

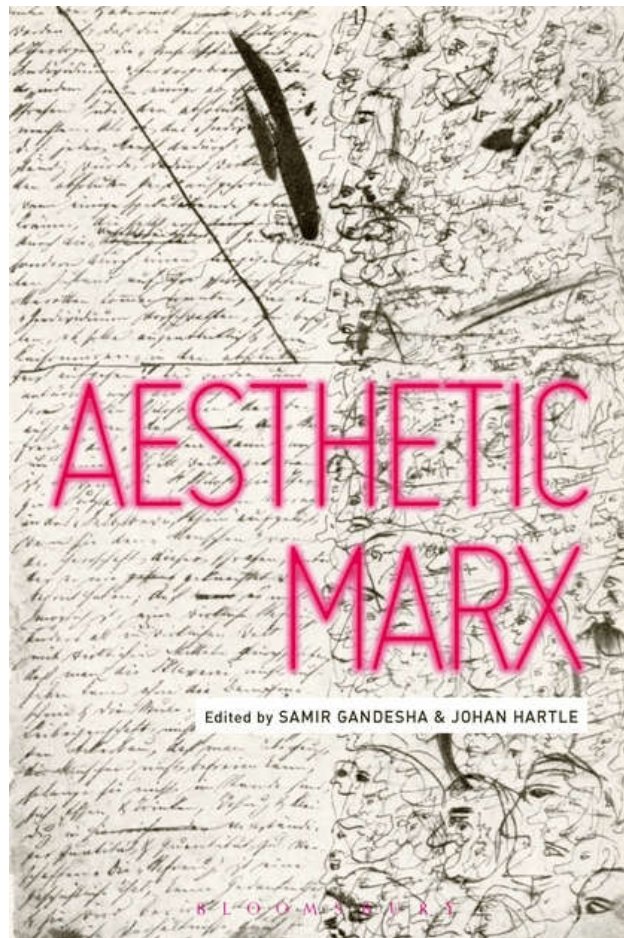
## FORUM

**SAMIR GANDESHA - JOHAN HARTLE (eds.)**  
*Aesthetic Marx*  
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Discussants:

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## INTRODUCTION

The title of this book is *Aesthetic Marx*, and not, for example, *Marx and Aesthetics*, *Marxist Aesthetics*, or – shifting from the domain of ‘the aesthetic’ to that of ‘the artistic’, which, as we will see, is not automatic and devoid of consequences – *Marx and the Philosophy of Art*, *Marx in the Arts*, *et similia*. From our point of view, this means that the main focus in this book, regardless of the different particular themes and topics that the single chapters of the book written by the various authors are obviously centered on, is represented by the relationship between Karl Marx, the philosopher, and ‘the aesthetic’ or, say, the aesthetic dimension or component of our experience. Where the latter is clearly assumed as one of fundamental importance for philosophy to deal with. So, far from being a less relevant philosophical discipline in comparison to logic, epistemology, philosophy of science or even ethics – as it is sometimes argued, or at least suspected, especially in certain academic contexts in which the leading philosophical trends have a prejudicial anti-aesthetic and, say, purely theoretical basic attitude –, according to this book what Marx seems to confirm is rather the ‘deadly serious’ character of aesthetics. In fact, the fundamental concern of the book seems to be precisely «the role of the aesthetic/aesthetics within Marx» but also, shifting perspective in the transition from one part of the book to another, «the increasing presence of Marx (both as figure and inscription) in contemporary artistic practices».

Precisely for this unorthodox, original and potentially groundbreaking approach to the ‘aesthetic Marx’, we have decided to dedicate this forum not to a single monographic study, but instead to a collection of writings, or rather to the spirit in which the collection has been realized. In the following pages Samir Gandesha (Associate Professor in the Department of the Humanities and Director of the Institute for the Humanities at Simon Fraser University) and Johan Frederik Hartle (Professor for Art Studies and Media Theory at the University of Arts and Design of Karlsruhe) will answer a set of questions asked by a group of Italian scholars, whose members integrate interests in Marx and Marxism with an aesthetic and historical-philosophical approach. As editors of this forum, our aim is to stimulate a discussion between different philosophical traditions, a discussion able to draw the theoretical potential of an aesthetic interpretation of Marx into open. The following forum has therefore the task to uncover the most fruitful

tensions of the book edited by Gandesha and Hartle, and to bring to light its innovative method and contents.

STEFANO MARINO  
(Università di Bologna)

On the basis of what has been already observed in the Introduction, my first question to the book editors is thus if I – as a reader of this book, especially its first part – have understood correctly their intention to propose a kind of *Zurück zu Marx* as a way not to turn aesthetics into a new *prima philosophia*, of course, but anyway to redeem aesthetics from certain prejudices against it and to strongly reaffirm its central role in the context of philosophical discourse and investigation in general. By referring to aesthetics I obviously refer to the particular philosophical discipline that, ever since its foundation and first developments in the eighteenth century, has been devoted to inquiring into ‘the aesthetic’, even determining this way a veritable anthropological turn, the advent of a new anthropology centered on the finiteness of the human being, as noted by Ernst Cassirer (1932).

By referring to ‘the aesthetic’, in turn, I implicitly refer to the fact that the latter, as has been said in the Introduction, cannot be completely reduced to ‘the artistic’. But this is precisely what has often happened in the tradition of modern aesthetics from the age of classical German philosophy and transcendental idealism up to the present time. Hegel famously opened his lectures on aesthetics with the claim that «their topic is the spacious *realm of the beautiful*; more precisely, their province is *art*, or, rather, *fine art*», so that «as a name [aesthetics] may be retained, but the proper expression for [this] science is *Philosophy of Art* and, more definitely, *Philosophy of Fine Art*» (Hegel 1843, 1). It might be argued that perhaps things haven’t changed so much from the time of Schelling and Hegel in this field, if we think of such philosophical traditions as hermeneutic aesthetics (Heidegger, Gadamer) or analytic aesthetics (Goodman, Danto) that completely identify the question of ‘the aesthetic’ with the question of art, or even better of fine art, and that are thus characterized by a tendency that has been recently defined «the removal of the sensible» (or: «the perceptible») (see Matteucci 2015). If so, then my next questions to the book editors is whether they agree in identifying in Marx, and in at least a part of the tradition of Marxist aesthetics influenced by

him (let us think of Benjamin's retrieval of «the theory of perception which the Greeks called aesthetics» [Benjamin 1936, 41], or Marcuse's emphatic reevaluation of the aesthetic dimension as a key for a new, unorthodox-Marxist and revolutionary way of philosophizing), a potential counterbalance or countermovement to the abovementioned leading trends in modern and contemporary aesthetics. A counterbalance or countermovement that makes it possible to overcome: (1) the long-time tendency to simply and abruptly identify 'the aesthetic' with 'the artistic'; and, as a consequence, (2) the long-time tendency in philosophical aesthetics to reduce art itself to the narrow domain of the arts officially recognized as part of the system of the fine arts, thus excluding other practices and techniques that are not of minor importance and significance today (for example, those belonging to the domain of popular arts and shaping our everyday aesthetic experiences).

JOHAN F. HARTLE, SAMIR GANDESHA

First of all, let us say that this statement succinctly clarifies our intentions in the book as a whole and the Introduction in particular. For Marx, it is especially important that these two concepts, aesthetics, on the one side, and fine art, on the other, be kept separate and distinct. The reason for this is that Marx's active conception of materialism is thoroughly grounded in the finite human body as a sensorium. Hence, Marx inverts Hegel's «labour of the concept» and proposes a concept of (sensuous) activity (labour). In this, Marx engages in a determinate rather than an abstract negation of Hegelian philosophy insofar as, as Adorno notes in *Hegel: Three Studies*, *Geist* is simply social labour that cannot recognize itself as such. Marx sees art as a product and symptom of the alienation of class society. With the abolition of such a society art will, itself, be abolished as a specialized activity and praxis will itself take on qualities we today regard as 'artistic'. This culminates the negation of the negation. Recent research undertaken by Douglas Moggach and his colleagues has centered on post-Kantian 'perfectionism' or the idea that the defining idea of post-Kantian thought is the attempt to define historical and institutional conditions under which spontaneity (freedom *from* external determination and the freedom *to* self-legislate) becomes possible. An emphatic post-Kantian form of perfectionism is one in which freedom supervenes happiness. Here there is a tension between those who em-

phasize subject (Fichte and Bauer) and those who emphasize substance in the Spinozist sense (Feuerbach). Of course, as Hegel famously points out in the Preface, the *Phenomenology* systematically seeks to grasp 'the True' not just as substance but equally as subject. In an important sense, Marx can be seen as the apotheosis of this form of perfectionism insofar as it is brought down to earth in the form of a active and creative transforming of Substance which is, itself, a self-formation of the Subject. This is what Marx means by Species-Being (*Gattungswesen*). If key to understanding the labour process under capitalism is the idea of 'separation' (an important term for Guy Debord who also criticized the existence of art as an autonomous practice) of the workers from the means of production and also from each other and therefore also the products of their collective labour power, then an artistic understanding of human sensuous activity in a post-capitalist society entails a negation of this separation. Under capitalism, commodities go their own way independent of the direct producers which means, among other things, workers cannot see their own practical activity reflected in the products of that activity in the way, say, a sculptor or a composer can. Under Communism, this would change and the direct producers would exert democratic control over every aspect of the labour process and, as a result of this, would be able to look upon the products of their labour precisely as the sculptor or composer might. Indeed, along with producing material goods the direct producers would be able to produce works both sublime and beautiful, but it would no longer be understood as art. Importantly, such a form of practical activity would be the basis for a positive conception of freedom under socialism – freedom understood as self-determination through the creative transformation of the material and immaterial objects.

Another thing that is pertinent here is that while Hegel does seem to reduce aesthetic to 'fine art' in his *Lectures on aesthetics*, in the *Phenomenology of spirit* he suggests that in art we see the «sensuous appearance (*Schein*) of the Idea» through which the Absolute is disclosed, which is then subsequently surpassed by both religion and philosophy. Notice that for Marx, the criticism of religion and philosophy as alienated forms of human experience is key to his agenda, particularly in his early writings. Perhaps as a way of coming back to the sensuousness of art understood now in terms of practical activity that can in no way be restricted to a narrow and specialized form of artistic practice, at the end of the

day, underwritten, which is to say funded and legitimated by the museum. Jacques Taminiaux (1985) argues that, like Plato, Marx engages in a negation of art in the service of beauty.

#### STEFANO MARINO

Finally, I would like to suggest that the fascinating and fitting formula 'Aesthetic Marx' may seem to dangerously point in a broader and in-itself-articulated direction, namely in the direction of a sort of aestheticization and, connected to this, commodification of Marx himself. Where by 'aestheticization' I do not aim to refer here to what usually comes to one's mind when using this term, namely «the spectacular and explicit modalities of configuration of the aesthetic [...] that on a larger scale are well represented by advertising and commodification processes [and] testified to by hedonistic and consumerist practices» (Iannilli 2018, who offers an excellent survey of this field): «advertising and commodification processes» that, for example, have been defined by Giovanni Matteucci (2016) as the «hyper-aesthetic» dimension of aestheticization, in order to differentiate the latter from the «hypo-aesthetic» dimension of this complex phenomenon.

What I refer to here is rather an aestheticization of Marx under the form of his transformation into an aesthetic object or content in works of art that, for their part, run the risk of being subject to strong commodification processes in our widely aestheticized age of 'aesthetic capitalism'. As far as one can learn from the book, the use of Marx in the visual arts (and one could perhaps add analogous examples in the popular arts: film, pop music, photography, etc.) is a relevant tendency of our age, which is indeed explicitly addressed in the third part of the book. Now, according to some scholars it is possible to identify in today's so-called 'aesthetic capitalism', and in 'the artworld' that belongs to it, a certain trend to consciously and even happily turn artworks into commodities or even the visual arts into a form of business, for example with Warhol, Koons, Hirst and others (see, for example, Di Giacomo 2015, 151-181; and Mecacci 2017, 9-38, 79-105). Another Marxist theorist of aesthetics, namely Adorno, famously wrote with his unique negative and prescriptive style that «the task of art today is to bring chaos into order» (Adorno 1951, § 143), whereas such expressions as 'Warhol economy' or 'business art', that have acquired a widespread diffusion and common use today,

unmistakably reveal the opposite (affirmative-apologetic, rather than negative-critical) tendency to accommodate oneself to the world order as it is, without any intention to criticize it and transform it. On this basis, my last questions are: (1) whether you think, on the one side, that using Marx as the image for commodified artworks might entail the commodification of Marx himself and hence the risk of assimilating or integrating him into the existing reality; and then (2) whether you think, on the other side, that Marx's and a Marx-inspired aesthetics can provide a contribution for a critical understanding of the abovementioned contemporary scenarios in art and aesthetics, also in this case as a counterbalance or countermovement to predominant trends in the philosophy of art our time that rather tends to be merely descriptive and thus uncritical.

JOHAN F. HARTLE, SAMIR GANDESHA

The danger of aestheticization of leftist politics is real: especially since leftist theory in general has often found its refuge in the cultural field – to then being attacked by right wing populist that it is elitist and unreal. In fact, this is the argument of (Johan Hartle's) article on «Marx as art as idea», this aesthetic or artistic leftism is very much aporetic but this aporia is the very aporia of autonomous art, itself: that it promises an alternative world while merely compensating the flaws of the really existing one. This has been the Adornian argument ever since: aesthetic autonomy is both necessary and an ideology. It seems that in contemporary art Marx is quite often being referred to as the personification of this contradiction.

On the international art biennials, it seems, you see more references to Marx and to the critique of political economy than in contemporary debates in the social sciences. And what is so uncomfortable about this is that the fact that such debates happen in the restricted realm of artistic discourse and cultural representation might, as a form of compensation, end up consolidating its shortcomings in manifest political struggles. Such dangers of aestheticization are quite concrete in the reception of the work of Jacques Rancière, whose political theory strongly emphasizes the importance of the orders of perception, of the distribution of the sensible, for any kind of politics. We are inspired by this position, by historically reconstructing the aesthetic regimes that also

ground and make possible what realizes itself in the political and economic realm. And, clearly, Rancière, strongly referring to Foucault's ideas about orders of the visible and the sayable, is not the only one to point this out – Antonio Gramsci did so in the early part of the twentieth century and, in the German tradition, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge more recently have also done an excellent work into this direction. The problem seems to begin at the moment at which such theories are incorporated into the art world and start being interpreted as a justification of the primacy of aesthetic politics, that is, of a form of politics that focuses primarily on aesthetic practices and implicitly justifies and legitimizes a social structure that is predetermined by the field specific logics of art with its specific class composition. This becomes its blind-spot, as it were. And this is exactly what has happened to Rancière and with the recent reception of Alexander in strictly artsy contexts, he runs the same risk. Will Marx end up being a merely artsy Marx in some cultural milieu? This question very much depends if Marx could possibly be separated from the logics of capital and class warfare. We don't see this risk, yet. Rather, art practices, because of the specific logics of the field that bind art to universal promises, on the one hand (art as a collective good, as public resource, as embodied and materialized in public institutions and theorized as 'the absolute') and to a continuous self-reflection of the conditions under which they operate (the whole institutional critical tradition *avant la lettre* introduced by the early avant-gardes in 1850 or so, which constituted much of what we now know as the somewhat autonomous field of art), are a refuge to certain types of critical discourse, on the other. Therefore, the aestheticization of Marx provides a refuge to leftist politics in the field of ideology (or 'ideological state apparatuses'), in a conjuncture that leaves precious little space for Marxism in the more direct, and in some ways more real, realm of political economy, and practical politics. We see this in many trajectories of leftist colleagues, who have turned to the 'aesthetic', because this was the only way to escape Rawls – accepting all the ideological implications of the aesthetic turn. Less polemically put: the ideology of the aesthetic (Eagleton) must not be underestimated and symbolic politics, politics of representation and semiotic revolts, must not be mistaken for politics *in toto*. But, as also Eagleton points out, Aesthetic discourse and the art field are also sublimations of political desires for emancipation that find little possibilities for ex-



pression where they belong. If you like, you can call this the new form taken by the 'German ideology' (given the history of classical German philosophy) – except, of course, that the aesthetic ideology and artsy 'progressivism' are neither simply German nor, strictly speaking, philosophical questions any longer.

ROLANDO VITALI  
(Università di Bologna)

I will start by highlighting one of the various aspect of this volume, which I think resumes the peculiarity of this philosophical enterprise. It can be resumed by the following practical maxim: do not presume the inherited concept of *aesthetics* – as a philosophical discipline concerning art and perception – but rather put in question the broadly understood *aesthetic* field through Marx, and vice versa, in order to renew the understanding of both. With regard to aesthetics, as the book editors argue, the present book «does not only (and not even so much) want to confirm the historically-generated understanding of aesthetics as it is» (Gandesha-Hartle 2017, xiii); whereas «addressing Marx from such a position means to focus on a Marxian way of addressing the aesthetic» which attempts to avoid as much «a classically Marxist» as «a narrowly philological, that is, Marxological fashion» (Gandesha-Hartle 2017, xiv). From my point of view, this means that both Marx and the Aesthetic are questioned as far as the common way we understand them is concerned. Starting from this recognition, I would like the book editors to further specify what is precisely understood under 'Marxian' as distinguished from both 'Marxological' and 'Marxist'. As the book editors write, their «book aims to reconstruct a Marxian spirit (inseparable as it is from the letter of Marx's writings)» (Gandesha-Hartle 2017, xiv).

My question is to what extent can this 'Marxian spirit' be understood as the *result* of the specific aesthetic questioning of Marx's thought, rather than as the interpretative frame within which they have based their interpretation. If I may present my question under the form of a kind of constructive criticism, so to speak, I would like to ask to the book editors if, given the methodological heterogeneity in the Introduction and in the various contributions included in this volume, they nonetheless think that the volume can be unified by a relative strong methodological commitment. I ask this because it seems to me that neither dialectics,

nor postmodern hermeneutics or other interpretative frames provide a common, unifying ground to the Introduction and the various contributions; the different contributions can be understood, by turn, as more 'Marxological', i.e. as more historical-philological contributions (for example, Gandesha's «Three logics of the aesthetic in Marx» and all contributions included in Part III) or as more post-modern hermeneutical (for example Hayden White's contribution «Marx: The philosophical defense of history in the metonymical mode»). Furthermore, the book editors seem to refuse to include their attempt within a 'Marxist' tradition, even if they also admit to draw out various suggestions from its heritage. Certainly this heterogeneity relies very much on the collective nature of this enterprise, which implies the diversified philosophical attitude of the different contributions. Yet, I would like to ask how, given this heterogeneity, the book editors understand the 'Marxian spirit' which they claim to have promoted with this volume. This question seems to me especially crucial if we confront this heterogeneity with the relative methodological strength that Marx himself seems to claim, for example in the afterword to the second German edition of *The capital*, where, after having complained «that the method employed in *Capital* has been little understood» (Marx 1873, 99), he then stresses its materialistic methodology, as much as his debt to Hegel's dialectical heritage. So, if we try to specify more precisely the 'Marxian spirit' claimed by the authors, it seems to me that it could be understood as the result of the reciprocal clash between, on the one hand, a broadly understood aesthetic field – which includes a focus on «the historical organization of human subjectivity» (Gandesha-Hartle 2017, xiv) – and, on the other hand, a likewise broadly understood Marxian field of inquiring: the result of this clash is both a revisited aesthetics and a revisited Marx. In this sense I would like to ask to the book editors if it is possible to determine this 'Marxian spirit' in such a way, namely as the result of this collision between aesthetical and Marxian fields. And, if it is so, if and how they intend to develop this result. Can we understand this volume as a first attempt to expand the traditional field of the aesthetic, on the one hand, and to show the fruitfulness of a Marxian questioning of our contemporaneity, on the other hand? In other words, can we understand this volume as an inaugural project for a yet unfulfilled undertaking? And, having this in mind, should we then proceed to a more sharp definition of the Marxian way of inquiring, in order

to embody this 'Marxian spirit' in a sensuous, material and effective critical theory of the aesthetical field, so to speak?

My other question – connected to the first – concerns the extent of this 'Marxianly' broadened understanding of the aesthetic: if, as the book editors claim, the aesthetic also concerns «the historical organization of human subjectivity», thus including «the formative or form-giving capacity of subjectivity» (Gandesha-Hartle 2017, xiv) and the human «metabolism with nature, historically mediated as it is» (ibid., p. xiii), what consequences should we draw then with regard to the methodological status and the specific field of aesthetics? If this broadened understanding implies that «the totality of social life» (Gandesha-Hartle 2017, xiii) has to be called into question, can we still speak of 'aesthetics' as a philosophical field of inquiry, or should we rather consider 'the aesthetic' as the broad concept which tries to determine the place in which objective and socially-determined processes are mediated with the empirical, material, subjective individuals? In other words, can we understand 'the aesthetic' as a more refined understanding of 'the material', which tries to overcome the unilateral and positivistic heritage of this terminus?

JOHAN F. HARTLE, SAMIR GANDESHA

It is possible to answer both questions together. The fundamental methodological commitment that we discern in Marx and the 'Spirit' (*Geist*) we share with him is to the idea of natural history. This is the idea that subjectivity is formed in the process of its own form-giving activity or, differently put, humanity's «metabolism with nature». This, by the way, means that Marxism must play a necessary role in the diagnosing of our current ecological crisis centered on anthropogenic climate change. Marx theorized a 'rift' or fissure that arose in this metabolism with nature under capitalist society and this turned on the unbearable pressure placed on the soil in producing sufficient food for an urban population that was burgeoning as a result of rapid industrialization and therefore also urbanization. But what does this mean specifically for the aesthetic? Well, if we take seriously Marx's commitment to historical transformation, then we are led to understand, and this is perhaps best indicated by the arguments of Lukács in his epochal «Reification and consciousness of the proletariat» essay in *History and class consciousness*, that philosophy and its disciplines as well

as art as specialized practices will look very different in a post-capitalist society. In this, Debord gets Marx exactly right when he implies that art (and aesthetics as a philosophical discipline devoted to the study of the beautiful and the sublime) will be negated in the future. What he means by this can be taken as an essential methodological component of dialectical thinking that Marx inherits from Hegel, and this, as Alfred Schmidt emphasizes, is *determinate negation*. Understood in this context, determinate negation means that that art will be both cancelled and preserved in the future. So, art (and the discipline of aesthetics) would continue to exist but not as a reified and rarefied practice. In this the intentions of the avant-garde (Dada and Surrealism in particular) cohere perhaps not so strangely with Marx's vision. This is, incidentally, also what makes Susan Buck-Morss' book *Dreamworld and catastrophe: The passing of mass utopia in East and West* (2002), on the relation between the Russian avant-garde and the Bolshevik vanguard, so interesting. But the key thing is that with the overcoming of the law of value, human practical activity will become aesthetic insofar as it will entail the panoply of the senses as well as the variety of human faculties. It will be meaningful in a way that under capitalism certain forms of labour, artistic or philosophical, anticipate but cannot fully embody because of the domination of the law of value. These dimensions of Marx's thought find a new resonance today with the discussion in the context of automation via robotics and AI of universal basic income and the extension of leisure time. Leisure is hardly the answer to the aforementioned problems. What is required is an understanding of the importance meaningful forms of work that make possible free human self-realization through creative activity, that is, the capacity to imaginatively form and shape matter, signs, codes. We want to emphasize the word 'free' here and this ties back to the question of perfectionism mentioned earlier. For free is also one main attribute that you find when Marx speaks about alternative societal formations, about associations, the associations of free and equal producers. Obviously, freedom also means a way of loosely connecting elements according to their intrinsic potentials and inclinations – subject and substance. Production, under conditions other than capitalism, must mean something like the mobilization and development of capacities from within, from within the labour capacities of socialized workers. This has, at all times, entailed aesthetic, i.e. material, sensuous dimensions.

MARTA VERO  
(Università di Pisa)

In this book, the authors evaluate different possible methods to develop what they define an «aesthetic Marx». This plurality of approaches relies on the various aesthetical-philosophical inputs Marx received in his youth, such as the Scottish «aesthetic of impact», the Baumgartenian philosophy of sensibility, the post-Kantian aesthetics of unity and reconciliation. Marx was aware of Hegel's metaphysical solution, the post-Hegelian aesthetics of Vischer, as well as Saint-Simon's and Fourier's utopian philosophy of perception and art. Even though he had a complex aesthetic education, which is also shown by various literary tracks and numerous references to poetry in his works, Marx never composed an Aesthetics.

This scenario allows us to examine various possibilities and to sift through different aesthetical approaches, in order to recognize the one best encompassing Marx's philosophy. For this reason, the operation the authors suggest in this book, finding an «aesthetic Marx», shows three levels of interest. Firstly, it is stimulating for (a) the aesthetics researcher, seeking an aesthetic-philosophical approach that could be valid for the current capitalist world, a world that «has turned aesthetic» (Gandesha-Hartle 2017, xi). Indeed, an aesthetic Marx could offer a privileged standpoint for evaluating the revolutionary potentiality of aesthetics in the current historical stage, as Post-Kantian and German Romantic philosopher formulated. (b) Secondly, it is interesting for the research field on Marx and Marxism, too. Marx researchers could find in this approach a tool to recognize the aesthetic perspective best suitable for comprehending Marx's works. In the end, it could be also useful for (c) the artist or anyone interrogating themselves about the role art can assume in this aestheticized capitalist world.

These three points of view, that I have just tried to summarize, have something in common. It seems that, in the crisis we are living, when the Marxian narration appears to have sadly lost its attraction power, an aesthetical approach could be successful. As Gandesha suggests in the conclusions of his essay, with the generalization of fetishization of the *real abstraction*, namely the commodity form, beyond the sphere of simple circulation to every sphere of society at the end of World War II, the aesthetic, in its

autonomy, and therefore negativity, becomes central to fashioning a form of truth that could enable men and women to grasp, in their very meditation, the *real conditions of their existence* (Gandesha-Hartle 2017, 19).

Thus, the *negativity* of the aesthetic is helpful ( $\alpha$ ) to reclaim the revolutionary potential of aesthetics, to restore its capacity to «provoke the crisis of other, contending discourse such as those of science and morality» (Menke 1991); ( $\beta$ ) to rehabilitate the very current importance of Marx's philosophy: an aesthetical approach to his work could be more suitable in a time, such as our own, which is dominated by a capitalism that has turned aesthetic; ( $\gamma$ ) to encourage a critical thinking on the social and political role of the work of art. Indeed, a work of art can still have a political meaning in a Marxian way. As it happens in Walter Benjamin's *Einbahnstraße* (according to Pickford 2017, in Gandesha-Hartle 2017, 38-39), a work of art can envelope the interaction between *praxis* and *poiesis*, encourage an «aesthetic wisdom» (or *phronesis*, according to Pickford 2017, 39-40, or a Machiavellian *virtù*: Gandesha-Hartle 2017, xxxv), promote solidarity of senses between humans and create, in the end, a new horizon of meaning, capable of constructing a valid alternative view to the bourgeois ideology. To conclude with a question: are we coming back to an Early Romantic interpretation of the role, the potentiality and the goals of aesthetics?

#### JOHAN F. HARTLE, SAMIR GANDESHA

This is, again, very much the way in which Jacques Rancière (2002) presents Marx in his text on *The aesthetic revolution and its outcomes*. He interprets the Oldest System Fragment as the paradigmatic text for Marxian versions of revolution, too.

This draft would not be just a forgotten dream of the 1790s. It laid the basis for a new idea of revolution. Even though Marx never read the draft, we can discern the same plot in his well-known texts of the 1840s. The coming Revolution will be at once the consummation and abolition of philosophy; no longer merely 'formal' and 'political', it will be a 'human' revolution. The human revolution is an offspring of the aesthetic paradigm.

Indeed we believe that the Schillerian and Early Romantic legacy is fully present in Marx – and even in later Marxist developments, that one would not primarily identify as aesthetic (think

of Gramsci's ideas concerning the new intellectual, mediating between the neuro-muscular and intellectual capacities, or Sohn Rethel's emphasis on the overcoming of the separation of manual and physical labour), the idea of mediation, the idea of an aesthetic reconciliation of unhappy consciousness, or, if you like, a modern world that has fallen apart. The resonance is especially clear with the early Romanticism (*Frühromantik*) as has recently been so fruitfully addressed in the so-called 'Constellation-research' of Dieter Henrich and in the interpretations of Manfred Frank. For example, in his lectures compiled in *The philosophical foundations of early German romanticism*, Frank completely alters our view of Romanticism as being allied with German Idealism, in particular with that of Fichte, in particular. The early Romantics, especially Novalis, take aim at the idea set forth by both Fichte and his predecessor, Reinhold, that philosophy can either take its point of departure from indubitable first principles (foundations) or that it could aspire to achieving Absolute Knowledge. Rather, Frank suggests that, philosophically, the early Romantics are committed to both epistemological and ontological realism. In this respect they anticipate what has come to be a truism about one of the key premises of Marx's thought: that Being determines consciousness not the other way around. If such Being is accessed through the senses then one can see the powerful role that art and literature can be seen to play in such an outlook. It is one, we claim, that is shared by Marx.

GABRIELE SCHIMMENTI  
(Università di Lecce)

Any attempt to renew a productive discourse between Marx and the aesthetics is praiseworthy. The new book by S. Gandesha and J. Hartle *Aesthetic Marx* provides a significant contribution in this direction, reconsidering Marxist and Marxian ideas under the light of some meaningful concepts of (meta-)aesthetics (Gandesha-Hartle 2017, xiv, xxxvii) and taking into account the interrelation with the conceptualization of Rancière's «aesthetic regime of art» at the very dawn of what one could call «modernity», even if Rancière himself probably would not agree with this term (cf. Rancière 2004, 15-26).

I want to focus my question on the central concept of «sensuousness» (*Sinnlichkeit*), which the authors grant a crucial theo-

retical role. On the basis of the sensuous it is possible to establish a meta-aesthetic consideration of Marx's theory, since it «restores the importance of the senses and introduces aesthetic strategies [...] as irreducible elements of theory» (Gandesha-Hartle 2017, xiv). Considering that Marx's theory starts ontologically – and anthropologically – from the concept of «sensuous human activity» (*sinnliche menschliche Tätigkeit*), it seems to me not only licit, but also unavoidable, to emphasize the aesthetic level of his discourse and reflect on its theoretical status – which is brilliantly underpinned by both authors and particularly emphasized in Gandesha's contribution on the three logics of aesthetics in Marx's thought (cf. Gandesha-Hartle 2017, 5-8).

Nevertheless, this background allows me to reflect and reopen the great debate on an old issue, *id est*, if Marx and Hegel – and, in this precise case, their aesthetics – should not be read in opposition, without thereby excessively stressing the controversial differences between idealism and materialism. In fact, as is well known, when Marx thematized the concept of *Sinnlichkeit* within the *Theses on Feuerbach*, he clearly argued (*These I*) that Idealism recognized and developed the «active side» of thought, even if only «abstractly» (Marx 1888, 121).

Now, if one carefully examines Hegel's philosophy of art, no tremendous conception is proposed, but rather a progressive one, whether taken as such, or if considered in comparison to Hegel's own contemporaries, since he was ascertaining and proposing the *Befreiung* of art from religious constraints in modernity. Without departing from the controversial *Lectures on aesthetics* edited by Hegel's scholar H. G. Hotho in the 1830s, if one gives consideration to Hegel's *Encyclopedia* and at the recently edited manuscripts of his lectures on aesthetics, Hegel himself repeatedly stresses the finiteness and the unavoidable sensuous level of the work of art (cf. Hegel 1830, § 556), indicating in this sensuousness something *necessary* and *essential* for art itself. Nevertheless, by means of the philological research on the very sources of Hegel's Aesthetics we know that Hegel probably never defined the concept of «Ideal» as «appearance of the Idea to sense (*das sinnliche Scheinen der Idee*)» (Hegel 1843, 111; cf. also Gethmann-Siefert 2005, 89-94), thereby attributing a negative connotation to the concept of «sensuousness». I am obviously not arguing that Hegel's theory would be an odd form of sensualism, but instead that Hegel attributed an essential role to sensuousness and intuition within the Absolute Spi-



rit. Now, since it can be argued that Hegel is conceptualizing art – at least at a certain level – in a form similar to Marx’s concept of praxis and labor (as *sinnliche menschliche Tätigkeit*), and Marx, in turn, is conceiving labor and praxis in a form similar to Hegel’s concept of art, I would like to ask the book editors if it is possible to let this Marxian stance interact with the meta-aesthetic aim of the book. Even if it is licit to consider art in its «positive» and «post-Nietzschean» determination, as the authors also suggest, is it not a risk to abandon the ‘dialectical’ heritage that Marx’s aesthetic thought shows? Is it licit or possible to maintain both heritages? And if it is, in which sense? In other terms, following the path suggested by Rancière, is it possible or not to conceive «[t]he texts written by the young Marx that confer upon work the status of the generic essence of mankind [as] only possible on the basis of German Idealism’s aesthetic programme, i.e. art as the transformation of thought into the sensory experience of the community» (Rancière 2000, 41-42)?

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We believe that there is a danger of approaching Marx’s text like a holy book that merits scholastic treatment and this is in part why we take a certain distance from the letter of the Marxian tradition and, rather, embrace its Spirit which, as you so well point out, is also, as it were, *Geist* of Hegel. As for Nietzsche, Adorno never thought his writings to be necessarily incompatible with those of Marx, especially when one looks at the second *Untimely meditation* on history and also the *Genealogy of morals*. In fact, one finds an alternative critique of what Lukács will call ‘reification’ in the early meditation on *On truth and lies in a non-moral sense* that is key for Adorno’s negative dialectic. As for the aesthetic program of German Idealism, I think one can see certain parallels with it, as described by Rancière, and Marx’s idea of communism in which art is both cancelled and preserved in a form of community that embodies a post-individualistic conception of autonomy. The normative or ethical core of such a community, entails the negation of alienation insofar as humans will finally find their total personalities objectified in their sensuous activity. So, this is perhaps a significant point on which we differ with Rancière. This also relates to the question of German Romanticism below, insofar as we can see – and the early Lukács was sensitive to this as well –

in which Novalis's definition of philosophy as the negation of alienation while dispensing with Hegel's metaphysics of Absolute Spirit, could be said to anticipate Marx in some respects. In our affirmative reading of Marx, however, we might also agree with him, as we understand the Marxian programme in terms of the material history of bodies, i.e. the history of the human sensorium, materially shaped human subjects. This is at best implicitly present in Hegel, whose hierarchical order of the arts also interferes within the historical organization of the senses, the human sensorium, by turning it into a uni-directional history of the development of one specific type of (one could polemically say: Prussian) subjectivity.

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For what it concerns the general purpose of the book, its original approach to a new interpretation of Marx's thought – most precisely, the Marxian *spirit* (Gandesha-Hartle 2017, xiv) – from the point of view of the aesthetic seems absolutely promising. Former attempts to identify an aesthetic dimension in Marxian texts have been devoted, generally speaking, to tracking down a classical definition of aesthetics as discipline in Marx's philosophical corpus, or to pointing to Marx's supposed artistic, namely literary, competence. Although the Marxist tradition, especially due to its connection to the Hegelian perspective, has engendered one of the most influential lines of philosophy of art in the nineteenth century, the aesthetic dimension in Marx's production itself has been long neglected before being acknowledged as part of the Marxian canon. In comparison to the urgency of social problems, to the alleged foundational character of economy, to the gravity of political issues, the aesthetic dimension has been long relegated to an academic and so to speak harmless position among the realm of Marxist concerns. At variance with this approach, Gandesha's and Hartle's project aims to re-tie the threads of Marxian aesthetic accounts and to reconnect their authors to a broader Marxist family who highlighted, in the nineteenth Century, the importance of the aesthetic question with its contemporary societal framework.

In this regard, Benjamin's outline of a new media aesthetics (Benjamin 1936), Adorno's critical enquiry into ideological sensuous expression (Adorno 1970), and Marcuse's Schiller-inspired idea of the aesthetic dimension (Marcuse 1977) provide an elu-

cidative backdrop to the re-evaluation and re-definition of the 'aesthetic Marx' in contemporary terms. A key question when it comes to this kind of reinterpretation of Marx lies however in the preliminary definition of 'the aesthetic' as a relevant philosophical element. As already anticipated in the Introduction, according to the editors Marx's idea of the aesthetic element has to be identified with the historical and material transformations of the social relation between senses and subjectivity. Therefore, provided I correctly understand the purpose, the notion of 'aesthetic' is to be taken as some sort of definition of human activity in terms of an exchange between subjectivity and objectivity in which any possible determination of 'sense' or 'meaning' goes back to its sensuous origin or outcome. There is no creation of value, no modification of nature, no human need's organized fulfillment, there is even no society without the historical transformation of the sensuous dimension of human beings as species-beings. Human beings can therefore be defined as those beings whose exchange with nature results in a collective disposition of senses and whose most typical and true aim is the socialization of those senses.

My question to you would then inquire on the possibility to further specify the implications of a so understood aesthetic element, as well as on the opportunity to achieve, on these premises, a viable interpretation of art as the distinctive expression of the social modification of the human/nature relation. In this sense, the history of art could be taken as the litmus test of the development of the human/nature exchange, and the sensuous constitution of the artwork, along with its purposeless creation, could be understood as the expression, as some sort of translation and therefore as a commencing dissolution, of the social tensions that give rise to the artwork itself. In this respect, the distinctive features of a Marxist and materialist reinterpretation of the Hegelian idea of artistic activity as a «dissolution of myth» (Formaggio 1983, 135) come to the fore; as the editors clearly indicate (Gandsha-Hartle 2017, xliii), the overcoming of capitalistic contradictions, the overcoming of the social tensions between labor and capital, which differentiates the product of alienated work from the product of art, corresponds in fact to the end of art as a circumscribed human activity.

Art would therefore be a progressive, historical way in which humanity sensuously reveals the deep tensions between capital and labor; it would be a mode of production able to ex-

press the always changing configuration of the social conditions of labor. On this ground, the development of art would correspond to the development of capitalism itself in its progressive revelation of its proper contradictory dynamics. As not only do you the editors, but contributors as well suggest (Gandesha-Hartle 2017, xlii; and Khatib, in Gandesha-Hartle 2017, 55), capitalism corresponds to an everlasting absorption of the aesthetic and material dimension in the realm of economic exchange; in this sense, the form of commodity as a sensuous supra-sensuous product expresses the capitalistic progressive appropriation of every aesthetic element. The commodification of the aesthetic world seems therefore to indicate the powerlessness of simply sensuous expression. Art would no longer be that kind of revelation of capitalistic myth that it has always been. In fact, every sensuous expression of value and meaning would be absorbed in the economic dynamics of capitalism, as the inexorable commodification of visual arts proves, also according to the accounts of liberal, non-Marxist authors (Danto 1986).

What I suggest, and what I intend to ask you, is whether it is possible to identify an aesthetic form which would be able to continue the above outlined kind of sensuous critical activity; a form whose aesthetic element has a sensuous super-sensuous nature which is able to escape the ideological moment of anesthetization involved in the commodification of sensibility. I would personally suggest, in short, to investigate literary narrative as potential candidate for such a job. Both the editors' introduction (Gandesha-Hartle 2017, xxii-xv) and Samir Khatib's contribution (Gandesha-Hartle 2017, 52-56) understand language as a sensible-nonsensible structure whose semantic is strictly connected to the commodity as expression of value. What I intend to suggest is therefore the possibility to take narrative (and literary aesthetic production in general) as one form which is able to accomplish nowadays the task of an aesthetic critique of the commodification of the aesthetic itself and at the same time, in a Gramscian sense, to provide the means for a non-ideological creation of cultural hegemony. While not being a material thing, aesthetic narrative could therefore be the super-sensuous structure which is able to reveal the contradiction of capital, which is in turn «not a thing, but a social relation between persons, which is mediated through things» (Marx 1867, 932).

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Well, when we speak about the aesthetic in terms of sensuous perception we mean it in the form of mediations rather than immediate apprehension. So, bodily suffering, important for both Marx and figures like Brecht, Horkheimer and Adorno, among others, can indeed be disclosed through theatre, music, painting and of course narrative. Narrative is especially important insofar as it can be seen as the very model for the kind of mediation that we mean. «He who returns from a journey has a story to tell», as Walter Benjamin states in his important essay on Leskov. Hegel's *Phenomenology of spirit* which, of course, can be understood as a long explication of experience (*Erfahrung*) takes the form of a *Bildungsroman*. Of course, the Frankfurt School as a whole asked whether experience itself, in the middle of the twentieth century, was even possible any longer. And this, indeed, why so many of its concerns were aesthetic – they sought to ascertain the limits and possibilities of experience as such. But it wasn't just the Frankfurt School. Starting in the late 1950s, Frantz Fanon's work sought to interrogate the dynamic nature of experience in the context of national liberation struggles. Fanon's account of experience, as Ghanaian-Canadian philosopher, Ato Sekyi-Otu suggests, was at once dramaturgical and narrative – that in the overall account of liberation the shifts were disjunctive. It showed the ways in which the specific claustrophobic confines of the colonized space – as for example brilliantly depicted in Gillo Pontecorvo's film *Battle of Algiers* (1966) – generated a specific kind of experience of the immediacy of solidarity amongst the colonized which, subsequently, gave way to a more differentiated understanding of the social order that now included categories of ethnicity, class, gender and so on. The point is this redistribution of the sensible in terms of what Marx referred to in chapter six of *Capital* «On the sale and purchase of labour-power», as a certain «change in the physiognomy of the dramatis personae», in the transition from the sphere of simple circulation or exchange to that of production, has much to offer in contemporary debates on the relative importance of race or ethnicity, on the one hand, and class, on the other. It shows the dynamic inter-relation of these 'moments' as they revealed themselves specifically in the context of political struggles. The importance of the dramaturgy form of presentation of dialectical thinking cannot be stressed too much!

But indeed, we see Marx at the beginning of a tradition of sensuous history, a history of the senses, which has been written by other materialist thinkers like Nietzsche, Riegl, Benjamin, Rancière. In the work of Benjamin, specifically, drawing heavily on Alois Riegl's work, the dominant cultural practices and maybe advanced artistic sensitivities, are also seen as materializations of the specific sensorium of a time. This is the historical materialist approach to subjectivity as we see it: Subjectivity, the battlefield of the artistic, or more broadly, the aesthetic, is the specific organization of bodies in and through history. Such an approach to aesthetics is not just an application of pre-given philosophical concepts. According to Tony Bennett, one of the harshest critics of the ideology of the aesthetic, this was the ideological implication of the discourse of the Second International. Including Marx in the philosophical canon would be to blunt the force of the Marxian critique of the history of philosophy, not least the specific discipline of aesthetics. For these reasons, we are, in contrast, looking for materialist conceptualizations of the aesthetic. Marx gives more than just keywords here: Think of the whole discussion of the historical formation of the senses in the *Paris manuscripts*, think of the discussion in *Capital* of the historical process it takes to produce the subjective preconditions of what we would then see as the modern worker, or the *Grundrisse* in which Marx posits the mutual implication of the production of subject and object.

As you will find, a very large part of our own philosophical argument is inspired by the second generation of the Frankfurt School. But here you should think less of the Habermasian line of tradition but rather of the philosophical propositions brought forward by Oskar Negt (an excellent Marxist) and Alexander Kluge (one of the most formidable artistic producers in the field of film, moving image, and literature, i.e. narrative and dramaturgy). What Negt and Kluge suggest in *Geschichte und Eigensinn* in 1981 (same year as the publication of the *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*), in essence, is to rewrite the history of living labour, of labour capacities, from the perspective of the formations of body and intellect, from the perspective of the specific requirements of capital. Negt and Kluge, writing this history with much emphasis on the aspects of expropriation and the separation from one's original potentials and capacities, thereby also write the history of potential resources of resistance, of obstinacy. In many ways these subjective resources are aesthetic and also have to be compiled

and organized aesthetically: through narrative, montage, and detournement – practices that you will find extensively in *History and obstinacy*.