

Marcuse on Rebellious Subjectivity / Art as Liberation

In an era of total domination of thought, how can true adult autonomy be realized? Here Marcuse turns to the liberating power of art, an avenue for social change well known to cultural workers in popular education through the theater of the oppressed, street art, community murals and video, independent film, rock and roll, punk, folk and rap music. But it is not this kind of overtly political ‘people’s’ art that interests Marcuse. To him true autonomy – separation from the contaminating influences of conformity and consumerism – arises out of the individual’s opportunity to abstract herself from the day to day reality of the surrounding culture. For an altered consciousness to develop it is necessary for the adult to experience a fundamental estrangement from commonly accepted ways of thinking and feeling. Immersion in artistic experience is one way to induce this estrangement. Contact with certain artistic forms offers a pathway of separation, a way of breaking with the rhythms of normal life. This focus on inwardness, on subjectivity, as liberating is very much at odds with how contemporary activists think of the political function of art. Privacy, isolation and inwardness have become suspicious ideas, indicating an irresponsible withdrawal from political commitment. How, then, can Marcuse regard them as liberating?

The answer lies in Marcuse’s belief that domination is so total in this society that group creativity, collaborative artistic work, team productions and other forms of collective activity have all been suffused with the dominant culture’s belief that such activity should be directed towards making the system work better. When people get together they do so to support, rather than challenge, the system. Each person’s belief in the basic efficacy of the way society is organized is reinforced by contact with others in the society. So removing ourselves from the influence of others is a revolutionary act, a step into rather than a retreat from, the real world.

In his analysis of liberating subjectivity Marcuse stresses three things – memory, distance and privacy. Memory is subversive because it signifies a temporary break with the current reality; “remembrance is a mode of dissociation from the given facts, a mode of ‘mediation’ which breaks, for short moments, the omnipresent power of the given facts. Memory recalls the terror and the hope that passed” (1964, p. 98). When we remember days of childhood bliss when the world seemed benign and beautiful, or when we remember our first cruel realization that life was unfair, we re-encounter a source of primal energy. Instead of being pleasant reverie, memory is here seen as a route out of the usual way of experiencing everyday life and hence a source of the estrangement Marcuse feels is crucial to developing revolutionary consciousness. In his view the distance from daily existence that memory sometimes provides is key to the development of all forms independent, critical thought. The further we get from the quotidian, the better chance we have of breaking out of domination. As a general rule “it is the sphere farthest removed from the concreteness of society which may show most clearly the extent of the conquest of thought by society” (1964, p. 104).

When we live our lives in association with others it becomes difficult to establish the necessary distance for autonomous thought. In all areas of our lives we are subject to

“aggressive and exploitative socialization” (1978, p. 5) that forces us into constant association with those who believe things are working just fine. For example, the contemporary emphasis on collaboration and teamwork, on being one of the team, on a successful marriage as comprising two people who make a good team (a *bete noire* of Fromm’s) has “invaded the inner space of privacy and practically eliminated the possibility of that isolation in which the individual, thrown back on himself alone, can think and question and find” (1964, p. 244). To him, privacy is “the sole condition that, on the basis of satisfied vital needs, can give meaning to freedom and independence of thought” (*ibid.*). It was no accident, therefore, that for most people privacy “has long since become the most expensive commodity, available only to the very rich” (*ibid.*).

Marcuse’s lamentation of the passing of privacy, and his stress on the revolutionary power of detachment and isolation, sits uneasily alongside the belief held by many adult educators that learning (particularly critical learning) is inherently social. I have argued (Brookfield, 1995) that introspective analysis of a private and isolated sort leads us into perceptual dead-ends. To me critical reflection is a social learning process in which we depend on others to be critical mirrors reflecting back to us aspects of our assumptive clusters we are unable to see. I have also (like many others) urged that true adult education is collaborative and collective, the building of a learning community in which the roles of teachers and learners are blurred. In my own practice the three doctoral programs in which I have been involved as worker or co-creator (at Teachers College, National Louis University and the University of St. Thomas) have all insisted on collaborative work as the norm, even to the extent of encouraging collaboratively written doctoral dissertations. I have felt that this co-creation of knowledge mirrored best practices in the field as seen in Freirean culture circles, the Highlander folk school, social movements and participatory research. For me isolation is usually a step backward, a retreat into the divisive, competitive, privatized creation of knowledge characteristic of capitalism. How on earth can privacy and isolation challenge the social order?

To Marcuse, this question is assinine. We should be asking instead ‘how can we possibly challenge the social order *without* experiencing first the separation that isolation provides?’ For example, experiencing art communally at a gallery, theater, poetry reading or concert is, he argues, inherently conservative. Our responses to the art concerned are pre-conditioned by our awareness of the presence of others. But when a person experiences a deeply personal, completely private reaction to a work of art, she “steps out of the network of exchange relationships and exchange values, withdraws from the reality of bourgeois society, and enters another dimension of existence” (1978, p. 4). This is the dimension of inwardness, of liberating subjectivity. Such subjectivity is liberating because we are moved by primal aesthetic and creative impulses, not the dictates of majority opinion or common sense criteria of beauty. Privacy, inwardness and isolation are all revolutionary because they play the role of “shifting the locus of the individual’s realization from the domain of the performance principle and the profit motive to that of the inner resources of the human being: passion, imagination, conscience” (1978, p. 5).

According to this logic a truly critical practice of adult education would be concerned not just with locating itself within existing social movements. It would also be seeking to create opportunities for people to experience the privacy and isolation they need for memory, introspection, art and meditation to trigger a rupture with present day experience. This rupture is not just a sort of spiritual awakening, but an experiential dissonance that will jerk people into an awareness of how life could be different. Only with distance and privacy can a new sensibility develop that “would repel the instrumentalist rationality of capitalism” (1972, p. 64).

Marcuse & the Aesthetic Dimension

Perhaps the most significant contribution Marcuse made to critical debate on Marxism was his questioning of the predominant orthodoxy of Marxist aesthetics. This orthodoxy, drawing on the idea that the material base of society determined the ideological, cultural and artistic superstructure, held that “art represents the interests and world outlook of particular social classes” (1978, p. ix). Marcuse rejected such a deterministic equation, arguing that “in contrast to orthodox Marxist aesthetics I see the political potential of art itself, in the aesthetic form as such ... by virtue of its aesthetic form, art is largely autonomous vis a vis the given social relations. In its autonomy art both protests these relations, and at the same time transcends them” (ibid.). As we shall see later in this chapter, Marcuse believed that the stylized, formal aspects of ‘high’ art could produce an estrangement with reality and that in this estrangement lay the truly revolutionary potential of art.

In defending individual creativity that produced art containing no explicit political message or intent, Marcuse broke with those who believed that the content of art should always serve a predetermined revolutionary purpose. He criticized the way that “Marxist aesthetics has shared in the devaluation of subjectivity, the denigration of romanticism as simply reactionary; the denunciation of ‘decadent’ art” (ibid. p. 6). For him overtly political art explicitly dedicated to raising people’s consciousness of oppression and igniting the fires of change – agit-prop theater, socialist realism, even the theater of the oppressed (Boal, 1985) – was actually less revolutionary than some forms of introspective poetry. This was because “the more immediately political the work of art, the more it reduces the power of estrangement and the radical, transcendent goals of change” (ibid. p. xii). The films of Ken Loach or plays of Dario Fo would not be strongly revolutionary art, according to Marcuse, since their direct critique of current social conditions did not produce the experience of estrangement, of an altered sense of reality. As Marcuse acknowledged, the logic of his critique meant that “there may be more subversive potential in the poetry of Baudelaire and Rimbaud than in the didactic plays of Brecht” (ibid. p. xiii).

Marcuse believed that at the root of all striving for freedom is the need to emancipate the senses. Feeling, touch, sight, smell and sound all contain sensuously uncontrollable qualities that stand against bureaucratic rationality. If adults are to be truly liberated they need to be free at “the roots of social relationships ... where individuals most directly and profoundly experience their world and themselves: in their *sensibility*, in their instinctual

needs” (1972, p. 62). Marcuse grounds his emphasis on liberating sensibility in Marx’s call in the *Education and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1961) for the complete emancipation of all human senses and qualities. In contrast to contemporary critical theorists who are skeptical of a focus on personal change, Marcuse is quite willing to stress that social change must be located in the individual’s altered sensibility; “it is this primary experience itself which must change radically if social change is to be radical, qualitative change” (1972, p. 62). A new sensibility is “the vehicle for radical construction, for new ways of life. It has become a force in the *political* struggle for liberation” (p. 72).

Of course, altered individual sensibilities acting alone will not activate change, they need to be united in building a new society. There is “no individual liberation without the liberation of society” (p. 48) and individual acts of transgression “must incorporate the universal in the particular protest” (p. 49). Hence, nurturing the new sensibility is only the beginning of transformation; “the individual emancipation of the senses is supposed to be the beginning, even the foundation, of *universal* liberation, the free society is to take root in instinctual needs” (p. 72). But, equally, skipping individual consciousness and concerning oneself solely with the mechanics of collective action, is to leave out one half of the transformative equation. Altered social and economic arrangements will not free people unless there are corresponding alterations at the level of instinctual sensibilities. For Marcuse “the individuals themselves must change in their very instincts and sensibilities if they are to build, in association, a *qualitatively* different society” (p. 74). This contention has important implications for formal programs of adult education, particularly those that emphasize changing the individual’s sensibility through aesthetic immersion.

The Revolutionary Potential of Art

If there is any truth to Marcuse’s argument regarding the power of aesthetic immersion to trigger a revolutionary estrangement from everyday experience, then adult education that concerns itself with liberating the senses through creative, artistic expression is potentially revolutionary. This is a switch for many critical adult educators who may be tempted to dismiss this kind of practice as elitist dilettantism. Recreational art or music appreciation is about as far as you can get from critical theory for many on the left who find it hard to think of these classes as potential crucibles for the development of revolutionary consciousness. But Marcuse’s analysis challenges us to reverse our dismissal of aesthetic education as an irrelevant indulgence of middle class, leisured learners. The key point, though, is that for liberal adult education to instigate a rupture with everyday experience, its programs would have to focus on fostering the isolation necessary for an immersion in aesthetics. Music or art appreciation would not be taught collectively as a group process in which people were introduced to the canon over a period of several weeks. Instead, the adult learner would receive minimal initiation into the criteria for judging artistic power, and maximal immersion in an extended private engagement with art.

This still seems like a politically correct rationalization for the elitist enjoyment of an elitist individualized program of artistic study, and commentators such as Reitz (2000)

have criticized Marcuse for what they see as the “ironically conservative political overtones” (p. 43) present in his work. To understand its political import we need to examine Marcuse’s contention that individual artistic experience represents rebellious, liberating subjectivity. Again and again he asserts that “the flight into ‘inwardness’ and the insistence on a private sphere may well serve as bulwarks against a society which administers all dimensions of human existence” (1978, p. 38). Because they instigate a separation from the routinized, unthinking life, “inwardness and subjectivity may well become the inner and outer space for the subversion of experience, for the emergence of another universe” (ibid.). It is the tasting of a new form of experience that is inherently revolutionary and the power to initiate this is “the critical, negating function of art” (1978, p. 7). Art can induce “the transcendence of immediate reality” which “shatters the reified objectivity of established social relations and opens a new dimension of experience: rebirth of the rebellious subjectivity” (ibid.).

Marcuse is careful to recognize that “art cannot change the world” (1978, p. 32) though he does believe that “it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world” (ibid.). Art represents only “the promise of liberation” (1978, p. 46) not its actuality, and “clearly, the fulfillment of this promise is not within the domain of art” (ibid.). What art does offer us, however, is a chance of breaking with the familiar, of inducing in us an awareness of other ways of being in the world. Art “opens the established reality to another dimension; that of possible liberation” (1972, p. 87). If radical political practice is focused on creating “a world different from and contrary to the established universe of discourse and behavior” (1969, p. 73) then art is one important prompt to this state of difference. What exists now for most people is a condition of voluntary servitude. Working to create a free society therefore “involves a break with the familiar, the routine ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding things so that the organism may become receptive to the potential forms of a non aggressive, non exploitative world” (1969, p. 6). The political significance of art is that it helps us make this break with the ordinary. It helps us “find forms of communication that may break the aggressive rule of the established language and images over the mind and body of man – language and images which have long since become a means of domination, indoctrination, and deception” (1972, p. 79).

Art, then, gives us new forms of visual and spoken language and opens us to new ways of sensing and feeling. Learning these different forms of communication and perception is the inevitable precursor to social action. Adult education that focuses on developing artistic sensibility is, in its way, as full of revolutionary potential as Freireian culture circles, theater of the oppressed, participatory research or education for party activism. This is why Marcuse felt that the development of the aesthetic dimension of life was as much part of political struggle as the democratizing of decision-making, rejection of consumer culture, or the abolition of the exchange economy. A liberated society “presupposes a type of man (sic) with a different sensitivity” (1969, p. 21) possessing different language, gestures and impulses and “guided by the imagination, mediating between the rational faculties and the sensuous needs” (ibid. p. 30).

For Marcuse, then, aesthetics is politics and adults who learn a new aesthetic sensibility are learning a new form of political consciousness. Indeed, learning a new sensibility is so crucial to liberating humanity that we can gauge the progress we are making in a revolution by reference to aesthetic as much as political or economic criteria. Hence “the aesthetic dimension can serve as a sort of gauge for a free society” (1969, p. 27) with the demand for quiet and beauty “cleaning the earth from the very material garbage produced by the spirit of capitalism” (p. 28). Again, Marcuse is careful to specify that this sensibility must be thought of as a deeply personal phenomenon. He is not afraid to focus on the individual and does not regard this focus as apolitical or ignoring wider social and economic forces. Developing a new sensibility can only happen when the individual has privacy and distance from quotidian reality. People “require a degree of emancipation from immediate experience, of ‘privacy’” (1972, p. 102) if they are to comprehend “the extreme aesthetic qualities of art” (ibid.).

As discussed earlier, the political power of art is not to be found in directly political images of revolution, struggle and socialist victory. Marcuse declares that “art cannot represent the revolution” (1972, p. 103) since it “obeys a necessity, and has a freedom which is its own – not those of the revolution” (p.105). It is the rigidly stylized aspects of art, the way it adheres to a set of strict constraints that are wholly aesthetic, that is truly emancipatory. If art is “to pierce and comprehend the everyday reality, it must be subjugated to aesthetic stylization” (1978, p. 122), to the tyranny of form. This sounds contradictory, for how can adhering to stylized artistic conventions liberate us? But Marcuse is very insistent on this point. Repeatedly he stresses how “the political potential of art lies only in its own aesthetic dimension” (1978, p. xi) and how “the critical function of art, its contribution to the struggle for liberation, resides in the aesthetic form” (1978, p. 8). The aesthetic form in painting, sculpture, music, drama and poetry “reveals tabooed and repressed dimensions of reality” (p. 9) by conjuring up different “modes of perception, imagination, gestures – a feast of sensuousness which shatters everyday experience and anticipates a different reality principle” (1978, p. 19).

When we submit to the aesthetic power of a work of art we immerse ourselves in an experience in which different rules are present. There is a tyranny of form and structure present, “a necessity which demands that no line, no sound could be replaced” (1978, p. 42). Because the rules of creative, artistic necessity are radically different from those governing social and economic necessity, works of art that adhere to these rules induce an estrangement from contemporary life. In this way “art breaks open a dimension inaccessible to other experiences, a dimension in which human beings, nature, and things no longer stand under the law of the established reality principle” (1978, p. 72). The rules that make for effective art (effectiveness being defined as the capacity to induce an altered consciousness) are quite separate from the rules that make for effective adult education practice, to take one example. Art “has its own language and illuminates reality only through this other language” (p. 22).

Although he does not draw explicitly on Marcuse, Newman’s (1999) provocative meditation on images of adult learning contains several examples of how immersion in

the different language of artistic experience is inherently emancipatory. Describing the activities of Australian surfers he notices how the different grammar of surfing – “sensing the currents, noting their distance from the rocks, maintaining their balance on a narrow piece of fibre-glass, watching the water for unwelcome shadows” (p. 92) – induces an altered sense of reality. Referring to the intense concentration surfing induces, Newman declares that “this form of focused reverie can result in profound personal and political change” (ibid.). Later in his book he describes attending a production of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, with Patrick Stewart (better known as Captain Jean Luc Picard in T.V.’s *Star Trek: The Next Generation*) as Prospero. Newman writes that “Prospero uses conflict openly to generate learning and promote change” (p. 175) and sees him as “an eccentric and passionate learner and educator, driven by anger at injustice, a belief that the world could be a better place, and a readiness, given the opportunity, to intervene in order to shift people towards his view of the world” (ibid.). In Marcuse’s terms Prospero, like other dramatic protagonists, restructures our view of life “through concentration, exaggeration, emphasis on the essential, reordering of facts” (Marcuse, 1978, p. 45) and other dramatic devices. In the hands of Shakespeare, Prospero and Patrick Stewart “the aesthetic transformation turns into an indictment – but also into a celebration of that which resists injustice and terror, and of that which can still be saved” (ibid.).

In contemplating artistic forms Marcuse believes we catch glimpses of other realities, of what our world could be like if technological, social and economic domination were removed. But these glimpses can only be apprehended through deliberately unreal artistic depictions. In a world in which the injunction to ‘get real’ means to adapt yourself to the brutal reality of every day life, the unreal expresses people’s yearnings for a different world. To Marcuse “the world of a work of art is ‘unreal’ in the ordinary sense of this word; it is a fictitious reality” (1978, p. 54). However, in its fictitious or illusory form art “contains more truth than does everyday reality ... only in the illusory world do things appear as what they are and what they can be” (ibid.).

This is because what we name as reality is actually a state of servitude, a way of living in which the needs we feel, and the satisfactions we enjoy, are essentially false. If on the one hand capitalism produces deception, illusion and mystification, then “art, on the other hand, does not conceal that which is – it reveals” (1978, p. 56). When artistic immersion induces an intense engagement with the stylized representation of a painting, play or poem, we are nudged towards a perception of life as “more as well as qualitatively ‘other’ than the established reality” (ibid.). From this perspective it is art that now holds empirical truth and “it is the given reality, the ordinary world which now appears as untrue, as false, as deceptive reality” (ibid.). When a play, song or film draws us into a stylized ‘other’ universe we experience an estranged state of being in which we are liberated from the so-called reality of daily life; “the intensification of perception can go as far as to distort things so that the unspeakable is spoken, the otherwise invisible becomes visible, and the unbearable explodes” (1978, p. 45).

Who produces art of such stylized intensity? Is it those who dedicate their life to socialist transformation? Not according to Marcuse. Those with no political consciousness can create just as powerful images of revolutionary other-worldness as lifelong

revolutionaries. We cannot assume that working class or minority artists produce art of greater revolutionary power than do the White bourgeoisie. In Marcuse's view "the progressive character of art, its contribution to the struggle for liberation, cannot be measured by the artists' origins nor by the ideological horizon of their class" (1978, p. 19). Whether or not art is progressive is determined by criteria intrinsic to the work itself, not by the artist's birthplace. Famously he declared that "Marxist theory is not family research" (ibid.). The revolutionary significance of art lies solely in its transcendent power; "the radical qualities of art ... are grounded precisely in the dimensions where art *transcends* its social determination and emancipates itself from the given universe of discourse and behavior while observing its overwhelming presence" (1978, p. 6).