

Some Thoughts on Classical Marxism and Art

This is the first of three articles (none of which should be regarded as definitive); followed by ‘Anti-art; then ‘Marx and the Idea of Homo Aestheticus’, which expands on earlier themes:

Marx’s Ideas about Art

These begin to take shape in his 1844 Manuscripts. But they also recur and are developed further in his later writings, including Capital. We live in an age when artistic decadence has reached its nadir, whereby art as a commodity is the only thing that matters; be that the art of the old masters or today’s anti-art. It’s time Marx’s ideas were re-examined:

Artistic labour is creative and free work: The subject (artist.creator, consumer of art) establishes a particular relationship with the object (creation ‘in accordance with the laws of beauty’ or the ‘artistic assimilation of reality’ in the form of the work of art). Initially the artist transforms the materials/ideas at his/her disposal, by giving raw matter a determinate form. ‘The result is a new object, the aesthetic object, in which the human wealth of the subject is objectified or revealed.

The aesthetic relationship evolves on a ‘socio-historical basis, in the process of humanising nature by means of work and objectifying the human being’. The formal elements of art undergo change with a change in the socio-historical conditions; e.g. classical, medieval, etc (But this occurs dialectically; it is not a mechanical process.)

‘[Art as superior labour] reaches its most developed stage [during the bourgeois epoch; albeit the artist is cut off from the majority of other workers, i.e. alienated labour to create use/exchange value.

Unlike the latter, artistic labour is freely undertaken, and tends to satisfy the artist’s inner need to objectify, express and reveal his/her essential powers in a concrete sensuous object. By freeing itself from the narrow material reality of [alienated] labour, art reaches a higher level of objectification and affirmation of man as a human being;... [increasingly] these powers are realised in [apractical aesthetic objects; but not exclusively].’

What is beauty? Aesthetic objects exist only for social beings. Man ‘elicits the aesthetic from things by means of his material, practical activity, giving determinate form to material nature with the aim of expressing a spiritual [imaginative], human content,...[beauty is consciously produced form; ugliness = absence of form. It is the imitation of form in nature/human constructions, as an effective means to express the work’s content, and, at the same time, the artist’s point of view/feelings about his subject. It] cannot exist outside of humanity [only man is conscious of/needs beauty].... Beauty is not an attribute of a universal being; it is created by man in artistic objects.... Moreover [because] it is social and human, the aesthetic object reveals its essence only to man; it exists only for ‘natural human beings’, that is, for social beings....

‘Aesthetic consciousness...is not something given, innate or biological [alone]; rather it emerges historically and socially on the basis of practical, material labour

[= mediated reality]; the subject exists only for the object and the object exists only for the subject. [But] the aesthetic object cannot be reduced to the subject; it exists independently of subjective perception or evaluation.’ **1.**

The ‘aesthetic’ therefore is not purely subjective. It is also objective. According to Lifshitz, Marx agrees with Schiller’s observation, quoted by Vischer (whom he read/made notes on, whilst writing *Critique of Political Economy*, 1857-8); viz. ‘Beauty is simultaneously an object, and a subjective state. It is at once form, when we judge it, and also life, when we feel it...’ **2.** (My emphasis.) This means that we need to have an objective standard of taste. Of course this is fraught with contradictions. This subjective/objective nature of art is analogous to Marx’s discovery of commodity fetishism: It is an objective, scientifically determined observation, which marxists hold to be true; but it needs to be overcome, because the masses are ruled by commodity fetishism at the subjective level (the need for money in order to live, etc.) I shall focus on these contradictions first, before returning to the objective aspect (section 11). At the same time, we should not divorce the two. The two most important contradictions are the commodity form and the bourgeois division of labour:

‘The need for money is the only genuine need created by political economy. ‘The quantity of money becomes more and more man’s sole essential trait; just as it has reduced everything to an abstraction, so now in its own development, it is reduced to a quantitative thing. [Paradoxically] Measurelessness and immeasurability become its real measure.’ **3.** This idea is developed further in *Capital*. The tendency

to amass capital is the essence of capitalistic progress; i.e. 'production for production's sake' (cf. ancient society); but the contradictory nature of the development of the productive forces 'is clearly inimical to some fields of spiritual activity - art for instance.' (Theories of Surplus Value); So spiritual production calls for a different kind of labour than that used in material production.

'The senses of social man [develop] only through the objectively unfolded wealth of human nature' [only then] can the wealth of subjective human sensitivity - a musical ear, an eye for the beauty of form, in short, senses capable of human gratification - be either cultivated or created....The cultivation of the five senses is the work of all previous history. [But under the commodity form] sense which is a prisoner of crude practical need has only a restricted sense. For a man who is starving the human form of food does not exist; only its abstract form exists [as a means to an end; to live, work. In this sense, man is reduced to an animal. But the idea of food in the literal sense, also applies to food in the metaphorical sense, e.g. art. Therefore] The man who is burdened with worries and needs has no sense for the finest of plays....] **4.**

Division of labour: In Wage, Labour and Capital, as well as in Capital, Marx points out that, on the one hand, the bourgeois division of labour permits an increase in the productive forces/man's power over nature. On the other hand, it is mind-crippling for the workers; given its hierarchical character; i.e. it separates intellectual from spiritual from practical labour; the latter being assigned to the workers. Therefore it 'divides concrete, real man, degrading and debasing

him...hence we have 'the exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals, and its suppression in the broad mass which is... a consequence of division of labour'. ' 5.

Under the commodity form, there is also the problem of the inverting power of money: 'It transforms loyalty into treason, love into hate, virtue into vice,... nonsense into reason and reason into nonsense'. Cf. mass art, which is commercially determined. It presents the most profound human problems only in the most banal and degraded forms, (which is hierarchical, because it separates intellectual/spiritual from practical labour), whilst or it merely affirms them, in order to keep mass man in his place, make him feel at home; thus closing the window to his understanding of a truly human world - and with it 'the possibility of becoming conscious of his alienation as well as the means of abolishing it'. 6. (Cf. Adorno's theory of the culture industry.)

Back to the question of the objective side of art or the need for an objective standard of taste, Therefore Marx writes 'If you wish to enjoy art, you must be be an artistically cultivated person.' 7. (My emphasis.)

Judgement of taste was once the preserve of the (semi-autonomous) bourgeois art institution. But in the period of late capitalism, the old consensus, based on the Enlightenment ideal of art as a 'free activity of the spirit', which elevates it above prosaic reality, has been exchanged for post-structuralist theory; i.e. the 'logics of disintegration'. Judgement of taste is purely a subjective matter. What matters more is that art's value is monetarised, be it a Rembrandt, a Picasso drawing

(dashed off in a few minutes; cf. his Guernica), a soft-porn picture of Jeff Koons and his wife, or anti-art (unmediated found objects, e.g. Koon's set of basketballs, or Tracy Emin's Unmade Bed.) The obsession with anti-art objects, in which the distinction between the art object and consumerism is blurred, means anything can be art. But not everyone can be an artist. For that, one needs the backing of the art institution, albeit one which is increasingly tied to the art market. Thus the artist becomes a productive labourer, whose product 'comes into being only for the purpose of increasing...capital'. (Theories of Surplus Value.) **8.**

If the schism within real and concrete man is to disappear; for art NOT to be an exclusive, privileged sphere, decadent or otherwise, we need a successful communist revolution. If not, art and society continue to decay. Where does this leave man as a species being?

Notes

1. Adolfo Sanchez Vazquez, Art and Society, 1979, Chapter 3.
2. Mikhail Lifshitz, The philosophy of Art of Karl Marx, 1973, Chapter 13, p 96.
3. Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, quoted by Lifshitz, p 97.
4. EPM, Karl Marx: Early Writings, Penguin Books, 1975, p 353.
5. Vazquez, p 282.
6. *ibid*, p 254-5.
7. Unlike Adam Smith, Marx sees the artist as an unproductive labourer; but only as long as his labour is part of his nature; i.e. not intended to be 'subsumed under capital,...for the purpose of increasing that capital'; not just for himself, but for the art industry as a whole.

8. EPM, Penguin Books, pp 378-9.

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Anti-Art

The rise of anti-art is not to be confused with the argument that, under communism, artistic and other forms of labour are reunited. On the contrary: Anti-art was a phenomenon of the 20th century, but continued into the 21st century; often referred to as conceptual art, or the art of installation. It is a reflection of the epoch of wars and (lost) revolutions; of hope and despair; and technological advance. Whilst some of it is clever, according to Adorno, anti-art ends up as the product of a 'destructive discontent with culture [as a whole]'. At best, it is an attempt by the artist to critique modern capitalism; at worst, it is a manifestation of self-alienation, which according to Marx, art should try to transcend.

Anti-art is a form of cultural nihilism. It divides into three movements:

1. Dadaism was the first. It emerged in Germany during World War. The Dadaists identified themselves with bohemian protest, which took the form of an attack on aesthetic value. For them, the idea of aesthetic sensibility continuing during a period of great power militarism, rampant chauvinism and imperialist war, was repugnant. Under these conditions, art-for-art's-sake was an immoral luxury of a decadent bourgeoisie. Henceforth, artists should use their labour in a socially-useful way; i.e. as a provocation against the ruling class and their precious art

institution (the gallery system, art market, etc.) Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) is a notorious example. But commodity capitalism continued. The art market appropriate anti-art as a commodity. Despite its reputation for being 'outrageous', this did not stop anti-works from being commodified along with the traditional object d'art (such as a painting, sculpture, etc.) The shock effect of a provocation could also serve another end: fame and money for the artist, along with the dealer; i.e. the annihilation of the art object, via the sacrifice of form, leaving only the content - objects taken directly from the prosaic life world. (See section 7.)

2. Leftwing avant garde: This movement grew rapidly in Soviet Russia under the impact of the October Revolution. It also spread to Germany (But the leftwing avant garde would soon fall foul of the Stalinist bureaucracy, on the one side, and Nazism, on the other.) Paradoxically, its leading proponents started out as defenders of aesthetic structure. For example, before 1917, Malevich and Rodchenko helped establish new art movements such as cubo-futurism, suprematism and constructivism. Malevich tried to create a totally new aesthetic, based on abstract forms, aka suprematism; such as his 'white-on-white' series. But under the impact of the revolution, they began to attack the idea of art as the making of practical art objects; because this was now seen as socially useless; outmoded.

For the constructivists, revolutionary art had to be utilitarian; i.e. become a part of socialist construction. At the same time, Rodchenko wanted that the new art of the masses to retain aesthetic value, whilst abolishing aesthetic structure (bourgeois

apractical art works for individual contemplation). But others, such as Alexei Gan, were more nihilistic; i.e. they wanted to destroy the art museums and everything in them along with the bourgeoisie as a class! Rodchenko, was less extreme. For him, the art museum and the works which they contain, should be preserved as a part of the history of art. He was more interested in the future: the possibility of re-integrating art with man's life activity directly; on a collective as opposed to an individual basis: work itself could now become more aesthetic; because the Soviet people were engaged in socialist construction. But in order to achieve this aim, somehow an aesthetic sensibility (cf. the medieval craftsman) had to be re-awakened among the factory workers, whose lives continued to be stunted by the old division of labour: the separation of intellectual from practical labour; moreover, the latter was dominated by repetitive tasks. After all, this is part-and-parcel of industrialisation itself; whether we are talking about the new Soviet state or the capitalist west.

The Russian avant garde persisted with their idealist notion of 'art into life', premised on the idea that the new technologies of mass reproducibility - such as the modern printing press, photography, film, the montage effect, the radio - could now be placed in the hands of the revolutionary proletariat. But the reality was different. Soviet Russia had been devastated by civil war; it was isolated from the capitalist west; there was a shortage of new technology; the workers were exhausted and demoralised; the mass of the peasantry were only interested in acquiring land. Worst of all, the party became isolated from the masses. In order to defend the revolution, it was forced to centralise power and even to partially

restore the market. When Lenin's died in 1924, it was already beginning to degenerate into a dictatorial and bureaucratic regime.

By the end of the 20s, the Russian avant garde found themselves at the bottom of a pit. Yet this was called socialism! They were forced to reconcile themselves with this reality, albeit under duress (as many famous names were forced to do after them!) All hopes for a new art, which would be democratic and open to all, had to be set aside. To paraphrase Trotsky: under pain of banishment or death, they were reduced to 'the status of domestic servants of [Stalin's] regime, whose task it [was] to glorify it on order, according to the worst possible aesthetic conventions [socialist realism].'

3. The neo-avant garde of the postwar period constitutes the third movement. On the one hand, Trotsky's anticipation of a new upsurge in the world revolution, once the war was over, never materialised. Rather, the revolution was crushed, via Stalinism itself (e.g. in Greece and Italy). The Second world War also gave capitalism a new lease of life, in the form of American imperialism. But pax Americana was characterised, not just by economic and military hegemony; but also by the rise of the mass consumerist/mass media society; viz the 'culture industry'. The onset of the Cold War helped instil the idea that communism = oppression; it was bad for humanity and art. So was western culture in general.

Against this background the neo-avant garde emerged. Once again, artists had a choice; resistance to a rapidly changing/more complex form of capitalism, including the seductive appeal of the culture industry, or reconciliation with the

new hedonism? Most would succumb to the easier of the two options. By the 1980s, artistic consciousness ceased to be preoccupied with the idea of art as 'heroic' resistance to reality; instead artists began to see themselves as businessmen/women, whose allies were the mass media and the advertising industry. Along with the pop star, the artist could become a celebrity, via the shock effect of their work or by behaving badly; ideally, by doing both! But when it comes to art's shock effect, one has to have a good reason to shock, e.g. Dada's opposition to WWI. But the need for money and fame for its own sake is not one of them.

Anti-art was now divided between the creation of mass produced art objects (of varying quality) and creating objects which did away with aesthetic structure altogether (cf. the Dadaists).

Andy Warhol's New York factory became a centre for the production of silk-screen prints that mimic 'the inert sameness of the mass product'; such as his Campbell's Soup Cans. At best, Warhol's work was an ambiguous protest against an ad-saturated world. But, as Robert Hughes reminds us, by the 1970s it had degenerated into 'the message of his career - that the fashion industry was the prime model of culture and that the business of art was business'. **1.** By the beginning of the eighties, Reagan was in the White House. With the help of public relations and image-management, a Feelgood government was created. 'America...embarked upon a politics of hypocrisy and reassurance [despite a deadly new nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union, now on its last legs] that

meshed perfectly with its culture of celebrity and promotion. Reaganism made extravagance okay...'. This coincided with the 'biggest art-market boom in history'. **2.**

At this point, another component of the art institution comes into play: the cultural intelligentsia, aka the post-structuralists. But they are the opposite of their pre-war counterparts: Adorno, was the leading cultural theorist of the Institute of Social Research. Benjamin also wrote essays for the ISR as well. Whatever their differences, both agreed with the idea that art cannot reconcile itself with reality (= injustice): On the one hand, Benjamin believed in the possibilities of direct participation by a cultural vanguard in the proletariat's struggle against fascism (e.g. Benjamin's own activities as a writer/broadcaster or John Heartfield's political photomontages). On the other, Adorno defended art's autonomy (e.g. Picasso's cubism or the difficult music of Schoenberg, both of which which seek to disrupt the commodification of art; the standardisation of the culture industry, etc; albeit unsuccessfully). Cf. the post-structuralists: They invented the theory of 'the end of modernism' and the start of a new 'postmodernist culture'; even though 'histories do not break off clean'. The reality was: a 'void of wholly monetarised art, in whose over-lit shadows thin voices are heard proclaiming their emptiness to be...a 'new development'. **3.** Conceptual art began to take centre stage; i.e. the idea, that 'the idea itself is more important than the execution of the artwork': An artist doesn't need skill. In fact, he/she could commission a craftsman to do the work? Anything can be art, as long as the artist says it is! But there's a catch: You have to be recognised by the art institution (in particular, new theories about art,

which have become closely entwined with the art market). If the man-in-the street says his unmade bed is a work of art (for example); well it isn't; it's just an unmade bed!) Thus art began to be drawn from prosaic reality in an unmediated form: e.g. a garden centre, a medical school museum, or the bedroom. (However, there is always the exception that proves the rule; such as conceptual art-max: earthworks and land-art, which are too big for the museum, as well as the art auction. James Turrell's 'on-going project [which] involves the...transformation of the entire, perfect cone of Roden Crater in Arizona.' **4**. Of course, you have to be a millionaire to do that!)

When we have an anti-art movement, which goes hand-in-hand with the 'biggest art-market boom in history', arguably Marx's 'doctrine of the inevitable decadence of art in modern times', becomes a self-fulfilling policy. But as Lifshitz points out, 'The materialist conception of the history of art has nothing in common with the inevitable death of artistic creation. All seemingly 'fatal contradictions' men themselves solve by a revolutionary critical construction of the world. [Yet, once again] this requires 'newfangled men, a Marx puts it - 'the working men' [and women of the present].' **5**. Thus anti-art is a cul-de-sac as regards the development of human culture as a whole.

Notes

1. Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, 1991, p 409.
2. p 409.
3. p 376.
4. p 384.
5. Mikhail Lifshitz, *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx*, 1973, p 103.

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Marx and the Idea of Homo Aestheticus

In his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844), Marx writes, ‘The cultivation of the five senses is the work of all previous history.’ **1.** (His emphasis. This obviously refers to the idea that there is a relationship between human sensuality and reason, which develops over time, both subjectively and objectively; subject to changes in man’s mode of production. What happens to this relationship determines whether we become more or less human. That said, Marx’s hope for an emancipated humanity in a future communist society is interchangeable with the idea of homo aestheticus. In this regard, he was indebted to German idealism, Schiller in particular. (See later section).

Arguably the passage in EPM on the ‘supersession of private property’ bears this out. **2.** Here Marx is referring to man’s need to appropriate [take back as his own] his real ‘human essence and human life’, by ‘sensuous means; that is, via ‘all the organs of his individuality’; not only his five physical senses, but also thinking, wanting [will], acting, loving’. Meanwhile, ‘Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only ours when we have it, when it exists for us as capital or when we directly possess, eat, drink, wear, inhabit it, etc.; in short, when we use it’. In this condition, we are ‘non-social’ man. But with the supersession of private property under capitalism, we cease to be ‘stupid and one-sided’. Then an object will belong to me, you, everyone, whether we possess it directly or not. Thus we become ‘social ‘ man, in both the subjective and objective sense..

Non-social man is alienated from the products of his labour and therefore himself, as well as his fellows. This is the historic legacy of primitive society: Initially human consciousness and technical ability were woefully inadequate for man's long battle with external nature. Later human estrangement was reinforced by the social division of labour, the emergence of private property and class society. Finally it was transformed again under capitalism and the commodity form, i.e. as commodity fetishism, whereby human beings are reduced to an abstraction; as a commodity for exchange, along with other commodities; albeit as a means to extract surplus labour for profit; whilst the things that we produce appear to take on a life of their own; they have power over us.

At the same time, Marx makes it clear that it is possible for individuals to escape alienation (at least for some of the time), whilst the majority continue to suffer from this condition. Obviously, this is only possible by means of thought, as long as private property relations exist. (Otherwise there would be no great artists or thinkers like Marx!) Such individuals, by means of ideas, point us towards the ideal of 'social' man in a future communist society; i.e. in both thought and deed, in both the subjective and the objective sense.

Marx's idea of emancipated humanity (= homo aestheticus), which is the basis of his EPM, raises three important questions:

ONE: On the relationship between the physical and intellectual senses. When Marx says that the physical senses must 'become theoreticians in their immediate practice', he does not mean that they should be considered to be on a par with their

intellectual counterpart. Rather there is an indispensable relationship between the two - there can be no 'immediacy' without 'mediacy' in nature (Hegel). When Marx says 'the most beautiful music has no sense for the unmusical ear', he means that the intellectual capacity, as well as the emotions is absent; not because the person is stupid; but because they have been deprived of both by capitalist society; in particular, the hierarchical social division of labour (the separation of intellectual from practical labour). Consequently his/her range of emotions, feelings, vis-a-vis listening to music, is limited. (Cf. Adorno's essay, *On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Hearing*, 1938. Here he is referring to the regression in musical appreciation among the masses, as a result of the displacement of popular culture (in the sense of the decline of a wide-spread folk tradition); i.e. the decline of old-style community singing, including getting together around the piano to sing popular songs, which is replaced by the culture industry; hence we have the consumption of the modern pop song. The latter can be played over and over by isolated individuals, thanks to the radio and record industry. But now the song is restricted to just three minutes in length; therefore the lyrics must be kept simple. A long complex ballad like Matthey Groves, which dates back to the middle ages, is no longer possible.)

As Marx sees it, the intellect supplements and completes the physical senses... 'man's object becomes a human object. All objects are social objects (or should be: apart from the clothes that we wear, because two individuals can't wear the same item at the same time; although clothes could be shared, because we like the style, but are willing to share this with a friend, who likes it too.) Then 'all

objects become for [man] the objectification of himself, objects that confirm and realise his individuality'. They become his objects and he [she]... becomes the object. In other words, 'need or enjoyment have therefore lost their egoistic nature, and nature has lost its mere utility, in the sense that its use has become a human use.' Therefore 'man is affirmed in the objective world not only through thought but all the senses.' (Note: In this regard, according to Marx, the ancient world was qualitatively better than the capitalist one: '...the ancient conception, in which man always appears (in however narrowly national, religious or political definition) as the aim of production, seems very much more exalted than the modern world, in which production is the aim of man and wealth the aim of production.')

3. Thus Marx says, 'Only through the objectively unfolded wealth of human nature can the wealth of subjective human sensitivity - a musical ear, an eye for the beauty of form, in short senses capable of human gratification - be either cultivated or created.'**4.** (My emphasis) (Cf. Schiller, see below.)

TWO: The materialist basis for the objectivity of concepts (contra the subjective idealism of the post-structuralists).

If the intellectual sense 'supplements' or 'completes' the physical senses, then we have the basis for the objectivity of concepts. On the one hand, it was for this reason that Isaac Newton was able to discover the law of gravity; as he said, because 'I stand upon the shoulders of giants.' On the other, it is only through the objectivity of concepts that we can have any concept of art (for instance) and its development at all.

But before we can proceed any further in this matter, the tricky question of taste needs to be examined; otherwise we shall end up with a confused, inconsistent argument. Firstly, taste itself involves making judgements about sense experience. To some extent, this is influenced by biological differences between individuals: One person has a better eye or ear than another. It would be the same in a future communist society as well as the present one. But in a communist society, the unsocial nature of existing civil society would be abolished. Social and political freedom for every individual would not be constrained by private property or capital, including its power to extract surplus value, then use it as a form of exchange. Only in a communist society will each individual be able to develop his/her potential in every sense; including 'a musical ear, an eye for the beauty of form'. Only then can democratisation be achieved in an all-sided or real sense.

On the other hand, as the critic Peter Fuller argues, judgements about taste, whilst being derived from sense experience, also depend on a social consensus of qualitative assumptions: 'For example, a man who judged excrement to have a more pleasant smell than roses would, almost universally, be judged to have aberrant or perverse taste...[because] this sense is not simply 'given' to us: rather it can only be reached through culturally and socially determined habits.'

Traditionally, western society has always preferred the aroma of roses to the odour of filth. But it is possible to hypothesise the opposite. In today's mass consumerist/mass media society, individuals may prefer rayon to silk; fibre-glass to elm-wood; insipid white sliced bread to the best wholemeal loaf; nasty plonk to the best wine, or tasteless Golden Delicious apples to Cox's.' **5.**

But as Kant points out in his *Critique of Judgement*, taste is not just about pleasure. A thing is not beautiful merely because it pleases one. When a man says that something is beautiful, 'he supposes in others the same satisfaction; he judges not merely for himself, but for everyone and speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things.' According to Kant, apropos the beautiful, we cannot say that each man has his particular taste: For this would be to say that there was no taste whatever, i.e. no aesthetic judgement which can make a rightful claim upon everyone's assent.'

The role of Vischer's *Aesthetik* (completed in 1857) would appear to bear this out. It made a great impression on Marx (who was working on his *Critique of Political Economy* at the time); in particular the following idea: 'That the enjoyment of the beautiful is immediate, and that it requires education, would seem to be contradictory. But man becomes what he is and arrives at his own true nature only through education.' **6.**

Vischer also quotes from Schiller's aesthetics. Perhaps this was how Marx discovered Schiller; in particular the latter's concept of human nature, which is bound up with his theory of the aesthetic? (Cf. emancipated man = homo aestheticus.) Schiller distinguishes three overlapping drives, which together constitute the human (man as a 'species being'): The sense drive = the reception of sensory data. But this on its own is insufficient; because the individual becomes a receptive vessel for constantly changing impressions; i.e. is deprived of individuality. The form drive = the human need to impress form on the sense data.

Form is not subject to the laws of nature, but to human reason. The play drive = a partnership between the two; ‘only the union of reality with form, of chance with necessity, of suffering with freedom, fulfils the conception with humanity.’ Beauty is the object of play, when man is no longer divided between sensuality and reason.

7.

These ideas are taken up in Marx and Engel’s discussion of the concept of *Gehaltaesthetik*, **8.** [DOMA pp 38-9] Contra to the perceived wisdom, for them, form cannot be subordinated to content in art; rather the two attributes enjoy a more dialectical - as opposed to a - one-sided relationship. Form (which comes from the play drive) does matter! (Because these ideas have a direct bearing on the question of the fate of aesthetic structure, I shall continue with this in the next section.)

There’s no doubt Marx agrees with Schiller’s view that existing society is based on ‘the blind struggle with egoistic interests,...whose development is subject solely to the mechanical ‘pressures of wants’ - this ‘realm of necessity’...which cannot serve as the soil for genuine artistic productivity.’ Schiller’s solution was to write a series of Aesthetic Letters, which he hoped would become the basis for the ‘aesthetic education of man’. (But for him, this would require the help of an enlightened ruler. If not, what then?) ‘Hegel, on the other hand, considered knowledge the supreme weapon in the solution of existing contradictions; his last word is a stoical reconciliation with reality, refusal to embellish it with artificial roses.’ (Not good enough!) It was left to Marx to provide a materialist solution:

This would not be a Hegelian reconciliation with reality. Rather he would go on to renounce his own romanticism - a nebulous opposition to the existing order - in favour of a 'more radical criticism of social relations'; the 'criticism of weapons'. The agency of the latter would be found within 'the anti-aesthetic spirit of readily', which could readily assume 'a revolutionary character'; i.e. the proletariat; but paradoxically, a class which had been stripped of its aesthetic sensibility by the industrial revolution. **9.**

THREE: Marx looks forward to the 'complete emancipation of all human senses and attributes, subjectively as well as objectively'. Does this mean that, art - as we know it today - will disappear in a future communist society?

According to some marxists, the answer is yes. This is because there will be a new division of labour, under which artistic labour to produce apractical, individual objects, will disappear. For once man's aesthetic sensibility is re-united with the rest of material labour, such labour will become redundant. The labour process itself ceases to be alienated. In other words, art as a separate activity, will no longer be needed as a consolation for man; cf. alienated society.

But bearing in mind the argument put forward in the previous section, I strongly disagree. In *The German Ideology* (1845) we find a clear statement to the effect that aesthetic structure will continue under communism: 'In a communist society there are no painters but at most people who engage in painting among other activities.' **10.** In other words, Marx and Engels anticipate a time when there would be a lot more polymaths around (Cf. Da Vinci.) If the art object were to

disappear under communism, then we would have to conclude that the long period of development involved in the emergence of aesthetic structure was an aberration of human evolution!

Their views about *Gehaltaesthetik* also appears to support this idea. This presupposes an aesthetics oriented to content. According to the marxist aesthetician, Stefan Morawski, Marx and Engels therefore regard the question of form 'in an instrumental fashion'. 'That is to say, they often wrote as though it were a transparent if necessary value, which, if competently disposed, would permit the content...to shine brightly through.' On the other hand, they were critical of Lasalle's play, *Sickingen* (who was their friend at the time), because it shows a lack of artistic skill, as far as form is concerned. They accused him of using 'mouthpiece characters' to utter his ideas; 'substituting the orator's art for the craft of the artist'. It would seem that, for them also, form is an equally important part of 'aesthetic realisation'. The basis of originality lies not just in the 'artistic-cognitive and ideological dimension', but 'also and strikingly in the stylistic dimension'. It enables art to play a unique role in the struggle between alienation and disalienation, as an expression of man's 'astonishing and irrepressible desire for freedom and fulfilment'. **11.** (Yet the prospect of the man who prefers the smell of shit to that of roses, keeps on popping up! Moreover, for the post-structuralists, that's Okay! See below.)

As far and Marx and Engels are concerned, it would appear that they also support Schiller's theory of the three drives in human nature. Thus we could conclude that

they are in favour of the preservation of artistic structure; i.e. that there will still be a place for the making of a-practical, individual art objects in a future communist society.

But today the problem of consciousness besets the intelligentsia - not just the proletariat. Like Hegel, they have (inadvertently?) reconciled themselves with reality. If so, it is a consequence of the defeats of May and August, 1968. They were already in the process of retreating into a severe form of subjective idealism. Its trajectory was tracked by Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*. (In this regard he himself was the midwife of post-structuralism; only he could not guess what the new-born child would be like in advance!) The marxist critic, Peter Dews, describes the latter as the 'logics of disintegration': The idea of the objectivity of concepts and all totalising theories has to be abandoned. After all, marxism, in practice, led to Stalinist totalitarianism and the terror.

For Adorno, this disintegration is a manifestation of the decline of the bourgeois individual, who is incorporated into an administered world by 'socialising agencies, such as the mass media. Obligated to conform to an overwhelming social reality in order to survive, the individual retreats into narcissism, into illusions of total self containment or total fusion.'

Language itself becomes a prison house, dissecting and deforming reality. '... instrumental reason annexes more and more of nature, society and - eventually - inner nature, until it becomes...freed from any goal...embedded in a network of intersubjective relations...essential to the continued existence of society as the

material exchange with nature.’ **12.** (My emphasis)

The best that the post-structuralists can come up with is a concept of ‘emancipation’, which amounts to the ‘breaking open of the coercive entity of the subject’; but this only leaves us with ‘the diffuseness and heterogeneity of the repressed’: For Derrida, deconstruction means that we can’t identify anything; so one ends up ‘not with ‘difference’, but with indifference’. Foucault’s theory ends with a ‘vision of omnipresent and homogeneous power’. Lyotard’s libidinal economy, ‘far from preserving the singularity of each moment of experience...ends by embracing the punctuality, anonymity and indifference of the commodity form’.

13. It follows that all aesthetic judgements are subjective, arbitrary.

Meanwhile 1% of the world’s population will soon own more wealth than the rest of us put together (the whole 7 billion of us!) Rampant capitalism is now polluting the great oceans themselves. Technology continues to be abused under this system: ISIS is beheading its hostages and posting images of their barbaric acts online. Art is anything, even if not everyone can be an artist. Play Bach’s Chaconne from his Partita No. 2, which is - as Joshua Bell says - ‘spiritually, emotionally, and structurally perfect’. (Schiller and Marx would agree with that!) But it now sounds like a lament for mankind's failure - so far - We are a long way from Marx’s vision of homo aestheticus!

Notes

1. Marx, EPM, Penguin Classics, 1992, p 353.
- 2 pp 351-6
- 3 Maynard Solomon, Marxism and Art, 1979, p 57.

4. EPM, p 353.
5. Peter Fuller, Images of God, 1985, p 29.
6. Mikhail Lifshitz, The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx, 1973, p 83.
7. Kai Hammermeister, The German Aesthetic Tradition, 2002, pp 51, 52, 53.
8. Lifshitz, pp 13, 14, 19.
9. Marx and Engels on Literature and Art (DOMA), Introduction by Stefan Morawski, pp 38-9
10. Marx and Engels, The German Ideology, Edited by C.J. Arthur, 1989, p 109.
11. Marx and Engels on Literature and Art (DOMA), pp 37, 38-9.
12. Peter Dews, The Logics of Disintegration, 1990, pp 226, 227, 228.
13. pp 230, 231.

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