

The Aesthetics of Ideology

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The Aesthetics of Ideology: On the Aesthetic Marx
Robert Sinnerbrink

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In the wake of the Global Financial Crisis, challenges to neoliberalism, and cultural-political tensions over race and gender politics, Marx's thought – seemingly consigned to the dustbin of history after 1989-91 – is once again attracting attention. Samir Gandesha and Johan Hartle's *Aesthetic Marx* makes a distinctive contribution to this revaluation, highlighting the relevance of Marx – as theorist, writer, and icon – for contemporary critical strands of artistic production and cultural-political engagement. The idea for this volume is inspiring but the resulting texts are more mixed, reflecting conflicting tendencies in contemporary scholarship as much as Marx's ambiguous cultural legacy today.

The editors note the pervasive role of the aesthetic – understood to encompass “aesthetic strategies of distinction and the modulations of affects” (xi) – within contemporary capitalism, which has long embraced the “society of the spectacle” diagnosed by Guy Debord. This suggests that it is time to return to the question of Marx and the aesthetic: “How is the aesthetic, the senses and their objects, conceived of in the classical writings of Marx? How does Marx, himself, who always

insisted that he was no “Marxist,” figure in contemporary aesthetic strategies and practices?” (xi). These questions guide the essays collected in this volume. Their sprawling Introduction undertakes a number of contextualising tasks: they underline what they call the post-Nietzschean/postmodernist context that marks the contemporary reception of Marx, the role of Marx in post-Kantian aesthetic theory, and the aesthetic and literary character of Marx's language. They also emphasise the pervasive influence of Marx on key twentieth-century critiques of aesthetic ideology, from Marcuse's 1936 essay “The Affirmative Character of Culture” (Marcuse, 1968), Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984), Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1983), to Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990). To this are added sections on the aesthetic turn in political theory, reflections on the “Machiavellian Marx,” accounts of materialist histories of subjectivity (from Lukács and Benjamin to Negt and Kluge), concluding with some commentary on the figure of Marx in contemporary art over the past 150 years (since the publication of *Das Kapital*) right up to the 2015 Biennale. This overwhelming array of topics and connections is held together by three main claims: the under-recognised role of the aesthetic within Marx's political thought, the significance of style in Marx's texts, and the uptake of Marx by critical theorists as well as artists. To this end, the editors divide the book into three parts, the first focusing on aesthetic issues in Marx's texts, the second on their literary aspects, and the third canvassing a sample of contemporary artists explicitly using Marx, both as textual source and visual icon.

Gandesha's opening chapter offers a fine-grained account, mapping out three logics of the aesthetic in Marx's texts. The challenge, he claims, is to avoid three reductionist attempts to link Marx with post-Marxist aesthetics and politics. The first is to apply Marxist categories to aesthetic discourse, the second is to cherry-pick Marx's comments on art and submit them to interpretation and analysis, and the third, following Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Rancière, is to argue that all radical attempts to theorize the political are dependent on figures of the aesthetic (3). The latter move results in the claim that the “aesthetic-political” comes to refer to “all aesthetic dynamics that cross (and confound) the hegemonic orders of reason and the established channels of perception” (3). All three strategies, Gandesha

contends, underplay “the aesthetic potentials of Marx’s work itself,” which displays three identifiable logics of the aesthetic (4). The first, to be found in Marx’s early critiques of Hegel, concerns sensuous perception; the early Marx “develops a “transformative critique” of Hegel’s understanding of the labour of the concept and develops a sensuous-practical concept of labour” that would inform his later work (4). The second logic concerns the transformation of the senses as the work of history itself. It appears in *The Communist Manifesto*, which shows how the transformation in capitalism, in particular the objective forces of production, will “transform the conditions of all aspects of life,” presumably including art. This radical transformation of society and culture – “all that is solid melts into air” – was supposed to lead to the *radical transformation of the senses* that would enable the proletariat to “perceive the “real conditions” of social life” with a social vision of co-operation and equality. This transformation of the senses would thereby lay the groundwork for the “genuine realization of the totality of human power, of species-being (*Gattungswesen*) in communism” (4). Whatever one makes of this claim philosophically, it gives way to the third logic of the aesthetic, found in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, where Marx modifies the linear, teleological conception of the history of productive forces culminating in communist revolution, proposing the idea of history as the repetition of previous forms of representation that inhibit such a production (4). Instead of a dictatorship of the proletariat we find the “farcical triumph of Louis Bonaparte” “under the aegis of the party of order” (4). For Gandesha, the role of the aesthetic, in this third logic, is to serve as a hermeneutic model “through which the compulsion to repetition could be broken” (4) – an aesthetically oriented, decidedly “modernist” (or Deleuzian) attempt to free the future from the past via differential repetition as the creation of the new (17–19).

A couple of authors take an historical comparative approach to Marx. Henry Pickford examines the Aristotelian underpinnings of key concepts in Marx such as *poesis* and *praxis*, the concept of *aesthesis* (the basis of aesthetics), and the distinction between change/movement (*kinesis*) and activity (*energeia*). Although the classical Aristotelian model of production appears under the guise of labour in modern political thought (Arendt and Habermas), Aristotle’s second model of production (as

energeia but also *poesis*), involving activities that have their goal or *telos* outside of themselves, appears in Marx’s work in the account of labour as an expression of our human species-being. Moreover, Aristotle’s conception of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) as involving practical perception, along with social aesthetic production, has fruitful potential, Pickford argues, for “a Marxist-inspired *practical* aesthetics” (23).

Johan F. Hartle compares Marx and Freud, focusing on the concept of free association, which does different service for each thinker (the egalitarian community of producers versus the technique of the “talking cure”). Hartle suggests a convergence between Marx and Freud concerning “a specific method that echoes a specific dimension of aesthetic rationality” (85) – a subversive use of reason that disrupts established orders of representation (87–88). Sami Khatib considers, in a textually focused manner, the “aesthetics of real abstraction,” that is, the sensuous representational/metaphysical aspects of the abstract dimension of value at the heart of commodity “fetishism”. He explores the parallel between linguistic value and economic value, and the underlying exploitation concealed by the dialectical abstractions of value, as well as the “theological,” symbolic, and allegorical mystifications to which it gives rise within capitalism. Readers perplexed by what this densely deconstructive analysis of value has to do with aesthetics are reminded that it does not refer to its philosophical senses but rather to an analysis of the logic of real abstraction operating in commodity exchange.

In Part II, authors turn to the literary, rhetorical, and aesthetic aspects (in the narrower sense) of Marx’s texts. Anna-Katharina Gisbertz discusses the influence of Friedrich Theodor Vischer’s writings on Marx’s early interest in aesthetics and critical engagement with German idealism. She points out the explicit study of Vischer’s texts evident in Marx’s notebooks, especially Vischer’s account of “the active role of the subject in the appearance of the beautiful” and the role of imagination against abstraction and “mechanical materialism,” along with “the role of myth and its relation to poetry old and new” (97–98). Vischer’s account of comedy and sublimity – mediating the Hegelian understanding of these concepts—also played a role in the young Marx’s transition from poetry to philosophy to politics.

The young Marx was clearly influenced by Vischer's account of aesthetic wholes, and although the later Marx eschewed this early aestheticism, the ideas of tragedy and comedy continued to shape his thinking with regard to history and politics, later turning to the "idea of farce as an unredeemed aesthetic form" (105). From tragedy to comedy to farce as a "grotesque repetition," for Marx history becomes an "inverted world" that needs to be revolutionised "to fight the "sublime" Prussian power" (105).

Hayden White's "Marx: The Philosophical Defense of History in the Metonymical Mode," from his 1973 book *Metahistory*, is presented in abridged form. It is included for its account of the "problem" presented by culture and art, from a dialectical materialist perspective on history. Art seemed to be accorded a "loose determinism" in order to account for its transhistorical value, which remained a "mystery" that "not even the theory of "commodity fetishism" could clear up" (111). The work of art could be thought of as "a simulacrum of the commodity" that literally presents itself as a product of human labour rather than a token of the wealth of its owner (112). Art is a commodity that resists the "expropriative relation of its market existence"; it is a manifestation of *free* labour, while artists could be regarded as "an avatar of the free worker in an ideal future society" (112). White acknowledges, moreover, that his treatment of Marx in *Metahistory* is susceptible to the charge of "Formalism," the view that Science (whether of history or economics) was a matter of form as much as of content, but defends his approach as aiming to show "how Marx's historiographical writing might be better understood as a work of art rather than as the kind of science he himself had hoped to create for a better understanding of history" (112). Without going into the details of White's formidable analysis, it is clear that aesthetics plays a central role in his account of Marx's approach to the historical field in "Metonymical mode". It is also relevant for his thesis that Marx's thought has recourse to a set of "tropological structures" – above all the strategies of Metonymy (for the severed condition of humankind in its current social state) and Synecdoche (for the glimpse of unity evident at the end of history) – as a means of developing "a comprehensive image of the historical world" (115). Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, and Irony offer not only means of conceptualising meaning, according to White, but also "the

categories by which such self-conceptualizations are to be comprehended as *stages* in this history of any aspect of the Superstructure" (146). This tropological system of categories provided a basis for Marx's categorization of different classes of events "and the stages through which they pass in their evolution from an inaugural to a terminal condition" (146) – from repeated tragic conflict to the comic resolution of the process at the end of history.

Terrell Carver argues that Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* offers a novel account of how "aesthetic practices are crucial to political action" (151). Taking "the aesthetic" in a broad sense, Carver focuses on Marx's use of imagery in his texts, coupling this with "an imputed visual imagery common to the period" (152). He takes Marx's journalistic pieces as performative political interventions that have a strongly aesthetic character; *The Eighteenth Brumaire* thereby becomes a key work of political activism, especially given the rhetorical effects of Marx's colourful language, his "extravagant imagery, withering scorn, and scathing satire" (155). Marx's famous (Hegelian) aperçus – concerning repetition in history, first as tragedy, then as farce, and about history as freely made by "men," but not in circumstances of their own choosing – are taken as emblematic of the performative political aesthetic in this text, one geared to arouse the emotions through striking imagery and to activate our political imaginations for a revolutionary repetition of the past.

Inspired by Althusser's analysis of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Daniel Hartley analyses Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* as a text on aesthetics that also serves as political allegory. He uses it to read the young Marx's texts in order to reveal an implicit aesthetic logic within "Marx's developing theory of revolution and the state" (165). Reading these texts together reveals an aesthetic element to Marx and a political slant in Schiller: "a radical Schiller and a young Schillerian radical" (177). Here, as in a number of other essays, the aesthetic serves as a catalyst to explore the productive intersections between Marx and a variety of other thinkers.

In Section III, the authors turn to the relationship between Marx and art, focusing on how (political) artists have taken up Marx in different ways. Boris Groys reflects

on how Marx (and Engels) anticipate the shift from individual artwork to the collective installation work, particularly those “that are designed as a means to reflect on the contexts of art production and functioning” (187). Commenting on Suprematism (Malevich), Groys points to the manner in which such works, precisely because of their “context-free” presumptions, prompt a Marxist reflection on “the dependence of art on its social, economical, and political context” (188). Russian artists El Lissitzky and Ilya Kabakov used Malevich’s Black Square as the starting point of their artistic practice, rendering visible the implied background or “infectious context” of the work (190). Indeed, contemporary installation art similarly occludes the “violence” of the social and political orders that underpin their self-presentation of autonomy and artistic independence. Russian Constructivism embraced the destruction of the individualist work in favour of a politically engaged art serving the purposes of revolutionary society. El Lissitzky, for example, drew a parallel between “the sovereign, creative freedom at the core of the Soviet experiment and the creative freedom of the artist as author of an installation that reflected this freedom” (192). Kabakov, by contrast, critically reflected the reification of this artistic freedom “after it was officially and institutionally installed by the Soviet Power and took a certain definite form” (192). Groys’s fascinating discussion of these artists’ work shows how aesthetic experimentation can be coupled with political expression, especially when installation art engages critically with its social contexts of production and circulation.

The final three chapters canvass contemporary art that activates either the spirit of Marx’s ideas or deploy his image for artistic and political purposes. Robin Greeley considers Conceptual art in Mexico after 1968, a time when the legacy and import of Marx’s philosophy and its relationship to aesthetics and to political action were central concerns. The aesthetic activist use of Marx, commemorating his death as an occasion for political engagement (205), led to “experiments in direct democracy” taking the form of collective art actions occurring in the street rather than the gallery (211–212). Such art interventions showed the political potentiality of Marx’s thought in a volatile social context.

Sven Lütticken turns to film, exploring contemporary cinema art projects that can

be viewed from the Jamesonian perspective of “cognitive mapping”. These films both map contemporary social reality under conditions of economic destabilisation, and foreground their status as cultural commodities that are both produced and distributed within globalised networks. Sekula and Burch’s *The Forgotten Space* (2010) examines “ocean transport and the labor conditions it entails,” reflecting on the notion of “abstraction” both in social-economic and aesthetic terms (232). Alexander Kluge’s *News from Ideological Antiquity* (2008) offers a more streamlined version of “filming Capital,” one that seems “almost over-adapted to the productive logic of the present” (233). Revisiting Eisenstein’s aborted plan to for a film version of *Das Kapital*, Kluge presents a “seemingly endless series of segments “which consist of conversations between Kluge and various cultural practitioners as well as mock historical figures. He abandons any Eisensteinian dialectical montage in favour of a televisual “flow” of abruptly juxtaposed talking heads, offering an “open-ended dialectic of intermingling discourses that regularly collapse into virtuoso sophistry” (233). Other essay films explore different ways to “film Capital,” from lecture-performance presentations of the idea of “mass-art production” (Hito Steyerl) to Ehrmann and Farocki’s *Labour in a Single Shot* (2015). The latter offers a controversial assemblage of footage covering workshops with the underprivileged across the globe, which Lütticken criticises as problematic because of the unacknowledged debts of Ehrmann and Farocki’s “networked” approach to collective authorship (245). John F. Hartle’s concluding chapter focuses on representations of Marx in contemporary art, showcasing an array of artistic uses of Marx’s image – from posters, photographs, drawings, sculptures, installations, and videos – in political art aiming at mobilising activists, energising critique, and tapping the latent radical energies of Marx’s iconic image.

Aesthetic Marx offers a fascinating array of texts dealing with Marx and aesthetics, aesthetic elements in Marx’s texts, and the artistic uses of Marx (and his image). The contributors remain mostly focused, however, on the academic reception of Marx or bringing Marxist thought to bear on contemporary artistic problems. Despite the virtues of these approaches, there could have been more exploration of how Marxist ideas have been adapted across a range of contemporary aesthetic and political theories (critical theoretical analyses of the new “attention economy”

(Bueno, 2017), for example, or the commodification of affect, attention, and experience as an intrinsic feature of contemporary “cognitive” capitalism (Beller, 2006)). Although Marx the thinker, writer, or icon retains the potential to energise aesthetics and politics, it is the Protean plasticity of Marxist critique that allows it to be critically and creatively adapted within our post-Marxist capitalist world.

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Biography

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