

The aesthetics of emancipation: Historical experiments and future possibilities

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ABSTRACT

Radical aesthetics has flourished in the contemporary era. New schools have emerged with astonishing rapidity along with new objects of concern and scrutiny. There is also no lack of criticism regarding the repressive effects of advanced industrial society. But the positive foundations and aims of such criticism have become obscured. In turn, this has engendered a paralyzing crisis of purpose for radical aesthetic inquiry.

Preface

Radical aesthetics has flourished in the contemporary era. New schools have emerged with astonishing rapidity along with new objects of concern and scrutiny. There is also no lack of criticism regarding the repressive effects of advanced industrial society. But the positive foundations and aims of such criticism have become obscured. In turn, this has engendered a paralyzing crisis of purpose for radical aesthetic inquiry.

The conditions which underpin the current crisis ultimately derive from the failure of past political movements to realize a new order, the poverty of so much directly political aesthetic criticism, and the integrative power of the system itself. The fragmentation which followed the student movement has seemed to render all political systems and philosophies suspect and impotent. As a consequence, radical aesthetics has turned in upon itself and sundered its connection with any coherent perspective regarding the socio-political transformation of society in terms of an emancipated alternative order. Thus the popularity of positions which claim that aesthetics should supplant social theory (Adorno: 1973), succumb to a phenomenologically inspired hermeneutics (Gadamer: 1976), or explode the entire project of emancipation through commitment to a thorough-going relativism based on resignation, cynicism, and despair.

Only a positive and inherently speculative, political vision can actually inform and give meaning to radical aesthetic inquiry. But the very attempt to articulate such a perspective has given way before the demands of a fundamental oppositional and indeterminate notion of cultural revolt. It is precisely this theoretical situation, and the need to re-establish a connection between cultural criticism and political philosophy, which *The Aesthetics of Emancipation* seeks to confront.

Aesthetics and modernity

Analyzing the contemporary crisis is impossible without first examining the relation between the radical ideological legacy of the revolutionary bourgeoisie and the concrete character of 'modernity'. Important works have sought to discuss the manifold experiences which 'modernity' has engendered (Berman: 1982). But a viable use of modernity as a concept must further the comprehension of the systemic conditions for its production and reproduction along with the original ideals which inspired the creation of these new social relations.

While the ideals basically derived from the enlightenment, modernity's construction was dependent upon the rise of a value-laden economic rationality which still underpins the capitalist production process. The critical power of speculative thought, however, rests on the assumption that practice neither exhausts nor invalidates the theoretical potential of that freedom which it putatively seeks to realize. Even initially, a fundamental contradiction therefore became apparent between the exigencies of this economic rationality and the potentially radical implications of bourgeois ideals like 'liberty, equality and fraternity'. It is in the same vein that a contradiction would ultimately develop between the socio-political and economic requirements of 'actually existing socialism' (Bahro) and Marx's commitment to an emancipated order predicated on the principle that "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (Marx I: 127). Indeed, particularly given the connection between any emancipatory socialist vision and the unfulfilled revolutionary ideals of the French Revolution (Bloch: 1977), it is my contention that the inability to deal with this form of contradiction lies at the root of the contemporary crisis in radical aesthetics.

Perhaps the framework in which thinkers like Lessing, Kant, Schiller, and Hegel formulated their revolutionary values could not come to terms with the immanent socio-economic practices of the nascent capitalist system (Lukacs: 1972, 83ft). But, too many critics are unable to distinguish between the limitations of the epistemological frameworks in which these values were formed and the political importance of those values themselves (Deleuze: 1983, Foucault: 1984). Others simply view them as part and parcel of the ideological baggage which buttresses a repressive status quo (Lyotard: 1979). Nevertheless, the emancipatory values which those revolutionary thinkers formulated ultimately project beyond the repressive reality which their class instituted. As a consequence, the material basis for a concept of transcendence emerges in the unfulfilled needs with which an oppressive reality cannot come to terms.

Even from this standpoint, however, transcendence still necessarily remains indeterminate. 'Unfreedom', no less than agreement on the *emancipatory* character of those needs themselves, only becomes open to rational consideration through a positive notion of freedom which forwards speculative criteria of judgement. Indeed, it is the positive character of freedom - and the articulation of those criteria which underpin the concept - which alone allows for the specification of oppression in its manifold forms.

Only when the critical moment is defined in terms of positive values which are inherently *universal*, like democracy and equality, reciprocity and autonomy, and the primacy of discursive truth over intuition and arbitrariness as a tool to adjudicate disputes, does a space emerge in which it becomes possible to discuss the emancipatory qualities of cultural phenomena. It is only within such a space that a truly 'radical' aesthetic can operate to help elicit and articulate the diverse emancipatory qualities of divergent artworks. Thus, a new aesthetic begins with the attempt to develop a coherent relation between a 'critique' of the existing order and an affirmation of those positive norms which would underpin any emancipatory alternative.

Establishing such a theoretical relation involves confronting the actual historical development of radical aesthetics. That development, however, was marked by a division between immanent socio-political and transcendent cultural concerns. The basis for this divide was the fundamental opposition which arose between mass working class organizations and avant-garde movements. The former promulgated the values of the French Revolution, the 'realism' of Balzac, and the need

to critically examine the impact of 'economic rationality' from the standpoint of a new socio-political and economic order. The latter followed Nietzsche who rejected all notions of the 'objectively' real and the values of the French Revolution even as he opposed the two dominant classes along with economic rationality in the name of what would become modernist cultural impulses. Thus the need for a choice appeared to emerge between what were generally considered mutually exclusive philosophical world views, political values, and cultural styles.

Beyond all the disclaimers, the demand for such a choice is still widespread. There is, however, a hidden dogmatism which becomes evident from both standpoints. Still, in order to break down that dogmatism, both positions deserve examination in terms of their assumptions, history, and contemporary relevance. The first two sections of this essay will therefore concern themselves with realism and its heritage, the next two with modernism and postmodernism. The last section will discuss the foundations for a new approach to the unresolved issues which these two dominant aesthetic traditions have raised.

Socialism, communism, and aesthetics

During the revolutions of 1848, the European bourgeoisie essentially surrendered its most radical philosophical and political values along with its revolutionary posture in exchange for hegemonic economic power and stability under the conservative and aristocratic regimes which took hold on the continent. The attempt to realize the positive and radical values of early bourgeois philosophy and the French Revolution thus fell into the hands of those working class movements which became prominent during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In this way, social democracy was placed in the position of simultaneously seeking to fulfil the most radical political promises of the bourgeoisie while attempting to promulgate its own unique socialist alternative.

Given the actual socio-historical constraints, the socialist movement basically chose to place political and economic - rather than experimental cultural - demands in the forefront. Unconcerned about the effects of an already nascent culture industry, on the cultural level, social democracy wished to provide workers with that grand intellectual heritage which had been substantively denied them. Against a tide of reaction, the movement committed itself to the radical legacy of the enlightenment and sought to build democratic values, a heightened recognition of the socio-economic basis for oppression, and a sense of *Bildung* among its proletarian constituency. Thus, the aesthetic views of social democracy somewhat mechanically corresponded to its political needs.

Generally, the movement embraced the classical humanist and realist styles of which Marx and Engels approved. This tradition seemed to provide, not only a 'realistic' description of capitalist social relations, but an insight into those values which a new socialist order would seek to realize. If Balzac exposed the workings of capitalism, Molière showed the corrosive effects of snobbery and hypocrisy, Lessing evidenced the tragedy of anti-semitism and the need for tolerance and solidarity, while Goethe manifested that great and unrealized notion of personality which capitalism seemed to stunt. Consequently, as Max Weber observed in another context an elective affinity appeared between the values to which social democrats were politically committed and the choice of artistic outlook which would give them sustenance in the struggle.

Paradoxically, however, this resulted in a situation wherein these radical political movements - whose leading aestheticians were Franz Mehring and Georgi Plekhanov - became culturally conservative. That even 'ultra-left' radicals like Rosa Luxemburg should have embraced these rather conservative aesthetic standards had nothing to do with coercion (Bronner: 1981, 41-9). Aside from the often forgotten fact that there is no necessary correlation between radical cultural tastes and radical politics, the very attempt to develop that revolutionary heritage which the bourgeoisie itself had betrayed necessarily created an aversion to a burgeoning avant-garde which based its remarkable artistic experiments on a flat rejection of bourgeois aesthetic norms in the name of an

experiential subjectivism that became ever more vehement and pronounced as the modernist tradition developed (Bronner: 1984, 39-44).

It is a mistake to believe that the works generally favoured by social democratic critics were simply propagandistic in character. Even during the movement's early years, its aesthetic was marked by a concern with progressive political values mixed with a commitment to the classical heritage. Following the First World War, however, the movement's retreat from marxist orthodoxy was coupled with a complacent toleration of those modernist tastes which had already grown quite popular within European society. Through its history, whatever its aesthetic priorities, social democracy never demanded that its members accept the line which its theorists promulgated. Social democracy was fundamentally democratic in structure and more than willing to tolerate divergent artistic tastes for a broader unity.

The story in the Comintern was very different. Particularly following Stalin's rise to power, commitment to the party line on aesthetic matters was expected under the rubric of democratic centralism. This was especially true during the thirties which witnessed the fundamental subordination of aesthetic concerns to the immediate political policies which the Soviet party determined. In essence, these policies boiled down to the terror-ridden consolidation program within the Soviet Union and the external attempt to rally all progressive - democratic and anti-fascist- parties around a European popular front.

The Communist attempt to create a political alliance with progressive bourgeois and social democratic parties was reflected in cultural terms. The need to create a clear line of demarcation between the popular front and the fascists was seen as a matter of the first importance. In keeping with the traditions of the revolutionary bourgeoisie and the social democratic movement, the Comintern supported the realist form and crudely vilified all divergent artistic styles. Indeed, even the acceptance of traditional realism was seen as a concession to Comintern allies. As far as Stalin and his cultural commissar, Zhdanov, were concerned, the old realism was to be transcended and infused with a new (prescribed) socialist content.

The result was socialist realism. Though there are nuances within the general form, which stem from differences between the internal and external exigencies that the Soviet Union faced and the way they were reflected by Communist literati, Stalin's purpose was clear. While retaining the objective and descriptive form of the old realism, the new genre would liquidate its critical and reflexive content to conform with Soviet party policies. Originally attacked by modernism and then transcended by socialist realism, the value and continuing relevance of critical realism can no longer be presupposed and demands discussion from the standpoint of its most articulate proponent.

Realism and revolution

The contribution of realism best emerges through analyzing the theoretical position of its most important aesthetician, Georg Lukacs. His argument, which has often come under intense criticism, is actually more nuanced than its critics recognize. Though he was clearly a Stalinist, and exhibited a certain admiration for certain socialist realists like Sholokhov, Lukacs was engaged in a guerrilla war against the worst excesses of Stalin's cultural policy (Pachter: 1984, 308). In fact, beyond his own dogmatism, a coherent philosophical and aesthetic position emerges which deserves to be taken seriously.

Lukacs basic standpoint is that the great realists were able to objectively mirror the existing social order as a mediated totality. In contrast to socialist realism, the issue is not how workers - or, by implication, the party - is to be represented. Instead it is a matter of how a literary analysis of the given society provides an insight into those contradictions which allow the position of the working class to be understood. What's more, the politics of the author is not a pre-eminent concern; this becomes particularly evident in Lukacs' admiration for Balzac and Thomas Mann. What counts is how an author provides an objective rendering of his epoch for a reader who can then clearly see

how real social forces and institutions directly and indirectly affect the lives of fictional characters and the choices that they make. It is the attempt to rationally comprehend reality as an objective 'ensemble of social relations' (Marx) which will inherently provide a critical insight into the production and reproduction of concrete oppression. Thus, according to Lukacs, the commitment to the realist enterprise creates a link between the rationalist and democratic ideals of the revolutionary bourgeoisie and the proletarian attempts to transform capitalist reality (Bronner and Kellner: 1983, 416ff; Bronner: 1984, 42ff).

In this way, Lukacs' aesthetic becomes an expression of popular front concerns and values. The Comintern line of demarcation is therefore maintained. On the one side are the forces of democracy, reason, science and progress. On the other side are the exponents of subjectivism, intuition, irrationalism, and chaos. Where the former inherently stand in opposition to fascist values and culture, the latter inherently created a climate in which fascism can thrive - beyond the subjective intentions of the author in question.

This is how Lukacs' attack on modernism takes shape. If reality is not understood in objective, rational, and socio-historical terms, then it becomes nothing more than a chaos whose character is arbitrarily determined through mere experiential means. In turn, this stems from giving a fundamental epistemological primacy to intuition and direct experience. As a consequence of this irrationalism, the desire for a socialist revolution which seeks to resolve determinate socio-economic contradictions will give way to the demand for an indeterminate, ahistorical, apocalypse. In fact, given that the experience of this indecipherable chaos necessarily becomes unbearable, it will engender an attempt to escape from freedom (Erich Fromm) through fostering a longing for some authority which can put an end to the nightmare of chaos once and for all.

Lukacs obviously excludes the subjective experience of reality from his analysis, refuses to take the differences between literature and painting or music into account, and fundamentally attempts to chain future artistic production to a particular style from the past. In fact, the entire 'popular front' controversy over modernism in general, and expressionism in particular, took place after the original excitement about the new avant-garde had passed. But there were still Communist members and sympathizers who had learned much from the pre-war aesthetic movements or who feared the new dogmatism regarding cultural matters. Certain thinkers therefore rose to oppose Lukacs, the most prominent of whom were Ernst Bloch and Bertolt Brecht.

Beyond the differences between them, they essentially claimed that Lukacs was engaging in a mechanistic formalism which identified realism with one historical style, that he chose to ignore the unrealized utopian moments of joy, wonder, and play which pervaded the works themselves, that he refused to consider the need for audience participation in the very construction of an artwork, and that he dogmatically eliminated the advances which were achieved through techniques like stream of consciousness, montage, etc. In short, they claimed that Lukacs was equating experimentation with mere decadence (Bronner and Kellner: 1983, 422ff; Bronner: 1984, 44-46), and they were right.

At the same time, it is simply a mistake to claim that reality has no objective structure at all or that this structure is simply not worth taking into consideration. If reality cannot be comprehended in its determinate workings then it can't be changed in a rational and emancipatory manner. Furthermore, artistic tendencies do have an impact upon the cultural climate and the legitimate criticisms of Lukacs' approach do not change the fact that irrationalism is always a danger, albeit to a different degree in different times. Thus, there is more than a grain of *socio-historical* truth to Lukacs' contention that a climate of neoromanticism and irrationalism helped shape the conditions in which fascism could thrive (Pachter: 1982).

The most telling problem is that Lukacs conflates art with social theory. In his view, it must perform a particular function and, if it does not, then all other functions which it may perform are invalidated. Assuming that the realist form is inherently progressive, while the modernist form is inherently reactionary, he makes no attempt to comprehend the actual achievements of modern art

since aesthetic values are directly and mechanistically reduced to socio-political ones. Thus, Lukacs never realized that the very attempt at aesthetic breakthrough might have dangerous political implications but that the one would have been impossible without the other. Indeed, the great dialectician's criticisms remain external precisely because he refuses to even recognize the legitimacy of modernism's cultural and aesthetic concerns which were never met by the cultural critics of working class movements in the years preceding the Second World War.

Modernism and utopia

Modernism was a fundamentally international movement which caused a cultural explosion throughout Europe. It shattered traditional linguistic, visual, and theatrical conventions. It promulgated free verse, stream of consciousness montage, photo-montage, collage, and numerous other formal innovations in order to express experiences which the older forms left unexplored. It also expanded the boundaries of art itself by giving new recognition to African and Oceanic art, medieval painting and sculpture, children's art, and more. In contrast to bourgeois traditionalists and socialist aestheticians, all of this became part of a longing to transcend the limitations of a capitalist status quo from the standpoint of an indeterminate emancipatory alternative.

Beyond the differences between the various movements, which emerged in very different national contexts, it was this inchoate desire mixed with a fundamental opposition to the conventional world of modernity which broke down the barriers and which allows for a discussion of the movement as a whole. Fundamentally inspired by the romantics and then by major figures like Baudelaire, D'Annunzio, and Nietzsche, along with an entire philosophical tendency which sought to walk a third path between traditional idealism and materialism in the manner of Bergson or Dilthey, these avant-garde rebels sought to contest society in its entirety. That entirety was shaped by culture and neither the bourgeoisie nor the working class was willing to challenge a repressive Victorianism, the primacy of classics which had grown stale in school, or the tastes of the *Bildungsphilister*. Thus, the stance regarding the status quo was perceived as coming down to all or nothing.

Basically the avant-garde saw social democracy as a mere extension of the old bourgeois world view since both had their roots in the enlightenment with its materialism, universalism, rationalism, and belief in technological progress. Understood in purely cultural terms, the radical democratic ideals of the bourgeoisie seemed to have produced nothing more than a 'loss of niveau', a standardized, bureaucratic world of commodity production driven by the lust for profit. Besides Nietzsche had shown how the 'objective' claims of positivist materialism, no less than the universal ethical imperatives derived from metaphysical idealism, were simply based on arbitrary conventions which thwarted the individual's experiential "will to power" and hindered those who wished to break with the past. Indeed, it appeared as if the entire socio-economic, political, and philosophical baggage of the past merely served to justify a new 'massification' of society, the creation of a vulgar "mass man" (Ortega y Gasset: 1957), which threatened the unique experience of subjectivity and to prevent that necessary "transvaluation of values" (Nietzsche) by those who sought to experiment with new and different modes of existence.

Contrary to popular opinion, it was not marxists who were concerned with issues like alienation, reification, the loss of subjectivity, and the social effects of commodification during the period which saw the rise of monopoly capital and imperialism. Instead, it was neo-Kantians like the young Lukacs and the more traditional Emil Lask or those committed to *Lebensphilosophie* like Georg Simmel and Wilhelm Dilthey who raised those concerns. No less than philosophers and thinkers such as these who helped shape the intellectual climate, the avant-garde was estranged from the politics of power which it contemptuously condemned. Instead, the modernists chose to engage in a higher politics that would ultimately come to terms with such issues and so usher in what Nietzsche had termed a "new dawn" by subordinating politics to cultural revolt.

From naturalism to futurism to cubism to dada, from impressionism to fauvism to expressionism, an attack upon all traditional mores and mimetic modes of representing reality took place. Simultaneously, this engendered an exploration of the internal world beyond objectivity (Kandinsky) and a concomitant attempt to reorganize the objective world from the standpoint of the subject's own desires (Braque). Both trends, however, were part of the same fundamental dynamic which sought to establish the primacy of subjective experience in a world which threatened its existence and from a perspective which fostered an indeterminate utopian alternative through aesthetic practice.

Loosened from any determinate agent or rational conception of social transformation, revolution ineluctably became the demand for an apocalypse. Because the transcendent utopia it would create was removed from any serious consideration of institutional or positive underpinnings, the goal itself became vague, arbitrary, and self-referential. The desire for an alternative - *any* alternative - was what created a situation in which opposition to the status quo became the cement which bound the various avant-gardists to one another despite their differing positive prescriptions.

It was this which enabled progressive, emancipatory, and critical moments to co-exist with the most reactionary, elitist, and atavistic within the modernist movement. In fact, as an international movement which was defined by what it opposed, the normative configuration of the particular avant-garde was fundamentally coloured by its generalized image of the bourgeois and the values which he espoused in a given country. Thus the perception of an effeminate, pacifist, cosmopolitan, and technologically backward bourgeoisie gave rise to a bellicose, chauvinist, and technologically obsessed futurist movement in Italy while the militarist, nationalist, and technologically developed image of the German bourgeois called forth directly opposite values in most of those who comprised the expressionist movement.

Modernism is therefore not characterized by an embrace of modernity. Instead, it is defined by an opposition to modernity which assumed different forms due to the different socioeconomic and political complexes in which the particular movements arose. Indeed, it was just this oppositional stance which enabled the various avant-gardes to emphasize the indeterminate moment of transcendence along with their divergent and inchoate utopian visions. But, whatever the political problems, in aesthetic terms, this fostered an unfettered commitment to experiment with new ways of hearing, seeing, and portraying a world that the artists themselves could not understand in determinate, socio-historical terms. Thus, a perspective emerges from which it becomes possible to assess the continuity and discontinuity which characterizes the relation between modernism and postmodernism.

Postmodernism and the crisis of radical purpose

Postmodernism, no less than modernism, embraces many diverse tendencies. Beyond the differences, however, there is a logic which defines the movement as a whole and which stems from the perception of a fundamentally closed and intractable universe. In this vein, the socio-political roots of postmodernism lie in the integration of working class movements following the Second World War, the revelations about the Soviet Union, and the horrors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Those artists who prefigure its broader development might therefore include Beckett and Celan. Still, postmodernism's recent popularity has obviously resulted from a new recognition of the culture industry's hegemonic power, the fragmentation which followed the collapse of the student movement, as well as the frustration with philosophical systems as such.

In keeping with its predecessor, postmodernism rejects those claims to objectivity which the proponents of realism forwarded. Similarly, it also subordinates politics to culture or merely conflates the two in terms of that closed universe which threatens the integrity of experience and which such experience inherently seeks to resist. Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference between

postmodernism and those avantgarde modernist movements which came before it. Where modernism sought to explode immanence in favour of transcendence, postmodernism rejects transcendence as well. It therefore denies both the possibility of forwarding an objective account of socio-historical reality as well as the commitment to promulgate transcendent utopian alternatives.

Beyond the rise of artistic movements such as neo-expressionism, neo-futurism, and the like, postmodernism basically concurs with Nietzsche's attack upon materialism and traditional idealism. But, particularly in the case of Derrida and the deconstructivists it does so through a neo-Heideggerian lens and consequently lacks the belief in a "new dawn" (Derrida, 1978). Following Heidegger's claim that "Being" is never exhausted through linguistic representation (Heidegger: 1972, 2-41), all categories and theoretical formulations necessarily become arbitrary with regard to their truth claims. From this, it obviously follows that generic distinctions between philosophy, criticism, and art become arbitrary as well (Derrida: 1981). The crucial innovation, however, is that language itself hides as it structures given relations of "power" (Foucault: 1970). Thus, giving primacy to discursive truth is already to accept a paradigm in which power manifests itself.

The need for epistemological coherence, commitment to the primacy of discursive truth, or the use of any objective referent for matters of judgement, therefore becomes a mere misplaced response to a purely arbitrary procedure which buttresses the status quo. Indeed, accepting such standards becomes even more ludicrous given the existence of a culture industry which transforms all meanings into its own codes, which co-opts such standards and renders them useless as it spews forth fad after fad, perspective after perspective, commodity after commodity, with the force of a Saturn who devours whatever liberating moments have been engendered. Thus, a situation results in which the traditional metaphysical subject becomes "de-centred" (Foucault) while the threatened experiential moment of subjectivity alone emerges as the criterion of resistance to those paradigms which hide the power that they exercise.

Unfortunately, with the rejection of any objective referent and all universals including the rule of law, freedom necessarily becomes license. At the same time, any disciplinary requirements of solidarity necessarily serve to limit or constrain the expression of subjectivity so that reciprocity gives way to the concern with pure autonomy. Such autonomy is what the forces of repression wish to eradicate and so it can only become manifest through the willingness to rearrange or deconstruct those consensual meanings which putatively confine the individual within a hegemonic discourse and which hide the multiplicity of possible significations that any object or text can inherently display. In a sense, then, postmodernism fosters the attempt to play with reality and consistently alter its signification. This has little in common with Schiller's vision of play, however, since such activity is only possible in terms of a self-referential recourse to an indeterminate, experiential "desire" (Guattari and Deleuze: 1977) which seeks to explode any and all objective constraints. The very threat to desire, not only by a totalitarian advanced industrial society, but by any movement which seeks to constrain it, therefore becomes the justification of true nihilism.

Again, traces of all this can be found within modernism. But the justification for the postmodernist adventure is not simply that modernism itself has become popular and integrated within consumer culture. Unique to postmodernism is that mixture of cynicism and relativism, of a self-styled indifference with a resigned apathy, which buttresses these perceptions and which inherently militates against the conditions of solidarity and the need for a concrete, systemic alternative to the existing order (Sloterdijk: 1983).

In the same vein, whatever the influence of Adorno and the Frankfurt School on this development, these thinkers always sought to maintain a standpoint of critique along with a profound contempt for "non-conformist conformity". It is just these concerns, however, which are liquidated by the very logic of postmodernism. After all, if it is true that all categories are arbitrary, all theories merely relative in their truth claims, all commitments to discursive truth merely expressions of power, and all responses to the given order equally valid (or invalid) from the

standpoint of experiential desire, then there is no reason whatsoever why critique should assume any primacy over simple acceptance of the given order.

Radicalism thus becomes one style, text, or approach among many. What's more, if any object can produce a multiplicity of significations, all of which are equally valid (or invalid) then why try to signify any purpose at all other than ambiguity. Indeed, the culture industry has come to this conclusion on its own and Madonna's "material girl", which can be understood either as an ironic critique of the worst commodity fetishism or as an embrace of those same values, is indicative of an entire trend in both popular and even high art (if one wishes to keep these designations). The very reflection of reality, which it claims to contest, therefore unconsciously occurs in the putatively radical theory of postmodernism. At the same time, conformity literally becomes indistinguishable from non-conformity while deconstruction can happily co-exist with an affirmation of the status quo. As all political criteria are eradicated in the name of a subjectively formulated cultural revolt, the fundamental hostility to all criteria of judgement becomes inextricably tied to a justification of the postmodernist inability to forward judgements in terms of positive values. In this way, the inability to make a moral, political, or cultural judgement from the standpoint of positive norms is actually itself elevated into a fundamental aesthetic principle.

By and large, the modernists did not attempt any elaborate philosophical attempts to justify their experiments in the manner of the postmodernists. When they did, again by and large, they sought to ascertain the ground of experience in what might be considered a phenomenological or quasiphenomenological manner. Postmodernists like Derrida, however pull a philosophical sleight of hand. Even while they deny the existence of any absolute ground of Being (Derrida: 1974), they nevertheless accept the totally traditional perspective that such a ground can alone provide the foundation for any notion of truth. In contrast to the modernists who perhaps naively sought to contest technological rationality by emphasizing the illusory harmony of pre-capitalist societies from the perspective of a freedom that was lost - or even build on the possibilities of technology in utopian terms - postmodernism simply mirrors the relativizing dictates of technological rationality, abdicates any need to speculatively develop an emancipated alternative, and so ultimately accepts precisely that which it putatively claims to oppose; Thus, the contemporary crisis of radical purpose and the need to reconstruct the basis for radical aesthetic inquiry.

Aesthetics and emancipation

A new, emancipatory aesthetic necessarily begins with a fundamental commitment to artistic tolerance. Though censorship is inherently repugnant, and assumes its own institutional dynamic which is difficult to control once unleashed, the commitment to such tolerance is still more than a merely practical issue. It is a philosophical and ethical one as well since an emancipatory aesthetic must obviously seek to foster conditions of cultural appropriation and production which are qualitatively more free than those which currently exist.

In this vein, the old need for a choice between realism and its modernist or postmodernist adversaries has been rendered irrelevant by the conditions of modern cultural production. But, even at the time, the proponents of both tendencies forgot that there is nothing inherently emancipatory about any particular style or mode of artistic representation. Depending upon the manner in which a style is employed, representational realism (Heinrich Mann/Robert Brasillach) as well as radical departures from it (Doblin/Celine) can serve diverse political purposes.

The emancipatory value of a work is therefore no more reducible to its formal contestation of hegemonic modes of perception than to its presentation of a prescribed content. Divergent works can forward a critique in different ways. It thus becomes incumbent upon a new aesthetic to derive categories which would further the portrayal and extraction of fundamental differentiated critical and/or positive utopian moments that diverse works may or may not evidence (Bronner & Kellner: 1983, 4).

Indeed, it is simply impossible to assume any longer that either the critical socio-historical elements of a work will self-evidently reveal themselves or that art retains an inherently critical form which assures its transcendent character (Marcuse: 1977). The reason is that the culture industry, not only forwards the most diverse styles and commodities to diverse publics, but also creates a pre-existing interpretive climate which tends to relativize or nullify any work's potentially critical or utopian qualities through that very on-going activity.

At the same time, it is questionable to assume that the commodity form in which works appear will necessarily exhaust the emancipatory value of those works themselves. The culture industry merely provides a built-in interpretation, along with the works that it produces, which is open to contestation. The power of such attempts at contestation cannot be determined *a priori*. What seems significant during one historical period can prove of crucial importance during another (Benjamin's work serves as a perfect example) and vice versa.

Under present circumstances, however, that contestation cannot really occur from the standpoint of a putatively threatened experiential subjectivity. All other philosophical issues aside, the reason is quite simple. Such subjectivity is not the enemy of instrumental rationality (Bell: 1976; O'Connor: 1984). In fact, the existence of that subjectivity is actually secured by the very instrumental logic which informs the modern accumulation process. The real enemy of instrumental rationality is what it has always been: speculative reason and its derivative categories which maintain the need for normative judgements from the perspective of universal freedom and an emancipated order. Thus, the crisis of purpose in contemporary aesthetics stems from a fundamentally misdirected response to the status quo.

Emancipation is merely a word unless its configuration can be thematized with respect to those values which it forwards. Beyond the reigning relativism, experiential particularism, and arbitrariness, the most basic of such values would include reciprocity and autonomy, formal and substantive equality, internationalism and cosmopolitanism, democracy and a commitment to discursive truth in terms of an on-going attempt to extend the universal realm of practical choices for all particular subjects. These interconnected values, not only underpin any emancipatory policy prescriptions, but also provide the framework and sense of purpose which would inform a truly radical aesthetic inquiry.

The difference between art and criticism, or social theory, thus demands formulation. Theory and criticism must develop their consequences and values from the expository logic of the arguments which they forward. Art, however, has no predetermined or immanent purpose to serve and its contextual meaning remains indeterminate unless a criticism take place which can provide the work with emancipatory form and purpose (Lukacs: 1971). The work of art therefore becomes a battlefield for diverse interpretations wherein real interests - whether directly or indirectly - take hold through the manner in which its content is appropriated, developed, or withheld (Mannheim: 1936).

The ability to inter-relate these interests with the work through interpretation depends upon the extent of objectification which the genre or style allows in terms of discursive categories thus it would make sense for those like Schopenhauer or Nietzsche who emphasize the moment of intuition and the reality behind discursive forms to suggest the primacy of music. Though it is useless to speak of any hierarchy of forms, however, a difference will obviously emerge in the manifold possibilities that music, painting, or literature can project. But, while this difference deserves theoretical recognition, it is still the existence of these interpretive interests which opposes all attempts to simply subordinate social or political theory to an all encompassing aesthetic or hermeneutic. What's more, the very attempt to relativize such interests becomes an absurdity insofar as real systemic contradictions along with the very practice of oppression become obfuscated to the necessary detriment of those who suffer from them. Consequently, since an artwork can no longer be understood as a hypostatized and self-defining entity, the derivation of its

emancipatory meaning will depend both upon the epistemological coherence of the aesthetic and its ability to recognize those speculative political values which inform it.

An emancipatory aesthetic must therefore explicitly forward its positive interest in emancipation as the foundation for any serious critique of the status quo (Habermas: 1975, 113). But the commitment to that inexhaustible interest in emancipation can neither be commanded nor made subordinate to the immediate political exigencies of any movement. In order to garner an emancipatory insight from any work, the critic must be willing to look for it in the first place and sustain his independent findings within an emancipatory discourse precisely because freedom is only freedom for a subject who will always experience conflicts with the world of necessity. Here again this demands tolerance for, even as the aesthetic recognizes the art of contemporary struggles, its interpretation of those works will still occur in terms of the ultimate purposes which that struggle putatively seeks to realize. Thus, the choice for the contemporary radical critic is no longer one between styles or forms, but rather between an approach which is consonant with the emancipatory purposes which frame it and others which either make art the handmaiden of politics or which simply subordinate emancipatory political values to an arbitrarily determined cultural revolt.

This means that a new aesthetic must seek to maintain a fragile speculative unity between divergent genres as well as between the divergent notions of immanence and transcendence which the two dominant artistic tendencies of the past have torn asunder. That is what implies the need for categories which can recognize the validity both of attempts to comprehend the determinate workings of the existing order and formal experiments with alternative modes of experience and perception. Both have differing contributions to make precisely because the critique of the existent and the projection of positive utopian traces' (Bloch) can take manifold forms and assume new meanings in new circumstances.

A new emancipatory aesthetic will therefore inherently view the artwork as unfinished even while it will decry artificial distinctions between high and low art which do not touch the particular work in question. The reason is that such an aesthetic will seek to further the diversity of cultural production through the very categories which it generates in order to expand the arena from which new emancipatory insights might be culled. The speculative inquiry thus accepts Walter Benjamin's injunction to "never forget the best". Indeed, it is the attempt to thematize what that demands which leads to a rejection of that prevailing relativism, cynicism, and political indifference which actually help keep the "lowly and the insulted" in a state of prefabricated ignorance and cultural provincialism.

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