Herbert Marcuse and aesthetics for dark times

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Malcolm Miles

The context for this paper changed between submitting the idea for the proposed paper for the Liberating Aesthetics conference in Exeter in the Spring, and its delivery at the event in November. Hitherto, it seemed that the UK was headed for a further decade or more of Right-wing populism and a catastrophic departure from the EU. The latter looks increasingly likely yet a resurgence of the Left since the June 2017 UK general election – when Labour gained 30 seats and 40% of the vote, its highest since 2001 – brings hope for a progressive future. Since then there have been blips, and an unfortunate mess over the Labour Party's approach to antisemitism, while opinion polls veer in various directions; still, after the damage done to the idea of society by successive UK and US regimes since the 1970s (and Mrs Thatcher's pronouncement that it did not exist), and despite continuing inequalities, injustices, social immobilities and civic tensions produced at least in part by austerity, an end to dark times begins to appear viable. Having said that, some of the shine on the Left's renewal has tarnished since the summer of 2017, austerity remains the default economic position, and a cliff-edge Brexit appears likely (as I write in August 2018). In its 9th August 2018 issue, *The New European* adopts a Dig for Brexit parody of the 1940s wartime Dig for Victory campaign, predicting post-Brexit food shortages among other ill effects of the triumph of populist politics in the 2016 referendum. Its centre-fold is a poster showing UK Prime Minister Mrs May looking panic-stricken as she holds a cauliflower, presumably

home-grown, flanked by a pitchfork. Satire is an important tool in political persuasion, now as it was in the 1960s.

Whether art has the same power seems doubtful. It used to be claimed by arts advocates that more people go to art galleries and museums than to football matches, suggesting at least a large public for what the artworld puts on show; but this ignores two facts: public art museums are mainly free while admission to football matches is expensive; and the main public for football is its television audience. Most people in the UK have little direct contact with art. There are examples of artists making significant political interventions, notably Joan Miro's 1937 poster for the Spanish Republic, *Aidez l'Espagne* (sold for 1 Franc to raise funds), his mural *The Reaper* in the Republic's pavilion at the 1937 Paris International Exposition, and Pablo Picasso's painting *Guernica* for the same site. Yet the remorse felt by Miro for the rise of fascism is perhaps more poignant in Still Life with Old Shoe (1937, Museum of Modern Art, New York), painted in Gallerie Pierre, Paris between January and May 1937 (painted in the gallery because, in Paris, he had no studio). This deploys objects from everyday peasant life – the shoe, a bottle, a loaf of bread, and an apple impaled on a fork, with heightened, acidic, almost apocalyptic colours and a scale more extensive than the genre of still life suggests as the table top becomes a horizon. The public for the work was small (and Miro's mural *The Reaper* was lost or destroyed when the pavilion was demolished after the end of the Exposition). Its appeal now may be largely among art historians familiar with it (and visitors to MoMA who see it directly). But my question is whether art's emotive capacity, *which I place at the core of aesthetics*, is better served by studio work of this kind, imbued with deep personal-political meaning, than by more public communications. This is not to downplay the aesthetic as well as immediate impact of Miro's poster, nor its lasting emotiveness in reproductions and art history books; it is to ask

whether aesthetic work is a means for social change. This leads me to revisit Herbert Marcuse's aesthetic theories.

Marcuse's three theoretical positions

There are three phases in Marcuse's development of an aesthetic theory (always a work in progress):

- In the 1930s, seeing affirmative culture as characteristic of bourgeois society, and a factor in the maintenance of repression contextualised by the rise of fascism;
- An optimism in the 1960s, seeing protest culture as evidence of a new sensibility and proposing beauty as a radical other, in the Hippie period;
- Reflection in the 1970s in despair of real political change, and reaffirmation of the radical potential of art in dark times, after the failure of revolt in Paris in 1968.

The three phases initially appear as major revisions, even successive rejections of past thoughts; but they are linked by an essay on French poetry first written in 1945 and heavily revised in the 1970s, drawing on ideas (and phrases) from Marcuse's later writing – from *The Aesthetic Dimension*, first published in German in 1974 (as *The Permanence of Art*) and in English in 1978 – arguing that in conditions of terror, a literature of intimacy – love poems – is the last resort of freedom. The personal is not only political here but becomes like a safe house in an occupied land. This informs Marcuse's later concept of an aesthetic dimension whereby freedom is glimpsed in the negation of the dominant reality, or in art's fracture of ordinary perception. While affirmative culture allowed reality to be unchanged by dislocating freedom to a dream-world, the later separation of aesthetics from ordinary life becomes art's critical distancing. That this can be achieved through images drawn from specific everyday life-worlds is demonstrated by Miro's still life (above).

Affirmative culture

Critical theory was always haunted by the failure of the German Revolution in 1918-19, in an industrialised country where it should have succeeded, and the subsequent rise of fascism in the 1930s. Marcuse stood holding a rifle to defend the new Republic in Alexanderplatz in the winter of 1918 as the city was terrorised by far-Right armed bands (*Freikorps*), saw the failure of the Revolution in January 1919 (with 3,000 people dead on the streets of Berlin), and retreated to his studies of German literature at Frieburg University.

In his doctoral thesis on the artist-novel (*Kunstlerroman*), Marcuse investigates Romanticism, and the dualism of the artist as a social outsider and a need in bourgeois society to conform to a different, dominant individualism based on class interests and codes. In novels from Goethe's *Young Werther* to Mann's *Death in Venice*, the protagonist, an artist or writer, faces tensions between social conformity and artistic freedom. Either artistic liberty is compromised along with personal feelings, or the artist becomes an outsider. The tension between seemingly incompatible polarities is – like all dualisms in critical theory – potentially creative, constructing an axis on which the work of theory is done. The tension takes a general form in Marcuse's later work, as art-society; and with it a particular form as art's rendering of suffering as beauty against the need to refuse to accept suffering and injustice – cited later in *The Aesthetic Dimension*.

Insights from his doctoral research are extended in Marcuse's 1937 essays on 'Affirmative Culture' and 'Philosophy and Critical Theory'. The former begins from the classical Greek separation of practical knowledge from that of the Good, True and Beautiful, which latter are conflated with the ideal life of a leisured class. Poetry is close to philosophy but painting and sculpture – as hand-work – are close to the practices of building and navigation. From

this, as aesthetics becomes a branch of pure philosophy, Marcuse argues that in bourgeois culture – notably Romanticism – a desire for freedom is displaced to an aesthetic dimension:

> By affirmative culture is meant the culture of the bourgeois epoch which led … to the segregation from civilisation of the mental and spiritual world as an independent realm of value that is also considered superior to civilisation. Its decisive characteristic is the assertion of a universally obligatory, externally better and more valuable world that must be unconditionally affirmed: a world essentially different from the factual world of the daily struggle for existence, yet realisable by every individual for himself "from within", without any transformation of the state of fact.[1]

Freedom is imagined but, being radically separated from goodness, truth and beauty, leaves ordinary life unchanged. Marcuse remarks, 'That individuals freed for over four hundred years [since the Reformation] march with so little trouble in the communal columns of the authoritarian state is due in no small measure to affirmative culture.'[2]

Enlightenment introduces freedom as the end (aim) of history: 'With the concept of reason as freedom, philosophy seems to reach its limit.'[3] But in prevailing conditions of unfreedom, to imagine freedom is as if enough, within a transcendental philosophy in a personal mental universe: '… the realisation of reason through factual transformation was unnecessary, since individuals could become rational and free within the established order.'[4] And: 'In a world without reason, reason is only the semblance of rationality; in a state of general unfreedom, freedom is only a semblance of being free.'[5] Thus the quest for freedom as an ideal does not 'extend to the material conditions of existence.'[6]

Then, looking to materialism as the other side of diactical materialism:

> The materialist protest and materialist critique originated in the struggle of oppressed groups for better living conditions and remain permanently associated with the actual process of this struggle. Western philosophy had established reason as authentic reality. In the bourgeois epoch the reality of reason became the task that the free individual was to fulfil. The subject was the locus of reason and the source of the process by which objectivity was to become rational. The material conditions of life, however, allotted freedom to reason only in pure thought and pure will. … [practical reason] means the creation of a social organisation in which individuals can collectively regulate their lives in accordance with their needs. With the realisation of reason … philosophy would disappear.[7]

Similarly, from Marcuse's writing in the 1960s, a society as a work of art would not require art. In critical theory, again, these are creative tensions rather than problems to be solved, and the available resolution may be continuing investigation. Marcuse says that in bourgeois society, 'imagination succumbs to the general degradation of phantasy … [and the idea of] a more beautiful and happier world remains the prerogative of children and fools.'[8] But one purpose of critical theory is to reconstruct the categories through which the world is apprehended, including the marginalisation of the playful and imaginative – a theme much adopted in 1960s protest culture. Theory begins to offer a squaring of the circle of distancing and engagement.

The optimistic '60s

Addressing the Dialectics of Liberation Congress at the Roundhouse, London in July 1967, Marcuse begins by saying he is pleased to see so many flowers but that flowers alone have no power, only that of the women and men who tend them. In the year of the Summer of

Love in San Francisco, before the events of May '68, he participates in an optimism that the world is changing, and a sense that culture, from folk and jazz to the broader shift towards non-market values, is the vehicle. Since the desired change is qualitative not quantitative, that is, culture acts as a medium of values and their rebuilding in face of consumerism and the quantitative shifts of buoyant capitalism.

A key problem is how to rupture the mechanisms of the dominant society which prevent an otherwise realisable freedom. A new sensibility, and the sensuous aspect of protest, echo an idea set out by Marx in his *Theses on Feuerbach*. The difficulty, however, is that if changes in social institutions depend on consciousness of new needs,

> We can formulate the dialectic of liberation also in a more brutal way, as a vicious circle. The transition from voluntary servitude … to freedom presupposes the abolition of the institutions and mechanisms of repression. And the abolition of the institutions… of repression already presupposes liberation from servitude, prevalence of the need for liberation.[9]

Marcuse saw hope in movements for national liberation and student protest; but the desire for freedom is suppressed by consumerism. 'The subjective need is repressed … by virtue of the actual satisfaction of needs, and … a … manipulation and administration of needs – by a systematic social control not only of consciousness, but also of the unconscious.'[10]

How does liberation break through? Through a spontaneous refusal of repression and by a dialectical engagement with consciousness: 'The dialectic of liberation … involves … a break in the continuum of the organism itself … liberation involves organic, instinctual, biological changes at the same time as political and social changes.'[11] Marcuse hopes for a reaction to contradictions within consciousness, of its own logic (as art has its own laws of form), as if in

biological terms. Looking back this seems optimistic, indeed an aspect of the optimism of the time – rather than an outcome of dialectical materialism. Still, biological organisms do change, either adapting to conditions or becoming extinct just as the artist conforms or becomes self-marginalising. Marcuse's optimism leads to the idea of an aesthetic society:

> This means one of the oldest dreams of all radical theory and practice. It means that the creative imagination … would become a productive force applied to the transformation of the social and natural universe. It would mean the emergence of a form of reality which is the work and the medium of the developing sensibility … And now I throw in the terrible concept: it would mean an aesthetic reality – society as a work of art. This is the most utopian, the most radical possibility of liberation today.[12]

The difficulty is how it happens. In May '68, Marcuse pictures 'the piano with the jazz player' on the barricades, and the red flag flying by a statue of Victor Hugo; he also notes a call for a return of the Langue d'Oc by striking students in Toulouse.[13]

Meeting Henri Lefebvre, Marcuse said that students and young technocrats, not the working class, were the revolutionary force in 1968. Lefebvre saw this as arty, pointing to the millions of French workers then on strike. Workers took over the means of material and social production by occupying factories and organising welfare services – perhaps an exit from Marcuse's model of a vicious circle: the new sensibility appears within the dominant society, co-present, not in temporal succession to it. Such change tends to be ephemeral yet awareness lingers in what Lefebvre calls moments of liberation within the routines of capitalism.

The despair of the '70s

The state did not fall in May '68. If the beach *was* under the pavements – as Situationists said, using Lefebvre's words – it stayed buried. In the 1970s, Marcuse justifies his concern for aesthetics in the absence of political change. He reflects:

> Auschwitz and My Lai, the torture, starvation, and dying – is this entire world supposed to be mere illusion and bitterer deception? It remains rather the bitterer and all but unimaginable reality. Art draws z\away from this reality, because it cannot represent this suffering without subjecting it to aesthetic form, and thereby to the mitigating catharsis, to enjoyment. Art is inexorable infested with this guilt. Yet this does not release art from the necessity of recalling again and again that which can survive even Auschwitz and perhaps one day make it impossible.[14]

Art's force is critical distancing, enabling interruptions of routine and modes of perception; and its ability to engage obliquely with reality, opening a crack wherein the ever-present possibility of an alternative is glimpsed. Art's unreality mirrors *and inflects* reality.

> Thus art corrects its ideality: the hope which it represents ought not to remain mere ideal. This is the hidden categorical imperative of art. Its realisation lies outside of art. … the question now arises: are the transcending, critical elements of the aesthetic form also operative in those works of art which are predominantly affirmative? And vice versa: does extreme negation in art still contain affirmation?[15]

Aesthetic form creates a separate dimension, echoing but critically differentiated from the separation of the aesthetics in affirmative culture and Greek idealism. Form, that is, has its own logic. 'Inasmuch as art preserves, with the promise of happiness, the memory of the goals that failed, it can enter … the desperate struggle for changing the world.'[16] And that is

about as much as can be anticipated. Art does not change the world; it interrupts how the world is understood.

A common thread?

Between the 1937 essay on Affirmative Culture and his writing in the 1960s, Marcuse wrote an essay on French literature under the Nazi occupation in which he argues that a literature of intimacy – love poetry, citing Charles Baudelaire, Paul Eluard and Louis Aragon (the latter two members of the French Communist Party and active in Resistance writers' networks) – is the last resort of freedom under terror. The essay dates from 1945 but was rewritten in the 1970s. If love poetry seems a fanciful means to revolt, Eluard's poem *Liberté* was included in a literary review air-dropped by the RAF over occupied and Vichy France in April 1942. Marcuse summarises:

> Art may well try to preserve its political function by negating its political content, but art cannot cancel the reconciliatory element involved … The *promesse du bonheur*, although presented as destroyed and destroying, is … fascinating enough to illuminate the prevailing order of life (which destroys the promise) rather than the future (which fulfils it). The effect is an awakening of memory, remembrance of things lost, consciousness of what was and what could have been.[17]

To me, the radical otherness of love poetry articulates a refusal of terror, reaffirming the human when little else is viable; and indicates another kind of world, its presence in any form within the dominant reality being subversive and interruptive. For Marcuse this is key to art's permanence – its continuing emotive effect regardless of whether the spectator is aware of the conditions of its production – and for me, following Marcuse's arguments in the 1945 essay and his later writing, it is how art maintains a role in political change. The

role is oblique, its presence ephemeral, and its interruptions of dominant narratives have a potential to linger. In dark times this is probably what we have.

References:

Texts used:

AC: Essay on Affirmative Culture (1937)

PCT: Philosophy and Critical Theory (1937)

LAS: Liberation from the affluent Society (1967)

EL: An essay on Liberation (1969)

AD: The Aesthetic Dimension (1978)

AR: Some Remarks on Aragon (1945, republished 1998)

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[1] AC, 95
[2] AC, 125
[3] PCT, 137
[4] PCT, 137
[5] PCT, 137
[6] PCT, 141
[7] PCT, 141-142
[8] PCT, 154
[9] LAS, 179
[10] LAS, 182
[11] LAS, 184
[12] LAS, 185
[13] EL, 30
[14] AD, 55
[15] AD, 58
[16] AD, 69
[17] RA, 212-213