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## LEONARDO THINKS

### Editorial: Art Criticism and the Death of Marxism

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*Marxism is not a philosophy of history; it is the philosophy of history  
and to renounce it is to dig the grave of Reason in history. After that  
there can be no more dreams or adventures. -Maurice Merleau-Ponty [1]*

For some time now-starting in the era of modernism and continuing into our own postmodern era-much of the analytical vocabulary of American art criticism has come out of Marxism. This may seem strange, for in this country, unlike in France or Italy, Marxism never had much popular appeal. Not even in the 1930s, during the Great Depression, when Marxism was of great importance for New York intellectuals, was the Communist party a real political power here. And yet, Marxism played a central role in defining abstract expressionism and what happened afterwards in the history of art.

We find an appeal to Marxism in Clement Greenberg's often quoted suggestion that "some day" a historian of abstract expressionism "will have to" tell "how 'anti- Stalinism,' which started out more or less as 'Trotskyism,' turned into art for art's sake, and thereby cleared the way, heroically, for what was to come" in the development of art [2]. We find it in Michael Fried's 1965 link of the "dialectic of modernism" to what he calls "the establishment of a perpetual revolution-perpetual because bent on unceasing radical criticism of itself" [3]. And we find it in influential American "postmodernist" critic Rosalind E. Krauss's 1977 description of the Eisenstein film *October*, which was about the Russian revolution: "It is Eisenstein's most basic assumption that sculpture, all art, is fundamentally ideological" [4].

Krauss has explained that the journal she edits is called *October* in order to identify its concern with "a specific historical moment in which artistic practice joined with critical theory in the project of social construction"-the pre-Stalinist moment of 1920s Russian art culture [5]. Although *October's* circulation has always been small-it is an intellectual quarterly, not a commercial artjournal-this magazine has been much discussed. To the extent



that its political position can be identified, *October* has, I grant, most often been associated with poststructuralists such as Michel Foucault. But just as Foucault's anti-Hegelian, anti-history *The Order of Things* cannot be understood apart from the Hegelian ways of thinking it criticizes, post-Marxists-however strongly they react against Marxism-are really working within the radical European tradition that they criticize. The concerns of the liberal democratic tradition of social contract theorists such as John Stuart Mill and John Rawls, for instance, are alien to Foucault. And so when *October* identifies itself on the cover as a journal of "Art/Criticism/Theory/Politics," it is fair to add that, although the journal does not usually take up concrete everyday issues, leftist politics are what the editors have in mind.

As Margaret A. Rose emphasizes in her useful history *Marx's Lost Aesthetic: Karl Marx and the Visual Arts*, Marx's very limited interest in painting was very much a product of his German education [6]. For him, the ancient Greeks were the greatest artists. He never wrote much about contemporary art, although he was interested in literature. He never created a theory of the visual arts; he had more pressing concerns. All of the very extensive Marxist literature on aesthetics involves extending some part of his concerns and intervening in struggles he could not have envisaged. When, for example, in the former USSR, the radical avant-garde lost out, by the early 1930s, to socialist realism, it would have been overly optimistic to think that Marx's own writings provided any immediate perspective on that situation.

What Marx did provide theorists were two themes used by American critics such as Greenberg, Fried and Krauss: a way of thinking about history and an essentially aesthetic model of the relationship between art and the culture in which it is produced. Marx's dialectic, derived from the grand model of Hegel's *Phenomenology* [7], provided a way of understanding historical development that Greenberg and Fried, in their different ways, apply to a subdivision of culture-namely, to art history. There is nothing specifically Marxist about this analogy between the culture's history and the development of art; but without the example provided by Marx, Greenberg's account of what Hegel called the "aufhebung"-the dialectical "cancellation" and "preservation" of the values of the old masters within the work of their modernist counterparts-would be inconceivable.

The second Marxist theme-what I will call the aesthetic model of culture, which serves to indicate how society is seen as an organic unity, as if it were an artwork-can be developed in two seemingly opposed ways. Older Marxist historians of art such as Arnold Hauser and Max Raphael link the painting of any given period to the broader culture of the time, as when Poussin, Rubens and Borromini may be said by dialectical analysis to express the values of seicento (seventeenth-century) Catholicism [8]. This way of writing art history assumes that a painter expresses some positive aspect of culture. But the terms of the whole analysis can also be reversed. Insofar as modern culture is judged decadent or postmodern culture viewed as oppressive, art can provide a critical viewpoint on that culture. Here, too, art is bound to its culture, but now in a negative-i.e. critical-way. Artworks show what is wrong with the culture; they do so either unconsciously, when their lack of appropriate order reveals the failure of social harmony, or self-consciously, as in "protest art," which aims to display the evils of our culture-the prints of German artist Kithe Kollwitz (1867-1945) would be an example. In 1961, John Berger, a then well-known



English art writer, adopted the former view. He finds in Jackson Pollock's work "the disintegration of our culture. ... It was the consequence of his living by and subscribing to all our profound illusions about ... the individual, the nature of history, the function of morality" [9]. Douglas Crimp's October-style account of Richard Serra's work takes the second position. "Serra's work does nothing other than present us with the truth of our social condition," which for Crimp is that "our society is fundamentally constructed upon the principle of egotism," or what traditional Marxists called bourgeois individualism [10]. Other leftists have presented the work of such different artists as Hans Haacke, Martha Rosler or Leon Golub in essentially the same way. According to these critical accounts, their protest art shows the truth of our present social condition; our culture lacks a proper unity, and such art reveals this problem.

No doubt Crimp, an admirably energetic social activist, would be dismayed to be compared to Berger-then a Communist aesthetic conservative, an admirer of socialist realism who elsewhere calls Oskar Kokoschka a genius. (Berger's view of Pollock is very much like that of many conservatives, and his view of Kokoschka is the same as that of Sir Ernst Gombrich, an aesthetic conservative who is a political liberal) [11]. But what Berger and Crimp share is the belief that in an unharmonious society such as ours, truthful artworks can-and, when great, perhaps must-reveal the nature of that society. This view is rooted in the Hegelian view of art that is so central to Marxism. What Pollock shows, according to Berger, Serra also reveals, according to Crimp, by his painful, unintentional honesty.

That this theoretical supposition is shared by writers with such diverse tastes is interesting, for what is striking is its fundamental implausibility. How was it possible that 1950s society rewarded such very different artists as Pollock and Kokoschka? Just as Hauser's attempt to explain how such diverse artists as Poussin, le Nains and Watteau are all products of French absolutism is obviously strained, so too Berger's attempt to divide 1950s artists into "progressives" and "reactionaries" is similarly flawed. Once Hauser admits that such very different artists are all part of the ancien regime, his Marxist vocabulary provides him with no more means to say anything interesting about their work as individuals [12]. As for Crimp, it is extremely odd to suppose that an artist whose work is exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and shown at prestigious galleries could really be socially critical in this way.

When I was young, I was fascinated by Marxism, which offered me, a middle-class Californian, a great shining promise. American culture could be radically reconstructed, re-created to constitute a just society. No doubt I was something of an aesthete, for what I desired was a more harmonious society; but what, in addition, I admired in Marxism was its claim to provide a very beautiful explanation of how history works. When, later in the 1970s, I read an interview with Francis Bacon in which the artist stated, "I'm not upset by the fact that people do suffer, because I think the suffering of people and the differences between people are what have made great art" [13], I was horrified at his archaic, no doubt deliberately provocative presentation of a view which, in Poussin's time, was but common sense.



I do not think that any reasonable person could fail to be horrified when today they walk outside our museums or galleries and look at our cities, which is why the absolute failure of Marxism as a practical force is so dismaying. However dreary the Marxist regimes, what Marxism provided was a critical view of capitalist society. But now capitalism has triumphed. My view, which no doubt some academic Marxists will dispute, is that now that the majority of the political regimes associated with Marxism have disintegrated, the ways in which art criticism is written must change. Marxism, I would emphasize, is not just a way of interpreting the world; it is, Marx himself insisted, a system of praxis. The philosophies of Descartes, Spinoza or Wittgenstein had no immediate political implications. Although such other important philosophers as Heidegger, Hume, Kant and especially Hegel were interested in politics, it is possible to write extended accounts of their arguments without touching upon their political views. Marx is a different case, for his ambition was to transcend the traditional limits of German philosophy. "Communism is for us not a stable state which is to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things" [14]. This famous statement indicates why he saw himself as something different from, and more important than, a mere philosopher.

It is absolutely impossible, if we take Marx's own view of his goals seriously, to adopt a Marxist intellectual framework merely as one possible way of explaining historical events. Of course, many Marxists were justly severely critical of the actual Communist states and the Western European Communist parties. As has been often noted, the singular misfortune of Marxism was that it came to power in a "backward" country, the former USSR, and not in the more "advanced" West Germany. But to suppose that history might have been different-so that events could have come out "better"-is to adopt an entirely non-Marxist view. Shlomo Avineri observes that the error of Marx was to disregard one of the "possibilities open to his own theory": the "combination of his philosophical and historical theory with the Jacobin tradition of merely political, subjectivist revolutionary action: Leninism .. ." [15].

Certainly Leninism was a "tragedy" insofar as we may wish that a democratic form of socialism had been established. It makes sense, I think, for a liberal to imagine that, but not for a Marxist, who can only call this idle moralizing. The notion that we can choose the values we wish to see established is inconsistent with Marx's ambition to overcome the traditional division between theory and practice, a division that, in his view, made it possible for philosophy to exist. It is this point of theory, and not just the fact that the actual Marxist states were so terrible, that raises the real conceptual problems now that those states have disappeared. Published in 1965, George Lichtenheim's survey *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study* could not, of course, have anticipated the disappearance of Marxism as a state religion. Still, his account is remarkably prescient. "Marxism disintegrates in the only manner suitable to a system that represents the union of its own theory with the practice of a revolutionary movement," he wrote; "its accomplishments are shown to be incompatible with its ultimate aims, which thus disclose their essentially metaphysical... nature" [16].

Distinguished Marxists have tried recently to continue to treat Marxism as a tool for providing historical explanations [17]. But their eclectic manner of



proceeding is quite inconsistent with classical Marxism. Although Marxism claimed to provide a tool for understanding historical development, Marxists were as unable as their enemies, the liberals, to anticipate the fate of the Communist societies. The Cambridge Companion to Marx, published in 1991, notes that the complete edition of the works of Marx and Engels "was planned to run to over one hundred volumes before completion sometime in the next century" [18]. No one imagined that all those governments would disintegrate so suddenly. How could Marx's claim to provide a master plan of history survive that failure?

In *Beyond the Brillo Box*, Arthur C. Danto states that "the need for a philosophy of art under which art is responsive to human ends is a matter of absolute priority. It is the mark of living in the post-historical period that we face the future without a narrative of the present" [19]. Although he is a critic for *The Nation*, a journal long associated with Marxism, Danto's extended study of present-day art-world institutions contains only one relatively insignificant mention of Marx. Marxism is really finished, but no one knows what can take its place. What the end of Marxism signifies is the end of those kinds of narratives which, for Greenberg and his successors, explained how past and present were connected. No one knows whether a post-Marxist account of art is possible. The end of Marxism as a practical political force has two important consequences for art criticism. We can no longer understand art history with a narrative such as Greenberg's or Fried's; and analogies such as Krauss's between artworks and the social structure are no longer convincing. My sense is that, as cultural historians look back, Marx's work will come to seem to belong to a period style, to nineteenth century ways of thinking that tell us nothing about how to proceed in the present. It is easy today to see problems with the Marxist tradition, but harder to rethink these problems. We art critics must find some new ways of making sense of art and of inventing a new critical vocabulary. These ways are, as yet, very hard to imagine.



## Endnotes

- [1] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, John O'Neill, trans. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969) p. 153.
- [2] Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1961) p. 230.
- [3] Michael Fried, *Three American Painters* (Cambridge, MA: Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 1965) p. 8.
- [4] Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking Press, 1977) p. 9.
- [5] Rosalind Krauss, Introduction, in Annette Michelson, Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp and Joan Copjec, eds., *October: The First Decade, 1976-1986* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987) p. ix.
- [6] Margaret A. Rose, *Marx's Lost Aesthetic: Karl Marx and the Visual Arts* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984).
- [7] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, J.B. Baillie, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).
- [8] Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, trans. by the author with Stanley Godman (New York: Vintage, 1957), 4 vols.; Max Raphael, *The Demands of Art*, Norbert Guterman, trans. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968).
- [9] John Berger, *Toward Reality: Essays in Seeing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962) p. 61.
- [10] Douglas Crimp, "Serra's Public Sculpture: Redefining Site Specificity," in Laura Rosenstock, ed., *Richard Serra/Sculpture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1986) p. 53.
- [11] On Kokoschka, see Berger [9] p. 137 and E.H. Gombrich, "Introduction," *Homage to Kokoschka: Prints and Drawings* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1976).
- [12] Hauser [8] vol. 2, chapter 9.
- [13] Francis Bacon, *Francis Bacon: Interviewed by David Sylvester* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975) p. 125.
- [14] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, excerpted in Lewis S. Feuer, ed., *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings of Politics and Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1959) p. 257.
- [15] Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971) p. 258.
- [16] George Lichtenheim, *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study* (New York: Praeger, 1965) p. 221.
- [17] See, for example, Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*, or, *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1991).
- [18] Terrel Carver, "Reading Marx: Life and Works," in Terrel Carver, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Marx* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991) p. 12.
- [19] Arthur C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1991) p. 230.

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