

ON THE AESTHETIC DIMENSION:  
A CONVERSATION WITH HERBERT MARCUSE

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in: Contemporary Literature 22:4( Fall 1981), pp. 416-424.

This interview, conducted in 1978, originally appeared in a locally distributed publication at the University of California, San Diego.

**Q.** I'd like to begin with a paraphrase of a critical response that is being made to *The Aesthetic Dimension*, which is that Marcuse has finally shown himself not to be a Marxist.

**A.** This criticism, of course, I knew beforehand. And the book was written intentionally in a provocative way to reply exactly to that accusation. In the first place, I don't care what label is being given me; nothing could be of less interest to me. Secondly, I quote old man Marx himself, who said, "*Moi je ne suis pas Marxiste.*" In English: "I myself am not a Marxist." So, if you look at many of the people who today call themselves Marxists, I don't mind if I don't belong to the same group and don't have the same label.

To be a little more serious about it, I do claim to be a Marxist. I do believe that his analysis of the capitalist society and the basic mechanisms which keep it going are still, today, more valid than ever before. As you may know, there is no such thing as a theory of socialism in Marx; there are only a few remarks. He never elaborated on them because he never claimed to be a prophet, and it would make no sense to give a prescription for the behavior of people in a free society which does not yet exist. That's a contradiction in itself.

Now I did not claim in my little book that art is free from social determination, but I do deny that the social determinants affect the very *substance* of the work. One can formulate that by saying that the social determinants pertain to the style of the work but not to its substance or quality. Let's take an example—*Hamlet*, or, for that

matter, any other of Shakespeare's plays. How much can you learn from these plays about the real workings of the society in which Shakespeare lived? I would say absolutely nothing. Nor is *Hamlet* in any way adequately understood by pointing to the social determinants. "To be or not to be" transcends any kind of social determination. And it will prove true, in different forms, for every and any kind of society.

I have at the beginning of *The Aesthetic Dimension* outlined what social determination of art I think does indeed prevail: it is, essentially, the material, the tradition, the historical horizon under which the writer, the artist, has to work. He cannot ignore it. He lives in a continuum of tradition even when he breaks it. This social determination affects any work of art. But, as I said, it does not constitute its substance.

*Q.* To be more specific about this criticism of *The Aesthetic Dimension*, it is that you have made the aesthetic a transcendental category.

*A.* That is not the case, because I think I use the term transhistorical. Transhistorical means transcending every and any *particular* stage of the historical process, but not transcending the historical process as a whole. That should be evident, because we cannot think of anything under the sun that could transcend the historical process as a whole. Everything is in history, even nature.

*Q.* Historically, would you say that the aesthetic appears as a dimension as a result or consequence of the Enlightenment, or what marks for Hegel the emergence of self-consciousness? Secondly, would you say that as capitalism ceases to be a progressive force in history that the aesthetic dimension becomes less accessible because late capitalism cannot tolerate its critical potential . . .

*A.* May I interrupt you: it cannot "tolerate"? I think we have seen today that there seems to be hardly anything that capitalist society cannot tolerate. It incorporated and accepted the most radical and avant-garde forms of art and literature. You can buy them in the drug store. But I think that this does not affect or detract from the quality and truth of these "accepted" works of art. Let's take an example from the visual arts: a statue by Barlach, or the artistic value and truth of a statue by Rodin. It is in no way reduced or falsified if you put that statue, as happens today, in the lobby of a bank or in

the lobby of the offices of a big corporation. What has changed is the receptivity of the consumer, not the work of art itself. James Joyce remains James Joyce; whether you can buy him at the drug store makes no difference. A Beethoven quartet remains what it is even if it's played over the radio while you are doing the dishes.

**Q.** Doesn't that last example speak more of the historically affirmative nature of art that survives today as opposed to the negative: that this society is still able to appreciate a certain kind of labor that is not being reproduced by this society?

**A.** You say this society: as a whole? Or only certain groups? The majority of the population has always been excluded from this relation to art, due to the separation between intellectual and material production to which art necessarily succumbs. You said that it would be characteristic of the affirmative function of art. I would say this is correct, but art by itself cannot under any circumstances change the social condition. And that is the necessary and essential powerlessness of art, that it cannot have an effective, direct impact on the praxis of change. I don't know of any case in which you could say that art has changed the established society. Art can prepare such change. Art can contribute to it only via several negations and mediations, the most important being the change of consciousness and, especially, the change of perception. I think we can say that after the impressionists, after Cézanne especially, we see differently than we saw before. That you can say; further you cannot go.

**Q.** You speak of the bifurcation of mental and material labor, and suggest that art is able to preserve in its autonomy, in its separation from material production, a certain promise of liberation. With the presence of "surplus repression" in advanced capitalism, is it possible that art's autonomy can actually serve advanced capitalism insofar as the labor we see in art, if not unalienated, is maintained as separate, as special, as "other" from material production? To go back to the *Gründrisse*, Marx makes a very strong case for the ontological dimension of labor—that it not be seen simply as sacrifice, but that labor itself is a unifying principle of human life.

**A.** What kind of labor? The labor on the assembly line? Marx certainly didn't mean that. He meant labor in a socialist society, but not in a capitalist society. He saw the possibility of reducing alienated labor already in capitalism, namely as a consequence of technical

progress or, as we would say today, increasing automation, mechanization, computerization, whatever you want to call it. That, however, is only the anticipation, or the first traces, of the liberation of the human being from full-time alienated labor—I say *full-time* alienation because alienated labor as such can never be abrogated. There will always have to be persons who adjust machines, who read gauges or whatever it is. So, alienated labor, and Marx said this, can never be entirely abrogated. But it can be reduced quantitatively and qualitatively so that it's no longer a full-time occupation to which the individual is bound during his or her entire personal and social life.

*Q.* But isn't it only in the realm of art, in its aesthetic dimension, that we are given the promise of a labor that is not simply the accommodation of oneself to a gauge or a machine?

*A.* Yes. And that is one of the interconnections and relations between art and, let's say, critical theory or revolutionary theory.

*Q.* Then the function of art is always one of mediation?

*A.* Yes. A mediation, but also more than that because art can represent the image of the human condition as it is rooted above and beyond the social sphere, which was my main point in relating art to Eros; art represents conflicts, hopes, and sufferings which cannot in any way be settled by the class struggle. We can again say in a trans-historical sense that there are permanent and eternal conflicts in the human condition, in the relation between human beings and between man and nature which transcend the entire sphere of the class struggle. Erotic conflicts and primary aggression can change their humiliating and destructive form in a socialist society, but they will continue to exist.

*Q.* Does your having written *The Aesthetic Dimension* imply that the philosopher has a primary critical function that the artist may or may not have?

*A.* Yes. Let me give you an example. The Marxist theory can reveal and represent the inner mechanisms and dynamics of capitalist society, especially in the economic sphere. Art cannot do this. The demand made by Brecht, for example, that art should represent the totality of the production relations in a given society is in my view absolutely contradictory to the potentiality of art. It cannot; nor can

art represent the extreme horror in the prevailing reality. We have here a good example, namely, the Holocaust.

*Q.* Since we have come to the Holocaust, in your book you almost seem to beg the question—it struck me as almost a *Verneinung*—when you bring in Leni Riefenstahl parenthetically as having filmed the beauty of a fascist feast. Is it possible to find art in a fascist form?

*A.* Yes—as exiled art and hidden art—but in no other way. I have asked this question myself many times, also, in the form: is there such a thing as fascist art? And I think I would like to deny it, but I must confess that one has probably to reformulate the question, because you cannot deny that there is literature produced by writers with strong proto-fascist features, at least utterly reactionary ones—the case of Dostoevsky, the case of Yeats. And there are more, but whenever I want to think of them I repress their names. . . . So, it is possible that a distinct reactionary and a repressive authoritarian can produce authentic literature. The question is: under what historical conditions?

*Q.* But there was a certain manipulation of conceptions of beauty in Nazi Germany, which may have been simply a devaluation of the aesthetic handed to it, of the tradition of art before it. But it did try to take the idea of an aesthetic form and call that art and in the process deny the Eros principle which underlies your own definition of the aesthetic.

*A.* It is a realism that conceals, that hides what reality actually is. And that, of course, is opposed to the very essence of art. Art should reveal and not conceal.

*Q.* Can you speak, then, of a successful art, an art that presents the problem properly? In Yeats, for instance, I never feel that he is presenting the problem correctly because in his poetry he is always invoking an archaic class structure which somehow denies the reality of his moment.

*A.* He denies the reality, but I would say in spite of everything he also preserves the images of a very different reality. I am not a Yeats expert. As a layman, this is my feeling when I read him.

*Q.* To what extent, then, would you deny, to go to the other extreme, art in its radical forms in our society?

A. Art in its radical forms—the present day avant-garde, for example: I would say yes, it is art. But the question is to what extent aesthetic criteria can be applied to some manifestations of avant-garde art. I had a long discussion on that here with the Visual Arts department two or three years ago. There was an exhibit that simply reproduced a garage sale. That wouldn't do because it just isn't art; it's a repetition of the given reality. It does not have the transcendence and dissociation which in my view are essential for art.

Q. In general, that seems very similar to Lukács, who grants his aesthetic approval to Balzac and denies it to a certain extent to Flaubert and to Zola for reasons not too unlike yours.

A. I would say there is indeed a difference in quality between the *Comédie Humaine* and the *Rougon-Macquart*. It is not so obvious in Flaubert.

Q. After 1848, which should have marked the passing of capitalism, art entered a decadent subject-object split, according to Lukács, which became increasingly irreconcilable, as evidenced, for instance, in Flaubert and Zola. My question is whether avant-garde art today can be seen as having finally assumed in some instances a more tactical position in its radical form, having finally realized that because Duchamps could be recuperated in a museum and could be given a monetary value, that it is the function of radical art to deny late capitalism the aesthetic completely?

A. Art continues in late capitalism. It might be the case that it is co-opted, but again that would mean something in terms of the recipient of art but not to the work of art itself. The work of art itself doesn't change. And by the way, decadent, you know, is a favorite fascist and Nazi slogan and we should be very, very careful in using it. Is Rimbaud decadent? Of course he's decadent, but at the same time he's a great poet. So was Baudelaire. And in this respect Lukács is certainly not a guide.

Q. What I want to ask now is related to the subject-object split, to the Oedipus complex and the weakening of the function of the father in society today. This, if I understand correctly, leads to an imbalance in the development of the individual, a weakening of the ego because the function of the father has been displaced to the state . . .

A. To the state, to the media, to peer groups, to the school, whatever it is. Yes.

Q. Does that displacement imply that the artist today has greater difficulty invoking the aesthetic because the repression is greater?

A. What you say refers to the increasingly total character of the management and steering of individuals, of their consciousness and unconscious. The consequence for art would be that the estrangement factor would be stronger than it was before. The contradiction of reality in art must be more radical than it could have been before—because there is more to contradict, to transcend. If and when practically all dimensions of human existence are socially managed, then, obviously, art, in order to be able to communicate its proper truths, must be able to break this totalization in consciousness and perception and to intensify the estrangement. Here is a difficulty: Adorno, as you may know, thought that the more repressive corporate capitalism is, the more alienated, the more estranged art must be and will be. But if this estrangement goes so far that the work of art no longer communicates, then any link with the reality is lost in the negation of reality; it becomes an abstract negation.

Q. But, in a way, can't this extreme form of art be seen as the "Great Refusal" without the content?

A. Yes, but the Great Refusal must in one way or another be communicable, understandable. If you break off the last remnant of communication, you have art in a total vacuum.

Q. I don't want to say that all art tends toward what Adorno is describing as its extreme form. But I am asking if that form today can serve as a negative focal point precisely because of a lack of content, its abstract negation?

A. I don't know. Looking at some of these super-supra avant-gardistic works, the refusal is lost; it's an intellectual game, intellectual masturbation, and no more. I may be wrong. I may not have enough affinity with this kind of art, but that is my experience. It begins already with the later Picasso works; for me, at least, it is difficult to take them as more than intellectual or technical games.

Q. Could you characterize that as art trying to define itself only in terms of art and not in terms of its situation in the established reality?

A. Yes, but I would say that by defining itself only and solely in terms of art, art also expresses its internal and essential relation to reality. And only in this form—definition in its own terms—can art carry the indictment and the negation.

Q. I feel the need to bring the idea of audience into the aesthetic dimension. I can see what you are saying about a Rodin sculpture or a play by Shakespeare not being changed through time; it still is that work, but it seems to me that our relationship to art does change. Our reading of Shakespeare is different from that of the audience to which he originally spoke because our linguistic and social reality is different. The aesthetic we create is not the aesthetic of his audience, of his creative process.

A. Well, I think we know the audience of Shakespeare very well. And it seems to me, as far as I can see, that the majority of the audience was mostly interested in the murders and battles, or whatever, and didn't give a damn about the underlying philosophy. Except for "elitist" groups. Our reading of Shakespeare is, of course, different from that of his average audience, but there remains a core of identity, affinity grounded in the transhistorical substance of his work.

Q. To bring this back to contemporary art, you speak of the totalization of perception in the established reality as perhaps involving an idea of "mass," that we no longer genuinely speak of individuals, we speak of a mass, of a consumer society in which identity is merged into a single function. Do you therefore see some kind of relationship between the aesthetic form and an idea of audience as an aesthetic category?

A. I think it's a truism to say that without an audience you don't have art. But the question is whether you can define the audience. Theoretically, the audience is anonymous. And art written for one particular and definite audience? Take, for instance, the degree to which Mozart composed for the nobility of his time. That was composition with respect to a very definite audience. But it was also more; it was also the negation of this relationship. There is a dimension in Mozart's music that has nothing to do with a specific audience; it is the depth dimension of his music which transcends the particular social determination: the universal appears in the particular!



*Q.* But what of art like that of Beckett, which can't seem to formulate a positive vision of the future?

*A.* I think it is precisely the total absence of all false hopes that brings out the depth of the necessary change. It has been said that reality is only adequately represented in its most extreme forms. In its normal forms, it doesn't reveal what it actually is. You have, if you want to really judge a repressive society, to go to the mental institutions, the insane asylums, the prisons, whatever are the extreme manifestations. Can the same be said with respect to art?