

SOME CRITICAL NOTES ON MARCUSE'S AESTHETIC THEORY

Donald C. Lee

Marcuse, in his most recent book, The Aesthetic Dimension,¹ criticizes the "orthodox" Marxist theory of aesthetics (essentially that means the official Russian dogma which is also imposed upon its oppressed colonies in Eastern Europe). That position can be briefly summarized as follows: There is a definite connection between art and the material base of society, the totality of the relations of production. With the change in production relations, art itself is transformed as part of the superstructure of society, although like other ideologies it can lag behind or anticipate social change. There is also a definite connection between art and social class. The only authentic, progressive art is an art of an ascending class, which expresses the consciousness of this class. A declining class or its representatives can only produce "decadent" art. Consequently, the political and the aesthetic, the revolutionary content and the artistic quality tend to coincide. The artist has an obligation to articulate and express the interests and needs of the ascending class. And finally, realism corresponds most closely to the social relationship.

Marcuse agrees with the "orthodox" view that art must be understood in the context of prevailing social relations and that art has a political function and potential; but he believes that it is not mere content but aesthetic form which gives it a special language by which it can transcend the prevailing conditions, by which it can: (1) reveal the essence of the ordinarily hidden "reality" of oppression, destruction of the environment, alienation of human beings from each other, from the products of their labor, and from themselves; and (2) suggest an alternative "reality", an overcoming of the inadequacies in the existing order, a fulfillment of human potentialities, a liberatory higher consciousness, a hope. Art "re-presents" reality. Art is "more real" than everyday experience, because it makes the essence of our reality clear and points toward the overcoming of the inadequacies of the given, toward new potentialities which are ordinarily hidden. Great art is committed to the emancipation of sensibilities, imagination, and reason, a breaking of the domination and repression of the existing reality. Art does not change reality, but contributes to the changing of consciousness and of those who can change reality. Therefore, art is an essential dimension of liberatory revolution.

Then in criticism of the "orthodox" Marxist point of view Marcuse makes the following points: by virtue of its aesthetic form, art is largely autonomous vis-a-vis the given class relations. For criteria of aesthetic form he gives examples such as: internal standards of poetic meter; or in painting the relationships of form and color, symmetry and asymmetry, richness of variety unified in a dynamic order, and studied spontaneity; or in drama and literature, tragic flaw or deletion of the trivial details of everyday life and the emphasis of the essential, and conversations which are more direct, more sarcastic, etc., than ordinary.

There is a standard of good and bad art which remains constant throughout the ages. Artists break through class background; all good art is rebellion against the given repressive social order. Realism per se is not subversive of the given order; Baudelaire may actually be more subversive and liberatory.

Marcuse admits that he is talking most specifically about that area of art with which he is most familiar, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century literature, but he expects that his analysis applies to other areas of art as well. This is the first point of weakness mentioned by several professionals in various fields of art with whom I have spoken: Marcuse's analysis doesn't seem to fit large areas of art, e.g., non-thematic dance or music, non-representational painting and sculpture, architecture, pottery, textiles, etc. Must we here distinguish "arts" from "crafts"? That would allow us to delete for instance architecture, pottery, and textiles from consideration, but what of "pure" dance and non-representational painting? Marcuse sees cubism (as Adorno sees 12-tonal music) as social protest, along with the poetry of Rimbaud and Baudelaire, because it breaks with the established form, or unveils the truth about social reality, or reeducates the senses and points to a new reality (it need not do more than one of these tasks to be significant). Dance could, in line with his thesis, be seen to be a liberation of the body and the senses from the restraints of everyday life, a celebration of unrestrained movement, of life-force; this, of course, is not simply a protest of bourgeois capitalist society, but of all historical societies to date, all of which have limited dance to particular social functions (but why should we not all dance through life? And what would happen were we to dare to dance down the street, or at work, today?); all societies have repressed the senses and restrained the body in subtle ways (with clothing, proper posture, etc.). In an earlier work, Counterrevolution and Revolt² (the long third chapter of which is devoted to "Art and Revolution"), Marcuse claims that "Art cannot represent the revolution, it can only invoke it in another medium",³ and he goes on to quote Stravinsky, who heard "a charter of human rights", "subversiveness", and "a high concept of freedom" in Beethoven's quartets.

If, with the above examples, we have suggested that Marcuse's thesis might, after all, be valid for all realms of art, we then come to a more difficult problem: How can we distinguish "good" from "bad" art? Marcuse has suggested on the one hand that there is a standard of good and bad art which remains constant throughout the ages and that there are internal standards appropriate to each particular realm of art, while on the other hand all good art is rebellion against the given repressive social order. Not only is this an apparent contradiction, but it raises a terrific hue and cry from the defenders of the "art for art's sake" tradition who claim that there can be no objective standards for art. The objective standards we are speaking of come not out of art itself, but out of the greater context of human needs (of which we will speak in a moment). But if art is criticism of a particular society, how can we appreciate T'ang Dynasty landscapes, the sculpture of Fifth Century Athens, or Baroque music? If Baudelaire's poetry is an attack

on bourgeois society, will anyone be able to appreciate it (will it be good art) in the liberated society of the future?

In The Aesthetic Dimension Marcuse only claims that there are eternal standards in art, but does not give us any clues regarding what those standards might be. It is in the earlier Counterrevolution and Revolt that he mentions that there have been eternal human problems which transcend particular human societies and cannot be overcome by any social organization (we might suggest for instance, birth, love, death, selfishness and selflessness, freedom and order), and art which addresses these can be appreciated across cultures and ages; thus we can appreciate the plays of Sophocles, Shakespeare, or Chimmatsu as much as we can those of Brecht. We might add that these are at the same time critical of the particular repressive features of the particular social order in which they are situated. Thus, Baudelaire, in his recent attack on the repressive bourgeois society of which he was a member, is also attacking the repression of the erotic, of the senses and emotions in general. But we are in danger here of accepting a pessimistic Freudian appraisal of the universal and necessary repression inherent in all civilizations in general (Marcuse has been very sympathetic with the Freud of Civilization and its Discontents).

To make any sense out of such a problem we must investigate it in the broader context of Marcuse's whole Hegelian-Marxian political worldview (which still contains important elements of the Platonic-Aristotelian-Kantian tradition): there is a rational goal of human development which is unfolding itself dialectically from the narrower and less adequate to the more complete; "the socialist universe is also a moral and aesthetic universe".⁴ The Socialist universe, which may not exist anywhere in actuality even though some societies call themselves "socialist", is comparable (to use the basic ancient Greek political analogy) to the individual physical body: the state of health may be an important goal to a sick person, but it is not the goal of human life, rather it is the normal condition, the sine-qua-non, which allows a person to fulfill his or her goals, for instance of creative expression. In the same way, a healthy (socialist) society is not the end of human history, but (as Marcuse points out in Reason and Revolution) the beginning of human history; not a static but a dynamic state in which we have arrived at a "normal" healthy situation in which the illnesses of institutionalized injustice, exploitation, repression, alienation from the senses, emotions creative and loving powers have been overcome; a situation in which all are free to fulfill their human and individual potentialities.

It may be easier to see the moral dimension of the socialist vision, for that has long been a central political concern; but as Wilhelm Reich pointed out in his work The Mass Psychology of Fascism (suppressed in the United States), the Russian Revolution failed just because of the failure to carry through the aesthetic liberation (in the sense of liberation of the senses and emotions). It may be that a genuine cultural revolution must precede or accompany any attempt at political and economic revolution (as Mao claimed), for the "liberators" in those revolutions of which we have some historical perspective (e.g., Russia and Mexico) became the new oppressors; they unquestioningly perpetuated the repression

of the senses and emotions and carried on old social values, such as "machismo" (mythical masculine virility as "man"-ifested in aggressiveness and domination).

"Good" art, then, is that which helps bring us, individually and as a society, into harmony with ourselves; it is liberatory in that it unveils the inadequacies (illnesses) in the existing "reality" and transcends it to point toward a new (healthy) reality, one which is more rational or presents a new sensibility, or opens up new experience (which is not merely new, but broader, deeper, more harmonious, more satisfying, or provides a basis for revolutionary praxis). "Bad" art is regressive in that it dulls or destroys our senses (acid rock), or confuses us (mere meaningless collage) and inhibits our ability to understand the essence of the existing reality, or preserves old myths such as those of domination.

Let us consider an example of contemporary art, the painting of Georgia O'Keeffe. I pick this example because her work is highly regarded and at first consideration I did not believe her work would qualify as "good" according to Marcuse's criteria. What liberatory message can we discern in her paintings of flowers? Georgia herself confessed that in high school she had looked at many jack-in-the-boxes before she had really examined one carefully;⁵ later she painted huge flowers so that people (even New Yorkers!) would be forced to see them. In the context of a society in which we see what we see largely in terms of the dominant values and expectations, few of us in American society ever really "see" a flower. Georgia is criticizing our value systems and pointing us toward the liberation of our senses; thus her art can indeed (in however limited a sense) be considered liberatory.

Or take the example of R. C. Gorman: I "normally" have "seen" American Indian women as overweight in terms of the standards of my cultural values, but Gorman "re-presents" these same "overweight" women to me in a way which points out the incredible nobility of their facial features and the grace of their hands and feet, time-worn with working and walking, and he does it with the qualities of negative space, line, and form (aesthetic form) reminiscent of the best of Taoist and Zen influenced oriental paintings.

To this point I have defended Marcuse's thesis, but the O'Keeffe and Gorman examples help to provide a transition to a broader problem I find, not only in Marcuse, but in the limitations of Marxist epistemology and ontology in general. It seems to me that Marcuse is wrong when he claims that (in theatre), "the mixture of Marxism and mysticism... does not work; it vitiates the political impulse".⁶ Charles Pequy, on the other hand, claims that although politics scorns mysticism, it is mysticism which nourishes politics. And Gandhi claims that religion and politics are ultimately inseparable. Marcuse's repulsion at mysticism is against the foggy, ill-defined rebellion against the existing "rationality" of the repressive technological society, which manifests itself as an anti-rationalism. But mysticism in its greater world traditions has not been simply anti-rational; remember the mathematics of the Pythagoreans or the high development of logic by the Buddhists. Nor are

mystics necessarily apolitical; remember the self-immolations of Buddhist monks during the Vietnam War or the work of Gandhi.

What is important to me in the mystical tradition vis-a-vis the topic at hand? Several if not all of the mystical traditions, East and West, remind us that to a large extent we create our own reality. I am not positing an idealist extreme, to suggest that all there is is my own solipsistic thoughts, --of course there are forces outside of my thoughts which may be described as material, --but on the other hand there is a continual tendency in Marxism (not shared by all Marxist thinkers) toward a naive materialism which takes for granted a given reality outside of us which is simply the way it is and most adequately describable by "scientific Marxism". The truth is, as far as I can discern, somewhere in between, and a bit of Buddhist or esoteric epistemology and ontology seems to be needed as an antidote to the extreme of naive materialism.

It is clear that we live in a world of self-fulfilling prophecy; psychology has pointed out the extent to which, when we expect to fail, we are more likely to fail, or when we expect people to like us they are more likely to like us (partly because we will act in accord with the ways most likely to cause the expected end) than when we expect them to hate us. When we have a materio-empirical world-view, we seek out the facts which will support that world-view or with a Freudian world-view we will find confirming instances everywhere (the same facts will be interpreted differently by different world-views, and the same is true if our world-view is economic, or religious, or artistic). In each case, we see only a fragment of what there is to see, select relevant facts, order and act upon them selectively in accord with our theories and expectations, and create our world. This, by the way, is in accord with Marx and Mao, but is too often overlooked in Marxian scholarship. Thus, it is also the case that people immersed in the Capitalist world-view and value-system create a violent, materialistic, dog-eat-dog world for themselves; people caught in the hopelessness of poverty, racism, sexism, etc., (as Freire among others point out) participate in the perpetuation of these very structures with their self-repressive mechanisms and self-fulfilling expectations (this is not to deny that there are also repressive structures external to them). And Marxists, to the extent that they are motivated by anger, envy, fear, and hatred, do not overnight create a world without these emotions, a society of love and support for all, just because they rearrange the economic relations in a society. In Russia, a new society of fear and domination quickly replaced the old. Marxists (in particular the "orthodox" Marxists of Russia who ignore Marx's early works and thereby foster a perverted, alienated, repressive version of so-called "Marxism") create a world in their own materialistic terms, a world of economic values as dominant as the one they replaced. As Gandhi pointed out, what Capitalist and Communist share in common is the gospel of material progress and the glorification of violence. But those who try to destroy other human beings in the name of an abstract value dehumanize and brutalize themselves in the process.

A true revolution would entail a cultural revolution, a revolution of heart and consciousness, a revolution based on love and non-violence.

Marxism has always presupposed a change in value systems (to honor peoples' needs rather than the profit motive for the greed of a few — and thus I have considered it a step forward in morality from Capitalism), but the aesthetic dimension of the revolution has generally been overlooked (we have a need to change our sensibilities and to get in touch with our emotions). For instance, most men in modern society have a difficult time crying, while most women have difficulty showing anger, not because these emotions are not present, but because they are repressed and turned into destructive or self-destructive directions (such as ulcers). Anger repressed must come out as violence, to oneself if not to others; witness the violence within minority groups which are repressed from outside. Many of the political events of the late Sixties were based on anger and fear, and were fruitlessly expressed as violence. What is needed is to get clearly in touch with those emotions (which are for the most part justified) so that we can purge them, reevaluate our situation, and begin to act effectively to get at the loving and creative persons we are behind those emotions. This is the basis of a genuine liberation. Only Mao, among the founding fathers of Marxism, stressed that one must struggle for the revolution all the while loving all the people (love the potential humanity even in your oppressor, for he too can be cured of his greed and brutality).

Marcuse, then, is not in contradiction with himself if we understand him correctly to be saying that "good" art is that which directs us to a "state of health", liberation from the oppression, repression, and alienation in which we have been caught throughout human history in general (and we recognize universal, rational, cathartic, etc., standards of art across cultures and times which are in accord with this function) while at the same time "good" art also addresses the particular inadequacies in a particular society, and points the way toward a new, more healthy "reality", which is possible and necessary (in the sense that health is a necessary pre-requisite to the fullest life; of course, we may not achieve it).

Given that rather basic emendation of Marcuse's thesis, then in a broader sense I whole-heartedly embrace his claim that great art is that which critically reveals the essence of the existing "reality" and which suggests an alternate, more adequate, more healthy, more moral and rationale "reality" which will satisfy human needs more profoundly.

FOOTNOTES

¹Marcuse, Herbert, The Aesthetic Dimension, Toward a Critique of Marxian Aesthetics. Boston: Beacon, 1978.

²Marcuse, Herbert, Counterrevolution and Revolt. Boston: Beacon, 1972.

³Ibid., pp. 103-4.

⁴Ibid., p. 3.

⁵Georgia O'Keeffe. New York: Penguin Books, 1977.

⁶Marcuse, Revolt, p. 113.