

Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, and the Motivation to make Political Art

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In this paper I re-explore the relations which do and which should hold between art and politics. I reaffirm the traditional Marxist view that there is an overlap between socialist politics and aesthetic activity from which both politics and art should benefit. In particular, I argue that in some historical circumstances criteria of aesthetic evaluation coincide with criteria of political worth so that an aesthetic motivation exists to make political art. Artists and socialists have too often failed to recognise this coincidence and so have failed to develop a thriving and insightful tradition of popular art; I think not just of Zhdanovist strictures on Soviet art, also of the abstract expressionists' antipathy to politics, and of socialists' antipathy to abstract expressionism. There are institutional causes of this divorce between artists and activists; these are not the topic of the present essay. Here I concentrate on some theoretical oversimplifications which exacerbate the difficulty of creating genuinely popular and political art forms.

Consider two extreme views. On the one hand, it is held that art and aesthetic concerns should be subordinated to political imperatives, or indeed that aesthetic value is reducible to social and political value. Art then becomes an instrument of education, propaganda or pacification. This was the position of Zhdanov in the Soviet Union, at least after 1936. It is the position implicit in Roger Taylor's recent book, *Art, An Enemy of the People* [1]. Taylor holds a populist political stance, and repudiates the fine art tradition which, he argues, has not fostered working class interests. It is the tendency encouraged by Raymond Williams' literary theory. For Williams rejects the concepts of 'the aesthetic' and 'aesthetic value' without replacing them with alternative criteria of quality in writing [2].

On the other hand, it is held that social and political concerns are irrelevant to art and to judgments of aesthetic value. This is the view of the 'art for art's sake' theorists. It is also the position of Herbert Marcuse who argued that the subversive potential of art lies only in the 'aesthetic form' which liberates Eros and celebrates human subjectivity in a way which transcends every 'realistic' political programme, capitalist or communist [3].

In arguing that there is a middle ground between these extremes I return to the 1930s debates on aesthetics and develop my own views through

exposition and criticism of the theories of Walter Benjamin and Georg Lukács. First it is necessary to clarify some conceptual issues.

I Aesthetic Values

Whatever its conceptual ancestry, and whether or not its roots lie in repressed human desires, the concept of aesthetic value is useful as a summary of the marks of quality demanded in, for example, novels, poems and paintings. Here I simply list some values which have been central in the art critical tradition and which Marxists have emphasized. I will refer to these values in the later argument.

Consider the cognitive value of art. Music, poetry and films can give us insight into human life and the structure of human emotions. Without such depth of insight, otherwise interesting works tend to become, we say, merely decorative.

On the other hand, consider the importance of the exemplified and expressed properties of artworks. These 'formal' properties give the pleasant or jarring tone we experience in seeing a film or in walking round a building. Without them, the insight given by the artwork is indistinguishable from that of sociology or psychology. Yet these exemplified and expressed properties themselves partly constitute the cognitive content of the work. Much of the human interest of Franz Kline's paintings, for example, arises from the exemplified properties of the works. The conflicting and crossing brushstrokes and gestures coexist as a 'construction' in a relatively stable equilibrium. We see how the equilibrium comes from the meeting of strong, heavy forces. The model is taken from mechanical engineering, but in Kline's work it is metaphorically extended to the human psyche and human relations; such insight into human life grows out of the purely 'formal' qualities of the work.

Turn to another type of aesthetic value, the value of artistic progressiveness. Artistically progressive works or styles open the way for future artists to explore fruitful new problems. Cézanne's work is a paradigm case of artistic progressiveness.

Finally, consider the Utopian and life-affirming aspects of art. As Marcuse has emphasized, art can keep alive ideals which are repressed in existing society; it can express unrealized hopes of peace,

reconciliation and joy; the beautiful work can offer 'the promise of happiness'.

Just as the exemplified formal structures of a work cannot be ignored in evaluating its cognitive content, so they partially constitute its artistic progressiveness and its Utopian content.

The values I have listed above may not be the only aesthetic values or the analytically basic aesthetic values. I claim only that they are aesthetic values and that they have been accepted by artists and critics from many traditions. American abstract expressionists, Irish traditional singers, and the English political poets of the 1930s would have accepted these values, their relevance being confined neither to the twentieth century nor to capitalist society.

II Ways for Art to be Political

What is political art? It is not simply art that happens to be politically effective. For almost any artwork can be used for almost any political purpose. just as almost any painting can be used to cover a damp patch on the wall. Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* would be equally politically effective as weapons with which to hit fascists on the head. Any piece of music might trigger the memory of one politician while lulling another to sleep, with grave political consequences. Such examples, of course, show nothing specific about art or politics because in these cases the political import and effectiveness of the work does not derive from its symbolic functioning. The interesting cases are those in which the political import and effectiveness of the work derives from its use according to the appropriate symbolic rules.

In art, as in other forms of symbolism, reference to objects, events or properties is rule-governed and context-dependent. Terry Eagleton correctly insists that the rules and conventions which constitute the meaning of the artwork are not given once and for all when the work is made; they are themselves produced through the labour of interpreting and re-interpreting the artwork [4]. Yet these rules and conventions are not produced through purely arbitrary interpretations; our interpretations are and should be guided by the physical structure of the work and its relationship to other works.

The question of how the rules of artistic reference are constituted is a difficult one, to be discussed in somewhat more detail below. Here I point out that two extremes are to be avoided: a consumer-orientated, Humpty-Dumpty relativism, where 'the work means what we want it to mean'; and an essentialist approach where the full meaning of the work is given prior to any interpretation. When both these extremes are avoided, rational argument about interpretation becomes possible and we can say that some uses and interpretations of artworks are appropriate, others inappropriate.

Consider some ways in which artworks may be political in virtue of their symbolic functioning. (a) An artwork may participate in forming political and cultural ideas; it may become a common point of reference for a social group when it articulates their ideals [5]. Eisenstein's revolutionary films, for example, informed, reinforced and legitimated the beliefs and ideals of a generation of Soviet workers. Political art of this type requires an underlying social movement whose ideals it articulates and partly defines; without a growing socialist movement, art which proffers socialist ideals will not become a common reference point. Thus it would be idealism to assume that artists could create such political art, in any circumstances, by their own efforts. We may hope to work towards a social

situation in which art becomes popular and integrated into all other aspects of social life in this manner but the question remains open how art can and should articulate political ideals.

(b) Artworks may be directly and narrowly political by fostering the policies of specific political parties. Some Soviet artists purposely made pictures propagandizing against grain-hoarding or for the collectivization of agriculture; Soviet cultural policy after 1936 was in favour of such party-political art [6]. Yet to argue that all art should be political in this way is totally to subordinate aesthetic value to political worth; aesthetic interests are not granted even relative autonomy with respect to immediate political aims. There is thus no *aesthetic* motivation to make such political art.



(c) Artworks may directly refer to social and political issues without being narrowly party-political. Goya's 'Disasters of War' are a condemnation of French Imperialism, Heartfield's photo-montages are clearly anti-Nazi without being specifically pro-Communist Party. It is not immediately clear why there should be an aesthetic motivation to make works with such a social content, and I will return to this issue in the following section.

(d) Artworks may be political in that they change the political relations of domination in the art world. Brecht's epic theatre promoted closer interaction between author, actors and audience. Many Irish traditional musicians are presently turning away from publicity and record companies and playing for groups of appreciative listeners. In such cases the political economy of the art world is challenged, the existing authority structures are changed and new social relations of production formed.

The relations of domination in the art world are not confined to political economy or to the context of artistic production. There is also dominance in aesthetic matters, where powerful persons combine to define what counts as a new style, as aesthetic quality or as creative direction of work. It can become a political act to challenge the ideological hegemony of these figures.

Further, the relations of domination in the art world themselves help reproduce the class structure of the wider society; ability to 'cope' in the art world is at once a product of an upper middle class education and a partial entry ticket to a privileged social position. Thus challenging the political structures of the art world may itself have wider political effects; a flowering of radical artistic genres gives impetus, spirit and direction to radical movements.

It remains an open question, to which I will return below, whether there is an aesthetic motivation to change the politics of the art world.

(e) All art has indirect social content and political import in that all art informs our perceptions, emotions, thoughts or general outlook and thereby affects our actions. The artist is a social being whose ideas, ideals, preferences and reactions are formed and coloured by his/her social relationships. The style chosen by an artist is not simply an acceptance or rejection of a previous form of art; the choice expresses the artist's social experience which makes a certain form of, for example, minimalist painting seem the only honest and direct mode of communication open to him/her. In giving a particular expression of their experience of social forces, artists show to us the given social reality and indirectly suggest the attitude which should be taken towards that reality. Yet the artistic meanings which affect our outlook and attitudes are themselves constituted in artistic activity which only exists in a given form because of the given social economic and political institutions. Thus existing social norms partially constitute artistic meaning while art itself participates in changing social norms.

I think that this analysis is accurate; however, to say that all art is therefore political is to extend the term 'political' quite far from its usual meaning. While all artworks implicitly express attitudes towards existing reality, some - like Clifford Still's paintings or William Carlos Williams' poems - at most educate our perceptions towards a more honest understanding of ourselves or a more sensitive appreciation of personal relationships. Such works may make us more sensitive, honest and open human beings, qualities to be encouraged in social life, but they are compatible with many directions of political action.

One might, like Marcuse, extend the argument further by suggesting that all art tends to increase our awareness and appreciation of human subjectivity. Even if this were true, we would again be stretching the term 'political' in claiming that all art was therefore political.

Not all art is political in senses (a), (b), (c) or (d), nor is it clear that all art should be political in those ways. We can think of works - abstract painting, symbolist poetry, even Cézanne's paintings and Stendhal's novels - which seem to meet the criteria of aesthetic value discussed above but which do not seem to be political in any of these senses. Thus the aesthetic motivations to make political art remain unclear.

Equally it is unclear that art which is political in these senses is effective in bringing about socialism. Many documentary artists in the USA in the 1930s felt that their work was neither politically effective nor of high aesthetic quality; they turned to abstract expressionism in the 1940s, despairing of changing the world through their art, hoping to change themselves. The actual political effectiveness of Brecht's innovations also remains questionable; did they win many, or any, converts to socialism? Marxists who are concerned only with making a revolution might well argue that artists would be more effective selling party newspapers than making poems and pictures.

The most straightforward interconnection between art and politics was discussed in category (e). This, however, raises a new set of problems with respect to the artist's intentions and aims. If all art has social content and political import, why should the artist bother to consider social life at all? Even if the artist is concerned with social life, what is he/she to do about it? For the artist's intentions are not always realized and the public meaning of the artwork may not correspond to the artist's own political commitments; think of Balzac and Zola. But if political commitment is so

divorced from political effect, the socialist theorist and the working artist have problems on their hands.

The crucial problem is that there is often a discrepancy between artists' intentions and their results, a discrepancy which is not simply the result of artists' lack of skill. I shall argue that it is precisely this problem which, in some historical circumstances, provides the aesthetic motivation to make art which is political in senses (c) and (d).

III Two Views of the Political Action of Art:

Lukács and Benjamin

Recall Georg Lukács' analysis of the relations between the aesthetic quality, the social content and the political import of the artwork [7]. Lukács holds that the best art - Shakespeare, Balzac, Tolstoy - most fully reflects the nature of the artist's society. Art is political in its mediation of reality; contemporary art should increase our consciousness of the real nature of our present social situation and possibilities.

For Lukács, as for Aristotle, art is the 'imitation' of an action. Since human action is integrated by the intentions or values guiding the action, so art must express an analogous integration and sense of human values. Since action involves interaction with others, and is most serious when the tensions and contradictions of the wider society are crystallized in the action, so such serious and typical activity is the proper subject matter for art. Anna Karenina, for example, lives out the social contradictions faced by every bourgeois woman; she is heroic only in honestly facing her situation and in refusing compromises. Such art, for Lukács, can only show human strength and human potentialities by situating the action in its social context.

In the above sketch of Lukács' view, the notions of 'imitation' and 'action' remain far from clear. To be adequate to the full range of art forms, 'imitation' cannot simply mean the copying of the appearance of the action, and the meaning of the term 'action' must be broadened to include such actions as emotional transformations and perceptual activity, and the actions of social groups. Yet Lukács' basic point is, I think, both plain and plausible. He argues that artists can only show us the depth of human passions, virtues and vices if they show these qualities emerging in social interaction in response to institutional oppositions and conventional wisdom. The portrayal of such properties, he suggests, can only be trite if they are shown in abstraction from this social context. If, as Marx noted [8], our emotions and even perceptions are formed and defined by their objects, then the very description of human life involves its situation in a social world. Thus Lukács has argued that if artists are to make works of high cognitive value - one of the marks of aesthetic value discussed above - they must realistically portray their own social world. It follows that there is an aesthetic motivation seriously to examine and portray one's own social milieu. One can accept this argument without accepting Lukács' other view, that stream of consciousness literary techniques cannot be realistic; since portrayal of society may take place through allusions, rather than by direct description or representation, it remains an open question which artistic styles are realistic at a given time.

Lukács holds that art is class-conditioned. It is not the artist's goodwill or commitment which allows

him/her to achieve realistic art. Rather his/her social situation either encourages or precludes such a total view of social life. For example, after the bourgeois triumph of 1848 Western European novelists like Flaubert and Zola, alienated from the bourgeoisie, had no class roots from which to create realistic art. The determinism of this view creates problems in Lukács' analysis of contemporary art.

Lukács' criticism of 'modernist' writers is notorious. I think, however, that his analysis of contemporary literature shows methodological problems much more serious than insensitivity to Joyce's humour. In *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* Lukács correlates contemporary literary styles with two world-views - the existentialist and the Aristotelian. He attempts to show the class bases of these world views, and argues that the existentialist world view and the art which stems from it lead to politically regressive practice. The Aristotelian world view, on the other hand, is at the basis of realist and humanist art; it is politically progressive in as much as it leads to anti-Nazi and anti-Cold War positions. Lukács recommends that writers adopt the Aristotelian style. He implies that it requires only an act of will, the correct moral stance, to adopt this style.

Such voluntarism sits uneasily with Lukács' determinist analysis. This unhappy mixture derives, I think, from Lukács' method of analysing the artist's activity. He focuses almost solely on the artist's consciousness and the world-view informing his/her work. Because ideology is the only mediating link between socio-economic life and the meaning of the artwork in Lukács' practical criticism (although in explicit statements he of course acknowledges other factors), Lukács can make no practical recommendations to artists other than to change their thoughts and thus their practice. 'Practical-critical' or 'revolutionary' activity *on the part of the artist* can barely be conceived on Lukács' view because the process of artistic production is treated as inessential to the meaning and value of the artwork.

For Walter Benjamin, on the contrary, art is a form of material production [9]. Progress in art, as in other forms of production, requires the full use of the existing forces of artistic production. This is only possible through a transformation of the existing social relations of production. Benjamin uses the notion of 'technique' to argue that progress in the social and political functions of art leads to and involves progress in aesthetic quality. Artistic technique includes the use of the existing technical apparatus - cameras, publishing facilities - and the transformation of existing modes of, for example, writing, painting or filming. Benjamin claims that artists, by their very profession, have an artistic motivation to use their technical apparatus to the full and thus to develop artistically progressive new styles and genres. The use of new techniques is, for Benjamin, intrinsically linked to the development of new styles. We might mention the following facts in favour of Benjamin's view, although they do not constitute any 'proof'. New styles emerge spontaneously when artistic tools are used in a new manner. When new tools are used with traditional artistic content - when photography emulates painting - the results are usually of low quality. When new tools are not used, artists tend to get into a rut. Thus there seems to be an aesthetic motivation to expand the existing forces of artistic production.

Such expansion, according to Benjamin, constitutes progress in the politics of art (our category (d) above) for the use of new tools increasingly transforms the social relationships of artist and audience. New technical developments demystify art, remove it

from the confines of the privileged classes, and open it to communal use.

Benjamin recommends that artists reflect on their artistic needs. They will see, he claims the need to develop the forces of artistic production and thus to produce work which is at once artistically and politically progressive.



As Benjamin's arguments stand, counterexamples abound. The development of the artistic productive forces is surely not a necessary condition of making high-quality art; consider almost all modern American poetry from Wallace Stevens to Robert Lowell, including Allen Ginsberg, although not Bob Dylan. It is not a necessary condition of making political art of types (a), (b), (c) or (e); consider the political poetry of Lorca, Solzhenitsyn's *First Circle*, and social documentary photographs. Benjamin suggests that the development of the forces of artistic production will lead to art which is politically progressive in sense (d); can Nazi films be explained away? Even when use of new artistic tools is politically progressive, it does not always lead to work of high aesthetic quality; consider hastily organized agit-prop or puppet theatre.

It is easy today to see that Benjamin's analysis of the progressive political effects of film was overgeneralized. Perhaps more important is the fact that his discussion of artistic quality gets submerged in his discussion of technical innovations. Benjamin emphasised the ways in which art reproduces the social relations of production. He did not analyse the ways in which it mediates reality. The symbolic functioning and meaning of artworks is not discussed. Thus even if the use of new artistic tools is always artistically progressive, Benjamin cannot argue that it leads to any other form of aesthetic value since both the cognitive and utopian values of art depend on the work's symbolic functioning. Because of his de-emphasis on artistic meaning, Benjamin cannot even give a full account of the value of artistic progressiveness. Progressive art, on his view, 'induce[s] other producers to produce, and ... put[s] an improved apparatus at their disposal' [10]. In what ways is the apparatus improved? We might expect Benjamin to claim that it is improved in its ability to let artists deal more adequately and entertainingly with contemporary social problems; to argue for these claims, however, would require analysis of the new modes of artistic reference possible with the new apparatus. All Benjamin can claim is that the new apparatus provides more new techniques for artists to use. This quantitative notion of artistic progressiveness is unable to distinguish fruitful new techniques from technical gadgets of merely passing interest.

Benjamin's analysis of artistic production is inadequate without an analysis of artistic reference and aesthetic value. While Benjamin distrusted discussions of aesthetic value, thinking that they relied on an elitist, consumer-orientated attitude towards art, he failed to provide an alternative account of artistic quality and thus failed to show convincingly the artistic motivation for politically progressive art. His concentration on the process of artistic production must be synthesized with Lukács emphasis on the role of art in mediating reality.

IV Artistically Progressive Use of Socially Conditioned Norms: a synthesis of themes in Lukács and Benjamin

A concentration on technique is not incompatible with a concentration on the interpretation and evaluation of artworks. There is not simply a causal relationship between technique and final product; the very techniques may themselves embody norms which are expressed in the finished work. The choice of a particular mode of making pictures or songs indicates how they should properly be interpreted; as Benjamin has pointed out, mass mechanical reproduction of a work tends to remove its 'aura' so that we would be wrong to expect the same sort of expression from, for example, a record as from a unique performance [11]. We must, however, broaden the notion of technique, as Benjamin did, to include the styles and conventions chosen by the artist and the social relationships between artists, employers and audience. Clearly styles and conventions - a painter's choice of flat or flowing brush-strokes, for example - partially constitute the symbolic content of the work. Rather less obviously, the social relations within which the artist works themselves express norms which are often echoed in the final product; when we find out the rules promulgated by newspaper editors and followed by photographers we often rightly change our interpretation of a photograph [12]. I am suggesting, then, that we must show how the norms involved in the production process are themselves expressed in the artworks produced. A social hermeneutics of artworks is necessary, in which we interpret the artist's formal choices in light of the norms he/she encountered in the production process. Thus we at once see the symbolic content of the work, and how that content was conditioned at all levels of the production process.

A concentration on art's role in reproducing social relations is not incompatible with a concentration on its role in mediating reality. The way in which artworks reproduce social relations is by their effect on their audience. Benjamin and Brecht were therefore concerned with the context of consumption of the artwork - the audience's mode of attention to the work and the work's subsequent effect on the audience. At the absurd extreme, concern with the audience's reaction in abstraction from the meaning of the work would involve the discussion of idiosyncratic trains of thought or worries of individual members of the audience. Lukács' emphasis on the meaning of the artwork, which provides the *norm* of the audience's response, is a salutary response to this extreme.



On the other hand, as Marx points out, consumption consummates and completes production [13]. Artistic reference is not determined by natural or logical laws but is socially constituted; the reasons why a particular picture represents a funeral rather than a party are rooted in the social institutions, pictorial conventions and perceptual habits of the community. While artistic reference is not relative to the actual interpretation of any and every audience - art does not mean just what we want it to mean - the audience's socially and historically conditioned

modes of perception and attention participate in constituting the rules of artistic reference - if no one had ever seen bathers in Cézanne's series of pictures he would not say that they represented bathers, whatever the title. Here Benjamin's discussion is a useful safeguard against Lukács' tendency to consider the meaning of an artwork in abstraction from the audience's response to it.

Thus a synthesis of the main themes of Lukács' and Benjamin's analyses is in principle possible. Here I offer only some notes on the implications of such a synthesis for the debate on art and politics.

Consider the various levels of artistic production. There is first the artist's use of his/her tools. This conditions the meaning of the product and is directly under the artist's control. Artists can choose to use a large camera with a long exposure which allows a detailed, sharp and rich photograph which cannot be achieved with small, short-exposure cameras.

At a second level, there are the artist's social relations with his/her employer and audience. These relations condition the meaning of the artist's work. In the most obvious case, the work may simply not be accepted by publishers or dealers until the artist learns what is expected of him/her. In less obvious cases the artist comes to accept the norms involved in his/her social relations and produces work expressing these norms while rationalizing this process by theories about the nature of art. For example, the artistic values of originality and newness are invoked, and distorted, to justify the proliferation of new styles which keeps the New York art market healthy.

Yet, as Benjamin saw, both these levels of production can be transformed by the artist. He/she can develop the technical forces of production. And he/she can avoid the distorting conditioning effects of the social relations by changing the relations with employers and audience - artists can work through dealers or through poster campaigns, in street theatre or in concert halls.

At a higher level of generality, artistic production is conditioned by conventions which the artist may not recognise. The existing language (and I include 'languages' of painting, film and music) defines the artist's tasks in ways which seem natural. While individual artists may introduce major revisions - as Cézanne did - they must rebuild their linguistic boat while they are sailing in it. Yet the conventions they accept often express a particular way of seeing the world and thus have indirect political import.

Further, as Georg Lukács perhaps overemphasised, artistic production is conditioned by forces and institutions outside the individual artist's control. The socio-economic structure of the wider society to a large extent defines the norms and problems which the artist meets throughout his/her life. Phenomena like depressions and wars thrust themselves upon the artist's attention. More subtle and pervasive are the structures of experience formed in, for example, anonymous, fast moving, violent American cities. Such structures of experience cannot be escaped. Even if the artist tries to ignore them, they are so pervasive that they reappear in disguised form in the artworks produced. For example, if the artist tries to produce sacred pictures in a society where the ritual and religious context of life has vanished - as in the United States - or where it is permeated with secular issues - as in the six counties of Northern Ireland - the artist must fail, for the secular norms of the age will be expressed in the picture and this will prevent the achievement of a religious art like that of the middle ages. For another example, take the abstract expressionists. They tried to ignore social reality and explore what

Franz Kline called the 'tragic and timeless' themes embedded in their psyches. Yet, their work is intensely social and, at its best, expresses the fragmentation of experience in contemporary America and gives a *timely* critique of the society.

Thus, while artists have some freedom to change the process of production and the content expressed in their work, socially conditioned norms still appear in their work, even against their intentions. These may, as Lukács argued, prevent the achievement of their artistic goals.

Even at this level, artistic creativity remains a possibility. If certain social norms and themes are going to be expressed in the artworks anyway, the only choice for the artist who wants to change or reject these norms is to make them the content of his/her work and use them to suggest the possibility of new norms and new forms of social organisation. So, in Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, the hero Azdak exemplifies all the evils of the present society - arbitrariness, one law for the rich, another for the poor, legalism - but in Brecht's play Azdak uses these vices to remedy existing social evils and under his guidance the people prosper and are happy. Similarly in some abstract expressionist works the theme of fragmentation of community and of experience is taken to the extreme so that the promise of happiness and order is seen to emerge. In one of Aaron Siskind's abstract expressionist photographs the cracked, splintered paint-man on the wall almost splits apart; he also almost flies. Such use of socially conditioned norms to suggest new possibilities is common to successful, socially critical artworks. Siskind only suggests the promise of happiness by showing the chaos of a fragmented society. Brecht's 'alienation effect' at once takes to an extreme our everyday lack of concern about injustice, and makes us all too aware of the institutionalized injustice all around us. Franz Kline's work shows the conflicting forces which threaten total destruction, yet he builds a complex equilibrium out of this conflict.

Such art is not necessarily political in senses (a), (b), (c) or (d). It is politically progressive in so far as it uses socially conditioned norms to suggest new possibilities in art, thus making us more aware of the institutions which presently embody these norms and of the fact that these institutions are not eternal. We see that in social life, as in art, a new order can be made out of existing materials and the works suggest what this new order might be like. They are not simply Utopian, not pure projections of the desire for happiness, for the hope only emerges through portrayal of the existing social norms. In the situation sketched above, it is only through such 'realistic' focusing on contemporary social norms that artists can transcend these norms and achieve their artistic goals. Here, as Lukács would argue, the artist has an aesthetic motivation to concentrate on present social life. Indeed this motivation towards social consciousness and involvement may lead artists towards art which directly refers to social and political issues - political art of type (c).

In the above discussion I accept some of Lukács' criteria of realism - that art should refer to central features of contemporary social life and project radical hopes for the future. I differ from Lukács in accepting a pluralism of forms of politically progressive art - abstract painting, music, as well as more traditional novels may be politically progressive.

Further the need for such art must be seen in the context of the whole process of artistic production, for the structure of the productive process may prevent the achievement of such art. Benjamin argued that there was an artistic motivation to transform

the social relations of artistic production. Whether or not such a motivation exists depends on two aspects of the structure of the social relations:

- (i) whether insightful politically progressive art can be made within them;
- (ii) whether the lack of a suitable audience reaction within these production relations gradually destroys the artist's ability to make such insightful art. In this case, the artistic production relations would cause the degeneration of artistic styles and the move from good art to bad art.[14]

In such circumstances an aesthetic motivation would exist to transform the existing social relations of artistic production - to make political art of type (d).

There is no general answer to the question whether artists should concentrate primarily on transforming the artistic production relations or on showing central features of the social world, whether they should make a new theatre or new plays. The aesthetic considerations will vary with the social circumstances mentioned above, just as the political considerations on the probable benefits of either choice will vary with the strength of the working class movement and the state of the capitalist economy.

Artists may have an aesthetic motivation to produce two sorts of political art. They may be motivated to make works which do not directly challenge existing social relations yet which use socially conditioned norms to suggest new social possibilities. On the other hand, they may be motivated to make works which transform the existing production relations and help remove art from its traditional function as an entertainment and legitimation for the upper classes. Either sort of political art can exist alone. The abstract expressionists, some of whom made political art of the first type, worked for a small audience and if anything increased the sense that art is for an elite. Daguerre, the inventor of photography, provoked a radical change in the artistic production relations, yet the content of his own work is rather conventional. The best and most politically effective art - I think of Brecht, Chaplin, Eisenstein, much jazz music - combines both aspects.

In the contemporary debate on politics and art one side champions Daguerre, the other the abstract expressionists. I have tried to show that this is a false dilemma. It is not a matter of choosing to concentrate on the process of artistic production alone, or on aesthetic meaning and value alone; on audience reaction or on formal qualities of the work; on actual political effectiveness or on eternal meaning; on working class culture or on high art. Rather an integrated analysis is necessary where the relationship between the processes of artistic production and consumption, on the one hand, and the changing modes of artistic reference, on the other, are investigated. At the same time an integrated praxis is needed, where community artists look beyond the good feelings generated by their new endeavours and more conventional artists look beyond the confines of the artworld. Only by such an integration, theoretically and practically, can we achieve a synthesis of 'serious art' and 'popular culture' which politicizes and popularizes art without destroying its particular role of representing reality, exercising our perceptions, and opening for us new imaginative possibilities.

Footnotes

- 1 Roger L. Taylor, *Art, An Enemy of the People*, Brighton, Harvester, 1978.
- 2 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977. Tony Bennett in his *Formalism and Marxism*, London, Methuen, 1979, is even more explicit in his rejection of normative judgements on the part of literary critics.
- 3 Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1978.

- 4 Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, London, Verso, 1978, chapter 5.
- 5 This aspect of political art is emphasized by Gordon Graham, 'Art and Politics', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol.18, No.3, Summer 1978.
- 6 Stephen Morawski, 'The Vicissitudes of Socialist Realism', *Inquiries into the Fundamentals of Aesthetics*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1974, chapter 7.
- 7 Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, London, Merlin, 1963, is a straightforward although sometimes crude and confused exposition of his views. The following books by Lukács give a clearer sense of his subtlety and insight in literary criticism: *The Historical Novel*, London, Merlin, 1962; *Essays on Thomas Mann*, London, Merlin, 1964; *Goethe and His Age*, London, Merlin, 1968; *Studies in European Realism*, London, Merlin, 1972; *Writer and Critic*, London, Merlin, 1978. See also the discussions by and about Lukács in E. Bloch *et al.*, *Aesthetics and Politics*, London, New Left Books, 1977.
- 8 K. Marx, 'The Power of Money in Bourgeois Society',

- Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (ed. D.J. Struik), London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1970.
- 9 See especially Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', *Reflections* (ed. Peter Demetz), New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978. See also his essays in *Illuminations* (ed. Hannah Arendt), New York, Harcourt Brace and World, 1968.
- 10 Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', p.233.
- 11 See especially Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations*.
- 12 For a detailed discussion of this example and its implications, see my 'Roots of Reference', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. XXXIX, No.1, Fall 1980.
- 13 Karl Marx, 'Introduction to the Grundrisse', *Grundrisse* (tr. M. Nicolaus), New York, Vintage, 1973, pp.90-94.
- 14 Peter Fuller traces such a degeneration in his 'Fine Art after Modernism', *New Left Review* 119, Jan/Feb 1980. See also his 'American Painting since the Last War', *Art Monthly*, No.27, June 1979, and No.28, July-August 1979.

BOOKS RECEIVED

- J. Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics*, RKP, £10.50 hc, £5.95 pb
- H. Blocker and E. Smith (eds.), *John Rawls' Theory of Social Justice*, Ohio University Press, £13.80 hc
- G. Brewer and R. Gunn, *The Politics of Organisation*, First of May Publications, no price)
- D. Burton, *Dialogue and Discourse*, RKP, £12.50 hc
- S. Clarke et al, *One-Dimensional Marxism*, Allison and Busby, £9.95 hc, £4.95 pb
- M. Cornforth, *Communism and Philosophy*, Lawrence and Wishart, £8.95 hc
- P. Dawson, *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics*, Oxford UP, £16.50 hc
- B. Easlea, *Witchhunting, Magic and the New Philosophy*, Harvester, £25 hc, £8.50 pb
- G. Della Volpe, *Logic as a Positive Science*, NLB, £9.50 hc
- W. Dray, *Perspectives on History*, RKP, £7.50 hc, £3.95 pb
- M. Fisk, *Ethics and Society: a Marxist Interpretation of Value*, Harvester, £20 hc
- J.R. Flynn, *Race, IQ and Jensen*, RKP, £10.50 hc
- M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: selected interviews*, Harvester, £18.50 hc
- S. Gaukroger (ed.), *Descartes: Philosophy, Mathematics and Physics*, Harvester, £28 hc
- Gay Left Collective, *Homosexuality: Power and Politics*, Allison & Busby, £9.95 hc, £3.95 pb
- E. Grassi, *Rhetoric as Philosophy: the Humanist Tradition*, Pennsylvania State University Press, £9 hc
- D.W. Hamlyn, *Schopenhauer*, RKP, £9.75 hc
- G. Hardin, *Promethean Ethics*, University of Washington Press, £4.80 hc
- B. Henderson, *A Critique of Film Theory*, E.P. Dutton, \$8.95 pb
- C.L.R. James, *Notes on Dialectics*
- C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*
- C.L.R. James, *Spheres of Existence*
Allison and Busby, each at £13.95 hc, £4.95 pb
- G. Jones, *Social Darwinism and English Thought*, Harvester, £22.50 hc
- M. Kunzle (ed.), *Dear Comrades: Readers' Letters to Lotta Continua*, Pluto Press, £3.25 pb
- G. Labica, *Marxism and the Status of Philosophy*, Harvester, £26.50 hc

- R. Lamerton, *Care of the Dying*, Penguin, £1.75 pb
- S. Lewenhak, *Women and Work*, Fontana, £2.25 pb
- M. Lippi, *Value and Naturalism in Marx*, NLB, £7.50 hc
- J. Loewenstein, *Marx against Marxism*, RKP, £8.25 hc
- T. Lovell, *Pictures of Reality*, BFI, £5.90 hc, £2.95 pb
- E. Malos, *The Politics of Housework*, Allison & Busby, £9.95 hc, £3.95 pb
- R. Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, Heinemann, £8.50 hc
- R. Norman and S. Sayers, *Hegel, Marx and the Dialectic*, Harvester, £16.50 hc
- S. Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought*, Virago, £4.95 pb
- A. O'Hear, *Karl Popper*, RKP, £9.75 hc
- G. Pilling, *Marx's 'Capital'*, RKP, £10 hc
- C. Rakovsky, *Selected Writings on Opposition in the USSR 1923-30*, Allison & Busby, £13.95 hc, £4.95 pb
- J. Richards, *The Sceptical Feminist*, RKP, £12 hc
- A. de Riencourt, *The Eye of Shiva: Eastern Mysticism and Science*, Souvenir Press, £6.95 hc, £4.95 pb
- J. Ryan and F. Thomas, *The Politics of Mental Handicap*, Penguin, £1.75 pb
- R. Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory*, RKP, £10.95 hc, £6.95 pb
- H. Sluga, *Gottlob Frege*, RKP, £12.95 hc
- G. Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*, NLB, £6 hc, £2.95 pb
- J. Thorp, *Free Will - a Defence against Neuro-physiological Determinism*, RKP, £8.95 hc
- R. Trigg, *Reality at Risk*, Harvester, £20 hc
- D.F. Tucker, *Marxism and Individualism*, Blackwell, £12 hc
- M. Vajda, *The State and Socialism*, Allison & Busby, £9.95 hc, £4.50 pb
- L. Wessell Jr., *Karl Marx, Romantic Irony and the Proletariat*, University of Louisiana Press, £12 hc
- M. Westlake, *One Zero and the Night Controller*, RKP, £5.95 hc
- D. Adlam (ed.) *Politics & Power*, RKP,
Vol.1: £4.95 pb; Vol.2: £5.75 pb
- A. Wood, *Karl Marx*, RKP, £13.50
- J. Zeleny, *The Logic of Marx*, Blackwell, £12.50 hc