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THE AESTHETICS OF RADICAL SENSIBILITY

ART AND POLITICS IN MARCUSE'S LATER WRITINGS

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“Permanent aesthetic subversion – this is the way of art”

– Herbert Marcuse

Between Aesthetic Politics and Political Aesthetics

Overshadowed by his social theoretical works, Marcuse's distinctive account of art has received less attention. Since *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, comprising hitherto materials which are unpublished or available only in German, began to be published from 1998, scholarly interest in Marcuse's thought has been increasingly reinvigorated.¹ In particular, the publication of its fourth volume in 2007, extensively focusing on his writings on art, has facilitated critical debates surrounding Marcuse's thought in respect of art and politics. Furthermore, the recent turn to affect theory in the areas of aesthetics and social and political theories has also drawn more attention to the roles of senses in the formation of a new subject.² A notable contribution to this turn

1 Marcuse (1998-2014), hereafter CP.

2 Leys (2011); Massumi (2002 and 2015); Gregg and Seigworth (2010: 52-70).

includes Jacques Rancière's reformulation of aesthetic politics with reference to "the distribution of the sensible" in "the aesthetic regime of art".³ In this scholarly milieu, there has been a range of discussions surrounding the relevance of Marcuse's aesthetics for developing a new critical theory of art and politics.⁴ However, over a long period, his works on aesthetics have been criticised as "an idealist aestheticism", "a reductive ontologist of art", or "an aesthetics of inwardness and quietism".⁵ In my view, many discussions have been overly preoccupied with the social theoretical aspects of Marcuse's insights into art, on the one hand, and tend to share uncritical approaches to Marcuse's equivocal attitude towards high art and mass culture, on the other hand. Hitherto, a good deal less attention has been paid to a vital question regarding how a new radical sensibility that Marcuse envisages could facilitate the articulation of a new corporeal subject, particularly the new publics in the post-totalitarian era. In this essay I aim to draw out, through a critical reassessment of Marcuse's later writings on art and politics, the theoretical motives embodied in his aesthetics of radical sensibility for the development of the critical theory of art and culture.

From the time of his participation in the soldier's council of Berlin *Reinickendorf* during the 1918 German Revolution, Marcuse never stood aloof from radical liberation movements for the remainder of his life. His firm belief in the inseparability of social and aesthetic practices underpins the enduring aspect of his theory of art and politics. For him, the aesthetic dimension constitutes the

3 Rancière (2006, 2013 and 2015).

4 Miles (2012); Guyer (2008); MacDonald (2011); Becker (1994).

5 Katz (1982); Lukes (1985); and Reitz (2000). For a detailed examination of these debates and historical contexts, see Douglas Kellner's comprehensive introduction, in CP 4: 1-70.

quintessential attribute of modernity. His primary concern was to move “art and aesthetics to the forefront of critical theory” (Schoolman 1976: 79). This proposition is firmly rooted in his *oeuvre*, including *The German Artist Novel* (*Der deutsche Künstlerroman*), his doctoral dissertation accepted by Freiburg University in 1922. His intensive study of bourgeois literary works, particularly those by Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Gottfried Keller, and Thomas Mann, grapples with how art and life are merged in their works and individual alienation is – and is not – overcome through integration into a harmonious community. Marcuse’s earlier view of the history of bourgeois literature is heavily influenced by Georg Lukács’ neo-romantic cultural criticism of industrial capitalist society. Lukács’ seminal works, such as *Soul and Form* (1911) and *Theory of the Novel* (1920), serve as an important backdrop to Marcuse’s literary criticism of bourgeois culture in the context of the emergence of industrial capitalist society. The novel, for Lukács, epitomises modern culture in an age of “transcendental homelessness”, resulting from the breakdown of the totality of life. In this soulless and hollow bourgeois society, the relationship between art and life is perpetually contradictory. It is well acknowledged that Lukács’ earlier pessimistic diagnosis regarding the meltdown of bourgeois literature lacks sufficient analyses of the material conditions of the collapse of the bourgeois public sphere. Unlike Lukács’ subjective, teleological call for redemption, Marcuse investigates the way in which a disrupted balance between art, everyday life and politics can be retrieved and rearticulated through the reconciliation of artistic life with bourgeois society. In Marcuse’s view, the debased life form of bourgeois culture is decisively sundered from everyday life of people, but, at the same time, brings aesthetic value into the public.

Marcuse's earlier idea of the positive role of bourgeois art in transcending the material realm is not elaborated in particular terms of "democratization of art" or "aestheticization of everyday life", but his insight seeks to grasp the aesthetic potential embedded in bourgeois literature that enables people to transcend affirmative culture.⁶ Since this initial approach to bourgeois literary works, Marcuse was preoccupied with the integrating function of autonomous and, at the same time, political art in society. This positive perception of bourgeois literature embodied in his doctoral dissertation markedly envisions his later idea of art as a perpetual revelation of images of freedom, liberation and happiness that rejects oppressive, dominant social relations. The issue surrounding art and politics is never distanced from his thought on social liberation and individual freedom and critically discussed throughout various works, including "The Affirmative Character of Culture" (1937), "Society as a Work of Art" (1967), "Art as Form of Reality" (1969), and, most of all, *Eros and Civilization* (1955). Following the profound ebbs of social movements of the 1960s Marcuse redrew his critical attention towards the revolutionary role of art in advanced industrial society. In his 1972 work entitled *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Marcuse fully explores how art plays a pivotal role in reshaping the radical subject and, for that purpose, in restoring sensibility.

The Politics of Libidinal Rationality

Counterrevolution and Revolt aims to offer a critical reconsideration of the main doctrines of the new social movements

6 For a debate regarding aesthetic politics/political aesthetics in the context of critical theory, see Kang (2010).

in the changing socio-political milieu.⁷ During the 1960s, Marcuse's works largely engaged with an analysis of the rise of new forms of social control in advanced industrial society. As widely recognised, Marcuse, as a guru of the New Left, hailed the student movements in Europe and the USA and celebrated national liberation revolutions in Asia as the new political movement against repressive social relations. However, witnessing the defeat and subsequent decline of those movements, he came increasingly to grope for the long-term strategy for liberation in the age of affluent society. In Marcuse's evolved view, advanced industrial capitalism serves as a totally administered society which is dominated by technological rationality. At this stage of capitalism, the reification process takes place through all strata of society, supported by its material capability of providing the masses with sufficient consumer goods and generating artificial needs. As a result, the working class is distracted, and hindered from realising its true interest. This kind of Marcusean view on the dynamic of advanced industrial society was developed in collaboration with numerous projects that the Institute for Social Research undertook in the 1940s and 1950s and he shared key tenets with its members. *Counterrevolution and Revolt* indicates that Marcuse went further on to scrutinise the deeper dynamic of a repressive system with reference to "monopoly-state capitalism", underlining a close binding between economic power and institutional politics. In his view, capitalism in this phase needs the global scale of repressive – yet efficient – apparatuses, "requiring the organisation of counterrevolution at home and abroad to defend the establishment from the threat of revolution". This total reactionary process, as exemplified in the US during the 1960s and 1970s, is prompted by

7 Marcuse (1972), hereafter CR&R.

institutional reorganisation. The social mechanism is fortified against the latent liberation movement and the political system shifts “from parliamentary democracy via the police state to open dictatorship”. Contrary to orthodox Marxist doctrine, Marcuse suggests that a highly developed capitalist society possesses a lower potential for radical social change as the entire population becomes voluntarily subjugated to the rule of capital. While questioning the idea of rationality of the subject itself, Marcuse urges the rethinking of the nature of the social agent in a fundamentally different way from the consciousness philosophy whose tenets strongly underpin Marxist social theory.

His emphasis on sensuality of the subject is crucially complemented by Freudian psychoanalysis. In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse propounds the concept of art with particular reference to “libidinal rationality”, which captures the complementary relation between instinct and reason: “The truth of art is the liberation of sensuousness through its reconciliation with reason... In a genuinely human civilization, the human existence will be play rather than toil, and man will live in display rather than need” (EC: 184 & 188).⁸ Marcuse’s attempt to integrate aesthetic theory into psychoanalytic social theory led him to actively encompass the act of “phantasy” as a mode of “thought activity”, an activity which provides an imagination of a new world and a better life (EC: 144). Contrapositive to rationality of the performance principle, erotic sensuousness facilitates the aesthetic and negating practices. In *One-Dimensional Society*, artistic practice is conceived of as “the Great Refusal”, “the protest against that which is” (ODM: 64), but in the all-assimilating society, even the Great Refusal is negated and absorbed into predominating social

⁸ Marcuse (1974), hereafter EC.

systems and total mobilisation (ODM: 68).⁹ In a totally administered society, even most progressive avant-garde practices are deprived of their subversive capacity, lose their potential of emancipatory imagination, and become part of the structure of a commodity culture. Unlike this pessimistic account, in *Eros and Civilization*, the Great Refusal is reinvigorated as a central aesthetic practice. For Marcuse, art is the only area wherein the creations of emancipatory images of hope, dream and freedom are engendered. Phantasy facilitates the Great Refusal as the aesthetic liberation. In the sphere of phantasy, “the unreasonable images of freedom become rational” and “the culture of the performance principle makes its bow before the strange truth which imagination keeps alive in folklore and fairy tales, in literature and art” (EC: 160). As such, art as an emancipatory phantasy is actively incorporated into the liberation practice in order to overcome reality principles and repressive civilisation. Herein lies Marcuse’s ambivalent approach to the phantasy as an aesthetic practice: the equivocal coexistence of “imagination” and “play”. On the one hand, Marcuse follows Kant’s view on aesthetics, attributing the “imagination” (*Einbildungskraft*) to the mediating function so as to reconcile conventional binaries between reason and the senses, and mind and body in the construction of non-repressive civilisation. On the other hand, drawing upon Schiller’s doctrine of aesthetic

9 Marcuse (1964), hereafter ODM. In his 1945 essay, “Some Remarks on Aragon,” extensively drawing on Whitehead’s procedural feature of reality, Marcuse identifies the notion of “great refusal”: “The real relevance of untrue proposition for each actual occasion is disclosed by art, romance, and by criticism in reference to ideals. The truth that some proposition respecting an actual occasion is untrue may express the vital truth as to its aesthetic achievement. It expresses the ‘great refusal’ which is its primary characteristic” (Whitehead 1926: 228, recited in CP 1: 202 and 214). For recent researches on contemporary social movement from the perspective of the Great Refusal, see Lamas, Wolfson, and Funke (2017).

education, Marcuse brings to the fore the formative role of “play” in combining “the passive, receptive ‘sensuous impulse’ and the active creative ‘form impulse’” (Kellner in CP 4: 36). Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education*, to Marcuse, indicates no less than “a classic example of the romantic protest against the distortions of bourgeois society” (Wolin 2001: 236). Marcuse draws attention to the notion of “play impulse” introduced by Schiller to the aesthetic sphere, wherein beauty primarily serves “freedom” rather than “necessity”.¹⁰ For Marcuse, through play practice, reason becomes sensuous, while sensuousness becomes rational (EC: 180). But are the two tenets – Kant’s critique of judgement and Schiller’s aesthetic education – compatible within Marcuse’s theory of art?

The Politics of Synaesthesia

Despite its psychological components in *Eros and Civilization*, the tension between aesthetic practices and the formation of the subject is not compellingly settled. In my view, there seems to be a noticeable change in Marcuse’s emphasis on the subversive subjectivity from *Eros and Civilization* to *Counterrevolution and Revolt*. This changing emphasis could be dubbed the shift “from existential Marxism” to “left Heideggerianism” (Wolin 2001: 246-252).¹¹ For Marcuse, the

10 Criticizing the destruction of totality of life in bourgeois society, Schiller locates the play impulse at the centre of aesthetic practices: “Reason demands, on transcendental grounds, that there shall be a partnership between the formal and the material impulse, that is to say a play impulse, because it is only the union of reality with form, of contingency with necessity, of passivity with freedom, that fulfils the conception of humanity [...]. Man is only serious with the agreeable, the good, the perfect; but with Beauty he plays” (Schiller 1965: 80).

11 For more detailed historical contexts of Marcuse’s engagement with Heidegger, see Abromeit (2004). In his more recent article, Abromeit (2010)

psychoanalytic approach to the subject is not incompatible with the phenomenological perspective. Rather, both are reciprocally complementary in his attempt to articulate the liberating function of aesthetic practices. Marcuse empathetically underscores that the predominance of technological rationality over the whole of society has brought about new dynamics of social control to an unprecedented extent. The new dynamics have reached not only into the mind and consciousness but also into the perceptual and sensual levels of existence. Thus, he maintains that the new resistance and rebellion against total reification should also operate on the deeper level of sense experience. He brings to the fore the issue of “radical sensibility”, a concept which illuminates “the active, constitutive role of the sense in shaping reason, that is to say, in shaping the categories under which the world is ordered, experienced, changed” (CR&R: 63). A new, political and aesthetic sensibility constructs a vital condition to form an emancipated individual. At this juncture, Marcuse distinguishes his use of “aesthetics” from an idealist theory of art that seeks to identify the essence of beauty in a work of art. As the Greek epistemological root of aesthetics (αἰσθητικός / *aisthetikos*) refers to a study of the human sensorium, in Marcuse’s work the notion of aesthetics increasingly delineates a study of sense perception. While the subject of consciousness philosophy, especially in the Kantian tradition, tends to recognise the object by analysing the sense data which are acquired by the pure forms of intuition, the bodily subject perceives the world to be concrete, material and empirical. By linking emancipatory social transformation with sensual

critically reviews the concept of “left Heideggerianism” which Richard Wolin uses to criticize Marcuse’s lasting inclination to Heidegger’s philosophy.

liberation of the body, Marcuse distances his aesthetics from the Kantian critique of judgement. Marcuse recapitulates the “synthesizing” function of the senses.

“The senses are not merely passive, receptive: they have their own ‘syntheses’ to which they subject the primary data of experience. And these syntheses are not only the pure ‘forms of intuition’ (space and time) which Kant recognized as an inexorable a priori *ordering* of sense data. There are perhaps also other syntheses, far more concrete, far more ‘material,’ which may constitute an empirical (i.e., historical) a priori of experience. Our world emerges not only in the pure forms of time and space, but also, and simultaneously, as a totality of sensuous qualities – object not only of the eye (synopsis) but of *all* human senses (hearing, smelling, touching, tasting). It is this qualitative, elementary, unconscious, or rather preconscious, constitution of the world of experience, it is this primary experience itself which must change radically if social change is to be radical, qualitative change” (CR&R: 63).

Setting aside an ambivalent function of imagination in Kant’s critique of judgement, Marcuse locates the constitutive role of the senses at the centre of the formation of the new subject. The subversive potential of art in a repressive society plays a decisive role in “synthesizing” the fragmented, isolated and alienated senses by using all human senses. Marcuse further seeks to articulate the new dynamic of the formation of the corporeal and sensual subject by integrating the aesthetics of radical sensibility into social and political contexts.

“Thus, the existing society is *reproduced* not only in the mind, the consciousness of men, but *also in their senses*; and no persuasion, no theory, no reasoning can break this prison, unless the fixed petrified *sensibility* of the individual is ‘*dissolved*,’ *opened to a new dimension of history*, until the oppressive familiarity with the given object world is broken – broken in *a second alienation*: that from the alienated society” (CR&R: 71-72).

Likewise, the liberating function of libidinal rationality actively engaged in *Eros and Civilization* is further elaborated in conjunction with the formative role of the senses in *Counterrevolution and Revolt*. Grounded upon the predominance of reason over sensibility, technological civilisation downplays the senses as being passive and receptive and, consequently, mutilates them. The radical subjectivity undoes the alienation of the human sensorium in its totality by synthesising the fragmented senses. For Marcuse, “emancipation of the senses” is associated with the process wherein the senses become not only “total” but also “practical” in the reconstruction of society, generating “new (socialist) relationships between man and man, man and things and man and nature” (CR&R: 64).¹² Marcuse’s aesthetics reveals that the matter of human freedom necessitates the liberation of human sensibility.¹³ Liberation of the senses would enable erotic sensibility to weaken the primary aggressiveness and violence embodied in

12 Marcuse goes on to illustrate the rationality of the senses: “But the sense become also ‘sources’ of a new (socialist) *rationality*: freed from that of exploitation. The emancipated senses would repel the instrumentalist rationality of capitalism while preserving and developing its achievements. They would attain this goal in two ways: *negatively* – inasmuch as the Ego, the other, and the object world would no longer be experienced in the context of aggressive acquisition, competition, and defensive possession; *positively* – through the ‘human appropriation of nature’, i.e., through the transformation of nature into an environment (medium) for the human being as ‘species being’; free to develop the specifically human faculties: the creative, aesthetic faculties” (CR&R: 64).

13 Marcuse gives credence to the active practice of the senses thus: “The senses do not only ‘receive’ what is given to them, in the form in which it appears, they do not ‘delegate’ the transformation of the given to another faculty (the understanding); rather, they discover or can discover by themselves, in their ‘practice’, new (more gratifying) possibilities and capabilities, forms and qualities of things, and can urge and guide their realization. The emancipation of the sense would make freedom what it is not yet: a sensuous need, an objective of the Life Instincts (*Eros*)” (CR&R: 71).

civilisation and would transform the instinctual structure. As such, Marcuse's project of radical sensibility aims to shatter total reification and bring about human freedom against repressive domination. While forgetting derives from the anaesthetic experience of the world and, subsequently, fortifies the reified social relations, synaesthetic perceptions prompt the anamnestic faculty which breaks reification.¹⁴ Marcuse's idea of the subversive potential of sensibility has been scathingly criticised for its biological and instinctual orientation. However, he never lost the critical view that "the emancipation of the senses must accompany the emancipation of consciousness, involving the *totality* of human existence". *Counterrevolution and Revolt* concludes with his speculations as to the pivotal role of art in mediating between sensibility and rationality by generating aesthetic needs. It

14 In a similar way wherein Marcuse articulates synthetic functions of the senses, in the early 1960s Marshall McLuhan, the Canadian media theorist, formulates the synaesthetic dynamics of media space with particular reference to the tactility of TV, then the new media: "The TV image requires each instant that we "close" the spaces in the mesh by a convulsive sensuous participation that is profoundly kinetic and tactile, because tactility is the interplay of the senses rather than the isolated contact of skin and object" (McLuhan 1997: 272). For McLuhan, the rise and hegemony of visuality reveal one of the key characteristics of modernity. In his view, Western civilization fundamentally involves a process of the stripping of senses and the isolation of one sense from the other by means of mechanical 'hot' media (e.g., radio and cinema). The development of printing technology accelerated the isolation of sight from other senses, resulting in the hegemony of pictorialization and uprooting the traditional and collective form of life. At this juncture, McLuhan elicits the emancipatory motif of the media space engendered by the tactile function of TV, that is, a motif that integrates fragmented senses (seeing, hearing, touching and smelling). TV is, above all, "an extension of the sense of touch, which involves maximal interplay of all the senses," and "a medium that demands a creatively participant response": "Synaesthesia, or unified sense and imaginative life, had long seemed an unattainable dream to Western poets, painters, and artists in general.... Yet these massive extensions of our central nervous systems have enveloped Western man in a daily session of synaesthesia" (McLuhan 1997: 333 and 336).

demonstrates that Marcuse never lost his grip on art's subversive potential to transcend the established reality. The political importance of the new subjectivity lies in the fact that the retrieval of radical sensibility necessarily leads to a revolt against technological and instrumental rationality. The aesthetics of radical sensibility aims to give rise to a corporeal subject that is able to transform the reification of everyday life by retrieving the alienated human sensorium, reversing the decline of the mimetic faculty, and reconstructing the fragmented body, that is, a *synaesthesia* of the bodily subject.

It is therefore unsurprising to find that the aesthetics of radical sensibility is deeply interwoven with the liberation of nature and the feminisation of society. On the one hand, the rediscovery of nature becomes an integral part of the radical transformation of society, since nature itself becomes a part of history. The harmonious relationship between man and nature is not only desirable but also essential for the struggle against the instrumentalist rationality of capitalism. Marcuse's critique of technology specifically targets the destructive and exploitative use of technology rather than technology in general. On the other hand, Marcuse finds another key exploitative relation in modern society between men and women. Civilisation has been established on the grounds of a patriarchal culture. Thus, the new formation of the sensuous subject is only facilitated by the feminisation of society. As such, the aesthetics of radical sensibility can be said to hold a great deal of relevance for the development of critical theories of ecology and feminism.

The aesthetics of sensibility greatly contributes to helping critically reappraise two dominant theories in relation to ethics and aesthetics: formalist communicative ethics, which provides an

overly rational version of the subject, and postmodern aesthetics, which overemphasises a passive aspect of the subject.¹⁵ Yet, in *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Marcuse limits himself to underscoring the progressive force of the Cultural Revolution and provides little analysis of “how” the new aesthetics of radical sensibility can maintain transcending potential without losing its political progressiveness. While *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, in general, is rich in profound insights, it is less concerned with providing a more historical and empirical analysis of the interplay between art and politics. *Counterrevolution and Revolt* can be seen as a radical manifesto of the permanent revolution that is at the core of his political thought and as the resourceful theoretical foundation for revolutionary praxis; however, as Marcuse himself points out, there is the unsolved tension, asking: “Does an analysis of the social reality allow any indication as to art forms which would respond to the revolutionary potential in the contemporary world?”¹⁶ This unsolved tension between aesthetic and revolutionary practices is withheld until his final work entitled *The Aesthetic Dimension*.

15 Habermas (1983 and 1991); Lyotard (1984).

16 Marcuse poses a detailed question as follows: “The tension between art and revolution seems irreducible. Art itself, in practice, cannot change reality, and art cannot submit to the actual requirements of the revolution without denying itself. But art can and will draw its inspirations, and its very form, from the then-prevailing revolutionary movement – for revolution is in the substance of art. The historical substance of art asserts itself in all modes of alienation; it precludes any notion that recapturing the aesthetic form today could mean revival of classicism, romanticism, or any other traditional form. Does an analysis of the social reality allow any indication as to art forms which would respond to the revolutionary potential in the contemporary world?” (CR&R: 116).

The Politics of Aesthetic Sublimation

The Aesthetic Dimension, the final work of Marcuse's lifetime, fully devotes critical attention to the matter of the emancipatory potential of art.¹⁷ Noteworthy is that this text was written under circumstances in which global reactions were fortified following the failure of the radical social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. As demonstrated in the previous section, the distinctive aspect of Marcuse's aesthetics lies in its rigid analysis wherein technological rationality reifies not only consciousness but also sensuality at a deep level of existence. The revolutionary subject that he envisages is overpowered by technical efficiency. The radical sensibility that he attributes to the liberating potential is subjugated by the culture industry. Thus, there seems to be no hope of breaking the vicious circle of a totally administered, fetishised commodity society. Under this kind of grim historical circumstance, in which sheer political, pessimist climates predominate, Marcuse revisits the political potential of art by thoroughly reviewing the main doctrines of Marxist aesthetics.

Since the publication of *Soviet Marxism* (1958), Marcuse was always disdainful of orthodox Marxism and its theory of art. The fundamental problem of Marxist theory of art, for Marcuse, rests not only upon its tenet of the totality of the relation of production. Taking the coincidence between the political tendency and the aesthetic quality as historical necessity, conventional Marxist aesthetics ascribes authenticity and progressiveness of artwork to no more than the expression of the collective consciousness of an ascending class. This doctrine results in nothing but the vulgar politicisation of art. Contrary to Marxist aesthetics, Marcuse offers

¹⁷ Marcuse (1978), hereafter AD.

a valiant claim that the subversive potential of art is inherently embodied in its aesthetic dimension. Marcuse offers an outline of his project thus:

“My critique of this orthodoxy is grounded in Marxist theory inasmuch as it also views art in the context of the prevailing social relations, and ascribes to art a political function and a political potential. But in contrast to orthodox Marxist aesthetics I see the political potential of art in art itself, in the aesthetic form as such. Furthermore, I argue that by virtue of its aesthetic form, art is largely autonomous vis à vis the given social relations. In its autonomy art both protests these relations, and at the same time transcends them. Thereby art subverts the dominant consciousness, the ordinary experience” (AD: ix).

Whereas in *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, his view on aesthetics oscillates between Kantian and Schillerean perspectives, in *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Marcuse reinvigorates his earlier view on the liberating potential embedded in modernist art, particularly some of the bourgeois literary works, a view that is sketched out as early as in his doctoral thesis, *The German Artist Novel*.¹⁸ *The Aesthetic Dimension*, as Fischer points out, still engages with the separation between Marcuse’s claims about “the removal of aesthetic from reality” and “his actual use of the concept of aesthetic form”, that is, “the difference between embeddedness aesthetics and aesthetic formalism” (Fischer 1997: 371). This reoccurring problem involves exegetical debates surrounding the nature of art; however, it is noteworthy that Marcuse maintains his position that art, by nature, contradicts the established social order because it transcends the immediate reality through its imaginative representation. He contends more strongly than ever that art,

18 Löwy strongly argues that some of main ideas of *The German Artist Novel* “reappear almost unchanged in *Eros and Civilization* and *One Dimensional Man*” (Löwy 1980: 26).

which has autonomy from the material base of production, can subvert the dominant consciousness not through its political tendency or ideology but through its own unique aesthetic values, consequently shattering the reified objectivity of repressed social relations. For Marcuse, art is revolutionary not because of its purpose or intention to serve the working class but because of “itself”, that is, art’s own aesthetic quality: “The political potential of art lies only in its own aesthetic dimension. Its relation to praxis is inexorably indirect, mediated and frustrating. The more immediately political the work of art, the more it reduces the power of estrangement and the radical, transcendent goals of change” (AD: xii-xiii). What Marcuse empathetically underlines here is that the political dimension of art should be evaluated neither by its content (e.g. the correct representation of social conditions or ideological tendency) nor by its form only. The aesthetic dimension strictly refers to the conjunction between form and truth content. For Marcuse, aesthetic form, art’s autonomy, and inner truth are all intertwined. Each component is “a socio-historical phenomenon” and “transcends” the socio-historical limitations (AD: 9). The autonomous feature of beautiful illusion (*schöner Schein*) constitutes the essential component of artwork, by which its transcending aesthetic quality is to be appreciated. While identifying the idealist notion of the beautiful as an abstract, moral and religious form, Marcuse links radical sensibility with the sensuous substance of the beautiful, that is, “aesthetic sublimation”: “The autonomy of art and its political potential manifest themselves in the cognitive and emancipatory power of this sensuousness. It is therefore not surprising that, historically, the attack on autonomous art is linked with the denunciation of sensuousness in the name of morality and religion” (AD: 66). It is

conspicuous that Marcuse continues to combine Schiller's play impulse with Freud's pleasure principle, but he further attempts to bring forth the sensuous substance of aesthetic experience as the central aspect of politics. For Marcuse, only the sensuous perception of the beautiful object leads life instincts to intensify the rebellion against the repressive principles of contemporary civilisation by invalidating dominant norms, needs and values.

It is hardly striking that Marcuse's over-evaluation of the aesthetic quality of bourgeois art and literature faces a number of criticisms.¹⁹ Despite its overemphasis on the aesthetic form of art, his stress on the sensuous dimension of autonomous art holds critical motives for a new form of aesthetics. Unlike idealist aesthetes, for Marcuse the relation between autonomous art and sensuality is not incompatible. In fact, the deeper, more fundamental theoretical question of Marcuse's aesthetics lies less in his nostalgic romanticization of high art than in his reservation of the subversive potential of mass culture, a culture that is grounded upon total sensual engagement.

The Aesthetics of Left-Wing Melancholy

In *The Aesthetic Dimension*, a crucial question remains unresolved: how a certain mode or style of art can attain political progressiveness without losing its aesthetic quality. In actual fact, this final work deepens the question. It is worth noting that Marcuse finds historical examples of the transcendent aesthetic

19 Kellner offers a sympathetic but nuanced critique thus: "While Marcuse is right that there are subversive elements in classical and modernist art, there are also ideological elements that in turn may undermine the political potential that he valorizes. Marcuse seems to underemphasize here those conservative-ideological elements in high culture in his eagerness to defend its subversive moments" (Kellner in CP 4: 65).

form not only in the German artist novels but also in the Surrealist movement. His 1945 essay entitled “Some Remarks on Aragon: Art and Politics in the Totalitarian Era” draws attention to the fact that the surrealist works of literature by Louis Aragon, Andre Breton, and Paul Eluard unpack no less than the essence of reality in their unique techniques by reshaping language, perception and appropriation. Their works, for Marcuse, serve as a powerful indictment against bourgeois society in which they are rooted. While revealing the revolutionary potential of surrealist art, Marcuse provides a scathing critique, too. Despite its attempt to “energize the revolution”, the Surrealist movement fails to bind art and revolution and, consequently, to “subvert the predominant experience, consciousness and unconsciousness needs of the people” (CP 4: 56). Regarding the debate and split in the surrealist movement in the late 1920s, in particular between Louis Aragon and André Breton, more closed readings of Marcuse’s critical appraisal of Aragon’s position. Yet, in Marcuse’s view, the surrealist failure profoundly strives from their instrumental attempt to utilise art as a direct political tool. In his earlier comments on Aragon, Marcuse explicitly identifies that truly revolutionary, oppositional, authentic art transcends everyday life not by means of “political contents” but by virtue of its “aesthetic form” (“Some Remarks on Aragon”, CP 1: 202-3). The limitations of the surrealist experiment, be it artistic or political, derive from its “direct politicization of art” or, in other words, “its proletarianization or popularization” (CP 4: 183). It can hardly be more evident that Marcuse firmly maintains his deep suspicion of the politicisation of art. Marcuse’s aesthetics consistently shows the separation of the political, ideological tendency from the autonomous function of art: “the political must rather remain

outside the content: as the artistic a priori which cannot be absorbed by the content... The political will then appear only in the way in which the content is shaped and formed” (“Some Remarks on Aragon”, CP 1: 202-3). From Marcuse’s perspective, the transcendent character of surrealist art hinges upon its aesthetic form and its sublime dimension is identified only with the avant-garde technique within high art. It might be controversial as to whether the Surrealist movement remains elitist, decadent and esoteric despite its complex political aspiration to approach the masses. Yet, for Marcuse, popularisation of art necessarily accompanies weakening of its subversive, liberated potential. It is a danger to avoid. Only in this context, Marcuse’s thesis is comprehensible that the poems by Baudelaire and Rimbaud have more subversive potential than do the didactic plays of Brecht (AD: xiii).

It should be noted that while articulating his critical assessment of the surrealist politicisation of art, Marcuse actively draws on Walter Benjamin’s theory of art and politics. Yet, from this very point, both views substantially diverge despite some notable affinities.²⁰ For Marcuse, those seminal modernist literary works by Poe, Baudelaire, Proust and Valery with which Benjamin was preoccupied entail “the historical forms of critical aesthetic transcendence”, exemplifying the non-popularised works “without weakening the emancipatory impact” (AD: 21). Particularly

20 Stressing the romantic dimension of their works, Löwy identifies a parallel between Marcuse and Benjamin in multifold: “both begin with German Romanticism and the problems of art; both move towards Marxism during the 1920s, under the influence of Lukács and Korsch, and both become linked to the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research during the 1930s; both are highly critical of social democracy, hope for a socialist revolutionary transformation, but refuse to join the Communist Party; and they probably met in Germany or in Paris (1933)” (Löwy 1980: 26).

drawing on Benjamin's essay entitled "Author as Producer", Marcuse underscores that Benjamin also rejects "vulgar Marxist aesthetics" by privileging aesthetic quality over political tendency (AD: 53).²¹ Despite a seemingly assenting tone, Marcuse places emphasis on the unsolved issue of Benjamin's concept of literary correctness by criticising that Benjamin only propounds the identification of literary and political quality in the domain of art and only mockingly "harmonizes" the tensions between the literary form and political content without properly resolving their antagonistic interrelation (AD: 53). This conventional – yet inimical – tie, in Marcuse's view, can be untangled only by reclaiming autonomous art, since a work of art is authentic and true by "the content becoming form" (AD: 8). In this vein, Marcuse's even later aesthetics reflects the lasting influence of Heideggerian perspectives. Here, the tension is not reconciled but rather rearticulated as an ontology of art, be it "transcendent" (in a nuanced sense) or "reductive" (in a rudimentary sense). He maintains thus: "The work of art can attain political relevance only as autonomous work. The aesthetic form is essential to its social function. The qualities of the form negate those of the repressive society – the qualities of its life, labor, and love" (AD: 53). Marcuse's lifelong task of integrating the aesthetic dimension into sociological and political dimensions reinstalls his earlier yet enduring position of an idealist aesthete with an emphasis on the autonomous function of high art.

The transcendent feature of art should not be appraised solely in terms of its aesthetic form. Marcuse maintains: "Art does not and cannot present the fascist reality (nor any other form of the

21 Marcuse provides an extensive review of Benjamin's essay on violence (*Gewalt*) in his "Afterward to Walter Benjamin's Critique of Violence" (CP 6: 123-127).

totality of monopolistic oppression)” (“Some Remarks on Aragon”, CP 1: 214). Yet, there is no intrinsic standard by which certain forms of technique can be judged to be progressive or reactionary. As Marcuse himself exemplifies, the aesthetic superiority of Leni Riefenstahl’s film derives from highly developed cinematographic techniques, but its political tendency cannot be appreciated without specific consideration of socio-political dimensions. Furthermore, Marcuse fails to recognise that art’s transcendent quality has been lost since the aesthetic form itself became subsumed under technological rationality, which led to the integration of avant-garde techniques into the culture industry or the massive scale of the media–entertainment industry complex. While he overestimates the autonomous feature of high art in a commodity culture, he underplays the critical potential of mass culture. During the peace protests, Bob Dylan’s songs caught Marcuse’s attention, but his engagement with the political roles of popular culture does not go beyond that of a platitudinous impression.²² Marcuse seems to have more in common with Horkheimer and Adorno, making a sharp distinction between a product of the culture industry and authentic artwork.

The recurrence of his romanticist and idealist idea of art resonates his reserved attitude towards the historical relevance of modernist art, represented by the Surrealist movement. Whereas Marcuse initially conceives of the surrealists in the 1920s and 1930s to be the most radical aesthetic and political challengers to bourgeois art, he does not fully grasp its limitations. In fact,

22 While integrating the songs of Bob Dylan into the contexts of Brecht’s didactic theatre, Marcuse offers his impression thus: “When I saw and participated in their demonstration against the war in Vietnam, when I heard them singing the songs of Bob Dylan, I somehow felt, and it is very hard to define, that this is really the only revolutionary language left today” (“Art in the One-Dimensional Society”, CP 4: 133).

Marcuse misrecognises their shortcomings. Historical limitations of the surrealists rest not upon their active politicisation of art but upon their constrained relation to subjectivity. They failed to sever their aesthetic link with the bourgeois individualist aesthetic form, but Marcuse shows his reservation about the meltdown of individuality and the emergence of collectivity in a new form of art:

“The most revolutionary work of art will be, at the same time, the most esoteric, *the most anti-collectivistic one*, for the goal of the revolution is *the free individual*. The abolition of the capitalist mode of production, socialization, the liquidation of classes are only the preconditions for *the liberation of the individual*” (“Some Remarks on Aragon”, CP 2: 203, emphasis added).

The surrealist influence on Benjamin’s perception of art is evident in his 1928 work entitled *One Way Street*, which comprises a set of aphorisms. Louis Aragon’s *Paris Peasant* and Andre Breton’s *Nadja* provide Benjamin with the theoretical means of aligning a distinctive mode of aesthetic experience with the interwoven process of technological and political practices. In the work of the surrealists, Benjamin finds a continuation of the modernist perception of art as characterised by Charles Baudelaire: “the transitory, the fugitive, and the contingent” (Baudelaire 1995: 12). Contrary to Marcuse’s assessment, for Benjamin, while the surrealists vigorously challenge “the sclerotic liberal moral humanistic ideals of freedom” both aesthetically and politically, they fail to go beyond this European idea of humanism (Benjamin 1999a: 215). In his 1929 essay entitled “Surrealism: the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia”, Benjamin explicitly attributes this failure to the individual subjectivity rooted in their aesthetic practices. For instance, Benjamin likens the key feature of

surrealist aesthetic practices to the gaze of the *flâneur*, the nineteenth-century stroller on the city street. The urban spectacle captured by surrealist aesthetic practice is no more than “a gastronomy of the eye”, coinciding with the gaze of the alienated bourgeois individual. Despite the active employment of technology and radical political practice in opposition to the liberal bourgeois regime, the intrinsic limitations of the surrealists derive from their romanticist understanding of the humanist tradition and their incapability to grasp the emergence of a new collectivity bound up with the expanding cultural spaces. In illustrating the surrealists as “the last snapshot of the European intelligentsia”, Benjamin uncovers that their experiments of art and politics are still deeply rooted in the European humanist tradition. In Benjamin’s view, the Surrealist movement is not fully disconnected from humanist practices founded upon the bourgeois literary public sphere, and fails to articulate an alternative mode of the aesthetic sphere corresponding to the emergence of new popular and mass cultures (Kang 2014: 195-196). In a similar vein, Marcuse profoundly challenges the foundation of idealist aesthetics, but he himself still remains among “the last good Europeans” in Nietzsche’s own terminology. Drawing upon Nietzsche’s emphasis that “Europe wants to become one” in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), Benjamin underscores that the European intellectuals act no more than as “the private citizen” that “we all are trying not to become”.²³

23 Benjamin (1999b: 442). Linking the limitations of Surrealism with an unavoidable failure of the avant-garde movement, Benjamin outlines the key facets of new materialist aesthetics against aesthetic modernism thus: “Nevertheless – indeed, precisely after such dialectical annihilation – this will still be an image space and, more concretely, a body space. For in the end this must be admitted: metaphysical materialism, of the brand of Vogt and Bukharin – as is attested by the experience of the Surrealists, and earlier by that of Hebel, Georg Büchner, Nietzsche and Rimbaud – cannot lead without

Reviewing Marcuse's 1937 essay entitled "Philosophie und kritische Theorie", which appeared in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, the scholarly journal of the Institute of Social Research, Benjamin expresses his critical concern over the institute's over-devotion to rationalism.²⁴ In my view, Marcuse's preoccupation with the aesthetic expression of the beautiful illusion represented by bourgeois literature epitomises him as a "good European" bound up with the humanist tradition and his failure to grapple with a new mode of the publics, which had already begun to shake and lead to a total crisis of European modernity on an unprecedented scale. Benjamin shares with modernists the radical critique of the humanist tradition of art, but goes much further by locating the question of the transformation of modernist aesthetic practice at the centre of the crisis of European modernity. Apart from his critical concerns over the reification of culture, few common elements are left between Marcuse's aesthetics of radical sensibility

rupture to anthropological materialism. There is a residue. The collective is a body, too. And the physis that is being organized for it in technology can, through all its political and factual reality, be produced only in that image space to which profane illumination initiates us. Only when in technology body and image so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the Communist Manifesto" (Benjamin 1999a: 217-8).

24 Benjamin remarks thus: "Critical theory cannot fail to recognize how deeply certain powers of intoxication [*Rausch*] are bound to reason and to its struggle for liberation. What I mean is, all the explanations that humans have ever obtained by devious means through the use of narcotics can also be obtained through the human: some through the individual-through man or through woman; others through groups; and some, which we dare not even dream of yet, perhaps only through the community of the living. Aren't these explanations, in light of the human solidarity from which they arise, truly political in the end? At any rate, they have lent power to those freedom fighters who were as unconquerable as 'inner peace', but at the same time as ready to rise as fire. I don't believe that critical theory will view these powers as 'neutral'" (Benjamin 1999b: 23), cited in Benjamin (2000: 442).

and Benjamin's media aesthetics. Marcuse's project not only shows his lifelong attempt to bring aesthetics into social theory but also explicitly illuminates *the aesthetic dimension* of his revolutionary utopianism.

Despite some valuable points that it has made, Marcuse's project of linking the utopian potential of artwork with aesthetic quality does not seem entirely plausible, due to the lack of mediating categories between art and politics, that is, a critical approach to popular culture. Marcuse's understanding of popular culture is too monolithic to grapple with the multiple interplay between the various forms of media and the human sensorium. Marcuse's project of aesthetics of radical sensibility demonstrates that Marcuse remains a critic of high literature rather than of mass consumer culture as much as the earlier aesthetic avant-garde movements and the surrealists failed to go beyond "left-wing melancholy". Varying forms of public spaces encompassing the cultural and political contexts of everyday lives are articulated by affective communication and the aesthetic experience of the media culture. These features are excluded from Marcuse's analysis of art in general and of surrealist literary practices in particular. The beautiful illusion (*schöner Schein*) that Marcuse continues to privilege as the central component of aesthetic experience is inextricably intertwined with popular culture and the entertainment industry in the age of the media spectacle. In an unfinished novel entitled *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802), Novalis, a mystic author of early German Romanticism, illustrates a medieval poet's lifelong search for the mysterious Blue Flower, a symbol of ideal beauty. As Benjamin notes, the beautiful illusion in the age of the media becomes no more than the technologically reproduced artifice; thus, "the vision of immediate reality" becomes

“the Blue Flower in the land of technology” (Benjamin 2000: 115).
Aesthetics without the public is empty – popular culture without
the beautiful is blind.

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