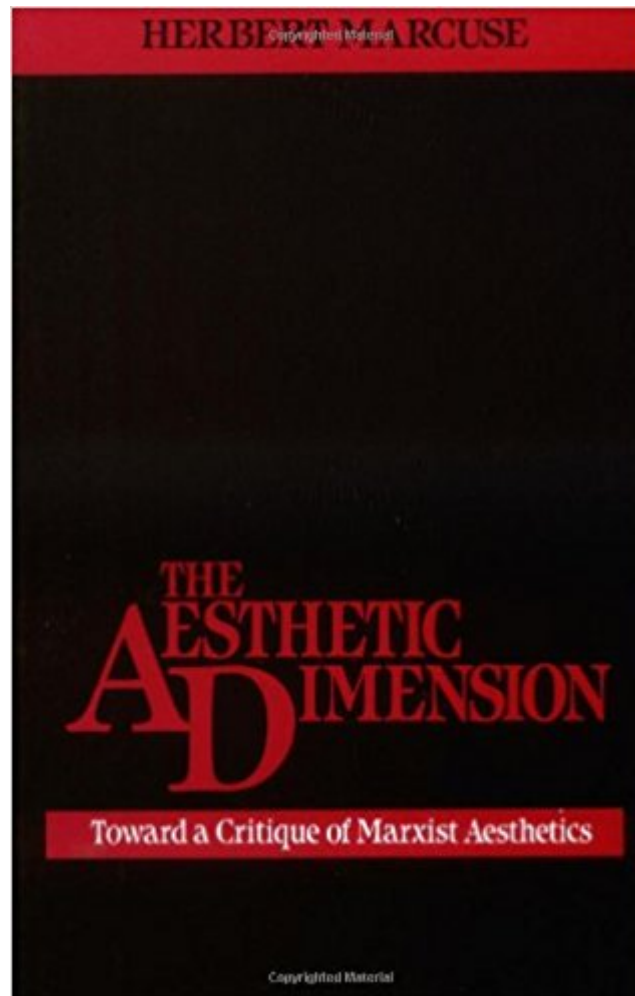




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The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward A Critique Of Marxist Aesthetics



Synopsis

Developing a concept briefly introduced in *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Marcuse here addresses the shortcomings of Marxist aesthetic theory and explores a dialectical aesthetic in which art functions as the conscience of society. Marcuse argues that art is the only form of expression that can take up where religion and philosophy fail and contends that aesthetics offers the last refuge for two-dimensional criticism in a one-dimensional society.

Book Information

Paperback: 88 pages

Publisher: Beacon Press (June 15, 1979)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0807015199

ISBN-13: 978-0807015193

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.3 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 4.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 7 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #315,070 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #88 in Books > Textbooks >

Humanities > Design #512 in Books > Textbooks > Social Sciences > Political Science > Political

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"His insights are genuine and his ... work, with its discussions of 18th and 19th century literature (by implication transferable to other modes of art) has a prophetic quality that suggests new generations will look at the Marxian model as a quaint artifact." — Publishers Weekly "Marcuse has written a study of aesthetics that will be central to intelligent discussion of this subject for some time. It is one of those profound books which simply must be taken into account." — Theory and Society

Text: English, German (translation) --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

time for a return to marcuse

Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) was a German philosopher, sociologist, and political theorist,

associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory, until he moved to the United States in 1934. (He was even briefly one of the "darlings" of the Student Movement of the 1960s.)# He wrote other books, such as *One-Dimensional Man*, *Eros and Civilization*, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, *An Essay on Liberation*, *Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics and Utopia*, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, etc. He wrote in the Preface of this 1977 book,

“This essay seeks to contribute to Marxist aesthetics through questioning its predominant orthodoxy. By ‘orthodoxy’ I understand the interpretation of the quality and truth of a work of art in terms of the totality of the prevailing relations of production. Specifically, this interpretation holds that the work of art represents the interests and world outlook of particular social classes in a more or less accurate manner. 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. Therefore art subverts the dominant consciousness, the ordinary experience.”

He continues, “a work of art can be called revolutionary if, by virtue of the aesthetic transformation, it represents, in the exemplary fate of individuals, the prevailing unfreedom and the rebelling forces, thus breaking through the mystified (and petrified) social reality, and opening the horizon of change (liberation).”

The truth of art lies in this: that the world really is as it appears in the work of art.

He says in the first chapter, “I shall submit the following thesis: the radical qualities of art, that is to say, its indictment of the established reality and its invocation of the beautiful image of liberation are grounded precisely in the dimension where art TRANSCENDS its social determination and emancipates itself from the given universe of discourse and behavior while preserving its overwhelming presence. Thereby art creates the realm in which the subversion of experience proper to art becomes possible: the world formed by art is recognized as a reality which is suppressed and distorted in the given reality.” (Pg. 6)

He continues, “The transcendence of immediate reality shatters the reified objectivity of established social relations and opens a new dimension of experience: rebirth of the rebellious subjectivity. Thus, on the basis of aesthetic sublimation, a DESUBLIMATION takes place in the perception of individuals---in their feelings, judgments, thoughts; an invalidation of dominant norms, needs, and values. With all its affirmative-ideological features, art remains a dissenting force.”

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. (Pg. 7-8) He adds, "The truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality (i.e., of those who established it) to DEFINE what is REAL. In this rupture, which is the achievement of the aesthetic form, the fictitious world of art appears as true reality." (Pg. 9) He observes, "The artist's desperate effort to make art a direct expression of life cannot overcome the separation of art from life. Nor can these differences be bridged by simply letting things happen (noises, movements, chitchat, etc.) and incorporating them, unaltered, into a definite frame" (e.g., a concert hall, a book). The immediacy thus expressed is false inasmuch as it results from a mere abstraction from the real-life context which establishes this immediacy. The latter is thus mystified: it does not appear as what it is and does---it is a synthetic, artistic immediacy." (Pg. 50-51) He acknowledges, "There is in art inevitably an element of hubris: art cannot translate its vision into reality. It remains a fictitious world, though as such it sees through and anticipates 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 realization lies outside of art." (Pg. 57-58) He concludes, "Art reflects this dynamic in its insistence on its own truth, which has its ground in social reality and is yet its other." Art breaks open a dimension inaccessible to other experience, a dimension in which human beings, nature, and things no longer stand under the law of the established reality principle. Subjects and objects encounter the appearance of that autonomy which is denied them in their society. The encounter with the truth of art happens in the estranging language and images which make perceptible, visible, and audible that which is no longer, or not yet, perceived, said, and heard in everyday life." (Pg. 72) This is a highly interesting book, and one which is very different from Marcuse's other, more explicitly political works. It will be of great interest to anyone studying Marcuse, or contemporary aesthetic theory.

In his philosophical work *Eros and Civilization*, Herbert Marcuse outlines his vision of a non-repressive society, where Eros is seen as a liberating and constructive power and how history is a fight against the repression of our instincts. And why are our instincts repressed? In our modern capitalist system, according to Marcuse, this suppression is done in the name of progress and performance. Marcuse's aesthetics is an extension of this worldview. I would like to cite a number of quotes from *The Aesthetic Dimension* and offer a brief commentary on how, in my view, Marcuse's ideas relate to current day American society. Marcuse writes: "The truth of art lies in its power to

break the monopoly of established reality to define what is real. In this rupture, which is the achievement of the aesthetic form, the fictitious world of art appears as a true reality." Think of the advertisements one sees on television. Basically, all the ads are presenting a set, fixed view of what is real and what we as consumers should value - new fancy cars, new colorful cellphones, new drugs to keep us young and happy. Now think of some great American novels: Babbitt, Sister Carrie, Revolutionary Road, A Fan's Notes, A Thousand Acres, The Sportswriter. We have to admit: the reality presented in these novels is quite different than the reality of the advertisers; in a word, the fictional world of the novelist's art is more real. Along the same lines, here is another quote: "Compared with the often one-dimensional optimism of propaganda, art is permeated with pessimism, not seldom intertwined with comedy." Again, think of some contemporary writers, Jane Smiley, Joyce Carol Oats, Richard Ford, Cynthia Ozick, for example. Marcuse's description fits quite well - the world presented in the novels and stories of these writers is, indeed, permeated with pessimism (alienated suburbanites, battered children, suicides, unbearable memories, etc. etc.) and also intertwined with a healthy dose of comedy. Herbert Marcuse writes: "In this sense art is "art for art sake" inasmuch as the aesthetic form reveals tabooed and repressed dimensions of reality: aspects of liberation." I couldn't agree more: our exposure to such art and literature is liberating - the more we are given an opportunity via art to see the dark, repressed dimensions of our world, the greater our freedom. Much better and more freeing than being glued to the pseudo-world of the television. To underscore this point, Herbert Marcuse writes: "Art's separation from the process of material production has enabled it to demystify the reality reproduced in this process. Art challenges the monopoly of the established reality to determine what is 'real', and it does so by creating a fictitious world which is nevertheless "more real than reality itself". I would like to end by quoting the first few sentences of the last chapter, chapter V: "Aesthetic formation proceeds under the law of the Beautiful, and the dialectic of affirmation and negation, consolation and sorrow is the dialectic of the Beautiful. Marxist aesthetics has sharply rejected the idea of the Beautiful, the central category of "bourgeois" aesthetics. It seems difficult indeed to associate this concept with revolutionary art; it seems irresponsible, snobbish to speak of the Beautiful in the face of the necessities of the political struggle." Please take this quote as an invitation to order a copy of this small book and study the many penetrating observations and philosophical insights on the subject of aesthetics offered by Herbert Marcuse.

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