

Aesthetics and Politics: Raymond Williams' *Marxism and Literature*,

Herbert Marcuse's *The Aesthetic Dimension*

by

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I

The title of this paper is also the title of a collection of edited writings by such as Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodore Adorno and others, published by New Left Books in 1977. The citation of Raymond Williams and Herbert Marcuse in the title refers us to two important works by them, also published in the 1970s – Williams' *Marxism and Literature*, published by OUP in 1977, and Marcuse's *The Aesthetic Dimension*, published in German in 1977 with an English translation for Macmillan in 1979. Marcuse's book appeared as part of Macmillan's 'Communications and Culture' series and members of its Editorial Board included Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams. The OUP series in which Williams' book appeared was 'Marxist Introductions' and its General Editors were Williams himself and Steven Lukes.

New and mainstream publishing houses, therefore, perceived that there was, in this period, an Anglo-American readership for a new mating of Marxism and, in a broad sense, 'culture'. All the writers presented in the *Aesthetics and Politics* collection had been active from the inter-war years onwards. Several were already known for their achievements in distinct cultural fields; Brecht as a playwright, Lukacs as a literary historian. Others, such as Walter Benjamin, were, in effect, 'discovered' for an English-speaking public in the late 1960s by *New Left Review*, the sister-journal to New Left Books. None, however, was a native writer in English. They wrote in German, so they inherited and refined upon the German debate between the idealism of Hegel and the materialism of Marx. Their mode of procedure was dialectical and their central concept was contradiction.

Perry Anderson had been appointed Editor of *New Left Review* in 1962 and part of his brief, as he and his Editorial Board saw it, was to introduce to the English-speaking world this inheritance of what the Review called 'Western Marxism', which was seen as, in the words of Robin Blackburn, a member of the Board, "a vital resource in rejecting alike the authorized catechism of official Communism and the bland philistinism of social democracy".¹ In the July-August 1968 number (50) of the Review Anderson published a lengthy article entitled "Components of

¹ Robin Blackburn, 'A Brief History of New Left Review', newleftreview.org/?page=history, n.d.

the National Culture". His thesis was that English intellectual life had suffered from the lack of a classical sociology and a developed Marxism. The necessary concepts were, therefore, not present to construct a revolutionary class-consciousness. They ordered these matters much better abroad, where the May/June *evenements* had just taken place in France, and students and workers were contesting the state apparatus of repression in Italy, Czechoslovakia, Japan and the USA. By the mid-1970s, however, Anderson was reflecting upon the shortcomings of this 'culturalist' approach to state power. In *Considerations on Western Marxism* (NLB, 1976, Verso ed. with an 'Afterword', 1979), he noted that Western Marxism had nothing to say about "the economic laws of motion of capitalism as a mode of production" nor any extended analysis of "the political machinery of the bourgeois state".² Only Antonio Gramsci had attempted a detailed analysis of the latter, but his prison conditions had imposed a fragmentary, if brilliant, mode of exposition. Culture, not economics or politics, had been the central focus of attention for Western Marxists; and, within culture, art and in particular literature, had provoked its most sophisticated readings. "Aesthetics, since the Enlightenment the closest bridge of philosophy to the concrete world", he concluded, "has exercised a special and constant attraction for its [Western Marxism's] theorists".³ It is within this context, one of defeat for a Marxist reading of Capitalism and the State, but one of growing influence for Western Marxist readings of culture in publishing, academe and, it could be argued, in popular consciousness, that I propose to situate our two texts.

Anderson observes in *Considerations*...that "a remarkable amount of the output of Western Marxism became a prolonged and intricate Discourse on Method".⁴ Williams' book, written in his own dogged, hesitant and painfully qualificatory style, could be called a Discourse on Methods. The chapter headings summarise the approach to art of Marx and Engels – 'Base and Superstructure'; the new concepts of Western Marxism – Gramsci's 'Hegemony', Adorno's 'Mediation' and the Structuralist 'Signs and Notations'; and his own terminology – 'Structures of Feeling' and 'Dominant, Residual and Emergent Cultures', ways of seeing the field that have permanent elucidatory value. The first section is 'Culture', a term that Williams had interrogated and redefined throughout his early career in "The Idea of Culture" (1953), *Preface to Film* (1954), "Culture is Ordinary" (1958), and *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (also 1958). Twenty

² Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, Verso ed., London, 1979, pp. 44-45

³ *ibid.*, p. 78

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 53

years later he undertakes the task of mapping onto the radical populism of the Marxism he encountered at Cambridge in the early post-war years, the esoteric and philosophically based Western Marxism of Adorno and company. The result is a precarious syncretism between old and new. Literature and art, he allows, have their specific rhythms and conventions but we have always to find “ways of recognising their specific kinds of sociality”. Language is “a constitutive faculty” of reality, one of the “indissoluble elements of the material social process itself”, but reality is constituted of more than language. The recent and influential attempt to mate Marxism and structural linguistics risks the expulsion of language from history and the reaffirmation of such divisive bourgeois categories as the distinction between the ‘individual’ and the ‘social’. Literature and art have meaning but that meaning is “always *produced* ; it is never simply expressed”.⁵

There is a sense of give-and-take in his presentation, an interested accommodation of these new concepts to an already formed world-view. Williams’ tone sharpens, however, when he reviews the history and influence of one particular concept, ‘the aesthetic’. He traces the late 18c. shift in its meaning from a sense of general perception to a specialised category to define what is considered artistic and beautiful. He admits its power as one of “the two great modern ideological systems – the ‘aesthetic’ and the ‘psychological’”.⁶ He allows that the new method of semiotics, as applied both to traditional (books and paintings) and popular (photograph, film and TV) media offers what could be a mode of analysis that combines a ‘sociology’ with an ‘aesthetics’. But he worries away at its asociality, the removal by what he calls bourgeois aesthetic theory of the art object from its relations of production. His tone of measured accommodation shifts into one of rhetorical confrontation. An unidentified “we”, he claims, will eventually turn away from the proposition that “all literature is ‘aesthetic’, in the crude sense that its dominant intention (and then our only response) is the beauty of language or form...”. The aesthetic effect, he contends, has malign intentions upon us – to make us forget that we live in a divided and dividing society through “the dulling, the lulling, the chiming, the overbearing” of its techniques and subject-matter.⁷

It is precisely the aesthetic dimension of art that Marcuse, with his Western Marxist synthesis of Hegel, Marx and Freud, revalues as revolutionary. He subtitles his book ‘Toward a Critique of

⁵ R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, OUP, Oxford, 1978 (1977), pp. 133, 24, 99, 28, 166

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 129

⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 155-6

Marxist Aesthetics' and announces his argument on the first page of the Preface: "I see the political potential of art in art itself, in the aesthetic form as such". He considers art to be largely autonomous of social relations and in this autonomy "art both protests these relations and at the same time transcends them". The dominant consciousness, which for him is the same as ordinary experience, is thereby subverted.⁸ Marcuse lauds the asociality of art as a weapon against "aggressive and exploitative socialization". He had already analysed, in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), the pressures towards conformity in post-war Soviet Russia and corporate America, where he had lived since 1935, when the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research relocated to the USA. Citizens of both West and East are, in Marcuse's analysis, socialised into mass production, of goods and of themselves. "Art's separation from the process of material production has enabled it to demystify the reality reproduced in this process". Beauty, through the individualism of its techniques, can recover the repressed individualism of its participants, enact an image of what might be, define by its criteria what is real. The sensuousness of beauty proffers fictions of pleasure which restore Eros to lives of alienated labour, but these fictions are representations through estrangement. They are critical mimeses which span a spectrum of techniques from Brecht to Beckett to Leni Riefenstahl.

Marcuse, though enthused by youth's challenges to political and social norms in the 1960s, is no naïve utopian. The possible 'other' which appears in art may be transhistorical, but the other history, of mass alienation, always drags it down. Beauty as political Eros may be represented in committed works of the Left, but there is always an inevitable conflict between art and political praxis. The liberation promised in the beautiful image is a liberation of the moment, "the remembrance of things past", a phrase which reverberates throughout the book. It is as if political Eros is in constant rehearsal for a play that never gets beyond the first scene: "The authentic utopia is grounded in recollection, but the joy of memory is overshadowed by pain".⁹

"'beauty is difficult' sd/ Mr Beardsley" writes Ezra Pound in the 74th Canto of his twentieth century epic *The Cantos*, and he repeats the quote three more times in the next 100 lines.¹⁰ Canto 74 is indeed an extended remembrance of things past, walking tours through the south of France, fragments of myth and history, memories of the great literary modernists, Joyce, Yeats, Eliot and

⁸ H. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Macmillan, London and Basingstoke, 1979, Preface, p. ix

⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 5, 22, 73

¹⁰ *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, Faber and Faber, London, 1968 ed., p. 472

Ford, as well as notations of present beauty – “and there was a smell of mint under the tent flaps/ especially after the rain”¹¹ – in the Detention Training Centre, north of Pisa, where he is being held by his fellow Americans. He was charged with treason for having advocated, in a series of war-time radio broadcasts, an American peace with Mussolini, whose statist economics he regarded as a better guarantor of social cohesion and justice than the market-driven practices of the western democracies. Thus Canto 74, scribbled in notebooks and on scraps of paper, opens with the deaths of Mussolini and his mistress Claretta Petacci as the deaths of tragic heroes. They had been shot and killed by partisans, then strung up in a central square in Milan. For Pound they are giants devoured by pygmies:

Thus Ben and la Clara *a Milano*

by the heels at Milano

That maggots shd/ eat the dead bullock

They are even gods who have suffered more than Christ: “but the twice crucified/where in history will you find it?”¹² Here then is a great poet who used language to beget beauty as an active force in the world, and who supported Italian fascism to the end of his life. In Canto 116, probably written by 1960, he acknowledges the “wrecks and the errors” of his life but pleads to be remembered as a teacher of enlightenment: “I have brought the great ball of crystal;/who can lift it?” This humility, however, is countered by the defiance, at the start of the Canto, of: “Muss., wrecked for an error”.¹³

Marcuse recognises what he calls “the beauty of the fascist feast” when he cites the pro-Nazi films of Leni Reifenstahl, but he argues that the speed and immediacy of the medium pre-empt critical analysis. Fascism in literature, however, “carries freely the recognition and the indictment”.¹⁴ The distinction is facile, as Pound’s career demonstrates. Mr. Beardsley was right. Beauty is difficult, whether of dark armies ranked beneath colossal monuments of white stone, or of lights reflected in the night waters of a remote harbour.

II

Thirty years on, what price art as product and beauty as the negation of reality? The price surely that the market can bear. Neither Williams nor Marcuse, as Marxists, would have been surprised by this commodification of beauty; but they might have been startled by the beauty of

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 454

¹² *ibid.*, p. 451

¹³ *Drafts and Fragments of Cantos CX–CXVII*, Faber and Faber, London, 1970, pp. 25-6

¹⁴ H. Marcuse, *op. cit.*, p. 63

commodification in our time. Stella McCartney designs for H&M, an unmade bed in an art gallery, tanned WAGS swinging Louis Vuitton handbags – this is popular beauty. It has sliced across ancient demarcations of class, age and locality and ‘empowered’ a people very different from the one envisaged by Williams and Marcuse as the motor of political revolution. From the 1980s on there has been deregulation not only of services and utilities but also of aesthetic criteria. Mergers and acquisitions – of business enterprises, and of artistic traditions and conventions – have been the new, principal activities in these two fields. The mobile is now a hand-held hub where converge the hitherto distinct media of telephone, text, email, taped music, television and photography. The 8GB iPhone, is a wonder of technological compactness and minimalist beauty copied by Nokia. Its challenger, the G1, made by Taiwan’s HTC, has a touch-screen like the iPhone but merges in yet another medium, a slide-out qwerty keypad. It will run on an operating system called, appropriately, Android.

These are mass-production objects created by an industrial work-force but made possible by the manipulation of world-wide money markets. As if in ironic homage to the discredited prestige of the industrial world, the language of credit has appropriated the language of the factory and the laboratory. “Special investment vehicles”, “mortgage products” and “financial instruments” conjure a world of the proletariat and the R and D scientist; in reality it is a world of numbers, screens and parcellized debt, the “hyper-reality” that the French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard defined and analysed from the 1980s onwards. In a compact and witty essay entitled “Transaesthetics”, published in an English translation by Verso, he detects the same tendency towards merging and undifferentiation in the art-market of the 1990s. Art, he argues, has disappeared as a “symbolic pact” and been subsumed into culture which he calls “a proliferation of signs *ad infinitum*, [the] recycling of past and present forms”. Without a gold standard of aesthetic judgment or pleasure the art-object has become delinked from any conventional exchange-value: “it can only float, its only reference itself, impossible to convert into real value or wealth”.¹⁵ The culture of the agon, it would seem, has yielded, in the West, to the culture of the spectrum. Marcuse’s dream of art as a transcendental ‘other’ to a meretricious reality seems as utopian as the dream of political revolution by the 1960s student activists. There is no Other in post-modernity, which is why, among other reasons, homosexuality has been decensured and celebrated in the last twenty years.

¹⁵ ‘Transaesthetics’ in J. Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, Verso, London, (1990), 1993, p.14

Baudrillard was a younger associate and admirer of the distinguished Marxist sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre. In 1947 Lefebvre published the first of what would become a three-volume series entitled *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, an attempt to describe and theorise that eminently democratic topic “everyday life”. Lefebvre’s analysis focuses on the alienating effects of the incipient consumer society on traditional structures of communal life in, above all, urban environments. Perry Anderson notes that Lefebvre made the first French translation in 1933 of Marx’s early 1844 *Manuscripts*, where the concept of ‘alienation’ is pivotal to Marx’s dialectical reading of the relationship between the worker and what he produces. He also notes that the full impact of these early writings of the ‘humanist’ Marx did not register in Left circles in Europe until the late 1950s when “themes from them were diffused on the widest scale throughout Western Europe”.¹⁶ They were also an important part of the heteroclitic intellectual heritage of the 1960s student movement in Europe and the USA. And it was in America that Andy Warhol was pondering a new aesthetics and politics of everyday life at the same time as Lefebvre in France. While still a fine art student at Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Institute of Technology in 1948 he speculated that window-dressing could be considered a kind of art-form. He presumably realised that a shop-window is a huge frame enclosing a variety of objects, clothes, food, shoes, and could therefore be regarded as a popular version of the seventeenth century Dutch ‘still life’ genre with its masses of flowers, fruit and foodstuffs. He would also have been attracted by the inanimacy, the very stillness, of the objects, particularly the mannequins, simulacra of human beings. In 1963, on the occasion of his first one-man show on the West Coast, he observed, of the ubiquitous public adverts in Los Angeles, “I’m going to make their language the language of art”.¹⁷ In the same year he opened his studio which he named The Factory and where he developed his trade-mark aesthetic; flat, affectless, serial representations of the unique stars (Marilyn Monroe) and the banal objects (100 Coke Bottles) of popular culture. Beauty, banality and death – his subjects were all to hand in magazine photos of celebrities and newspaper photos of car-crashes and executions. They only needed his frame to make them our art.

Baudrillard cites in his essay Warhol’s statement that he wished he were a machine and goes on to declare that “all the industrial machinery in the world has acquired an aesthetic dimension” and that this aestheticization of everyday life has subsumed and neutered art’s oppositional

¹⁶ op. cit., p. 51

¹⁷ Cited in Part 1 of *Andy Warhol: The Complete Picture*, directed by Chris Rodley, producers Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, a three-part series shown weekly on Channel 4 from January 27, 2002

value. This is not Marcuse's sensuous beauty that may redeem the alienation of labour. It is rather "a *materialization* of aesthetics everywhere under an operational form", beauty as value-added rather than intrinsically other. 'Materialism' for Williams is a grounding concept, anchoring culture and art in the sociality of everyday life: for Baudrillard, whose essay evinces everywhere a nostalgia for art as transcendent other, it is a limiting concept which forces art to "minimalize itself, to mime its own disappearance".¹⁸ The only transcendence Baudrillard detects in our society is what he calls, in a companion essay, the weightlessness of "Loan, finance, the technosphere [and] communications".¹⁹ These have "taken off to become satellites in an inaccessible space and left everything else to go to rack and ruin", a prescient scenario of recent financial turmoil. With value ephemeral, and aesthetic criteria archaic, Warhol re-appears, for Baudrillard, as our avatar of taste:

The only benefit of a Campbell's soup can by Andy Warhol (and it is an immense benefit) is that it releases us from the need to decide between beautiful and ugly, between real and unreal, between transcendence and immanence. Just as Byzantine icons made it possible to stop asking whether God existed – without, for all that, ceasing to believe in him.²⁰

III

'Icon' and 'iconic' are key terms in the discourse of popular beauty. Its stars are cloned by the popular press in an endless series of two-dimensional images, or created by TV cameramen, the true professionals on shows dedicated to amateurs. Popular beauty also has its enhancers. Mr. Beardsley was right to say that beauty was difficult and Ezra Pound, in an earlier poem *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, figures himself as a new classical poet who refuses what the age demands – the meretricious speed of "a prose kinema" – and struggles on with the craft of "the "sculpture" of rhyme".²¹ Our age demands that speed and sculpting merge. Hephzibah Anderson in *The Observer* notes that a body called The British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons decries lunch-time liposuction and adverts for breast augmentation that target teenagers and are "anatomically incorrect". This sounds like a pious plea for knife-control. Anderson records a near 300% increase in female body-sculpting since 2002. She also suggests that, by and large,

¹⁸ *op. cit.*, p. 16

¹⁹ "Transeconomics", *op. cit.*, p 31

²⁰ "Transaesthetics", *ibid.*, p. 17

²¹ in Richard Sieburth (ed.) *Ezra Pound: Poems and Translations*, The Library of America, New York, 2003, p. 550

“posh girls do not aspire to big boobs”; their desire is rather for emaciation.²² She is right to read popular beauty in Britain through the filter of class. Working-class bodies were traditionally either lauded or stigmatised for their ugliness, as either sons and daughters of toil or misshapen brutes. Cinematic images raised their aspirations. J. B. Priestley in 1934 notes with approval the “factory girls that look like actresses” on his approach to London at the end of his journey round Britain,²³ but it is only recently that the grandchildren of those young women and men have had easy access to the items and aids, including digital cameras and the net, that enable their own beauty.

Fifty years ago Katie Price (a.k.a Jordan) might have had to fulfil her social aspirations, as did Christine Keeler, through whoredom with the ruling class, a Right-wing political Eros. They both began as beautiful, ambitious working-class girls from South-East England. But Price inflated her breasts to a grotesque size, appeared on a reality TV show, allowed autobiographies to be authored in her name, and presented herself recently as an experienced and accomplished horsewoman who was refused entry to the select Cartier International Polo festival on grounds of pure snobbery. Whoever writes her website has a shrewd insight into popular sentiment. She sees herself, we are told, as a “strong, realistic icon for many ordinary girls and women”. She claims she was excluded from the Polo festival because she was a glamour model, but she points out she is also a very successful businesswoman and that after all Eliza Doolittle could go to the races with Henry Higgins after only a few elocution lessons. Eliza Doolittle is a business-woman of sorts in Shaw’s play. She begins as a flower-seller and ends looking forward to a more successful career as a phonetics-teacher than her mentor Henry Higgins. Katie Price is worth some £30 million from her career as glamour model, “writer”, columnist, TV personality, singer and songwriter, and owner of her own lingerie and perfume lines. It is as a very successful business-woman that she claimed entry into the elite circle of the Polo Festival. And it is her breasts and her business acumen that have won her enormous popularity among women of all ages. She certainly represents some kind of Eros, but its politics transcend traditional categories of Right and Left.

It is not that Jordan comes from nowhere. She is Barbara Windsor as a business-woman, Donald McGill vulgarity made flesh, a Page Three girl in jodhpurs. She is, in the largest sense of the

²² “Seduced by the Myth of Perfection”, *The Observer*, September 21, 2008

²³ J. B. Priestley, *English Journey*, Heinemann, London, Jubilee Edition, 1984, p. 300

word, a political figure,²⁴ but the intellectual tradition we have been tracing in this paper could only view her, if she ever came within its ken, as a supremely fetichized commodity. She is that, but she is also, along with Kate Moss, a representative figure within the landscape of popular beauty. Moss is the remote androgyne, the girl/boy, first chiselled out as the statue of the beautiful youth, the “ephebe”, in classical Greece. This is a figure, in Camille Paglia’s description, who “dreams but neither thinks nor feels. His eyes fix on nothing. His face is a pale oval upon which nothing is written”.²⁵ Moss never speaks, for to speak would be to enter society and break the spell she casts as angelic mute. Jordan complements her as the gabby earth-mother, and together they re-incarnate the two most powerful female personae in Western culture.

Sue Harper, in a most illuminating lecture at the V&A, detected in the 1970s films of Ken Russell and Nicolas Roeg a new “weight of meaning [given] to inanimate objects” which demanded, on the part of the viewer, “a transformation of regard for goods”.²⁶ For Baudrillard the line of cognitive vision is now the other way. The subject knows himself too well. “It is the Object that is exciting, because the Object is my vanishing point...not a reflection but a challenge, a strange attractor”.²⁷ If today the Object has merged with the Subject by recreating the Subject as Object, we can appreciate the fatal attraction of Kate Moss and the value of Katie’s Price. **(3,915 words)**

ENDS

²⁴ Price ran as a candidate for the Parliamentary seat of Stretford and Urmston near Manchester in the 2001 election. Her slogan was “For a Bigger and Betta Future”. Her campaign promises included free breast implants, an increase in nudist beaches and a ban on parking tickets. She got 1.8% of the vote. Source: Wikipedia entry for “Katie Price”

²⁵ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, Yale University Press, London and New Haven, (1990), pbk. ed. 2001, p. 118. Paglia’s brilliant, interdisciplinary work is a still-unrivalled study of the persistence, from classical Greece to the present-day, of sexual archetypes at all cultural levels.

²⁶ Professor Sue Harper, “Visual Style in the 1970s British Cinema”, lecture at the Victoria and Albert Museum, February 2, 2008

²⁷ “The Object as Strange Attractor” in Jean Baudrillard., op. cit., p.173

