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Ding Guoqi

*Professor and Director of Marxist Literary Theory and Criticism Research Centre,
Institute of Literature, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, China*
guoqingding@126.com

Art's Commitment to Liberation in Marcuse's Philosophy

Abstract: Art has a liberating function because it stands on the opposite side of a suppressed society; it is deeply connected with the public's daily life and has an inherent characteristic of "catharsis", like describing a good society and identifying with freedom. In the eyes of the theorists of the Frankfurt School, its form is what makes "art" art, while the autonomy of art is what realizes the transcendence and detachment of art over and from society and politics in reality by constructing a new and tangible kingdom of art. Artistic form, artistic autonomy, and the liberation of mankind are the integral parts that form art and they constitute all the elements that are needed in the art world. For as long as art exists, it will keep its commitment to truth, happiness, and liberation. This paper examines the inevitable inherent relationship between art and liberation mainly through discussing and studying Marcuse's theories of art and aesthetics.

Keywords: Frankfurt School, Marcuse, Artistic autonomy, Liberation, Man

"Artistic form" occupies an important position in the theory of Herbert Marcuse, a theorist of the Frankfurt School. It is "artistic form" that endows his ideas with vitality and significance and makes his art and social critical theory unique, which eventually evolved into a theory of social transformation. Reitz once said: "the foundation of the Marcusean protest and the basis of his recommended political activity is not the concrete struggle of classes, nor the historical struggle of ideas. Instead, his program is grounded in the 'activism' of the aesthetic form seeking after the earthly actualization of pleasure, beauty, happiness, and satisfaction".¹ Marcuse's concern for people ultimately settled in his concern for aesthetic issues, and his aesthetic ideas found roots in "artistic form" (aesthetic form). "Artistic form" not only defends the independence and ontology of art, but also performs a very strong function of criticism and negation

¹ Charles Reitz, *Art, Alienation and the Humanities*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2000, 171.

and shows a remarkable ability to transform reality. “Artistic form” ensures people’s freedom and happiness from aspects of nature, as well as artistic and human liberation, and preserves and shapes elements leading to the future of mankind.

Marcuse’s Theory of “Artistic Form”

In Marcuse’s view, “throughout the long history of art, and in spite of changes in taste, there is a standard which remains constant”² This constant standard refers to the standard of artistic form. What makes art art is the existence of artistic form; therefore, form is the reality of art, and it is art itself.

Artistic form is also known as “aesthetic form” which, in Marcuse’s eyes, is

the result of the transformation of a given content (actual or historical, personal or social fact) into a self-contained whole: a poem, play, novel, etc. The work is thus ‘taken out’ of the constant process of reality and assumes a significance and truth of its own. The aesthetic transformation is achieved through a reshaping of language, perception, and understanding so that they reveal the essence of reality in its appearance: the repressed potentialities of man and nature. The work of art thus re-presents reality while accusing it.³

Here, the value of form is similar to mathematical permutations and combinations. As an example, take the configuration of carbon atoms in chemistry: graphite and diamond are so strikingly different in hardness only because their carbon configurations are different. In cinema, the techniques of montage also reflect the relationship of such a reorganization in form: the organization and arrangements of a number of different scenes enable the expression of the film’s theme. It thus follows that different combinations of arrangements will lead to qualitatively different things.

In Marcuse’s eyes, the process of art is one of aesthetic transformation. It reveals the nature of reality through permutations and combinations of a given contents. That is, “the repressed potentialities of man and nature”. To this end, he proposed the concept of “the tyranny of form”. “A work of art is authentic or true not by virtue of its content (i.e., the ‘correct’ representation of social conditions), nor by its ‘pure’ form, but by the content having become form.”⁴ “In the work of art, form becomes content and vice versa.”⁵ “A play, a novel become literary works by virtue of the form which ‘incorporates’ and sublimates ‘the stuff’”⁶ The “tyranny of form” is the inevitable overwhelming trend in a work that prescribes that no line or sound may be replaced and suppresses the immediacy of expression. Not only poetry and drama, but also realist novels must transform the reality, which is their material, and supply its contents and experience with a “heteronomous” power, which will lead to the production of a new awareness and consciousness, to represent their essence as envisioned by art (form).

² Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1979, X.

³ Ibid, 8.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Ibid, 41

⁶ Ibid, 42.

Marcuse believes that stories and plots are roughly similar at different times and in different ethnic groups and that the objects and creative materials they depict can be shared by others, meaning that these “contents” are not what makes a work “a work”. What makes a work a work of art can only be “form”. Furthermore, it is form that removes, dissociates, and alienates a work from a given reality and allows it to enter into its own reality. In this way, the “form” possessed by art itself confronts the effort to withdraw the view which regards art as “the second reality” and to transfer the truth of creative imagination into “the first reality”. Art is not something subordinate to reality; on the contrary, it becomes an independent existence because of its unique form. “Form as art’s own reality, as die Sache selbst.” “Form is the achievement of the artistic perception.”⁷ Discussing art whilst deviating from its form goes diametrically against art.

Of course, form is not haphazardly organized in art. Marcuse believes that the material, stuff, and data of art (words, sounds, lines, and colours, as well as thoughts, emotions, images) are ordered, interrelated, defined and “contained” in the *oeuvre* in such a manner that they constitute a structured whole. “The laws or rules governing the organization of the elements in the *oeuvre* as a unified whole seem of infinite variety, but the classical aesthetic tradition has given them a common denominator: they are supposed to be guided by the idea of the *beautiful*.”⁸ The combination of artistic elements based on the principle of “the beautiful” creates a world of art, a realm of form that brings people consolation beyond the reality for the human soul. It provides people with something “higher”, “deeper”, and “better” that people worship but can never obtain in reality. Different from the established reality, artistic reality in the realm of art is the result of “aesthetic transformation” (formalization) which is a sublimation of real life.

The realm of form is associated with human sensuousness and obeys the principle of pleasure, which confronts the operating principles in reality. Marcuse advocates a return to “immediate” art, because “immediate” art is closely related to the most fundamental, corporeal “sensuousness” of humans. “The search is for art forms which express the experience of the body (*and the ‘soul’*), not as vehicles of labor power and resignation, but as vehicles of liberation. This is the search for a *sensuous culture*.”⁹ “Immediate” art is a kind of real human sensuous art because it is a reflection and activation not only of the intellect and a refined, distilled, and delimited sensuousness, but also of natural experience and feelings freed from social requirements in a declining exploitative society. Marcuse believes the logic implemented by art is one of satisfaction. Behind the sublimated artistic form, there is unsublimated content – art’s obedience to the principle of pleasure. As Marcuse puts it, “The aesthetic form is sensuous form – constituted by the *order of sensuousness*. If the ‘perfection’ of sense-cognition is defined as beauty, this definition still retains the inner connection with instinctual gratification, and aesthetic pleasure is still pleasure.”¹⁰ The art of form is a kind of natural sensuous art.

The discussion above was meant to show that Marcuse’s concept of “form” did not come out of thin air and that it had its profound historical origins in the theory of form. Regardless of its absorption of Aristotle’s constitution theory of “form” and “material”, or the reflection on Kant’s dictum that “beauty originally only relates to form”, or the apperception of the gist of the claim of “art for art’s sake” proposed by “aestheticism”, Marcuse’s identification and choice of “aesthetic form” theories definitely include his own values and ideals.

⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1969, 39.

⁸ Herbert Marcuse, “Art as Form of Reality”, *New Left Review*, 1972, No. 74, 51–58.

⁹ Herbert Marcuse, *Counter-revolution and Revolt*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1972, 82.

¹⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1966, 185.

Marcuse's Thought on "the Autonomy of Art"

"Aesthetic form" constructs a unique realm of form that distinguishes art from "the given" by its principle of "autonomy".

In the aesthetic form, the autonomy of art constitutes itself. It was forced upon art through the separation of mental and material labor, as a result of prevailing relations of domination. Dissociation from the process of production became a refuge and a vantage point from which to denounce the reality established through domination.¹¹

When the division of labour makes art a separate category, art is characterized by its alienation from real life. Marcuse conducted a relatively detailed discussion on this point in his early work, *The German Artist Novel*.

Aesthetic form constitutes art itself, and the autonomous qualities of art endow art with independence and freedom. As Marcuse argues,

to ascribe the nonconformist, autonomous qualities of art to aesthetic form is to place them outside 'engaged literature', outside the realm of praxis and production. Art has its own language and illuminates reality only through this other language. Moreover art has its own dimension of affirmation and negation, a dimension which cannot be coordinated with the social process of production.¹²

In other words, autonomy and form constitute art's dimension of independence, which refuses to join the mainstream in real life.

In a developed industrial society, where everything is likely to be integrated in its given reality, the autonomy of art is particularly important, because a "subversive counterculture today is conceivable only in contradiction to the prevailing art industry and its heteronomous art. That is to say, a real counterculture would have to insist on the autonomy of art, on its own autonomous art".¹³ As a subversive force, art cannot be expected to express social revolt directly; we need to count on art's reliance on autonomy. Among the members of the Frankfurt Research Institute, Marcuse and Adorno both greatly emphasized the political function of art, while their respective understandings of the function of art differed concerning this point. Marcuse emphasized the "autonomy" of art, whereas Adorno focused on the "negation" of art, which means that Marcuse regarded aesthetics as that of liberation and Adorno as that of criticism.

Marcuse tends to highlight and reserve the fundamental "heteronomous" feature of art and culture. In his view, a certain culture is inevitably produced when the bourgeois era achieves a certain stage in its course of development. Culture shows that the mental and spiritual world, as independent realms of value, are superior to civilization, which alienates culture from the civilized world. This alienation remains crucial in developed industrial societies. Only by keeping this alienation will art not be integrated into the established society and become its negation, so that it may be an art of liberation. By contrast, Adorno emphasized art's direct opposition to existing society. For example, he believed that the

¹¹ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics...*, op. cit. 17.

¹² Ibid, 22.

¹³ Ibid, 52.

anti-realistic moment in the modern novel, its metaphysical dimension, is called forth by its true subject matter, a society in which human beings have been torn from one another and from themselves. What is reflected in aesthetic transcendence is the disenchantment of the world.¹⁴

In his *Aesthetic Theory*, *Philosophy of New Music*, *Negative Dialectics*, and other works, Adorno expressed the idea that art in contemporary society should have “negative” characteristics, which he also posited as the highest aesthetic features of art. On the basis of that, he goes further, mounting a “defense against a variety of -isms”; that is, he mounts an aesthetic defence of the rationality of the existence and appearance of a number of schools of modernism, ranging from Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Dadaism, to Absurdism. As Timothy J. Lukes writes,

Adorno believes that relevance is a large part of art’s attractiveness and power. For Marcuse, however, play, harmony, and communality are not improper aesthetic themes, even in contemporary technological society. In fact, for Marcuse, the power of aesthetics is its ability to consider the most irrelevant things, and any attempt to subordinate that ability to this or that ‘proper’ context only impedes the aesthetic contribution to liberation.¹⁵

Marcuse is critical of modern art because it betrays form and autonomy, whereas Adorno fully appreciates modern art in that it confronts the reality and abandons imitation. Obviously, Marcuse’s perspective is more penetrating.

Orientation toward “Truth” in Marcuse’s Artistic Thought

Marcuse’s thought on “artistic form” is infused with more meaningful elements when exploring “form”. In particular, he does not study form merely from the perspective of form, but often combines “form” organically with the fate of human liberation and people’s dissatisfaction with repression in real life so that his thought on form presents distinct and revolutionary practical features, which naturally adds theoretical value and truth to his theory.

As long as art exists, it will keep its commitment to truth; for as long as it is art, it is an existence of “form”. Marcuse argues: “That which it has achieved, shown, and revealed in authentic forms, contains a truth *beyond* immediate realization or solution, perhaps beyond any realization and solution”.¹⁶ “Truth” in art refers not only to the internal consistency and logic of a work, but also to the confirmation of its words, image, sound, and rhythm. Elements of a work, such as text, structure, and rhythm, are an “objective” existence inviting people to identify and recreate, and they constitute the objectivity of the work. “Nor is this objectivity of the *oeuvre*, its general validity, canceled by the fact that those who created it have come from

¹⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, “The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel”, in: *Notes to Literature (Volume One)*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, Shanghai, Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2009, 30–36.

¹⁵ Timothy J. Lukes, *The Flight into Inwardness*, Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania, Susquehanna University Press, 1985, 133.

¹⁶ Herbert Marcuse, “Art as Form of Reality”, op. cit.

bourgeois families: a confusion of the psychological and ontological realm.”¹⁷ This objective existence makes up the eternal true connotation of a work.

In Marcuse’s view, in the world of art the fate of an individual (as described in literary and artistic works) represents not only himself, but also others. “The individual ‘embodies’ the universal; thus he becomes the harbinger of a universal truth which erupts in his unique fate and place.”¹⁸ “Aesthetic form” contains rich contents that are both specific and universal. “The aesthetic form responds to the misery of the isolated bourgeois individual by celebrating universal humanity, to physical deprivation by exalting the beauty of the soul, to external servitude by elevating the value of inner freedom.”¹⁹ The work of art transfers specific and individual content to the general social order to which it belongs. Marcuse’s analysis is definitely profound. In his essay *The Affirmative Character of Culture*, Marcuse explains: “The critical and revolutionary force of the ideal, which in its very unreality keeps alive the best desires of men amidst a bad reality, becomes clearest in those times when the satiated social strata have accomplished the betrayal of their own ideals.”²⁰ These words are equally reasonable. The analysis of the truth of “aesthetic form” enables Marcuse to obtain a proper way to examine existing society.

The realm created by aesthetic deformation is a fictional realm of art, which presents “higher”, “deeper”, perhaps “truer”, and “better” things, as discussed above. “By virtue of this truth (which art alone can express in sensuous representation) the world is inverted – it is the given reality, the ordinary world which now appears as untrue, as false, as deceptive reality.”²¹ Art opens a realm that is unattainable through other experiences where people, nature, and things no longer succumb to the established field of reality, so that the unspeakable is spoken, the otherwise invisible becomes visible, and the unbearable explodes.

The truth that aesthetic form opens is directly related to human happiness. It is with the help of beauty that people make themselves involved in happiness. However, even the beautiful is affirmed by a noble heart in the ideal of art in that beauty contains dangerous destructive power threatening the established way of living. The direct sensuous nature of the beautiful can provide direct sensuous happiness. Marcuse advances the idea that only in art, namely, in the dwelling place of ideal beauty, may happiness be reproduced as culture in the process of the integration of social life. Neither philosophy nor religion, two cultural fields that resemble ideal truth in aspects other than those in which art does, can reproduce happiness as culture. Philosophy increasingly produces distrust of happiness in its idealistic tendency, while religion merely positions happiness in the afterlife. Ideal beauty is a form where desire is expressed and happiness satisfied; hence, happiness becomes the harbinger of truth. “And once it has taken form in the work, the beautiful moment can be continually repeated. It is eternalized in the art work. In artistic enjoyment, the percipient can always reproduce such happiness.”²²

Unlike the field of technology, the realm of art is a universe of fantasy and appearance. However, this appearance is similar to that kind of real quality of threats and commitment to the established reality. The universe of art is organized according to a fearless life image in various forms of camouflage and silence. Although art does not possess the power to realize life or fully express life,

¹⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *Counter-revolution and Revolt*, Boston, op. cit. 89.

¹⁸ Ibid, 87.

¹⁹ Ibid, 92.

²⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1968, 102–103.

²¹ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics...*, op. cit. 54.

²² Herbert Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory...*, op. cit. 120.

still, the powerless, illusory truth of art (which has never been more powerless and more illusory than today, when it has become an omnipresent ingredient of the administered society) testifies to the validity of its images. The more blatantly irrational the society becomes, the greater the rationality of the artistic universe.²³

Marcuse calls this rationality of art “specific rationality”. It is this “specific rationality” that demonstrates the truth of art and meanwhile exposes unhappiness in the given reality to people in the world. “Even the most realistic oeuvre constructs a reality of its own: its men and women, its objects, its landscape, its music reveal what remains unsaid, unseen, unheard in everyday life. Art is ‘alienating.’”²⁴ Human society will never be perfect; therefore, art will never perish. Art’s commitment to happiness and truth will always beckon people to transform reality.

Aesthetic form, autonomy and truth, which work together to constitute the complete contents of art, are interrelated and inseparable in the unity of art. Theoretically the emphasis of “aesthetic dimension” constructed by “aesthetic form” makes Marcuse’s theory of art both a sharp sword to wipe out the unfairness in the world and a mighty weapon to construct a beautiful society. “Aesthetic dimension” casts a ray of hope toward the painful people living in reality, re-empowers them with fantasy and Utopian consciousness, and helps them find the only road leading human society from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom. As the night ushers in the dawn or one is unexpectedly rescued from a desperate situation, the exploitation of aesthetic consciousness will relight the salvation fire stolen by Prometheus so that humanity will re-gather strength to move forward, welcoming a new beginning in ecstasy of hope.

Contemporary Value of Marcuse’s Thought on Art and Liberation

Marcuse’s concern for artistic and aesthetic issues is a modern echo of those unfading wise insights into the unique humanistic value of beauty and art in human history realized through the emphasis of “form” containing a certain kind of unique meaning. In an era of cultural crises, the significance of “form” in aesthetics is that it makes the beautiful eventually become a pursuit of life in the dimension of value.

As a response to the two historical waves of aesthetic consciousness – Plato’s aesthetic consciousness suggested by “beauty itself” and Kant’s aesthetic consciousness characterized by the idea that “the delight of ‘beauty’ and the ‘form’ of ‘beauty’ achieve harmony because ‘human is the goal’”²⁵ – Marcuse’s restatement of aesthetic consciousness symbolized by “form” expresses his sensibility and deep concern in the face of the cultural crisis of humanity. Especially in circumstances when everything is controlled by technical rationality, Marcuse’s reflection on problems concerning technology and art, science and humanity in his thought on “aesthetic form” produces a serious topic of discussion. Concerning *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Reitz argues that Marcuse’s stress on form and autonomy produces a re-evaluation of the concept of “art as art” and the liberating potential of mental labour. In this sense,

²³ Herbert Marcuse, *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1991, 239.

²⁴ Herbert Marcuse, “Art as Form of Reality”, op. cit.

²⁵ Huang Kejian, “Aesthetic Self-awareness and Aesthetic Forms”, *Philosophical Research*, 2000, 1, 52–59.

Marcuse's aesthetic theory thus converts quite decisively from the militant activist positions outlined in *Eros and Civilization* and *An Essay on Liberation* to an explicit reassertion of certain of the most contemplative values and assumptions of classical European aesthetics.²⁶

Humans will never abandon their pursuit of beauty because there is always a gap between reality and the realm created by beauty, and human worship for beauty is correspondingly considered a measure of social progress. At one point, Marcuse distinguished and defined distinctive and advanced concepts in modern Western culture from the perspectives of "quality" and "quantity". In his view,

the advanced industrial countries have long since reached the stage of wealth and productivity which Marx projected for the construction of a socialist society. Consequently, a quantitative increase in material productivity is now seen to be insufficient in itself, and a qualitative change in society as a whole is seen to be necessary. Such a qualitative change presupposes, of course, new and unalienating conditions of labour, distribution and living, but that alone is not enough. The qualitative change necessary to build a truly socialist society, something we have not yet seen, depends on other values – not so much economic (quantitative) as aesthetic (qualitative) in character. The change in turn requires more than just a gratification of needs; it requires, in addition, a change in the nature of these needs themselves. This is why the Marxian revolution in our age must look to art also, if it is to succeed.²⁷

Marcuse believes that advanced industrial society provides a wealth of material goods for the wellbeing of people, which, however, do not bring true happiness; on the contrary, the society "indicates a proto-fascist potential *par excellence*"²⁸ and has fallen into the quagmire of cultural crisis. "One-dimensional" society and "one-dimensional" people condemn this world as a whole to languish in a state of morbidity, and only art and beauty might save such a society without its antithesis. "It (art) is committed to an emancipation of sensibility, imagination, and reason in all spheres of subjectivity and objectivity."²⁹ Faced with such an "integrated" society, art and beauty shed the first rays of the dawn of human liberation.

Marcuse's aesthetic stress on art's resistance to reality and on human liberation is by no means blind; it is proper to position his thought in the framework of value because of the connotation of value itself. Huang Kejian argues that "achieving sublimeness" implied by "tracing origin" indicates the consistency between supreme morality and full happiness.

It is utterly impossible to be fully realized in perceptual human world, but its ethereal light has always attracted people's goodness of heart. This is actually just an 'Ought to be' which has factual and authentic origins of humanity, it does

²⁶ Charles Reitz, *Art, Alienation, and the Humanities*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2000, 195.

²⁷ Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984, 73.

²⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution and Revolt...*, op. cit. 28.

²⁹ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics...*, op. cit. 9.

not belong to experienced or sensuous truth, it is 'ethereal truth' staying with people's real intentions.³⁰

The profound humanities in Marcuse's artistic thought are a "practical investment of human life filled with conscience". Although he did not set a realistic model of the society of the future, the many soulful reminders he brought to human society enable people eventually to realize their potential and achieve happiness in the process of constructing a future society in order to achieve the goal of real freedom and liberation.

Desperation (helplessness) is earthly suffering; hope is the source of happiness; art and beauty arouse hope in people. Marcuse did give us hope!

³⁰ Huang Kejian, "An Introduction to Metaphysics of Value", in: *A Personal Anthology of Huang Kejian*, Guilin, Guangxi Normal University Press, 1998, 350.