Norman Fischer

Frankfurt School Marxism and the Ethical Meaning of Art: Herbert Marcuse's *The Aesthetic Dimension*

This article takes up the ethical meaning of Herbert Marcuse's aesthetics, especially as espoused in his last book, The Aesthetic Dimension (1978). *In it, Marcuse responds at both an ethical and aesthetic level to three versions of Marxist/Frankfurt school theory of art: realism, negation theory, and formalism. The first part of my article situates* The Aesthetic Dimension *in a tradition; the second part lets it speak for itself as a synthesis of the three ethical/aesthetic traditions; and the third part queries and develops Marcuse's synthetic efforts.*

My aim is to show the ethical meaning of Herbert Marcuse's aesthetics, especially in his last book, *The Aesthetic Dimension*. This book, which appeared in 1978, and represented Marcuse's last statement on aesthetics, constitutes both a moral and an aesthetic dialogue with three ideas in Frankfurt school and Marxist art theory. The first is realism, as in the work of Lucien Goldmann and Georg Lukács, an aesthetics that fundamentally places the work of art within reality, particularly social reality. Because realism has three possible forms, a mirroring of nature, a mirroring of social reality, and an expression of self as social being, I will also use the term *embeddedness* or *realistic embeddedness* to characterize realism in all three forms (Goldmann, 1964; Lukács, 1969). Marxist/Frankfurt school aesthetic realists typically concentrate on artworks with thick descriptions of social reality, for example, *The Historical Novel* (1969), a study, produced by Lukács during the triumph of fascism in Germany, of history, politics and class in such novels as Walter Scott's *Rob Roy*. The second aesthetic tradition is utopian negation theory, and the third is aesthetic formalism. These two aesthetic theories are particularly displayed in the work of Marcuse and Theodor W. Adorno in the Frankfurt school, Walter Benjamin on its periphery, and of such Marxist aestheticians with close historical and thematic affinities to the Frankfurt school as Ernst Bloch and Hans Mayer. These aestheticians appear more concerned with seeing how the artwork negates and opposes existing society (utopian negation theory) or how its formal organization differentiates it from life (aesthetic formalism). Negation theorists concentrate on artistic tendencies such as surrealism (Marcuse,

1969) or artists who construct highly personal visions of emancipation from the existing social world, such as Baudelaire (Benjamin, 1973) or Wagner (Mayer, 1981). Formalists do not so much concentrate on a type of work but rather on the power of form in all art to subvert content. Marcuse's account of surrealism gives an example of both negation theory and formalism (Adorno, pp. 151–176, & Bloch, pp. 16–27, both in Adorno, Bloch, Lukács, Brecht, & Benjamin, 1977; Benjamin, 1973, 1985; Lukács, 1969, pp. 29–68; Marcuse, 1969, pp. 30–32; Mayer, 1981, pp. 90–101). *The Aesthetic Dimension* gives a complex response to these three versions of Marxist/Frankfurt school theory of art, at both an ethical and aesthetic level. The first part of this article situates *The Aesthetic Dimension* in a tradition; the second part lets it speak for itself as a synthesis of the three ethical/aesthetic traditions; the third part queries and develops Marcuse's synthetic efforts.

I

At the ethical level the theories of realistic embeddedness, utopian negation and aesthetic formalism present different analyses of the relation of fact and value. At the aesthetic level they present different positions on realism and expression in art. Basically for embeddedness ethical theory, facts and values are closely linked and all aesthetic expression must be realistic, whereas in negation ethical theory and for any ethics coming from aesthetic formalism, facts and values are not so closely linked, and artistic expression does not have to be so realistic. Because the three theories are both ethical and aesthetic, the fact/value duality cannot be resolved in isolation from the realistic/nonrealistic expression issue, or vice versa. In *The Aesthetic Dimension,* these ethical and aesthetic issues interpenetrate. Debate over the ethical aspects of the three theories turns into a seemingly unresolvable dispute on the nature of facts and values. Debate over the aesthetic aspect of the three theories turns into a seemingly unresolvable dispute over the nature of artistic expression. But when the issues of fact and value and realistic versus nonrealistic expression are linked, both sets of issues seem more resolvable.

Neither Marcuse nor the other Marxist/Frankfurt school aestheticians usually talked as explicitly about the link between aesthetics and ethics as I do. Yet the work of the contemporary Frankfurt school writer on ethics, Jürgen Habermas, can be used to help unlock the ethical debate in older Marxist/Frankfurt school aesthetics. Habermas remains the most famous contemporary writer on social ethics with roots in post- and even pre–World War II Frankfurt school theory and Marxism. His dominant interest for a long time has been ethics; from this standpoint he has often judged the ethics of Marxism and Frankfurt school theory as inchoate at best, as problematic or wrong at worst. Yet the aesthetics of such thinkers as Marcuse, Adorno, and Benjamin, as well as Lukács, Bloch, Goldmann, and Mayer, represents a major untapped reserve for

those, like Habermas, who have sought to create a better ethics out of the tradition of Marxist and Frankfurt school cultural and social theory. In particular, Habermas's critique of the overriding naturalism of previous attempts to find an ethics in Marxism or Frankfurt school theory can also be addressed from an aesthetic perspective. Naturalism in ethics, the belief that ethics can be based on facts about how people are embedded in society, has as a parallel aesthetic realism, the view that art best functions by depicting the society in which individuals are embedded. To this naturalism Habermas has consistently opposed and defended a moral standpoint, an abstract perspective on ethics that for him must undergird any renewal of substantive social ethics, Marxist, Frankfurt school, or otherwise (Habermas, 1987, pp. 51–75, 106–131, 294–327). The resolute nonnaturalism of this moral perspective has strong affinities with the great nonrealistic perspectives in Marxist and Frankfurt school aesthetics: negation theory and aesthetic formalism. In contrast, a book like *The Historical Novel* (1969) shows that Lukács's realistic aesthetics, embedding art in society, is based on a naturalistic ethics, strongly influenced by Marx and Hegel. I will argue that *The Aesthetic Dimension,* although never as explicitly ethical as the writings of Habermas or Lukács, nevertheless inserts Marxist/Frankfurt school aesthetics into ethical debates.

The beginnings of an aesthetic/ethical dialogue about embeddedness, negation, and form can be traced in a debate between a major defender of realistic Marxist aesthetics, Lucien Goldmann (with Lukács in the background), and Marcuse as a major Frankfurt school defender of utopian negation and aesthetic formalism. The debate started when Goldmann, writing from Paris in 1970, characterized Marcuse's essays from the 1930s as emphasizing the oppositional, utopian content of art to the detriment of its ability to depict actuality. He objected to Marcuse because both his practical and aesthetic opposition to reality was not itself adequately grounded on reality as understood by Marxist theory of history. In Hegelian terms, rationality is not grounded on actuality, or in Marxian terms, emancipation is not seen as coming from a specific class, or at least from a determinate historical and political situation. In later remarks on Adorno's aesthetics, and on further development of Marcuse's aesthetics, Goldmann continued to make the same points: Adorno and Marcuse situate the work of art too much outside of history and society. Furthermore, Marcuse's comments on Goldmann in *The Aesthetic Dimension* show that he was quite willing to accept the latter's challenge, and defend his own position of putting the artwork further outside of society than most other Marxist aestheticians (Goldman, 1959, pp. 280–302; 1970, pp. 265–267; 1976, pp. 140–144; Marcuse, 1978, pp. 30–31).

Unfortunately, neither Marcuse nor Goldmann ever discuss their opposition clearly in terms of the relation between ethics and aesthetics. The reason, I believe, is that they both too readily accepted conventional

Hegelian and Marxist opposition to an ethics independent of social reality and to the notion of value separated from facts. Thus, I am faced with a paradox. My problem is that I am trying to resolve the issue of the relation between ethics and aesthetics by using thinkers who, following a definite line of Hegelian Marxism, are often hostile to a language of value too autonomous from describing factual situations. But the most obvious link between aesthetics and ethics would be ethical and aesthetic value; and how can such a link be made by thinkers who seem to deny the autonomy of value and the possibility of an ethics based on such value?

It must be remembered that one traditional Hegelian and Marxist argument against an ethics that stresses autonomy of moral perspectives from facts, such as Kant's, or Habermas's, is that is fails to speak adequately to the concrete situation of human beings, as it is expressed in the aspirations of existing communities or groups (Lukács, 1975, pp. 146–167). A parallel move is often made in aesthetics, when embeddedness theorists argue against negation theorists or formalists, that if art transcends too much it does not speak to the concrete situation of the artist or the spectator (Goldmann, 1970). Marcuse, however, gives a different twist to the issue by happily pointing to evidence that Marx's own aesthetics is Kantian or Fichtean rather than Hegelian, in that it does stress elements that transcend the facts (Marcuse, 1978, p. 76). This may well be an overstatement, as Marcuse himself notes, but it suggests that the real issue between Goldmann and Marcuse is not whether they talk of values separate from facts but the degree to which they are willing to link facts and values, both in ethics and aesthetics.

Facts and values are linked in aesthetic realism, because the fundamental idea behind it is that art expresses the way the individual needs society in order to act and think. Hence, moral-aesthetic Marxist/Frankfurt school theorists of aesthetic realism, or embeddedness, often emphasizes structures of consciousness, such as social world views—fundamental ways in which groups perceive the world, which are too large scale for any individual to attain by themselves. Goldmann's book, *The Hidden God* (1964, published in French in 1959), which analyzes the basic worldviews of 17th-century French tragic thought, is a good example. There, Goldmann argues that the "tragic" views of human destiny expressed in the religious philosophy of Pascal and the tragedies of Racine are not explained as well by psychological analysis as by an explication of what social world views were possible in that age. Thus, embeddedness aesthetics emphasizes the role of realistic expression in art. A typical formulation is that because art is embedded in the whole social world, art can and should express the most significant world views of the age, albeit more coherently than they are ordinarily expressed. Emphasis on expression does not preclude realism but rather allows its attainment. Realism in art is attained insofar as the world views of the age are correctly depicted and expressed (Goldmann, 1970, pp. 228–

241). On this account the individual artist, even of genius, is limited in how far he or she can transcend the age. For art must express a core self which was already predefined in large part by the age, before the artwork came into being.

On this interpretation, facts and values in the artwork are closely linked. For the range of values found in art is circumscribed by how realistically the situation of the self and world is described. Thus, a generally nontranscendent ethic is associated with embeddedness aesthetics. The ordinary human being and the artist, both very much alike, are given their ethical and aesthetic tasks by their concrete situations in the world, from which they cannot get too distant. On this view, for example, art and ethics may give a certain amount of distance between the individual and his class situation, but action and art are finally bounded by that or some other socioeconomic aspect of their life.

In contrast, according to utopian negation theory, values in art are quite autonomous from facts realistically depicted. This is an aesthetic theory in which it is precisely the task of art to depict the world as refused or opposed and as transformable. It is in opposing the world that true morality reveals itself. Realism, however, is not a primary task. Expression is a primary task, but it is expression of the self as it could be not of the self as it is defined by the age. Corresponding to this aesthetic is an account of ethical action as opposed to or refusing the world. On this account, art and action can get far enough away from the concrete situation of selves in the world, including class situation, that they can point to another, less class-bound, situation.

Although the opposition in negation theory is achieved in the realm of art and not in the realm of action, still opposing action and the opposing art are seen as analogous and serve as mutual inspiration. Negation aesthetics directly links itself to negation ethics, in that both enjoin change and action in the light of ideals that are not yet incorporated in the world and thus oppose at least a significant part of the present state of the world and the self. Hence art and action are alike in that both oppose the present state of existence. Expression, for negation aesthetics, thus involves opposition to the world. Such opposition, as Marcuse suggests when he defends the surrealists' dreams and utopian fantasies, not only does not depend on realism but often rejects it (Marcuse, 1969, pp. 30–32). Thus, negation art theory differs from embeddedness art theory, which holds that proper expression entails realism. Furthermore, these different attitudes toward the relation of realism and expression correspond to different attitudes to the relation of facts and values. As opposed to the embeddedness theory of expression, which emphasizes expressing the self as it is and also emphasizes the role of facts and realistic and naturalistic description of the self and world, negation theory emphasizes expressing the self as it ought to be. The negation theory of aesthetics sees arts as presenting images which negate at least part of the existing world and self. Goldmann was actually sympathetic to such a

moral account of art, but his constant striving for naturalism in ethics led him to try to anchor the moral strivings of art to the aesthetic realism of embedded worldviews (Goldmann, 1976, pp. 138–139).

Both utopian negation aesthetics and realistic embeddedness aesthetics can be opposed to aesthetic formalism. Formalism is not concerned with realism and is concerned with expression only indirectly. Formalism in aesthetics holds neither that facts and values are closely linked in the artwork nor that they are not. It attempts to go beyond the dichotomy of facts and values. It holds that the work of art creates a new world with its own logic, a world that is so aloof from the ordinary world that it does not even counterpoint it as utopia, since the concept of utopia suggests that the new world will change the old world in its image, a notion that still links art to action — to action in a better world — whereas aesthetic formalism is suspicious of any link between art and action, past, present, or future. In emphasizing art's distance from the world, formalism implies an ethic of distance from action itself, neither integration into the world as in embeddedness theory nor refusal of the world as in negation theory.

In contrast to both embeddedness and negation aesthetics, formalism emphasizes that the aesthetic form possesses qualities radically different from existence and from the realm of action as such. Of course, for negation theory, art is also very different from present action and existence. But in the case of formalism, art is qualitatively different from action as such, not just from present action, whereas with negation theory art is not so different from action as such. Negation theory opposes the present state of action in the light of a better future state of action. Thus formalistic aesthetics is more removed from ethics than the other theories. Holding that the aesthetic form is qualitatively different from the realm of action as such, nevertheless it holds out the possibility of a breakdown of the dichotomy between action and life, on the one hand, and art on the other. Its promise is that if ever life and action could lose some of the qualities that seem to make them what they are, as opposed to what art is, then the distance from life and action found now only in art could also, perhaps paradoxically, be found in a new type of life and action.[1]

In summary, the three aesthetic theories of embeddedness, negation, and formalism point to ethics. But they must be given fuller ethical meaning. Ethics is sometimes thought to be the application of value judgments to human action. If this definition is followed, than an ethical aesthetics would, in the course of developing value judgments about art, also develop value judgments about human action. It might, however, seem easier to simply relate value to aesthetics and forget about relating ethics to aesthetics. Why? Because typically it might be held that value judgments, defined through some sort of contrast with factual judgments (even if one is attempting to overcome this contrast), would include value judgments concerning both ethics and aesthetics. Value judgments would

be the larger class, containing the smaller classes of ethical and aesthetic value judgments; there would have to be some relation between value judgments and aesthetic judgments, but not necessarily between ethical judgments and aesthetic judgments, other than their sharing of the abstract characteristic of being value judgments. However, although I would certainly agree that ethical and aesthetic judgments are linked generally at the level of value, I want still to cling to the more difficult point, that the value judgments made about aesthetic objects say something directly concerning ethical value judgments made about human actions. But in order to accept this notion of the direct relevance of aesthetics to ethics one must be fairly open to different possibilities as to what constitutes value judgments about action, in order that they may include the three broad categories that I have sketched: action as integration into the world (realistic embeddedness), action as refusal of the world (utopian negation), and distance from action as such (formalism).

Although all three aesthetic theories have potential links with ethics, it is clear that both embeddedness theory and negation theory have more obvious links than does formalism. Aesthetic formalism conflicts, in many ways, with both embeddedness theory and negation theory. It is in conflict with negation theory, because, for formalism, aesthetic form exists on another plane than either the present situation of life or its negation. Formalism conflicts with embeddedness theory, because it holds that worldviews are too close to life for art to be defined in terms of them. Worldviews, other than purely artistic ones, are seen as parts of life that do not have aesthetic form. In contrast, realistic embeddedness theorists such as Lukács and Goldmann held that life and action are homologous with art, in that both express world views, the one through behavior, the other through artistic form and the creation of artworks. But in fact, worldviews, both in art and outside art, are characterized by Goldmann as having a kind of form (Goldmann, 1970, pp. 234–235; Lukács, 1974, p. 8). Thus, according to embeddedness aesthetics the forms of life and art are interchangeable. Note, too, that the apparent separation of formalism from ethics emerges in its dual relation to negation and embeddedness aesthetics. For negation theory, art refuses life as it is; for embeddedness theory, art links itself to the already existing worldviews found in ordinary life. For formalism, neither art as refusal nor art as expression of worldviews can capture the way that artistic form is different and distant from existence.

These brief characterizations of the three aesthetic theories help make good on my promise to sketch the connection between the three types of value judgments in aesthetics and corresponding value judgments about human action. They also demonstrate that the ethical judgments concerned would probably not be the ones usually talked about in ethics textbooks, which concentrate on particular examples of activity. Rather, the link between ethics and aesthetics is general and at the level of attitude. As the next section of this article shows, a particularly instructive

example for reconstructing aesthetics from an ethical perspective is provided by the trajectory of Herbert Marcuse's career as aesthetician, culminating in *The Aesthetic Dimension*.

II

As we have seen, Marcuse had written on aesthetic issues in the 1930s, during the midst of the struggle against fascism, when first associated with the early Frankfurt school in Germany (Marcuse, 1968). After he left Europe and arrived in New York with other members of the school, his first major aesthetic statement appeared in *Eros and Civilization* (1966), which first came out in 1955 but did not become internationally famous until the radical years of the 1960s. *Eros and Civilization* began an almost 25-year period of reflection on art's ability to symbolize moral striving.

In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse had attempted to connect aesthetic formalism and negation aesthetics, by utilizing Friedrich Schiller's argument made in 1795, that the "playful" element of art, connected with the power of aesthetic form to gain distance from life, also paradoxically represents an essential element of the liberated life. The playfulness of artistic form negates the alienation of being dictated to solely by external circumstances of the world, and points the way for life also to overcome alienated life (Fischer, 1996; Marcuse, 1966, pp. 140–197). Thus, in *Eros and Civilization* art was linked very closely to life, but to life as it could be, a negation of present life. Thus negation aesthetics and formalist aesthetics worked together. Oddly enough, however, in works written in the heyday of late 1960s, early 1970s radicalism, such as *An Essay on Liberation* (1969) and *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1972), Marcuse got closer and closer to fellow Frankfurt school member Theodor W. Adorno's purer aesthetic formalism, which usually tends, by itself, and if not linked to negation aesthetics, to more radically disconnect art from life (Adorno, 1984). Yet even then, Marcuse still continued to think that even though art may be sharply differentiated from life and action because of its form, aesthetic form itself achieves a liberation which life and action also aim for but cannot now achieve (Marcuse, 1969, pp. 30–32). The liberation, however, that art attains and action seeks, departs from many, but not all, of the conditions of life and action as we know them. Art anticipates an ideal life, including an ideal life with nature, which could not be systematically carried out until society achieved liberation from domination (Marcuse, 1972, pp. 73–74).

When we reach *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978), we find that Marcuse's solution to the riddle of art and life represents a dialogue not only with other versions of Marxist, Frankfurt school moral aesthetics, but also with his own earlier versions. One might almost miss Marcuse's real moral points, the subterranean themes of *The Aesthetic Dimension*: the nature of the self, tragedy, optimism, and pessimism, all themes of moral

aesthetics. This book expresses, often within a few pregnant sentences, the whole history of Marcuse's five decade ethical-aesthetic analysis of art. What is the fundamental message of Marcuse's final statement on aesthetics as moral and ethical theory? He is more skeptical in this book about the possibility of the conditions of action ever becoming so changed that liberated action could be a transmutation of the form of art. Art and life are seen as very different. Liberated action can move in the direction of imitating art's formal aesthetic qualities, but there seem to be sharper limits to how far it can go. Although in some respects closer than ever to Adorno's aesthetic formalism with its separation between art and life and very critical of Goldmann's realistic embeddedness aesthetics with its claim of a close connection between art and life, *The Aesthetic Dimension* in fact aids in reconciling the three dimensions of negation, formalism, and embeddedness, and it does so at both an ethical and an aesthetic level (Adorno, in Bloch et al., 1977, p. 157). This synthesis, however, is obscured by the fact that Marcuse does not adhere to the kind of realistic notions of embeddedness found in such Marxist aestheticians as Goldmann and Lukács before him but rather states his version of embeddedness theory realism in the form of an emphasis on "remembering" the past.

The theme of remembering the past, recalling the past, appears almost as a leitmotif throughout the book: "the memory of things past," "remembrance of a life between illusion and reality, falsehood and truth, joy and death" (Marcuse, 1978, pp. 10, 23). Through its evocation of memory, art negates and transcends reality, and also in Marcuse's terms preserves or affirms it. But this preservation no longer has simply the ideological function described in his 1930s essays on art (Marcuse, 1968, pp. 88–158). Rather, *The Aesthetic Dimension* above all presents a tension between preservation, acceptance of the world, and memory of the past, all conceived as a kind of realistic embeddedness, and negation of the world, a tension replete with ethical ramifications.

These ethical-aesthetic links originate in the basic tension in moral-aesthetic Frankfurt school and Marxist art theory, between the self embedded in society and the self which negates society, between ethical naturalism emphasizing embeddedness in actual ethical practices and ethical utopianism emphasizing an independent moral perspective; however, a further tension is added between action — including ethical action — in its normal mode and the ideal of an activity modeling itself on aesthetic form. *The Aesthetic Dimension* sketches an unremitting tension between the idea that art should be linked to life, either by negating the world or by accepting it, preserving it and realistically embedding oneself in it, and the idea that art, through its aesthetic form, is simply removed from life. The book raises the issue of art's similarity to life versus its distance from life via its artistic form, that is, the difference between embeddedness aesthetics and aesthetic formalism; and it then probes the issue of art as negation of the world versus art as acceptance of the

world, that is, the opposition between the negating self and the embedded self.

More in this book, however, than in earlier works, Marcuse apparently sought a synthesis, a view of art as both negating the world and attaining equilibrium with the world through embeddedness in it. Also the idea of aesthetic form as representing a value different, in many ways, from the value of liberated life, comes out very strongly in *The Aesthetic Dimension*. Thus, Marcuse emphasizes how the "degree to which the distance and estrangement from praxis constitute the emancipatory value of art becomes particularly clear in those works of literature which seem to close themselves rigidly against praxis" (Marcuse, 1978, p. 19).

Indeed, one general problem with *The Aesthetic Dimension* is the sharp separation between Marcuse's claims about the removal of aesthetic form from reality, and his actual use of the concept of aesthetic form, which he often ties more clearly to a type of realistic and naturalistic embeddedness than he indicates he is doing. Thus, Marcuse seems to be consciously intervening on behalf of Adorno in the debate between Goldmann, defending realistic embeddedness in the world, and Adorno, defending a nonrealistic formalism, when he talks of how "in all its ideality art bears a witness to the truth of dialectical materialism—the permanent non identity between subject and object" (Marcuse, 1978, p. 29). For in critical comments that Adorno and Goldmann had made about each other Goldmann had argued that a realistic aesthetic that embeds art in society by emphasizing how art expresses worldviews is the natural consequence of Hegelian subject/object identity. Adorno, in turn, had rejected subject/object identity.[2] Of course in Hegelian and Marxist theory the notion of a subject/object identity, in which objective and subjective interpenetrate, leads to stress on the embedded self, to naturalism in ethics, and to realism in aesthetics. In contrast, rejection of subject/object identity leads to emphasis on the disembedded self, negation in aesthetics, and a Habermasian nonnaturalism in ethics. This is because if the subject is in some way identical with or at least undefinable without the object, then the subject cannot get his or her ethical tasks and principles solely from himself or herself but must get them as well from the social world in which he or she lives. Hence by rejecting subject/object identity here, Marcuse is rejecting naturalism in ethics and realism in aesthetics (Habermas, 1987).

The activism of Marcuse's account, however, with its emphasis on the power of emancipatory thought to negate facts, differs from Adorno's, no matter how much Marcuse may appear to be on Adorno's side of preferring the distance from life gained by aesthetic form to integration into and embeddedness in the world, as for example when he suggests that Goldmann's question of how art can be anchored to social reality in the modern world was answered by Adorno's response that the autonomy of the work must assert itself in complete estrangement from the

world (Marcuse, 1978, pp. 30–31). By not emphasizing that Goldmann would have disagreed with this answer, Marcuse somewhat mutes the debate between realism and utopia in aesthetics. Yet there is no doubt that this emphasis on the autonomy of form is used by Marcuse to distinguish his less historical and social account of culture from Goldmann's more realistic account. For Marcuse specifically claims that through that autonomy and the creation of distance that follows from it, the "*Lebenswelt* . . . is transcended" (Marcuse, 1978, p. 23). But how little he really transcends the concept of worldview, lived world, or other forms of embeddedness type aesthetic realism is shown by the fact that he opposes to them not just aesthetic distance and form, not just negation, but also "remembrance," which involves embedding oneself in the reality of the past and, thus, in its emphasis on a whole larger than the individual serves some of the same functions as Goldmann's worldview theory or embeddedness theory generally (Marcuse, 1978, p. 23).

Indeed, ultimately, aesthetic formalism is overshadowed in *The Aesthetic Dimension*. For the more Marcuse moves away from the specific worldview version of embeddedness theory found in Goldmann, the more he moves toward a synthesis of formalism, negation theory, and an embeddedness realism interpreted in terms of "remembering" the past, a concept that echoes another Frankfurt school associate who tried to give a moral probing of aesthetic issues: Walter Benjamin. The memory and influence of Benjamin is significant in *The Aesthetic Dimension,* particularly because toward the end of his life Benjamin more and more sought an activist, negating aesthetics, probably ultimately ethical in origin. For Benjamin, in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1969) written in Paris shortly before the Nazi invasion, the concept of being driven by the past instead of pulled by the future plays a structural role similar to more traditional Marxist embeddedness theory. Remembrance of the past, like linking up with the aspirations of groups with ethical practices embedded in society, can give the individual ethical motivation (Benjamin, 1969, p. 260). Indeed, when Marcuse first introduced the ethical ramifications of "remembrance" of things past, he explicitly recalled Walter Benjamin (Marcuse, 1966, p. 233).

Marcuse formulates this theme of remembrance of the past in a way that is both more personal and more psychological than it usually is in Benjamin. The emphasis on memory leads to Marcuse's notion of tragedy. For Marcuse, art teaches us to accept tragedy, the past, and that part of reality that cannot be changed by art. Yet, even in the face of this tragic reality there exists the "power of aesthetic form to call fate by its name"; and that power relies heavily on memory. It is the ability to stand up to the memory of what cannot be transformed. "In the authentic work, the affirmation does not cancel the indictment: reconciliation and hope still preserve the memory of things past" (Marcuse, 1978, p. 10). For Marcuse, memory of the past is linked with an interpretation of Aristotle's theory of tragedy, in which catharsis involves a "guiltless

guilt" (Marcuse, 1978, pp. 10, 58–59, 24). This paradoxical interpretation of tragedy plays a role in Marcuse's ultimately paradoxical resolution of the ethical/aesthetic dichotomies of negation, formal distance, and realistic embeddedness, gained through the tragic catharsis of remembering the past.

For whatever the origin of Marcuse's emphasis on memory of the past and calling fate by its name, it seems to refer to a version of embeddedness realism which the distance giving power of aesthetic form itself helps to attain. Thus in *The Aesthetic Dimension,* the ethics and aesthetics of form and the ethics and aesthetics of embeddedness and tragic remembrance work together with the ethics and aesthetics of negation. For Marcuse, when memory of the past, negation, and the distance associated with aesthetic form work together, what results is "transcending preservation," a concept which seeks almost violently to link radical negation of the world and acceptance of and embeddedness in a world of almost tragic immersion in the past, and in actual history and society (Marcuse, 1978, p. 73). Marcuse seeks to synthesize utopian negation theorists' stress on refusing the world in the interests of attaining an ideal life, with the emphasis on integration into the world that results from realistic-embeddedness aesthetics and naturalistic-embeddedness ethics. Furthermore, the resulting mix has many aspects of aesthetic formalism in it. This explains Marcuse's emphasis on the autonomy of art, and his critique of Goldmann's realistic embeddedness aesthetics, which he does not think puts enough emphasis on art's autonomy. Indeed, Marcuse even overstates his opposition to realism and embeddedness and then has to reunite them with formalism and negation, through aesthetic-ethical analysis and through the literary form of paradox.

Thus, the concept of what Marcuse calls "transcending preservation" is often stated in terms of the paradox that art is removed from the world and yet, in its removal, must always relate to the world by negating or accepting it. Art, Marcuse says, "is inevitably part of that which is, and only as part of that which is does it speak out against that which is," a paradoxical idea appearing in many guises in the book (Marcuse, 1978, p. 41). Trying to link the imitative aim of literary realism found in embeddedness aesthetics with the antirealism of negation and aesthetic formalism, Marcuse describes a "transforming mimesis," in which the "image of liberation is fractured by reality," and of how even if a work ends happily it still deals with tragedy and concerns remembrance of things past (Marcuse, 1978, pp. 47, 48). He speaks of how only by breaking with reality can we achieve reality, of the "reconciliation with the irreconcilable" (Marcuse, 1978, pp. 8, 66). All these expressions of the central paradox culminate in the conclusion of the book.

The utopia in great art is never the simple negation of the reality principle, but its transcending preservation . . . in which past and present cast their shadow on fulfillment. The authentic utopia is grounded in recollection. . . . If the remem-

brance of things past would become a motive power for the struggle for changing the world, the struggle would be waged for a revolution hitherto suppressed in the previous historical revolutions. (Marcuse, 1978, p. 73)

Thus, in transcending preservation, the struggle to preserve through remembrance—the struggle to be realistically embedded in the context of the past—is seen to be in harmony with the struggle to negate and the struggle to attain aesthetic distance, that is, the perspectives of utopian negation theory and formalism. Once again we see why Marcuse allies himself with Walter Benjamin in this book. Defenders of surrealism as an art liberated from reality, they both emphasized artists such as Baudelaire (Benjamin) and Andre Breton (Marcuse), whose embedded participation in society is less pronounced than their desire to negate reality. Their removal from society contrasts with the integration into society's moral structures of the typical literary heroes celebrated by the great Marxist realist, Lukács, as, for example, in his praise of the democratic protagonists of Sir Walter Scott's historical novels, such as *Rob Roy*. Yet in the end the surrealistic heroes that Marcuse and Benjamin delighted in must also link up with the whole of social reality and the past. They negate and transcend but also preserve and are embedded in the world (Benjamin, 1985; Lukács, 1969, pp. 29–68; Marcuse, 1969, p. 33). With his phrase, "transcending preservation," Marcuse hints at a synthesis of the traditions of utopian negation, realistic embeddedness, and formalism. Marcuse enters into the debate over the values of embeddedness in and refusal of the world by seeking a remembrance of things past which both transcends and preserves the past. This transcending preservation is characteristic of an art which, through its formal distance from the world (formalism) creates an image of the whole most appropriate for selves who achieve realization both through integration into the world (embeddedness theory) and negation of the world (negation theory). This is the concluding statement on art and life by someone who, though never closing his eyes to the ability of late capitalism to distort opposition to it, nevertheless insisted throughout his life that opposition could be found in the very structure of aesthetic perception itself. But does this ethical/aesthetic synthesis really work? My answer in the section that follows is "not yet," but that further ethical analysis can make it work.

III

As we have seen, at the ethical level realistic embeddedness and utopian negation involve different analyses of the relation of fact and value. At the aesthetic level they involve different positions on realism and expression in art. Basically, for realistic embeddedness theory, facts and values are closely linked and all expression must be realistic, whereas in negation theory facts and values are not so closely linked and expression does

not have to be so realistic. Aesthetic formalism is basically on the side of negation theory on expression and on fact and value. Debate over the ethical aspects of the three theories turns into a seemingly unresolvable dispute on the nature of facts and values. Debate over the aesthetic aspect of the three theories turns into a seemingly unresolvable dispute over the nature of expression. But when the issues of fact and value and realistic versus nonrealistic expression are linked, both issues seem more resolvable.

For embeddedness aesthetics, the values found in art are circumscribed by how realistically the situation of the self and world are described. Thus, embeddedness aesthetics is linked with naturalistic ethics. The ordinary human being and the artist, both very much alike, are given their ethical and aesthetic tasks by their concrete situations in the world, from which they cannot get too distant. They are given their ethical tasks by a collection of ethical practices, what Lukács, following Hegel, called *Sittlichkeit,* for example the set of ethical practices faced by *Rob Roy* in 18th-century Scotland (Lukács, 1969, p. 40). In contrast, according to utopian negation theory and aesthetic formalism, values in art are quite autonomous from facts realistically depicted. These are aesthetic theories in which it is precisely the task of art to depict the world as refused or opposed, and as transformable in the light of imaginative, utopian, ideals. It is often in opposing the world that ethical harmony is achieved. Realism, however, is not a primary task. Expression is a primary task, but it is expression of the self as it could be, not the self as it is defined by the age. Corresponding to this aesthetic is an account of ethical action as opposed to or refusing the world.

Although the opposition in negation theory is achieved in the realm of art, and not in the realm of ethical action, still, opposing action and opposing art are seen as analogous and serve as mutual inspiration. Negation in art is closely linked to negation in ethics because both enjoin change and action in the light of ideals that are not yet incorporated in the world and thus oppose at least a significant part of the present state of the world and the self. Hence art and action are alike in that both oppose the present state of existence. Expression, for negation theory, thus involves opposition to domination in the actual social world and does not depend so strongly—indeed sometimes, as in surrealistic fantasies not at all—on realistic depiction of that world. Thus, negation theory differs from embeddedness theory, which implies that proper expression entails realism. Furthermore, these different attitudes toward the relation of realism and expression correspond to different attitudes to the relation of facts and values. As opposed to the embeddedness theory of expression, which emphasizes expressing the self as it is and also emphasizes the role of facts and realistic and naturalistic description of the self and world, negation theory emphasizes expressing the self as it ought to be. Negation aesthetics sees art as presenting images that negate at least part of the existing world and self.

All of this argument suggests that the necessity of a synthesis of negation, formalist, and embeddedness aesthetics arises in conjunction with the question of how art can be ethical in the modern world. Are, however, the theories of art as embeddedness in reality, as negation of reality, and as the achievement of formal distance, three exclusionary answers to this question; or, rather, are they three different, but perhaps ultimately compatible ways of responding to the idea that art could only depict the world in so far as it is capable of being transformed? It is true that the affirming, embeddedness critics may take so long in contemplating the worldviews art is embedded in, that they never see how art transcends past and present. But the negating critics and the formalist may deny the world so much that they never see any way of linking past and present to the future utopia art sketches.

According to realistic embeddedness theory, the range of art is circumscribed by the boundaries of a worldview appropriate to the society in which it is created. It cannot go too far against or even beyond that world view. Thus, embeddedness theory, like much of naturalistic ethics, may be opposed to both a more Marcusian stress on negating or refusing the world, and a more Habermasian stress on attaining an ideal moral perspective, liberated from actuality and from embeddedness in society. This opposition occurs because the more the individual is identified with history and society, the less he or she is able to negate history or society in the interest of achieving ideal values.

Embeddedness aesthetics seems to promulgate an ethics of acceptance or affirmation of the world, as providing the basic conditions for action; it is linked with the world of naturalistically embedded ethical practices. Therefore, embeddedness aesthetics seems opposed to the ethics of revolt on behalf of an ideal moral perspective, a revolt that would be more associated with the aesthetics of negation. Thus, the issue between our three versions of ethical aesthetics turns on the extent to which the individual is limited by the actual structures of the ethical practices in which he or she lives.

Hence, one criticism of embeddedness from the standpoint of utopian negation and aesthetic formalism is that the former is not able to adequately link art to the task either of opposing the worldview of the age and aspects of the self that receive their definition from that worldview, or of opposing the world itself. Adorno often made this point against what he viewed as the conservatism of embeddedness theory (Adorno, 1974, p. 17). Yet, it is not true that embeddedness theory cuts art off from action. Rather, the argument from the standpoint of negation theory must be that embeddedness theory's stress on realistically depicting action prevents it from enjoining negating action. In this view, embeddedness theory connects art to the actions that are, and not to the actions that could be.

Of course, some versions of embeddedness theory do not concentrate on actions at all, but only on thoughts. But Marxist/Frankfurt school

embeddedness theory was always meant to analyze actions as well as thoughts. Worldviews structure thoughts that are directed, immediately or not, to actions as well as thoughts that have no special connection with action. It is art's task, then, to express those thoughts about actions more clearly than they are usually expressed. One can oppose them only in the context of expressing them. Thus, on this account it is not art's primary task to negate worldviews or other embedded forms of consciousness but rather to suggest how the thoughts about them can be changed. Stress on art's power to negate worldviews or embedded forms of consciousness implies an extreme difference between the meaning of art and the meaning of worldviews oriented toward ethical action in the world, a difference that embeddedness theorists cannot accept. Of course the value question is over what constitutes too much. Yet it can be said that if the negation theorist emphasizes the difference between art and life, the embeddedness theorist stresses that life and art are homologous. For the embeddedness theorists it is true that more valuational coherence may be found in art than in life. Nevertheless, this is not so much a qualitative as a quantitative difference. Therefore, insofar as the liberating or negating power of art is limited always by the necessity of art to relate to a worldview found in life, the potential for inciting new action that arises from art itself is correspondingly limited.

Thus ethical naturalism and aesthetic realism both stress embeddedness in facts, whereas a Habermasian ethical nonnaturalism, and an aesthetic negation theory and formalism stress distance from facts. A defense of an ethical action or work of art which stresses how different its values are from facts, can base itself on the idea that values give art and ethical action reflective distance from the facts of the world. Thus Habermasian ideal ethics gives greater distance from practice than typical Marxist naturalistic ethics. Ethically, presence of distance means that one's principles are reflective and yet efficacious in guiding action. Ethical action is not simply a result of embeddedness in the ethical practices of the community. Aesthetically this means that the work of art creates a world with its own logic, one that is not simply dictated by the facts. The two ideas, of a work of art with its own logic and of ethical principles that in reflecting on the world present reasons for acting that are not in the world, are united through the common denominator of distance.

One may also state the theory of distance in terms of interests. With a reflective ethics we are not simply guided by our immediate interests in attaining something. Similarly, in an aesthetics of negation and form there is movement away from the immediate gratification of our interest in having things happen in the world. A negation theory aesthetician like Marcuse certainly holds that is possible to attain a considerable amount of distance, both at the ethical and at the aesthetic level. Embeddedness theory can be interpreted in two ways on distance. It can imply that most distance is illusory. It can also imply that it is not illusory, but nevertheless depends on embeddedness. For embeddedness theory to work, it

must adopt the second position. It must not claim the illusoriness of distance, but only its dependence on embeddedness. Furthermore, when it does so, embeddedness theory can be combined consistently with negation theory and formalism, as Marcuse apparently wished to do in *The Aesthetic Dimension*.

For this synthesis to work, the following problem must be faced. Embeddedness theory often implies that ethical action and art can never achieve the Archimedean point of distance that some negation theorists say they can attain. It is not that embeddedness theory is completely unsympathetic to the notion of reflective ethical principles seen as autonomous values guiding action, or to the sui generis harmony of a work of art, seen as possessing autonomous value, distant from action. The argument, rather, is that if such values become too distinct from the world of historical facts and action, they become ineffective even as values. But there is a paradox in this claim, for it must also be acknowledged that if the distance between ethical action and art on the one hand, and the historical and social world on the other, becomes reduced too far, then the elements that make art and ethical action what they are seem to disappear.

For embeddedness theory and Marxist ethical naturalism and aesthetic realism generally, social reality sets tasks for the self that cannot be denied. These tasks put limitations on the ability of the self both to reflect, through general ethical principles, and to organize a work of art that has its own autonomous structure. These limits can be stated as follows. Yes, one is free to construct semiautonomous ethical principles and aesthetic forms. But the very logic of ethical perspectives and aesthetic forms points to the notion of an actual ethical practices either disguised or not disguised. Hence an ideal moral perspective needs to be filled out with an understanding of what society does in practice. The ideal images of morality and art depend on the actuality of embedded ethical practices, but they cannot be reduced to it. Only when these two aspects, actual social ethical practice and their image in reflective moral perspectives and art, are properly linked can the nature of art and ethical action in history be grasped. In art any expression of value must have an adequate link to the expression of one's situation in the world as found in history and society, but the value elements found in art cannot be reduced to the value elements in history and society. The difference between the embeddedness concept of aesthetic value and the negation concept is that for the former values transcend social practices, in the sense of negating them or achieving aesthetic distance from them, only because they realistically express them. In contrast, for negation theory, values transcend social practices only because they do not express them realistically but rather express the autonomous values of the self's search for an ideal moral perspective.

But what is the relation between the value of embedding one's self in the actual social world and other values that the self may seek or that

may be used to define the self, such as negation through emphasizing opposition to less crucial aspects of the self and achieving distance from the world through artistic form? How great a harmony can be found between embeddedness and negation of the self in art? Is it the theory of the self that holds that transcendence through negation results only from expression of a core of the self that already factually exists in society, which achieves the proper balance between embeddedness and negation? Or is it the theory that denies this? Can one negate the facts of the self without some idea of what the self is as defined by its historical situation such as class, politics, and so on? But equally, can the self express the core of what it is without being able to oppose what is or without distancing itself from what is through aesthetic forms?

Embeddedness theorists emphasize the challenge of the first question and that values in art are extremely limited by facts about our embeddedness in society and its ethical practices. Negation theorists emphasize the challenge of the second question and hold that values in art are less limited by these facts.

The problem is that both questions are genuine challenges to any easy answers. Do we have to choose between Marcuse's surrealistic poems and Lukács's historical novels? One could argue, of course, that one should simply express and not negate. But express what? The self as it is or the self as it could be? What the self is, in part, is a value choice. Of course, if art simply expressed what is, then the upholders of embeddedness theory could argue that expression involves no negation of or aesthetic distance from what is. But if art expresses the self both as it is and as it should be, then it is more difficult to eliminate the negating and formalist elements. It is true that one could get rid of the negating side of art more easily if one held that knowledge of which aspects of the self to negate and which aspect to preserve, as well as knowledge of the relation between them, was simply given by knowledge of the existing social and historical forces and not by reflective values in art, or moral perspectives. However, this is a very difficult position to hold in general and particularly in regard to art. For ideals of what the self is are expressed in art, and they appear as values even within embeddedness theory. Goldmann's and Lukács's failure to always keep this in mind weakened their version of embeddedness realism. Actually, the values required by embeddedness theory compete, but creatively, with the values required by negation theory and aesthetic formalism. Any other interpretation of embeddedness aesthetics makes it too susceptible to the charges that its opponents are too willing to make against it anyway—that it suppresses the ideal element and simply anchors art to historical practices. The values of negation and distance associated with negating aesthetic forms require the values associated with embeddedness. However, the values of negation and distance are not reducible to the values of embeddedness. Furthermore, distance and negation aid in the self expression sought for by embeddedness theory.

Conclusion

Embeddedness, negation, and aesthetic formalism have always been unruly aspects of the great Marxist/Frankfurt school synthesis of art and ethics. They can perhaps be synthesized, as Marcuse apparently wanted to do in *The Aesthetic Dimension*, if the following points are kept in mind. For embeddedness theory art can negate only insofar as it expresses a core self defined partially by social and historical practices. An expressive and realist view of art must always imply that there is a core of the self that must be expressed in art no matter how much of that core self is denied by defining the self in terms of a better world surrealistically negating the present one or in terms of distancing aesthetic forms.

All combinations of embeddedness realism, negating utopianism, and aesthetic formalism must hold that there is a basic core of the self, including a social and historical element that must be expressed in the work of art in order for the negating and transcending elements to occur. This aesthetic point has ethical ramifications. What the self involved in aesthetic experience learns about the necessity of expressing a core self in order to negate by opposing an ideal to reality is also learned by the self in ordinary practical ethical situations. Of course negation appears very differently in art and ethical life. Negation in art must be parasitic on negation in life. In life, the world or the self bound up with the world is actually opposed, whereas in art it is only the artistically and symbolically reworked aspects of self or world that are first presented and then denied through art and its unique aesthetic forms.

In the service of an ethical aesthetics, Marcuse sought an art of "transcending preservation." With this phrase Marcuse sought to synthesize utopian negation, realistic embeddedness, and formalism. Marcuse enters into the debate over the values of embeddedness in and refusal of the world by seeking a remembrance of things past which both transcends and preserves embeddedness in the past, history, and society. This "transcending preservation" characterizes an art which, through its formal distance from the world (formalism), creates an image of life most appropriate for selves who achieve realization both through integration into the world (embeddedness theory), and through negation of the world (negation theory). Marcuse tried to synthesize artistic images of surrealistic negation and modern art's emphasis on the autonomy of form, with a Benjaminian stress on art's immersion in the historical past. My fundamental response to Marcuse has been that these artistic divergences can be reconciled only when their core ethical meaning is extracted from them.

Norman Fischer *is associate professor of philosophy at Kent State University. He publishes and teaches in the areas of political and social ethics with emphasis on Marxism and critical theory, aesthetics and cultural theory, and environmental values.*

1   For a good statement of this utopian version of formalism see Marcuse (1969, pp. 26–27).
2   Goldmann and Adorno in Goldmann (1976), pp. 121–147. For Goldmann's specific critique of Marcuse from a world view embeddedness perspective see Goldmann (1970).

Adorno, T. W. (1974). *Minima moralia*. London: New Left Books.
Adorno, T. W. (1984). *Aesthetic theory*. London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
Benjamin, W. (1969). Theses on the philosophy of history. In Hannah Arendt (Ed.), *Illuminations* (pp. 253–264). New York: Schocken.
Benjamin, W. (1973). *Charles Baudelaire: A lyric poet in the era of high capitalism*. London: New Left Books.
Benjamin, W. (1985). Surrealism. In *One way street and other writings* (pp. 225–239). London: New Left Books.
Bloch, E., Lukács, G., Brecht, B., Benjamin, W., & Adorno, T. (1977). *Aesthetics and politics*. London: New Left Books.
Fischer, N. (1996). From aesthetic education to environmental aesthetics. *Clio, 25*(4), 365–391.
Goldmann, L. (1959). Y a-t-il une sociologie Marxiste? In *Recherchesdialectiques* (pp. 280–302). Paris: Gallimard.
Goldmann, L. (1964). *The hidden god*. New York: Humanities Press.
Goldmann, L. (1970). Reflexions sur la pensée de Herbert Marcuse. In *Marxisme et sciences humaines* (pp. 259–287). Paris: Gallimard.
Goldmann, L. (1976). *Cultural creation in modern society*. St. Louis, MO: Telos Press.
Habermas, J. (1987). *The philosophical discourse of modernity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Lukács, G. (1969). *The historical novel*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Lukács, G. (1974). *Soul and form*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Lukács, G. (1975). *The young Hegel*. London: Merlin.
Marcuse, H. (1966). *Eros and civilization*. Boston: Beacon Press.
Marcuse, H. (1968). *Negations*. Boston: Beacon Press.
Marcuse, H. (1969). *An essay on liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press.
Marcuse, H. (1972). *Counterrevolution and revolt*. Boston: Beacon Press.
Marcuse, H. (1978). *The aesthetic dimension*. Boston: Beacon Press.
Mayer, H. (1981). Tannhauser als Aussenseiter. In *Versuche uber die Oper* (pp. 90–101). Frankfurt, Germany: Suhrkamp.