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Ugly and Monstrous: Marxist Aesthetics

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Abstract

An analysis of Marxist conceptions of the good and the beautiful and their relationship to alienation, "Ugly and Monstrous" argues that Marxism was ultimately a set of aesthetic beliefs, one that paradoxically called for the temporary cessation of all attempts to create beautiful artwork. Marx understood beauty as Kant had – that it is the result of the harmonization of the faculties that occurs when a disinterested observer encounters a work of art. Capitalism gives to all works (art included) monetary value, and all observers become interested consumers, debasing art appreciation and killing the human desire (and need) to experience the beautiful.

The work of later Marxists, particularly Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse, take the Marxist position to its logical conclusion, that any art in the age of capitalist exploitation and worker alienation must, by its nature, be political. The best way to judge art, according to these twentieth century Marxist aestheticians, is to measure the level of alienation the work contains. The more alienated the artist and the work are , the more correct the political statement is. The work, which can never be pleasant and must always and ever agitate, is thus judged good. It cannot, however, be beautiful because the work retains utility – it encourages political action on the behalf of the community and the individual and is not a whole in and of itself. Beautiful art, cannot exist until a communism has been established. Thus Marxist (and neoMarxist) aesthetics mandate the impoverishment of the senses and the death of beauty.

Everything ugly and monstrous despises art.

– Karl Marx, from a marginal note in
Johann Jakob Grund, *Die Malerei der Griechen*

From the *Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* to the unfinished third volume of *Capital*, Karl Marx consistently articulated a vision of a post-historical utopia in which spontaneous creative expression replaced alienated labor. The aesthetic sense was the unique human quality, according to Marx, that separated man from the beasts. The damning fault of the present capitalist order was not that it produced scarcity or was inefficient, but that it dehumanized human society by eliminated the aesthetic experience. Capitalism elevated an animalistic self-interest over all other values, making the disinterested appreciation of beauty impossible. The destruction of beauty, not social justice or issues of equality, outraged Marx. For Marx and his most consistent followers, most of the so-called art produced under capitalism did not harmonize the faculties, but instead anesthetized the people to their own suffering. Real artists, therefore, should not strive for a false beauty, but work diligently to disharmonize the faculties and awaken the people to their acute pain. After the social revolution and the putting of self-interest in its proper, subordinate place, could artists return to creating and appreciating beauty. It is a curious contradiction that an esoteric experience, not physical reality, stands at the center of the system championing historical materialism.

Marx did not acquire an aesthetic set of convictions as he developed his philosophical system, rather the system developed around his core contentions concerning the nature of art. The founder of scientific socialism wrote poetry as a philosophy student at Bonn and stayed abreast of European literature all his life, and expressed sophisticated insights on a range of aesthetic matters his whole adult life. Marx devoted more time and energy studying aesthetics than was necessary for a philosophy student. At two points in his life, Marx attempted to write specifically on aesthetics, but both times became distracted leaving a systematic analysis of his ideas unexplored.[1] Such an exploration would have made analyzing Marxian aesthetics easier, but would have been almost unnecessary, as Marx's theories on the division and alienation of labor are simultaneously theories on aesthetics.

Many scholars make the mistake of labeling Marxism an economically deterministic theory of history. A closer reading, however, reveals the inherent aesthetic value Marx found in labor. In the third volume of *Capital*, Marx envisioned the communist factory as an industrial symphony, with each worker willingly subordinating himself to the will of the "director" to engage in aesthetic creation.[2] In his pre-alienated past, man had created his world in a similar fashion – through his spontaneous labor, filling his life with pleasure and satisfaction. Through the mastery of his five senses, man wrested meaning out of the natural world and ennobled it in his work. Labor's aesthetic dimension was ever-present in human pre-history. All animals, including man, were self-interested, but man was unique in that he could experience disinterested pleasure, and thus contemplate and create beauty. Man's labor was aesthetic and thus superior to the merely instinctive labor of bees, beavers, or any other animal. The disinterested contemplation of beauty, so fundamental to human nature, had been debased and perverted under capitalism, in which all values were subjugated to self-interest. Beauty disappeared from the human landscape as capitalism advanced.[3]

Capitalism was not a system that could be reformed or changed, and Marx argued that the aggrandizing logic of capitalism caused Europe to burst from its borders and colonize the entire world, putting all peoples in an ever-tightening grip. All labor everywhere with no exception was perverted and every man reduced to a beast. Marx explains in *Capital:*

> Within the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productiveness of labor are brought about at the cost of the individual laborer; all means for the development of production transform themselves into means of domination over, and exploitation of, the producers; they mutilate laborer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an

> appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work, and turn it into a hated toil; the estrange from him the intellectual potentialities of the labor process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power; they distort the conditions under which he works, subject him during the labor-process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness; they transform his life-time into working-time, and drag his wife and child beneath the wheels of the Juggernaut of capital.[4]

If one accepts Marx's analysis, then there can be no compromise and reality must be negated. The agonistic element drives the system toward confrontation between the exploiter and the exploited. In Marxism, there is no third way, and artists became combatants like everyone else.

Artists are workers and workers artists and the alienation of the worker from his labor must be equated with the alienation of that artist from his. According to the Marx, labor in the capitalist order became external to the worker, an activity he performed away from his home and in which the core of his being did not participate. His labor was forced, that is, the worker worked not because he received satisfaction from his labor, but to satisfy the needs of his body, from which he became alienated as well. The worker thus avoided all labor, seeing it as outside himself, something alien and hostile. Labor, and by extension art, in capitalism was not a spontaneous activity or an expression of life, instead it was something that belonged to someone else; work led to a "loss of self," and "mortification."[5] All activities and relationships in such an inhuman system became tainted, vulgar and, most importantly, ugly.

While alienated labor cretinized workers and artists, leaving them with a dulled or nonexistent capacity for creating or experiencing pleasure, capitalists were similarly rendered incapable of identifying beauty. In their case, acquisitive feelings destroyed disinterest and aesthetic pleasure, making automatons out of investment bankers, and industrialists, and art merchants " … [the capitalist's] pleasure is only a side issue – recuperation – something subordinated to production: at the same time it is a *calculated* and therefore an *economical* pleasure."[6] Marx's contention that the nineteenth century was profoundly unaesthetic even anti-aesthetic is obvious, but only slightly less so is the connection to Kant and the notion of the disinterested subject.

Kant argued that in order to appreciate beauty, the subject must approach the work with a spirit of disinterestedness.[7] Marx was in lock step with German philosophical ideas on the nature of the aesthetic experience in art. He accepted Kant, but in the world as he described it, pure judgment could not exist. A capitalist computing value looked at art as a means to increase his advantage, and thus cannot experience beauty, while an alienated artist could only pretend to harmonize the faculties. Indeed, Marx expands on this idea and maintains that the rule of industry is the rule of asceticism, leading to further deprivation of the human spirit. "The less you eat, drink, and read books; the less you go the theatre, the dance hall, the public-house; the less you think, love theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc. the more you save – the *greater* becomes your treasure … the less you are … ."[8]

The fact that the products of the capitalist regime fulfill physical needs is ultimately unimportant to Marx because they do not satisfy the fundamental human need for beauty. The centrality of disinterested pleasure in Marxism places it in direct opposition to nineteenth century Utilitarianism. A master of the epithet, Marx sneered in *Capital* that "arch-Philistine" Jeremy Bentham represented, "the insipid, pedantic, leather-tongued oracle of the commonplace bourgeois intelligence of the nineteenth century," and that "at no time and in no country has the most trivial commonplace ever before strutted about with such appalling self-satisfaction." Bentham's sins included, among other offenses, condemning artistic criticism as "'harmful,' because it disturbs worthy people in their enjoyment of Martin Tupper," Tupper being a contemporary quotable English poet Marx found unbearably vulgar.[9] Bentham and his self-interested disciples were English boors of the lowest order, and possessed no aesthetic sense. They made an unforgivable mistake and confused animal need (utility) with human need (aesthetic), and therefore could not understand the necessity or purpose of art or artistic criticism.

Also in England, however, lived and wrote the most important authors of nineteenth century, because, Marx argued, their work shook up a complacent bourgeoisie. Marx praised Dickens, Thackery, the Bronte sisters for revealing the "presumption, affectation, petty tyranny, and ignorance" of the English middle class. These writers were the anti-Benthams of their age, searching for beauty but finding instead a world of child labor and mass-produced sentimental trash. Articulating "social truths" became the sole purpose of artists living in an alienated reality.[10] Upon finding a contemporary poet he approved of, Marx praised Ferdinand Freilgrath as "a real revolutionary and an honest man." Nowhere does Marx comment on the beauty of Freiligrath's verses, but his revolutionary potential electrified Marx.[11] In *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx argued that all art reproduces its social reality, and therefore in an age of ugliness and alienation, contemporary art must reflect those values.[12] From these foundations socialist realism and anti-art would emerge.

The extension of Marx's theories on the specific political role of the artist was largely left to his ideological successors. Following the discovery and publication of Marx's early writings in the 1930s, a furious debate over Marxist aesthetics began. Mikhail Lifschitz's kicked off a discourse with *Karl Marx und die Aesthetik* that reached a crescendo in the 1960s and 70s. At issue were why Marxism could at times appear hostile to art, and how artist fused the aesthetic and the political. The rift between Bertolt Brecht and Georg Lukacs was emblematic of a larger split between Marxists supporting a more conventional view of aesthetics that was detached and at times at variance with Marx's writings (the Lukacs faction) and those who took Marx's dialectic and agonistic historical mechanics as an absolute starting point for the evaluation and creation of art (the Brecht faction). Ultimately, Brecht's retention of core-Marxist principles, including the militancy of art and its commitment to a diachronic, historical perspective won out.[13]

What becomes apparent from a brief overview is that though the critics, like Marx, loved art and the pleasure it produced, they were simultaneously bound by the logic of the system to reject the

art produced in their time as ugly but politically useful or, much worse, pleasant and reactionary. Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, and other New Marxist intellectuals fought against the effort to portray Marxism as a system of economic determinism, and in Benjamin's case, completely inverted the old base-superstructure arrangement. In order to restore aesthetics, they found it was necessary to give the conscious artist agency. Arguing that the artist is the one who through an uncompromising engagement with social reality becomes "ideologist who pierces the veil of false consciousness," they maintained that Marxist criticism must at some level be politically informed and the artist and critic are to be identified by their "passionate involvement the humanity."[14] Though pure art requires disinterest, they claimed that disinterest was not a quality the Marxist artist or critic should cultivate.

At the front of the New Marxists stood Herbert Marcuse, who in an impressive intellectual feat not only successfully fused Marxism with Freudianism,[15] but also carried Marxist aesthetics to their final resting place. Marcuse despaired over capitalism's ability to absorb, "co-opt," and render impotent the liberating potential of revolutionary art. In an initially strange linking of the pluralistic liberal democracies and totalitarianism, Marcuse finds the formula for a Marxist aesthetics. "In the realm of culture, the new totalitarianism manifests itself precisely in a harmonizing pluralism, where the most contradictory works and truths peacefully coexist in indifference," a situation that undermines, "the very basis of the artistic alienation."[16]

Marcuse contends that artists, in order to be authentic and relevant, must be the most alienated members of modern society. Capitalism's biggest problem is that it makes life too pleasurable, and the artist and his subject have trouble seeing why it should be resisted. Any decrease in alienation and subsequent suffering represents a reactionary intrusion to be challenged and negated. Marcuse was the first to realize the central importance of the artist in Marx's aesthetically-centered system and the implications this posed for Marxism at large. Marcuse remained pessimistic about the future of art, even anti-art, because even it falls into "the daily universe, as an enjoyable and understandable element of this uni-

verse."[17] Art's seemingly inherent ability to please is something to be regarded with the utmost suspicion. Arguing from the Brechtian perspective, Marcuse maintains that artists must strive for, and critics must promote, further estrangement, so that empathy and feeling drain out of art and are replaced by distance and reflection.[18] Art must increase the feeling of alienation and ultimately negate reality. Marcuse called this concept the "Great Refusal" and its implications are staggering, surreal, and frightening.

Like his master, Marcuse was an artistic reductionist – the essential core of good art under capitalism was its ability to engage the subject's sense of righteous indignation at the state of everything existing. Authenticity has nothing to do with craftsmanship or any other sentimental heresy Marx would accuse Proudhon and the French socialist of promoting, but in its political orientation. Walter Benjamin went as far as to place political orientation in a dominant position over economic reality. "Instead of [authenticity] being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics."[19] An artist could not produce authentic art without a proper political orientation. Possessing a Marxist worldview, an artist would consciously try to reproduce or amplify the alienation of his life in his work. Then and only then could he make a proper indictment of the evil world he all inhabits, thereby inciting the disorienting or incendiary effect in the subject. If the artist found delight in someone or something and depicted it in his work, his work was no longer subversive, and thus accommodationist and implicitly reactionary. Marxist aesthetes should regard the present as hateful.

Marcuse and prominent theorists' rejection of the world as an ugly place and its human inhabitants as animalistic comes as a direct result of Marxism's philosophical grounding in Hegelian philosophy. Hegel's dialectic is grounded in the notion that man's purpose in the universe was to become aware of his own divinity. Human history thus becomes a process whereby spirit and matter violently clash as the universe progresses linearly with man becoming ever more aware of himself as God. The division in the world between spirit and matter ends when God, through man, achieves self-consciousness. Man, increasingly aware of his true nature, demands the infinite, and in

the effort to achieve total self-consciousness, destroys all elements in himself and his world that are at variance with his divinity. Identifying impurity from within or without, man singles out the contaminating element and annihilates it, and thus the dialectic progresses. Man cannot tolerate ambiguity and is locked in a never-ending battle with self. The normal man in the Hegelian worldview appears as a neurotic personality, constantly at war with his own being and the world at large.[20]

The never-ending, violent quest for self-actualization represents a religion of revolution, in which the change is the highest value. As Hegel put it, "The tendency of all man's endeavors is to understand the world, to appropriate and subdue it to himself; and to this end the positive reality of the world must be as it were crushed and pounded, in other words, idealized" (Tucker 50-51). Ultimately, the universe, god, and man would be one supremely self-aware spirit. In order to accomplish this, reality was to be treated with utmost violence, "crushed and pounded" into submission.

Marcuse's "Great Refusal" stands in a direct line stretching back through Marx to Hegel, and Marcuse's critique of pluralism has its antecedent in Hegel's dictum , "[F]or freedom it is necessary that we should feel no presence of something with is not ourselves."[21] Likewise, the central role of art extends back through to Hegel and German philosophy in general. Hegel identifies creative self-expression as evidence of man's connection to the divine, Marx sees creative production as uniquely human (and for all intents and purposes divine), and Marcuse identifies artists as those most affected by their alienation –the most revolutionary class – capable of convincing the world to reject itself. Marx and Marcuse differ from Hegel in their contention that artists can help the endless revolutionary cycle forward – Hegel believed the process to be inevitable and predetermined. Their rejection of the world as unfinished or impure, however, remains fundamentally Hegelian, as does their call for the annihilation of all forms of otherness.

These then are the central aesthetic tenets of Marxism: the world is corrupt and because of its corruption man has become alienated from himself and incapable of being human, which means incapa-

ble of evaluating beauty via the aesthetic experience. Therefore, to reclaim his birthright and fulfill his destiny, man must reject this world and regain his fundamental powers of creation through aesthetically satisfying labor, which will be amplified and extended to all classes by means of mechanical reproduction. The "Great Refusal" requires a compete negation of all positive reality. For the dark days of the present, art exists for the sole purpose of raising revolutionary consciousness. Whether it takes the form of socialist realism, revealing the alienated reality of the social milieu, or Brechtian expressionism that emphasizes the grotesque and exaggerates alienation, it cannot harmonize the faculties and produce pleasure. It cannot, therefore be beautiful, and as Marx and German philosophy make clear, it is not *real* art. As Marcuse realized, Marxist artists must be vigilant against the potential of capitalist co-option and be engaged in an endless struggle to make ever-more alienated and angry art. As revolutionaries negate the world in violent action, artists similarly refuse any accommodation, and in their works negate and indict positive reality. Total, violent rejection is the Marxist aesthetic, or anti-aesthetic. The refusal of any beauty in the world makes Marxist aesthetics a contradiction in terms. The contradiction is important because it indicates a larger and troubling problem inherent in Marxism.

In Greek art Marx saw the charmed play of man's "normal children." The pleasure Greek art produced in modern man represented not the true aesthetic experience, but merely the nostalgic longing for the unalienated existence of his past.[22] Marx loved Greek art, but rationalized and diminished his aesthetic experience to fit within the narrow confines of a totalizing system of unlimited rejection. Nothing could seem as ascetic as the denial of pleasure, but this is the ultimate advice of Marx and his followers. One should feel guilt if one delights in any part of a corrupt world. Pleasure and aesthetic enjoyment must wait until the social revolution, and even then, as Marcuse notes, it still might not be a good idea to create or indulge in pleasurable art as Eros and Thanatos remain irreconcilable. What appears to be a system designed to defend beauty, in fact becomes one that seeks out and destroys beauty wherever it finds it. The rejection of positive reality has had a murderous and barbarous impact

on world history, as the previous century's revolutionary mass movements attest. To reject the world as one knows it marks the worst excess of romantic idealism, substituting an unknown abstract for real, experienced (but denied) pleasure. The "Great Refusal" is really the great escape, an intellectual flight away from ambiguity and the difficulty of pluralism into an imagined purity. Marx could not accept the simultaneous existence of Bentham and Dickens, and it is the unfortunate logic of his system that both would face annihilation.

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Notes

1 Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski, eds. *Marx & Engels on Literature and Art: A Selection of Writings*. St. Louis: Telos Press, 1973, 5.

2 Karl Marx. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. v. 3, ed. Frederick Engels. New York: International Publishers, 1967, 451

3 From *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker. New York, Cambridge University Press, 1972, 52.

4 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* v. 1, ed. Frederick Engels. New York: International Publishers, 1967, 40-41.

5 From *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker. New York, Cambridge University Press, 1972, 74-5.

6 Karl Max, "Pre-Capitalist Formations,"in *Marx & Engels on Literature and Art: A Selection of Writings*. in Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski, eds. St. Louis: Telos Press, 1973, 63

7 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, in *Critical Theory Since Plato.* ed. Hazard Adams. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanvich College Publishers, 1992, 376-377.

8 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, in *Marx & Engels on Literature and Art: A Selection of Writings*. Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski, eds St. Louis: Telos Press, 1973, 62.

9 Karl Marx. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. v. 3, ed. Frederick Engels. New York: International Publishers, 1967, 688.

10 Karl Marx, "The English Middle Class," *Marx & Engels on Literature and Art: A Selection of Writings*. Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski, eds St. Louis: Telos Press, 1973, 105.

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13 Mittenzwei, Werner. "The Brecht-Lukacs Debate," *Preserve and Create: Essays in Marxist Literary Criticism*. Eds. Gaylord C. LeRoy and Ursula Beitz. New York: Humanities Press, 1973, 228.

14 Maynard Soloman, ed. *Marxism and Art: Essays Classic and Contemporary*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973.

15 Unlike Marx, Marcuse did not believe that the social revolution would automatically result in an aesthetic utopia. This significant difference is due to Marcuse's synthesis of Marxism with Freudianism. "Socialism does not and cannot liberate Eros from Thanatos," Herbert Marcuse. The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics, Boston: Beacon Press, 1978, 72-73.

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18 Ibid., 523.

19 Walter Benjamin. "The Trajectory of Art," *Marxism and Art: Essays Classic and Contemporary*. ed. Maynard Soloman, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 557.

20 Robert Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1972, 50.

21 Ibid., 53.

22 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. in *Critical Theory Since Plato*. ed. Hazard Adams, Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1992, 378.