience. The aesthetic sublimation, referring here to aesthetic response, can be most accurately described by the Kantian notion of *interesseloses Wohlgefallen*, pertaining to reactions of a strictly contemplative nature, such as musing, reflection and excogitation, presumably free of interest, desire, piquing and egotism. These reactions correspond to the behavior of narcissistic instinctual impulses that naturally seek tranquility, passivity, inertness and placidity. In other words, there is a striking correlation between the actual aesthetic response to art and the predicted response given the hypothetically repressed instinctual basis for art. It is only logical to inquire next whether the coincidence between the behavior of primary Eros and aesthetics extends to other facets of art. It is at this time that Marcuse's theory of the reconciling power of art is especially significant.

Marcuse further develops the Aristotelian notion of catharsis by applying it to the artistic *oeuvre*, giving it a meaning beyond that which refers exclusively to the personal cathartic experience in perceiving and enjoying art. He argues that whereas the critical power of art partially stems from its portrayal of tribulation, adversity and misfortune, inequality, oppression and injustice, the reproach and judiciousness of art is censured because the aesthetic experience is agreeable, but the pleasant feelings are a consequence of the content of art, the anguish that it conveys, for example, being transfigured and purified within the *oeuvre*. Marcuse declares that "the aesthetic necessity of art supersedes the terrible necessity of reality, sublimates its pain and

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30. For an analysis of the significance of the concept of instinctual fusion in Freud's metapsychology, cf. my article, "Marcuse's 'Second Dimension,'" *Telos*, 23 (Spring, 1975).

31. Marcuse makes an explicit link between art and primary narcissistic Eros in "Art in the One-Dimensional Society," *Radical Perspectives in the Arts*, p. 59.

pleasure; the blind suffering and cruelty of nature (and of the 'nature' of man) assume meaning and end—'poetic justice.' The horror of the crucifixion is purified by the beautiful face of Jesus dominating the beautiful composition, the horror of politics by the beautiful verse of Racine, the horror of farewell forever by the *Lied von der Erde*. And in the aesthetic universe, joy and fulfillment find their proper place alongside pain and death."<sup>32</sup>

This artistic metamorphosis of pain into pleasure occurs by virtue of the "form" of art, whose appeal is to repressed Eros, the imagination and fantasy. Marcuse's contribution is realized when we recollect that the content of art is at the same time the content of reality, of a social and political universe that is sustained through its cultivation of the aggressive instincts and the repression of erotic drives. The aesthetic dynamic which Marcuse has uncovered—a sort of aesthetic alchemy, where the agony and distress of reality is almost magically changed into pleasure, where form cancels content—is actually Eros true to its biological-instinctual form, harnessing aggression. Art, thereby, provides unusual insight into the form of a social and political reality whose prerequisites no longer require the renunciation of libidinal drives. The dialectical interaction of artistic form and content is demonstrable of the naturally unrepressed interrelationship of the primary erotic and aggressive instincts, and thus anticipates a radically different biological-organizational basis for new social and political relationships in a non-repressive society. In art, Eros masters aggression the way it would in a reality which did not create art, that is, did not demand repression. We are now able to comprehend the meaning and import of Marcuse's statement that "as desired object, the beautiful pertains to the domain of the primary instincts, Eros and Thanatos. The mythos links the adversaries: pleasure and terror. Beauty has the power to check aggression: it forbids and immobilizes the aggressor."<sup>33</sup> Beauty ceases to apply only to art, but as Eros, it is a norm which captures the form of a non-repressive society and joins together politics, biology and psychology in the "aesthetic dimension." Marcuse's assertion that the "Way of Truth passes through the realm of the Beautiful," is more than a metaphor from classical German aesthetics, it is the summary statement of his critical theory.

The normative verity of art appears to lie exclusively in the artistic form. Form is the expression of beauty, the sublimated externalization and repressed objectification of Eros. Through form we regain the image of a

32. *An Essay on Liberation*, p. 44.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

natural freedom whose sovereignty is continuously reaffirmed in the recurring ascendancy of form over content each time a new work of art is created and at each moment a literary, musical or poetic work is experienced. Content is irrelevant and superfluous. Within the *oeuvre* artistic content is subordinate and experiences the defeat which is the "imagined" and "fantastic" fate of the real oppression that it symbolizes. In art, the revolution is always victorious. We should not be surprised that content is ignored altogether. Since the values of the aesthetic dimension reside in form, it is only form that possesses an authentic normative import. The new art which communicates this thesis, the surrealist and formalist movements, supposes the content of art to lie in its form, and form must become the content of all art. Form becomes the language that speaks to the "content" of a non-repressive society.

Marcuse explores the possibility that this aesthetic "rupture" within the established universe of discourse had a parallel in counter-cultural politics. A similarity is suggested by the eccentricity of surrealist and formalist art, its stress on technique to the exclusion of any recognizable imagery, an emphasis destroying any opportunity for the perceiver to relate the meaning of art to familiar referential experience, and by the abrasive and peculiarly rebellious language of the younger, militant generations. The expropriation of words and ideas from the dominant culture by subcultural groups removes language from one (familiar) context and places it into another (and unfamiliar) context, constituting a practice that redefines and generates new meanings for terms which may then become part of a verbal, but also ideological, arsenal subversive of the prevailing universe of discourse. A counterpart to this divorce from common language is the counter-cultural breach in sanctioned behavior seeming to mark the development of a new sensibility. Does this radicalism, perhaps, have more in common with the preoccupation for form discussed above? Could the political manifestations of the new sensibility also be a socio-cultural vanguard of the aesthetic dimension, such that the common denominator of the political and the aesthetic would be their convergence in an aesthetic ethos? Marcuse dismisses this parallel. Although the radical subcultures did project tendencies that correspond objectively to the types of behavioral traits inferred by the notion of qualitative change inherent in the philosophy of the aesthetic dimension, the new sensibility, in its subcultural form, was little more than a quickly passing protest, an elementary contradiction, a simply antithesis and negation of the status quo which was easily swallowed up by the established political and economic order. The facility with which the cultural radicalism of the late 1960s and early 1970s capitulated to the exigencies of advanced industrial

society leads Marcuse to conclude that "the search for specific historical agents of revolutionary change in the advanced capitalist countries is indeed meaningless."<sup>34</sup> We are thus thrown back again to the highest level of abstraction—to the critical sphere of art.

*Counter-Revolution and Revolt*, Marcuse's latest work to date, continues the thematic thrust of his prior explorations into art, but is particularly significant in that it reflects a conscious recognition of his deviation from the elevation of content over form in traditional Marxist aesthetics, and by attempting to defend his unorthodox position, Marcuse is compelled to elucidate further his ideas on the critical and progressive function of the formalistic qualities of art.

Marcuse severs all connection of art with the revolutionary groups. He summarily dismisses the possibility of a western socialist art that envisions the working-class as the vehicle for radical change by saying that "when the proletariat is non-revolutionary, revolutionary literature will not be proletarian literature."<sup>35</sup> The counter-culture's attempted desublimation of the aesthetic form is not a true expression of the behavioral norms of the aesthetic dimension, partly because it could not withstand a reduction to the commodity form, lending it an affirmative and one-dimensional character but more so because in an authentic expression of aesthetic sensibility its reduction to exchange value is, in principle, theoretically inconceivable. Marcuse has advised that Eros and power, including market and business power, are contraries. The economic redefinition and political absorption of the counter-culture suggest that it falls in with the dynamics of capitalism during its most advanced stages. Paradoxically, it is this capitalist dynamic, which has all but completed the demolition of bourgeois society, that is the same bourgeois social order from which the counter-culture had sought its liberation. Marcuse contends that such anti-capitalist movements as the counter-culture confuse bourgeois capitalism with modern capitalism and thus implicitly align themselves with the regressive tendencies in advanced industrial society. Marcuse suspects that an unwanted and unperceived juncture occurs between the forces of modern capitalism and radical organizations in their efforts to become liberated from bourgeois society and culture which undermines their subversive impact. How, then, should the goals of a cultural and political revolution be formulated?

Marcuse reminds us that bourgeois culture, even when it has been affirmative, has also opposed and contradicted the material and commercial

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34. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

35. *Counter-Revolution and Revolt* (Boston, 1972), p. 125.

aspects of civil society. "It has sublimated the repressive forces by joining inexorably fulfillment and renunciation, freedom and submission, beauty and illusion."<sup>36</sup> Yet, fulfillment, freedom and beauty are qualities of pre-bourgeois art, as well, qualities that pertain historically to the form of all art. And in addition to these formalistic components of art, we have noted its universalistic characteristics in the tendency of art to remake the problematics of a society during a specific point in history into a trans-historical problematic. By universalizing the political and social content of its own history through art bourgeois society participates in a generalized concern with the human condition. In two important respects, therefore, it appears as though the genuine aesthetic value of bourgeois art has nothing to do with its class character or preoccupation with bourgeois concerns. Its value is as art as such, a value acquired—and here bourgeois art resembles all other art—as a consequence of the aesthetic form, and its appeal to a repressed and alienated erotic sensibility. Marcuse can argue, quite contrary to traditional Marxist aesthetics, that "by virtue of this transformation of the specific content itself—[all art, including bourgeois] art opens the established reality to another dimension: that of possible liberation."<sup>37</sup> Bourgeois art represents the "aesthetic dimension," the dimension of Eros and freedom. The anti-bourgeois stance of the traditional Marxist aesthetics and the contemporary efforts of the counter-culture to desubliminate the aesthetic form are regressive. Critical theory modified the indictment of bourgeois capitalism by recognizing the progressive implications of the separation between bourgeois culture and civil society, and that the former may be liberating, even when (and, in fact, because) the latter is alienating. When critical theory incorporates a biological and psychological dimension, links these dimensions to the notion of aesthetic sensibility, and views this sensibility within the dialectics of art, bourgeois culture can be rightfully judged as the objectively correct expression, albeit in an alienated form, of the supercession of an alienated social universe. Bourgeois history appears to be the necessary pre-history of socialism, *and the swan song of the bourgeoisie, of the bourgeois ethic and culture, may be the Tod und Verklärung of future socialist theory*. Marcuse is strongly contending that today's cultural revolution cannot proceed without a re-evaluation of the images of freedom and fulfillment that dominated the most sublimated expressions of the art of classical bourgeois liberalism. Marcuse's position is best summarized, perhaps, when he declares that "there is no work of art

36. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 87.



which does not break its affirmative stance by the 'power of the negative,' which does not, in its very structure, evoke the words, the images, the music of another reality, of another order repelled by the existing one and yet [literally] alive in memory and in anticipation, alive in what happens to men and women, and in their rebellion against it. Where this tension between affirmation and negation, between pleasure and sorrow, higher and material culture no longer prevails, where the work no longer sustains the dialectical unity of what is and what can (and ought to) be, art has lost its truth, has lost itself. And precisely in the aesthetic form are this tension, and the critical, negating, transcending qualities of bourgeois art—its anti-bourgeois qualities. To recapture and transform them, to save them from expulsion must be one of the tasks of the cultural revolution."<sup>38</sup>

Modern art exhibits conformist tendencies which sacrifice the truths of the aesthetic dimension such that art is transformed into an affirmative language and experience that supports and sanctions the repressive social order. Art suffers a fate comparable to the functionalization of reason through the positivist and operationalist methods of social science, to the syntactical abridgement of language, and to the elimination of transitive predication.<sup>39</sup> Marcuse makes this parallel by saying that "if we look at the historical element in art, we would have to say that the crisis of art today is only part of the general crisis of the political and moral opposition to our society, of its inability to define, name, and communicate the goals of the opposition,"<sup>40</sup> and when he declares that the "obscene merger of aesthetics and reality refutes the philosophies which oppose 'poetic' imagination to scientific and empirical Reason."<sup>41</sup>

The allusion to the historical element in art conveys the point that it is predominantly modern art that capitulates to the repressive rationality, and historically, traditional art forms successfully maintained a critical distance from society. Though Marcuse argues that there are certain properties of pre-modern (pre-technological) art that compromised the oppositional and antagonistic elements in art, the conclusion reached in *Counter-Revolution and Revolt* is that the only art which continues to represent the aesthetic dimension is conventional "bourgeois" art, and that short of the aesthetic forms of the pre-technological era, no modern art stands opposed to the values and goals of the prevailing society which can illuminate the

38. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

39. Cf. *One-Dimensional Man*, pp. 84-120; 170-199.

40. "Art in the One-Dimensional Society," *Radical Perspectives in the Arts*, pp. 54-55.

41. *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 248.

contradiction between the actual and potential within the prevailing social organization of production. In light of the conservative aspects of modern art, Marcuse submits that art must again "find the language and the images capable of communicating this necessity [for the construction of a qualitative new technical and natural environment by an essentially new human being] *as its own*. For how can we possibly imagine that new relationships between men and things can ever arise if men continue to see the images and to speak the language of repression, exploitation, and mystification. The new system of needs and goals belongs to the realm of possible experience: we can define it in terms of the negation of the established system, namely, forms of life, a system of needs and satisfactions in which the aggressive, repressive, and exploitative instincts are subjected to the sensuous, assuasive energy of the life instincts."<sup>42</sup> The manifest absence of moral and political opposition to advanced industrial society is a prospect that alarms Marcuse, so much so, that his conviction that the abstract, recondite and nebulous language of art can be an effective means of assault on the values and experiences of the social order appears to have evolved into an exclusive, and perhaps justifiably obsessive, theoretical focus in his writing. In every major work beginning with and subsequent to *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse has devoted not less than an entire chapter to art and aesthetics. Art is the last ideological refuge for two-dimensional criticism of a one-dimensional society when all other forms of opposition have disappeared, for when a repressive social order prevails over all modes of dialectical criticism, the opposition is displaced to the aesthetic realm. The increasing emphasis Marcuse places on art within his work is tacit acknowledgement of the importance of this last oppositional refuge.<sup>43</sup> To the degree that Marcuse's analysis of the extent of reification in modern capitalist society is correct, the case is made for moving art and aesthetics to the forefront of critical theory. This is precisely the direction that Marcuse's research has taken, for his immediate pursuits focus exclusively on aesthetics.<sup>44</sup>

42. "Art in the One-Dimensional Society," *Radical Perspectives in the Arts*, pp. 57-58.

43. In his early writings the theory of "historicity" is Marcuse's initial form of conceptual opposition to reified discourse. In a reified social universe, historicity is charged with the function of recollecting the dialectical nature of historical development. For a revisionist interpretation of the significance of the concept of historicity in Marcuse's pre-Frankfurt Institute period, cf. my "Dialectics, Historicity, and Ontology," *Telos*, 27 (Spring, 1976), written as an introduction to the first publication of an English translation of Marcuse's "Zum Problem der Dialektik," appearing in the same issue.

44. Letter from Marcuse to me, December 2, 1975. The manuscript on aesthetics that Marcuse refers to in his letter is presumably his *Philosophy of Aesthetics*, which has received several bibliographical citations but has not yet been published. It was intended originally for publication by Humanities Press, 1972.