

## **SENSUS COMMUNIS AESTHETICUS AND THE PROJECT OF EMANCIPATION: THE UTOPIAN FRAME OF THE AVANT-GARDES**

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### **RESUMEN**

La base conceptual de lo que sería más tarde desarrollado por la vanguardias artísticas fue colonizada por alemanes de pensamiento romántico e idealista, cuya dimensión utópica puede ser fácilmente reconocida en el «antiguo programa del idealismo alemán» (1796), un texto que consagró un pensamiento idealista, que clamó por una nueva racionalidad o una mitología de la razón de Hegel, la intuición intelectual de Schelling y la Humanidad de Schiller. Aunque este proyecto de emancipación desarrollado más tarde por la vanguardia ha perdido su credibilidad para nosotros, todavía tenemos que investigar en qué medida el arte de hoy puede mantener una función social. Este artículo señala algunos conceptos idealistas a la luz de una filosofía del arte, y fue creado siguiendo las líneas esbozadas en la Crítica del juicio de Kant, que han contribuido a la historia de la «avanzada» del arte.

### **PALABRAS CLAVE**

*Sensus communis, idea estética, filosofía del arte, proyecto de emancipación, vanguardias.*

### **ABSTRACT**

The conceptual basis which would be later developed by the artistic avant-gardes was settled by German Romantic and Idealist thought, whose utopian dimension could be easily recognized in *The oldest system-program of German Idealism* (1796), a text which provided Idealist thought with the claim of a *new rationality* or a *mythology of reason* in Hegel, an *intellectual intuition* in Schelling and the *Humanity* in Schiller. Although this emancipation project developed later by the avant-garde has lost its credibility for us, we still have to investigate to what extent today's art can maintain a social function. This article point out certain idealist concepts in light of a philosophy of art modeled along lines sketched out in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and that have contributed to the history of the "advanced" art.

### **KEY WORDS**

*Sensus communis, aesthetic idea, philosophy of art, emancipation project, avant-gardes.*

In Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790) and Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) we have for the first time in the modern aesthetics the idea of the unity of knowledge throughout the aesthetic experience, the both texts attributing to art an autonomous dimension and the power of social reconciliation. This idea of the aesthetic experience as a kind of non-contaminating form of communication will be a referential point not just for the Hegelian Marxist tradition until Marcuse, but also for neo-conservative thinkers as Heidegger or Gadamer, who have seen in art a post-metaphysical force resistant to the rationalization process. I wish to begin by a brief introduction to Kantian concepts *sensus communis aestheticus* and *aesthetic idea*.

The Kantian *sensus communis* as the communicability and community of taste, which has its own logic and modes of recognition, inscribes itself right into the philosophical tradition of the rational and sensitive human beings, members of a concrete social and political community and that generated the aspiration of art as a social public sphere. Indeed, Kant was the first one to surpass the category of an empirical public, which dominated the debate on taste in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and linked beauty with a potentially universal disposition called by him "a kind of *sensus communis*" (Kant, 1977/1952, p. 198). According to Kant, this universal or social dimension of the judgement of taste is not based on human nature, nor on the education of a concrete public, but on the autonomy of the faculty of judgment of taste. In other words, *sensus communis* is a mode of reflection: if human being is *rationis capax*, such a "universal feeling" is precisely the faculty to recognize in others the same faculties he has: it is neither a mystique, nor an appropriation of universality either, but the name for the own condition of communicability of our knowledge in general.

With regard to the judgement of taste –in Kant's language, "a faculty", i.e. a transcendental or synthetic *a priori* principle, which mediates between imagination and understanding– Kant considers that there is no objective concept which could deter-

mine what is beautiful and what is not. Nevertheless, in the paragraph 51, Kant maintains that we all own an idea of beauty, a kind of archetype or an internal intuition whose expression is the own beauty: "Beauty (whether it be of nature or of art) may in general be termed the expression of an Aesthetic Idea." Which means that there is no beauty either in nature nor in art, unless there is an expression of an aesthetic idea. It is not clear how or why beauty should apply to the expression of aesthetic ideas, but our concern here is not to solve this puzzle, but to indicate how these Kantian ideas open the door up from the aesthetics as the theory of sensibility (*aisthêsis*) to a philosophy of art which would be developed by the Idealist thinkers.

We might indicate first that Kantian reference to the aesthetic ideas, quite frequent in the third *Critique*, served as an inverted analogy to what Kant named *rational ideas* or *ideas of reason*. In the paragraph 49, Kant pointed out that "it is easy to see that an aesthetic idea is the counterpart of a *rational idea*, which is, conversely, a concept to which no *intuition* (presentation of the imagination) can be adequate." The reason these are called "ideas" is to indicate "that they at least strive toward something that lies beyond the bounds of experience." Kant explains that the aesthetic idea is *the representation of the imagination* (a mental image) that gives rise to a free play of imagination and reason at the same time. Thus, the aesthetic experience involves the harmony of all our cognitive faculties (imagination, understanding and reason). An aesthetic idea is "a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e., no [determinate] *concept*, can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it." Is the language of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, i.e. the language of philosophy, the one incapable to express the aesthetic idea, who owns to the sphere of art. The famous idea of "the beauty as a symbol of morality" in the paragraph 59 and the remark of the paragraph 49 about the aesthetic ideas as a result of the imagina-

tion process that uses association and analogy would suggest that Kant considered that every artwork was a metaphor or a symbol of the aesthetic idea.

Many scholars, following the two “Introductions” Kant wrote for the *Critique of Judgment*, suggested that Kant’s theory of beauty is in part motivated by a problem left over from the first *Critique*, the problem of how concepts apply to percepts. That is, how does imagination manages to interact with the understanding. Thus, it might be said that what really interested Kant was not “what beauty is”, but “how is an agreement possible on beauty”, since we cannot prove it empirically, nor demonstrate it logically. Odo Marquard, for example, suggested that the *Critique of Judgment* is the result of the failure of pure reason and practical reason concerning the problem of the finality of the human being and this explains the linking of man to the idea of emancipation. Since the concept of practical reason –“as if”– is incapable of obtaining the emancipated life (because the faculty of desire is always subjective), this led Kant to produce a shift in the direction of aesthetics and found the judgment of taste on a transcendental subject (Marquard, 1994, pp. 49-54). In *Antinomies* of the two first *Critiques*, Kant had already formulated the question about freedom: how can nature be both determined according to the laws of science and have “room” for the freedom necessary in order for morality to have any meaning? Ultimately, for Kant this would be a conflict of our faculty of reason against itself. He thought that the problem would be solved by “an aesthetic turn” when finding a certain sphere of life that could be independent of the private interest and legitimate the autonomy of the subject, according to the ideal of the Enlightenment. Nevertheless, the famous sentence “beauty as a symbol of morality” in the paragraph 59 (emphasis added) although eliminating the conflict, it does not actually unify the two sides of reason, nor the two objects of reason (*what is* and *what ought*). Nevertheless, although the *Critique of Judgment* is mainly an extensive analysis of the autonomy of judgement of taste, this autonomy however does not at all imply

that aesthetic judgement simply lacks relation to the two other spheres, the cognitive and normative. In fact, it establishes a rich network of connections –analogies, bridges, “as-if” relations, that weave together the unitary fabric of reason. Kant’s concept of beauty has in fact remained opened to all kind of external determinations.

The cognitive direction in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* allowed many later thinkers, even those in the Kantian tradition, to find new dimensions of it. Ideas like “the beauty as a symbol of morality” and the work of art as an expression of an aesthetic idea, generated a theoretical climate where idealist thinkers like Schiller developed them speculatively in the key of a platonic transitive bridge between art and morality. The idea that “a free art” implies “a free society” was one of the most important bases of the Enlightenment and of Romantic thought. But when it was to be taken much further, from Schiller’s idea of an *Aesthetic State* to the avant-gardes progressive vision, this idea was to lead to dangerous alliances with the political. Even Adorno, who was one of the staunchest defenders of the autonomy of art, will privilege in his *Aesthetic Theory* a certain aspect of the Kantian aesthetics which promises to rescue certain form of “pure” communication that the logical and the practical thinking cannot preserve. Although he was often very critical with the avant-gardist claim to change life through art, Adorno thought that art can generate a radical contrast with the alienated and non-conciliate character of the social reality. Far from being a means of reconciling the internal contradictions of society, art participates with the dialectical dynamism of society and culture; it realizes itself as a product of this dialectic and, as a result, mobilizes itself as a counter-culture of accepted culture or ideology: “Artworks are afterimages of empirical life insofar as they help the latter to what is denied them outside their own sphere and thereby free it from that to which they are condemned by reified external experience” (Adorno, 2004, p. 5). From this perspective, the role of art would be a kind of reminder of a lack –that the present society lacks

something and the realization of a lack is the precondition of social critique.

**THE KANTIAN TRADITION OF MORAL BEAUTY.  
THE OLDEST SYSTEM-PROGRAM OF GERMAN IDEALISM**

From Schiller to Marcuse, the aesthetic dimension<sup>1</sup> has been conceived as a kind of moral forum, a critical mirror for society and as a dimension in which a more affirmative mode of existence is possible. From the perspective of this German Idealist tradition, Kant's aesthetics proved to be as much challenging as inspirational.

On the one hand, although the implicit structure of the third *Critique* supported the sovereignty of aesthetics, Kant denied aesthetic experience any metaphysical role. Aesthetic judgement is not cognitive, but only expresses a universal pleasure. From this point of view, *in aextremis*, one could argue that in Kant the aesthetic experience is “demoted to a status worse than in Plato's cave: it tells us only about our feelings about appearances, and so, nothing even about appearances, let alone things-in-themselves” (Beiser, 2008, p. 374). The emphasis on the autonomy of the aesthetics implied by the Kantian concept of «purposiveness without a purpose», means that art must be made free of all constraint by theoretical or moral concepts and that it must only be judged by the yardstick of aesthetic categories, which determined the separation of the judgement of taste from the moral sphere and laid the ground for *l'art pour l'art*, the initially literary movement which later in the eleventh century determined a radical conception of art who rejected any kind of educational and humanizing functions for it.

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<sup>1</sup> I refer here to what Jaques Rancière called “the aesthetic regime”, i.e. “the specific mode of being of whatever falls within the domain of art”. The aesthetic of both senses is invoked here: as practice of art-making and on the subjects capable of receiving meaning. (Rancière, J., Rockhill, G., & Zizek, S., 2006, p. 22).

On the other hand, the Kantian “aesthetic turn” and the idea of “beauty as a symbol of morality” generated a major influence for idealist thought and for the emergence of a philosophical aesthetics as an independent discipline mainly throughout Friedrich Schiller, F.W.J. Schelling and G.W.F. Hegel, whose philosophical contributions will be considered here only from two perspectives: the epistemic role attributed to art and beauty and the social function these thinkers located in aesthetic experience. My task here is not to offer a systematic view of these thinkers, but to see how they supplement Kant’s formalist aesthetics. I will focus on their common points on art as a cognitive and social dimension, resumed in *The oldest system-program of German idealism* by the idea of *a new religion* –a synthesis between the spheres of the truth and the good, which Kant had tried to maintain separated. This dualism was precisely what Kant’s younger contemporary, Schiller, although deeply impressed by the Kantian aesthetics, felt he had to correct (Tauber, 2006). We might remember here that if when Kant’s third *Critique* appeared in 1790, the French Revolution was in its first hopeful phase, but when around 1792 the Revolution took a bloody turn, Schiller rejected it, convinced that without authority, the deep division in the human soul lead to chaos rather than to freedom. For this reason, Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1793-1795) claim that it is not the political, but the aesthetic turn, that will bring freedom without chaos. As remarked Lerry E. Shiner, knowing that his exigency for the redemptive power of the aesthetic experience “seem grandious, he set up to prove it in a spiralling argument based in part on Kant’s theory of the disinterested character of the aesthetic, in part on a vision of human nature divided between human and sense and desperately needing integration.” (Shiner, 2003, p. 148) If not direct, Kant did claim an indirect connection between aesthetics and morality: beauty is a symbol of morality since both aesthetic and moral judgements are similarly free of external rules and the sublime reveals our dignity as rational-human beings. Although he stressed that an aesthetic experience of beauty

or sublime does not teach us a particular moral lesson, nevertheless, he suggested that it makes us aware of our freedom as moral agents. Schiller developed these ideas and argued that though it is disinterested, the aesthetic experience becomes the true vehicle of moral and political education, providing human beings both with the self-identity that is their fulfillment and with the institutions that enable them to preserve their liberty, an idea that Hegel will develop later.



**Figure 1.** Caspar David Friedrich, *Sunset (Brothers)*, ca. 1835  
State Hermitage Museum St Petersburg

The mediator function of art, that was to resolve the difference between nature and liberty, is expressed in the notion of *Spieltrieb* (“the play drive” or “the play impulse”), which for Schiller is synonymous with artistic beauty or “living form”, which is no longer a subjective dimension, but a principle of reality. In his twenty-second letter, Schiller said: “By this operation we are no longer in time, but time, with its complete and infinite succession,



is in us. We are no longer individual, but species [...] Subjective man will be ennobled by objectivity” (Schiller, 1967, pp. 17-21). This last statement is important because Schiller states here the overcoming of the individualism throughout the idea of the *aesthetic man*, capable to act as species or society as a whole, which is indispensable, from Schiller’s point of view, for us to understand, express and respect the State. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Letter, Schiller names this harmony “humanity” and the aesthetic experience is that force able to preserve it: “he [man] possessed his humanity as a predisposition, before any definite condition into which he may come; but in actual practice he loses it with any definite condition into which he comes and he must, if he is to be able to make the transition to an opposite condition, by newly restored to him every time by means of the aesthetic life.”

Aesthetic education, that is the spontaneous synthesis of senses and reason, will be about this reconciliation between man and state, between modern man and his nature, which is his original sensitiveness. There would be two aspects we could refer to here. First, although he inspired himself with the ideal of reason proper to the Enlightenment, Schiller didn’t consider nature as an external object of mind, but he thought that a human being belongs to nature or that he is nature –as *humanity*, human being is “no longer in time, but he is time”– aspect which allowed some commentators to value Schiller as one of the fathers of the “ecological thought”. Secondly, when we say that the man became one with the state, we have to have in mind that the Schillerian state is an aesthetic one, i.e. the ideal of beauty applied to real life. In a letter to Wilhelm von Humboldt of 1795, Schiller explains that when humanity is complete, “it is no longer sentimental, but ideal.” Naïve poetry is followed for Schiller by sentimental poetry, but only *ideal poetry* achieves the ideal of human being. The internal tension between two projects inherent in the Schillerian concept of freedom is shown here: the tension between the aesthetic utopia of a “beautiful humanity” as the philosophical ab-

solute and the social-pedagogical program of the aesthetic education of man –starting from beauty and aiming at “higher” values over and above aesthetics: cognitive, moral and cultural values. A similar utopian image of society we’ll find later in Goethe’s “Pedagogical Province” in book two of his 1821 allegorical novel *Wilhelm Meister’s Journeyman Years*, where he uses the example of music to illustrate the ideal art form who, throughout the continuum of the formation (*Bildung*) leads to the cultivation of both the individual and the society as a whole.

According to Peter Szondi, the German romantics shared the aspiration to recover, by means of speculative thought, that which Kant had abandoned. There where Schiller speaks of “ideal poetry”, Hegel speaks of “beautiful religion” and the both refer to a synthesis between the freedom and nature, between subject and object (Szondi, 1992, pp. 123-126). Just as Schiller had taken Kant’s epistemology as a basis for the explanation of the relation of aesthetics to ethics, so now the Kantian position was used to explain the relation of religion to aesthetics. The Schillerian “aesthetic drive” of free “game and play”, already involved the idea of art as a manner in which to change the world and will be connected to a new wave of utopian thought. “This is how Schiller’s aesthetic state became the *aesthetic project* of the German Romanticism summarized in the rough draft written together by Hegel, Hölderlin and Schelling: the material realization of unconditional freedom and pure thought in common forms of life and belief” (Rancière, 2009, p. 27). Thus, the aesthetic solution supposes here the resolution, in its sphere, of what fails in the political one and will be resumed in a generalized conviction: that “beauty will make us free”. This synthesis expressed by the artistic beauty implies *a new rationality*, which is not abstract, nor argumentative, but concrete, sensitive and imaginative.

The idea of an “intellectual intuition”, present in Hölderlin, Shelling and also in Hegel, assumes the possibility of some form of knowledge or experience of the absolute, through the unity

between the subject and the object, that is not attainable theoretically, but aesthetically. The idea of a *new mythology of reason*, which would fulfill the Enlightenment's project of the human emancipation through the power of reason, arose in the so-called *Oldest system-program of German idealism*—a manuscript dated from mid-1795 and which was first published in 1917 by Franz Rosenzweig. Initially attributed to Schelling, nevertheless others felt Hölderlin or Hegel were most likely the author. In recent years, however, a consensus seems to have developed around Hegel's authorship (Williamson, 2004, p. 57). Anyway, this short text could be seen as showing the influence of the three thinkers and is mainly important as “a founding-text” for Romanticism. In their debate from “The Literary Absolute” on Rosenzweig's discovery of the *Oldest System-Program of German Idealism*, Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy pointed out the incompleteness—both in its structure on paper and as a Program—of this manuscript. But for others, like Rebecca Gagan, for example, its “failure” or incompleteness could be relevant precisely for its opening as a founding moment of the Romantic thought: “The System-Program would then serve as a frame through which Idealism itself could be viewed in its ruinous glory”. (Gagen, 2004, pp. 204-205)

This fragmentary sketch projects the idea of a new humanity and a new philosophy of spirit, which are to unify the spheres of freedom, nature and art, though a new “mythology of reason”—referring to “a complete system of all ideas [...] or of all practical postulates” based on a disagreement with the authoritarian state of the epoch. “In the idea of *humanity* [...] there is no idea of state because the state is something mechanical; just as little is there an idea of a machine. Only that which is an object of freedom is called an idea. Thus we must also proceed beyond the state! For every state has to treat human beings like mechanical-wheels; and it should not do so; hence it would cease” (McNeill & Feldman, 1998, p. 37). This particular historical aspiration of Hegel's generation for “the universal freedom and equality of spirits”, where man is able to act as a free and decided person,

follows an antiquity-oriented ideal of a republic of free citizens that also appears in the idea of a modern democratic state, at first conceived by Rousseau and is perhaps, as an ethical project, an idealist counterpart of Spinoza's *Ethica* (Williamson, 2004, p. 57). Ideals like "the eternal peace", "the absolute freedom of all spirits", etc. are all subordinated and united by beauty, taken in its higher, Platonic sense. "For I am convinced that the supreme act of reason, because it embraces all ideas, is an aesthetic act; and that only in beauty are truth and goodness of the same flesh." At this point, the text connects Fichte's idealist metaphysics of "absolute" and Schiller's idea of the pedagogical task of aesthetics, the author raising art to the highest principle of philosophy: "The philosopher must possess as much poetic force as a poet [...] The philosophy of spirit is an aesthetic philosophy [...] poetry will thereby attain a higher dignity; in the end she will again become what she was in the beginning –the instructress of humanity." Such a great work of humanity would also imply a sense of religion. Therefore, it concludes that "monotheism of reason and polytheism of imagination of art, this is what we need!"

The final sentence of this text reveals that the central problem –the collective actualization of the ideal identity of freedom and nature– still remained unresolved: "A higher spirit sent from heaven will found this new religion among us; it will be the last, greatest work of mankind." But within a few years, Hegel, Schelling and Hölderlin, among others, thought that they themselves were ready to fulfil such a messianic role. The "absolute" of Schelling and other romantic thinkers such as Hölderlin and Fr. Schlegel, the "ego" of J.G. Fichte and the *Geist* (spirit/mind/consciousness) of Hegel are basically attempts to circumvent the various dualisms that dominate Kantian thought, especially that of perceptible (*phenomena*) and non-perceptible (*noumena*).

The power and appeal of this short text seems to explain the long-running debate over its author. As George S. Williamson pointed out, it's well known that Hegel devoted his writings, between 1796 and 1799, to the issue of religion and mythology, in-

cluded Herder's proposal to revive a national mythology. "Moreover, the document is written in Hegel's hand, and the proposed scenarios by which he might have transcribed the thoughts of Hölderlin and Schelling do not seem particularly plausible. What is more likely is that Schelling picked up some of these ideas from conversations with his Tübingen friends and then carried them with him in Jena, where they became common currency among the Romantics" (*Ibid.*, pp. 67-68). Therefore, although Kant and Schiller did open the theory of sensibility to a philosophical aesthetics and Hegel will fulfil the idea of "the higher spirit" as spontaneous unity of all the antinomies, Schelling is perhaps the philosopher of art *par excellence*. Emphatically overcoming Kant's definition of beauty as merely a state of consciousness and Schiller's stress on the socio-political functions of beauty and art, Schelling glorifies art as "the capstone of the philosophical system" that transcends the dichotomy of subject and object and provides access to the otherwise incomprehensible primordial "absolute"; therefore, with Schelling's *Lessons on the Philosophy of art*, we could say that for the first time we have the aesthetics integrated into a philosophic system.

#### FROM THE MAXIM TO THE PROJECT OF EMANCIPATION

The idea of a "religion of art", that would bridge the deep divide between the unenlightened and the enlightened, will exercise a profound influence not only for later generations of Romantics, including Heinrich Heine, Richard Wagner and early Nietzsche, but will retain its appeal for many avant-gardist projects to come. Especially Schiller's displacement of the aesthetics to the ideal would produce an approach of the transcendental subject towards the empirical one and prefigure the epoch of the ideologies. In *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, the aesthetics is thought of in a more extended project of emancipation where the aesthetic ideal of Humanity is opposed to the bourgeois society

that generated it. The projection of aesthetics to the social field was called by Jacques Rancière the *modernatism*, that is, “the identification of forms from the aesthetic regime of arts with forms that accomplish a task or fulfil a destiny specific for modernity” (Rancière, 2006, p. 26).

Following Rancière, we could say that the Romantic idea of an “aesthetic state”, where the ideals of the French Revolution are fulfilled, had become the new paradigm of the social revolution and allowed the brief but decisive encounter between the “artisans of the Marxist revolution and the artisans of forms for the new ways of life”. The historical conditions around 1910 allowed the strategic convergence of various avant-garde fronts (from aesthetes to radical political activists, a formation of diverse, conflicting impulses mobilised against “a common enemy”) to reach a critical mass. This encounter faced the artists with an important dilemma: they had to choose between what W. Benjamin called “the theology of art” (Benjamin, 2008) –an art that serves to no ulterior purpose but is purely an end in itself (and assuming that art neither affects, nor reflects the social circumstances)– or, on the contrary, to adopt the critical position according to which art must involve itself in social life. If the poetics of *l’art pour l’art* finally led to an anaemic decorativism in the artistic practice, the socially critical avant-gardes, on the other hand, prepared another “end” of art when identifying it with life: they declared the end of art and the identification of its practices with the practices that “construct” the common life, which seems to be directly dependent on the Schillerian and Romantic interpretation of Greek’s art as a community’s way of life. By waving a political flag, the radical avant-gardes thought that they could achieve the idealist social *sensus communis* derived from the idea of Humanity generated by art. Their critical function was, in this case, the guardian of the adjustment of means to achieve the aims, i.e. a critical vigilance on the ethical domain. From this perspective, movements as different as Dadaism (of nihilist ideology and anti-art aesthet-

ics) and Constructivism (initially implicated with the communist political ideals of the Russian revolution) could be considered as two halves of the same coin: they shared in the end the same prejudices, derived basically from a structural connection between the ethical and the aesthetics –that *if there is artistic freedom and equality, then there will be social freedom and equality too*.



**Figure 2.** Vera Mukhina, *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*, disassembled in the course of restoration, Moscow, 2003.

“The problem of the avant-gardes”, according to Thierry de Duve in his book *Kant after Duchamp*, would be a long range effect of the confusion between the maxim described by the Kantian “as if” of the famous statement “beauty as a symbol of morality” and “the project of emancipation” –the romantic belief that Humanity will be free, equal and shared in common. This prejudice would lead not just to those artistic practices in service of the State like Soviet socialistic realism, perfectly exemplified by Vera Mukhina’s *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* of 1937 and also by certain Constructivist’s practices, but also to the radical avant-garde’s

identification of “the good art” with its critical function. In the case of Dadaism, Robespierre’s revolutionary maxim “No liberty for the enemy of liberty”, was to become the prejudice that modern and relevant is only the critical art, whereas other forms of modern art –like the ones satisfied with pre-modern functions as the decorative one and little interested in the social critical task, would be reactionary. For the socially critical direction of the avant-garde like the one described by Peter Bürger in his seminal *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), the only valid criterion would be its critical function.

Insofar as it has remained only a project, the emancipation has been necessarily postponed and denied by the successive avant-gardes. This failure determined the destiny of the *modernism* in two phases: on one hand, the critical avant-gardes which had an authentic revolutionary potential opposed to the degeneration of the political revolution (Dadaism and Surrealism, in the artistic field and the Frankfurt School, in the thought field, established the vector of this “antimodernity”); on the other hand, the failure of the ontological aesthetic model was considered as the cause of the failure of the political one (Rancière, 2006, p. 27).

Is quite clear today that the avant-garde’s utopian aspirations for a fundamental transformation in culture and society that would break down the barriers between art and life, never proved to be achievable and within its historical conditions, it only succeeded in stimulating gradual productive transformations. One can say that the avant-garde inherently worked in a tragic movement of cyclical self-destruction, so it remains insufficient to look back at only the aesthetic side of it. Which means that a retrospective view on the avant-garde has to change the idea of a static antagonism between the avant-garde and technology with a more nuanced, dialectical and dynamic one. In fact, the avant-garde was never as cut off from the industry as its most ardent polemicists like Adorno, for example, wanted to proclaim.

In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse openly discusses Schiller’s thesis according to which the very far reaching “the true human lib-



erty” is beauty, contrasting it with the historic secondary position of aesthetics in relation to philosophy as the discipline of reasoning and logic (Marcuse, 1989, p. 174). According to Marcuse, philosophy historically followed the repressive domination exerted by the Occidental civilization against the sensuous potential of humanity –proof of this alliance between thought and domination, the very philosophical definition of man as *animal rationalis*. According to Marcuse, the separation between the spheres of art and ethics has been generated by the instrumental reason which historically tried to relegate the sensitive dimension of the human being. Following Marx, Marcuse proposes here what in the *One-Dimensional Man* just suggested: that liberty is possible as an overcoming of the necessities in a non-repressive order of society characterized by the “play drive”, a kind of a non-alienated or “erotic” labour, that is not exclusively economic-productive, but also mainly gratifying. Marcuse does not pretend here to dispense with the technical basis of society, but to reconstruct it following different ends.


Art appears here not as antagonistic to technology, but rather informing it through sensitizing people to the potential of their lives. At the core of our actual environmental crisis lies our relationship with nature and technology: extinction, pollution, depletion of natural resources, ill treatment of animals and people, etc. Therefore, certain lines of the idealist thought, like Marcuse’s project of a radical philosophy of technology, seem not only to have sense today, but to be an imperative<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> For the relationships between technology, rationality, and democracy, see Feenberg, 2002. The conclusion of this analysis would be that while we are more than ever aware of both the promise and the threat of technological advance, we still lack the intellectual means and the political tools for managing progress.

## CONCLUSION: CRITICAL FUNCTION AND AESTHETIC REASON AFTER DUCHAMP

A revision of the aesthetic question in pragmatic terms, besides any social utopian frame, send us inevitably to a tautological definition of art and this is probably the only specific ground for it. We finally have to assume the contingency of all interpretations of art, something that in principle appears incompatible with the universal claims of the project of emancipation of the Enlightenment. But in fact, Kant did not deny the variability or historical contingency of concrete aesthetic answers. Now, what does the Kantian “as if” mean for the implication between beauty and morality? Does the Kantian statement mean that the art stimulates the realization of the moral life, as Schiller thought? In Kant, as I tried to explain, *sensus communis* has nothing to do with such metaphysics or such an inherent *telos*, therefore must be exclusively identified with the regime of the *sensus communis aestheticus*. The universality of such a feeling belongs then to the sphere of duty.

Therefore, Kantian statement in relation to the maxim of emancipation would have to be reformulated as followed: “one must act, in art as well as in politics, in aesthetics as well as in ethics, as if men were free, equal and brothers, that is, as if one were adult, rational and a reasonable being. One ought to regulate one’s conduct on the Idea of humanity” (Duve, 1996, p. 443). It is true that art does not entirely exclude a potential association between aesthetic experience and moral being, and it is this possibility that the Idealist and Romantic thinkers pursued. But it is also true that the judgments of beauty are incontrovertibly free of moral interest and external constraints. Therefore, the analogy of art with the morality today would be, at the most, a reminder of which the same exigency ought to regulate the ethical action in its own sphere. I would conclude by paraphrasing Tzvetan Todorov and say that, although today we cannot go back to Enlightenment ideals, because its world is not ours, nevertheless, in criticizing it, we might remain faithful to them (Todorov, 2008, pp. 177-187). 

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