

## Chapter-VIII

### Marxism and Aesthetic Judgement

One of the most influential strains in aesthetic theory during the twentieth century has been that of Marxism. Marxism is the prime example of a politically motivated aesthetic theory. Of all aesthetic theories Marxism is the one most explicitly tied to a political programme. Value is probably the area of greatest contention in Marxist aesthetics. There have been competing schools of Marxist thought, yet there is general agreement that, at some point, the arts must be considered to be subsidiary to politics. No Marxist theorist is likely to deny that the arts are part of a process of ideological struggle. We propose to trace the debate on value in Marxist aesthetics from Marx through to the late twentieth century.

Marxism has followed different lines of development in the twentieth century, but some common features can be identified amongst its many variants, such as the requirement to judge all activities of a society, its artistic activities included, in political perspective. Under such a reading, works of art may further or retard the class struggle, be progressive or regressive in their effect on their evidence. Marxism in its sophisticated forms shows a great interest in determining exactly why given works of art have the effect they do. Underneath it lies the compulsion to situate artworks within a political context. It is worth pointing out that 'Political' is a term with a very wide range of reference to a Marxist, embracing the structure of a social relations as well as politics in its institutional sense.

Arts' value to a Marxist, therefore, is to be politically determined. Both art work and artist are to be analysed according to political criteria, although that leaves considerable room for debate as to the exact value of individual works of art, or artistic styles, within a given society. It is a debate going right back to Marx himself. There is, for example, his famous analysis of the value of Greek art and literature in *Grundrisse*. Marx stresses that Greek art and literature are bound up with certain forms of social development, and speculates as to why it is that they still afford us artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect they count as a norm and as an unattainable model, when the forms of social development in question have long since disappeared. The problem arises because Marx espouses a progressive theory of

social development. He sees mankind as evolving through a series of historical stages from tribalism through feudalism to bourgeois capitalism, and then eventually communism - to become more advanced beings in all sense, including the production of art. Modern art, being the product of mankind's highest stage of social development, ought by rights to exert the greatest effect and to supersede the art of the past, to have the greatest value, as it were.

The answer that Marx put forward in explanation is quite notorious. His notorious 'Childhood of humanity' agreement runs as under, "A man can not become a child again, or he becomes childish. But does he not find joy in the child's naivete, and must he himself not strive to reproduce its truth at a higher stage ? Does not the true character of each epoch come alive in the nature of its children ? Why should not the childhood of humanity, its most beautiful unfolding, as a stage never to return, exercise an external charm ? There are merely children and precocious children. Many of the old peoples belong to this category. The Greek were normal children. The charm of their art for us is not in contradiction to the undeveloped stage of society on which it grew. It is the result, rather, with the fact that the unripe social conditions under which it arose, and could alone arise, can never return".

An important principle is established at this point : that works of art do not transmit eternal truths over time. For a Marxist, the Homeric poems do not make any eternally valid statements about the human condition instead, Homeric poems, like any other great works of art, have to be recreated and reappropriated by each generation in terms of the specifics of its own ideological struggle. The main thrust of Marxist aesthetics will be to contextualise art works within that progressively unfolding ideological conflict, in order to determine how the arts are helping to form ideological attitudes.

Politics will therefore be the ultimate determinant of a given work of art's value, but the precise nature of the relationship between the arts and politics remains a matter for dispute. Whether the arts can claim a relative autonomy from

the realm of politics and economics has been debated in Marxist circles of late, and both Marx and Engels had floated such an idea in their writings. Even the notion of a relative autonomy, with its implication that partial escape only can be made from political and economic constraints, gives away the unequal nature of the relationship and directs us back to consideration of the base/super structure model on which so much of Marxist cultural theory depends. Marxism assumes that society consists of an economic base (the production of good by labour) and a superstructure comprising a range of social activities, such as the arts, religion, the law and education. The economic base is held to determine, in some sense, the form that the activities in the superstructure will take : The mode of production in material line determines the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. Here 'political' refers to institutional politics. Thus a society structured on capitalist principles gives rise to an educational system based on competition, and a conception of the arts heavily imbued with the notion of individualism (the heroic author, painter, composer, etc. communicating a personal vision), since competition and individual effort form the cornerstone of *Laissezfaire*, free - market economic theory.

Early Marxist aesthetic theorists saw the relationship between the arts and the economic base as essentially a reflective one, thus the arts reflected the ideology of a society, an ideology determined by economic factors. Reflection theory, for many years one of the major paradigms in Marxist aesthetic, postulated a somewhat passive role for the arts in the ideological process. Plekhanov remarked that the art of a decadent epoch *must* be decadent. This is inevitable; and it would be futile to become indignant about it. More recent theorists, structurelist Marxists such as Louis Althusser for example, have argued for a much more complex relationship between the arts and the economic base, to the extent of claiming a relative autonomy for the arts as a social practice. Nevertheless, the base is invariably the dominant partner in the relationship, and, as with all superstructural phenomena, the arts will be viewed - against an ideological background that is base derived. Engels makes this very plain when he says that political, juridical, philosophical, religious, literary, artistic etc. development is based on economic

development. But all these, he says further, react upon one another and also upon the economic base. It is not that the economic position is the *cause and alone active*, while everything else only has a passive effect. There is for Engels, rather, interaction on the basis of the economic necessity, which *ultimately* always asserts itself. For all that there is interaction, in the final analysis it is the economic base that is considered to hold the key to superstructural development.

The objective of Marxist theory in general is to alter the economic base obtaining in a capitalist society, a base reinforced by a variety of superstructural practices, to one involving less exploitation of the working classes whose labour created that society's wealth. In a capitalist society there is vastly unequal distribution of wealth and profit across the social classes, and Marx's response is to call for a change in ownership of the means of production, leading to the "dictatorship of the proletariat" in which the working class assumes control of a society's industries and institutions. All his writings from *The Communist Manifesto* onwards are directed towards this goal of class struggle against an exploitive socio-economic system. And the arts, if one accepts the idea of their having a relative autonomy, become one more means of contriving to bring this about. Marxist aesthetic presupposes a far reaching and active influence exerted by art on various spheres of material and cultural life, the participation of art in the process of transforming the real world. This would suggest the need for a reassessment of artistic history in terms of the current struggle being waged, and also for a reassessment of the role of the artist in generations to come. Put crudely, artists henceforth will be treated as being either *for or against* the progressive ideology - that of Marxism. The positive side of such an injunction is that it encourages artists to take their socio-political role seriously, and to understand the power, for good or ill, that the arts can have in forming people's ideas and attitudes. The negative side can be seen in the censorship and distortion that resulted in Stalinist Russia from an over-zealous application of class - struggle principles to creativity.

### The law of art and the law of politics

There are strong imperatives within Marxism towards censorship of politically suspect material. Marxist aesthetics does not as such entail censorship, and there have been many dissenting voices against it throughout its history, but Marxist politicians are not averse to adopting Plato's solution when it comes to potentially socially subversive poets and artists, and expelling these figures from the commonwealth. Leon Trotsky's assertion that a work of art should, in the first place, be judged by its own law, that is, by the law of art has not always been heeded, and is in contradiction with the views stated above. Indeed, It is not clear that a law of art, if we mean by that a law for constructing value judgements that is independent of political considerations, is even possible under a Marxist scheme. Given the belief that economics 'ultimately' are the determining factor of all superstructural activities, then it would seem that the analysis of the work of art will always be reducible to ideological criteria, to what we might call 'the law of politics'. It is a moot point whether there can be even be a law of art such as Trotsky suggests, except in the rather simplistic sense of checking that formal procedures, say the rules of counterpoint in musical composition have been correctly executed.

Marxism is an aesthetic theory which insists on a didactic role for the arts, and in practice this has most often led to a strong commitment to 'realism' as an artistic style because of its assumed greater power of accessibility to a mass audience. Realism is notoriously a difficult term to define. Does it have any relevance to an art such as music ? Georg Lukács attempted to do just that is conformity with Marxist political imperatives. What realism tends to encourage is a highly partisan form of aesthetics, in the sense that works dubbed non or anti-realist are treated as politically undesirable. In Lukács' case this led to the rejection of modernist literature as inappropriate, indeed inimical, to the cause of socialism. Orthodox Marxist theorists have been prone to dismiss experimental or anti-realist art such as constructivism as anti-socialist in spirit.

Both sides, realist and anti-realist, have a different vision of art's role in society, and some of the major positions in Marxist aesthetics may be examined to see how these differences are manifested. To 'bring art back to the people today' can mean, on the one side of the realist divide, to speak to the people at large in a voice which is both readily understandable and employs the 'correct' political register: "It should be comprehensible to the masses and loved by them" as Lenin puts it. Or, on the other side, to challenge the people, by means of experiment and novelty, to reject traditions and ways of thinking which are held to be outmoded as well as politically suspect. While the two positions have similar underlying objectives, to make art politically relevant and publicly accountable, their methods are radically different and perhaps ultimately incompatible with each other. It is over the question of experimentation, particularly in the case of modernism, where some of the sharpest exchanges in twentieth-century Marxist aesthetics have taken place.

## **SOCIALIST REALISM**

Plekhanov and reflection theory :-

Reflection theory holds that the value of art lies in its being a recorded of social trends. We have only to look at the art of a historical period, according to the Plekhanovite view, to understand what kind of period it is ideologically speaking. Decadent periods produce decadent art and conversely politically progressive periods produce progressive art. It is a measure of the complications involved in this area that progressive, under a Stalinist regime, came to mean stylistically conservative and thematically traditional in the manner of nineteenth century realism, a style which is generally held to reflect the ideals of the socio-economically progressive middle class of the time (and even more insidiously, that any art produced under a regime that met with official approval become, by definition, progressive)

Plekhanov's attack on abstract art provided one of the major sources of Soviet Socialist realistic theory. His critique of Cubism is a case in point. *In Art and social life* he criticized Cubism as belonging to the art for art's sake movement,

and in consequence being tainted by association with a bourgeois ideology which sought to keep art separate from politics. Cubist art represented to Plakhanov a subversion of his belief in the duty of art to reflect accurately social reality. Artistic 'decadence' of this kind mirrored a socio-political decadence, amounting to a celebration of it. Under such a reading abstract art, by its very nature, could not constitute a critique of social evils and become value-loaded in the wrong way : effectively, it was a part of the mechanism whereby bourgeois society kept its politics hidden.

To move away from realism in painting was to move away from the masses and thus to deny art's political value. Formal experimentation of any kind was frowned upon, and the upshot was an art heavily committed to figurative representation and idealized forms. Art became relentlessly upbeat and optimistic in mood, and just as relentlessly propagandistic. The vogue for painting workers engaged in socially progressive labour in Soviet, and subsequently in Chinese communes. Whether this was an accurately reflected social reality was highly debatable. It was, however, how social reality *ought* to be if the political theory involved, Marxism, was accurate in its analysis. The value of the art was to be determined by the extent to which it reflected that politically constructed Marxist reality.

### **Art as social engineering**

In the wake of social realism each writer was called upon to become 'an engineer of human souls', whose task was to depict reality in its revolutionary development. Zhdanov had spelled out what such 'engineering' was to involve. He said that the truthfulness and historical consciousness of the artistic portrayal should be combined with the ideological remoulding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism. 'Engineer of human souls', 'ideological remoulding and education' : art's didactic role is unmistakably made clear by Zhdanov. This is art reduced to propaganda and artistic value is defined in exclusively political terms. The creative artist under such a scheme is little more than a state

functionary whose capacity for social criticism, which is ironically enough one of art's most revolutionary characteristics, has all but been withdrawn. Post-Zhdanov, the artist must reflect what the political rulers decree that reality to be. There are definite echoes of Platonic aesthetics in this circumscription of the artist's role, and what was to be engineered were not only the 'souls' the workers but the souls of the artist's themselves.

Art as a form of social engineering is a concept of which Plato undoubtedly would have approved, and it is striking how close Zhdanov can be to the Platonic line on aesthetics. In Plato, as in socialist realism, political considerations are always primary and the didactic imperative is the only acceptable one for artistic activity to display. The discussion on dramatic art in *The Republic* (398 A-B) is uncompromising on this score. It is precisely the 'more austere and less attractive' type of writer that Zhdanov wishes to encourage, and, as in Plato's case, those who choose not to conform will be banished from the commonwealth, although in Stalinist Russia the opportunity for self-censorship will first of all be extended to the dissident before the exclusion principle is applied. In Plato too there is a commitment to an idealised reality peopled by larger than life figures. Both poet and prose-writers, says Plato, are guilty of "the most serious misstatements about human life", and this has to be prohibited (392 B). Prohibition means that when a poet refuses to confirm, the state is to control the arts and it will fall to the politicians to set the ground-rules. Zhdanov also speaks in a similar voice. Platonic and socialist realist aesthetics has similar underlying objectives. Plato provides, it has been rightly observed, Leninist dictatorships with a precedent they can not find in Marx and Engels. Each theory fears the affective power of literature, indeed of the arts in general, and it may well be that both of them overrate this power considerably. A direct correlation is assumed between what people see or read and what people believe and then proceed to act upon. Both theories would appear to conceive of reception as a fairly passive process, in which a highly impressionable individual uncritically consumes works of literature and the ideological assumptions encoded within them. The obvious solution is to censor those works deemed to feature socially unacceptable views, and to

substitute for them others containing approved sentiments, the assumption being that the mass audience will just as uncritically absorb the one as the other. The judging process is being dictated by political considerations and scant attention is being paid to any law of art. There is no suggestion that art might entertain, or that pleasure might be taken as a primary criterion of value, in either Plato or socialist realism. Where politics sets the agenda such things can only appear escapist, and escapism can have no part in a social system so heavily committed to didacticism.

Many of the concerns of socialist realism are prefigured in neo-classicism, an aesthetic theory heavily based on the writings of such classical figures as Plato, Aristotle and Horace, and which dominated European aesthetics from the Renaissance through to the latter eighteenth century. Neoclassicism had a similar commitment to didacticism (although its ideological orientation was very different, being more concerned with the promotion of moral virtue than of class consciousness) but it allowed greater scope for pleasure in the reception process. Poets, as the Elizabethan neoclassical theorist and poet Sir Philip Sidney noted, imitate both to delight and teach : and delight to move man to take that goodness in hand, and which without delight they would fly as from a stranger. What is posited in Sidney's *Apologie for Poetrie* is a working relationship between education and entertainment that is often missing in socialist realism, where delight is in short supply and the bias is rather unrelievedly towards education. What Sidney and Zhdanov agree upon is the objective power of literature, and that affective power's didactic implications.

There are definite echoes of Sidney - style neoclassicism in socialist realism, in that both theories are concerned that the arts should provide appropriate models of behaviour for the audience to imitate or to be inspired by. Ultimately, however, socialist realism is closer to the Platonic tradition given socialist realism's bias towards censorship and the artist's, social role, the question arises as to whether such a limited aesthetic theory can be defended. A defence of a kind can be mounted on the censorship issue. New sociologically-based aesthetic theories would be willing to sanction complete artistic freedom of expression, pornography often provides as

interesting test case for feminists, for example - and in that respect socialist realism differs only in degree. Neither is self-censorship an unknown side-effect of other aesthetic theories : most creative artists in most generations tend to conform to the 'rules'. It is the extent of restriction of subject-matter and formal experimentation that mark socialist realism out for special attention. Politics may be present in many other aesthetic theories, Art with the exception of Plato, none is as explicit about its politically-inspired programme nor about the censorship that backs it up.

Some defense is possible, too, of the socialists realist's conception of 'the artist's social role as 'the engineer of human souls'. Creative artists have traditionally set art to communicate some vision of the world, no matter how obscure and eccentric that vision may be, and their work can have a profound effect on its audience. In that sense most artists are to some extent aspiring to be 'engineers of human souls', and a measure of responsibility must surely be attached to the process. To disclaim any responsibility in such cases would be to deny the affective power of one's art. There are too many extent example of this affective power in action successfully to deny the premise. Dicken's or Saratchandra's novel's drew attention to many of the social evils of the day, and in some cases provoked legislation to correct such evils. To call Dickens or Saratchandra engineers of human souls seems entirely justified under the circumstances. They sought through their novels to arouse the audience's social conscience, and they manifestly succeeded in doing so. What might be objected to at this point is that no one questions that some art is like this, and that it can be admirable; but it seems excessive to demand that *all* art be like this, or to claim that engineering *alone* can explain aesthetic success.

More recently Jean-Paul Sartre put forward a variant of the 'engineer' argument when he called for writers to engage directly with the political issues of the post-war world in his major work of aesthetic theory, *What is Literature?* Sartre said that writing is not living, neither is it running away from life in order to contemplate Platonic essence and the archetype of beauty in a world at rest. It is,

sustained work, professional consciousness, and the sense of responsibility. This sense of responsibility requires that an author must write in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it's all about. Whether the state is justified in forcing authors to write in this way is another question, and Sartre is by no means calling for official censorship of literature that does not meet his criteria. Sartre was no supporter of Zhdanov or Stalin : in fact many of his plays, which engage with the era's political problems in a confrontational manner, were viciously attacked by pro-Zhdanovite elements in the French-Communist Party. Yet in hindsight his aesthetic arguments have an ironic similarity to Zhdanov's. Sartre was impeccable 'realist' in approach both as theorist and dramatist, and in his later career was fairly openly Marxist too. Where Sartre differs is in objecting to the element of compulsion involved in Zhdanovism, as well as to the notion of political correctness : "The opponent is never answered; he is discredited". Sartre wants the artist to have a significantly greater degree of personal freedom than Zhdanov could countenance, although he is just as insistent as the latter regarding the artist's responsibility to society and equally unwilling to allow the law of art alone to dictate criteria of aesthetic value. Politics intrudes forcefully in both cases. Zhdanov, and Plato before him, effectively demand state-approved propaganda, where as Sartre calls for individually initiated intervention by writers in political debates. The difference is a crucial one and should not be under-estimated, but all parties assume that artists have a socio-political role to fulfil which, given the powerful affective power of art they can not readily ignore. Socialist realism may be to most people as unattractive and often cynical theory, but its starting premises - that art should be didactic, that artists have political responsibilities are neither unreasonable nor indefensible in social or philosophical terms.

### **Luka'cs and Critical realism**

Zhdanovist socialist realism was largely geared to the demands of judging, and directing, the output of currently practising socialist creative artists. Luka'cs's critical realism, on the other hand, is a way of judging the work of non-Marxist writers, both past and present, from a Marxist perspective. Luka'cs is not opposed to

socialist-realism, but he does maintain an attitude of healthy scepticism towards its claims as an aesthetic theory and the Knee-jerk response it can generate from its supporters. If every mediocre product of socialist realism is to be hailed as a masterpiece, confusion will be worse confounded, he said. The reference here is to the Soviet critic's tendency to judge works according to their political correctness rather than their artistic merit.

Luka's thesis in *The Meaning of contemporary Realism* is that twentieth-century bourgeois literature can be broken down into two main styles, modernism and critical realism. Modernism is marked by an obsession with formal experimentation, a concern with technique at the expense of narrative content and an intense subjectivity that pictures human being as essentially isolated and alienated from their fellows. Overall, the modernist presents a very despairing view of the human condition, and seems to see little real opportunity for change. Alienation is generally regarded as part of man's nature by modernists, whereas for the Marxist it is a state induced by socio-political system. It is the work of such author as Franz Khfka, James Joyce and Sammuel Beckett that Luka'cs takes as being representative of the modernist ethic. Critical realism, on the otherhand, is realism marked by linear narrative, credible situations and character based on real life models, literature and transparent writing style, plus what Luka'cs refers to as a sense of 'Critical detachment'. Properly deployed as in the fiction of Thomas Mann, this critical detachment places what is significant, specifically modern experience in a wider context, giving it only the emphasis it deserves as parts of a greater whole. Luka'cs pictures the bourgeois author as being confronted by a clear choice of value systems. It is the dilemma of the choice between an aesthetically appealing and a fruitful critical realism. The value of bourgeois literature is to be determined by its critical realist content; that is, by the extent of critical awarness that it displays of a society's overall mechanisms of operation. Rather like Sartre, Luka'cs demands that the author write in such a way that nobody can be ignorant or inocent of the world. The fictional individual must be presented within a culture context where ideology is visible shaping his or her social being. Since modernism insists that the world is full of isolated, alienated

individuals apparently independent of political processes, then as a style it has to be valued much lower in Luka'cs's aesthetic scheme. What this adverse value judgement results in is a rejection of some of the most highly regarded authors of the twentieth century, and an explicit criticism of the anti-realist tradition of literature.

The realist tradition in Marxist aesthetics, as both Zhdanov and Luka'cs suggest, is essentially back-ward looking in its distrust of experimentation, and authoritarian in operation. It calls for a highly prescriptive aesthetics, almost invariably tending to polarize debates—either Kafka or Mann as well as expecting a high standard of political correctness in works of art. Socialist realist aesthetics in particular involves a tight system of social control in which the artist obeys the instructions of the aesthetic theorist, who in turn obeys the instruction of the political theorist. There is small scope for deviation or artistic innovation in such a system, and the economic base very much drives the superstructure, with artists being placed under an obligation to tailor their works to the demands of that economic base as determined by politicians. Luka'cs is a less dogmatic theorist than Zhdanov, but he is still authoritarian and prescriptive in his method. The modernism/critical realism division acts to close off debate, and is clearly politically motivated in its insistence that authors be condemned for presenting 'false' models of the human condition. Luka'cs is less suspicious than Zhdanov is of formal experimentation. Such an activity challenges the stability of the theorist's culture models, and is less easily turned to polemical account. There is an argument to be made for didacticism in the arts, neoclassicism makes it very successfully on behalf of moral virtues, but ultimately it is very narrow-minded, and perhaps even anti-artistic didacticism that is being called for in socialist realism. Luka'cs's version of social realism is much more self-critical than most, but the theory has in general been an unappealing blend of censorship and authoritarianism.

It may be noted finally that not all Marxist aesthetic theories have taken the realist route towards value, and a counter - tradition can be identified

whose most important contribution have been Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, the Frankfurt School and the structuralist Marxist movement in France. There is an acute sense of scepticism about reflection theory amongst such thinkers, which is neatly summed up in Brecht's remark that if art reflects life it does so with special mirrors. As for Brecht's method, Engelson has glossed : The Play is less a reflection of than a *reflection*, social reality. This is to say, the dramatist does not simply reflect, but decides *what* to reflect and also what *form* the reflection will take. But we shall not enter into these discussions. However although the issue of social control, and how large a part it should play in an aesthetic theory remains alive. It is on that issue that the realist/anti-realist divide in Marxist aesthetics is at its very sharpest.

**References :-**

Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1968 edn.

Marx K. *Grundrisse*, Nicholas M., (trans), Penguin Books, 1973 edn.

Plato, *Republic*, Lee translation, Penguin, many edition.

Plekhanov, G.V. *Art and Social Life*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1936 edn.

Rose, M.A. *Marx's Lost Aesthetic : Karl Marx and the Visual Arts*, Cambridge University Press, 1984 edn.

Sartre, J.P. *What is Literature*, Fruhtman B (trans), Methuen, 1967 edn.

Sidney, Sir Philip, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, Signet, 1970 edn.

Siegel, P.N.(ed) *Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art*, Path, 1970 edn.

Trotsky, L. *Literature and Revolution*, University of Michigan Press, 1960 edn.

Zhdanov, A.A. *Soviet Literature in Soviet Writers'*, 1934, Lawrence and Wishart.

Zis, A. *Foundations of Marxist Aesthetics*, Judgson K. (trans.). Central Books, 1977 edn.