

**Marx, Marcuse, Moten:**  
**Sensuous Materialism, Invisible Utopia, and Black Performance**

by

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## **Abstract**

This study takes up the vexed question of whether art is compatible with human emancipation. To investigate this question, I compare and contrast the considerations/understandings about the character and effect of emancipatory art forms according to, on the one hand, the tradition of Marxist aesthetics, and to, on the other hand, the black cultural concept of sonic fiction. I title the two main sections of the study “Prologue” and “Praxis.” Part I (Prologue) develops an intellectual and critical history of Marxist aesthetics from its first moment (mid-nineteenth century) through the later twentieth century. My focus in this section is the role of the senses and the aesthetic in promoting (or delaying) the Marxist revolution. In Part II, “Praxis,” I hone in on an influential scholar, cultural and critical theorist, and poet of our time, Fred Moten. I use Moten to explore the art practice of sonic fiction and track the ways in which its revolutionary (or, revolutionizing) methods challenge a Eurocentric understanding of emancipatory art. The purpose of this study is to show the economic, geographical, and racial historicity of the character and effect of, as well as philosophical disposition toward, liberatory aesthetics.

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## Introduction

This study takes up the vexed question of whether art is compatible with human emancipation. Rooted in the intellectual and critical history of Marxist aesthetics, it maintains that two theoretical formulations from two different moments in the history of Marxism are invaluable in apprehending an emancipatory aesthetic for the current historical moment: namely, Karl Marx's sensuous materialism and Herbert Marcuse's negative utopia. I seek not merely to recover these formulations, but rather to locate them in the context of the black cultural concept of sonic fiction and with particular reference to the influential scholar, cultural and critical theorist, and poet, Fred Moten. My purpose is twofold: to view Moten within the scope of Marxist aesthetics, and to demonstrate that sonic fiction internalizes its own conditions of political possibility in a way that cannot be recognized by the European theoretical tradition of Marxism. Put simply, I want to reveal that Marxist aesthetics lacks the theoretical and vernacular bedrock to explain the emancipatory effects of black art. By looking, through Moten, at that which is distinctly, self-consciously African-American, we must, I argue, acknowledge race and geography as historical forces if we wish to realize a new version of the emancipatory aesthetic, one that reflects the genuine contradictions and impasses of our moment even as it arouses our capacity for utopian thinking.

The first part of this study (Prologue) consists of two chapters, which develop an intellectual and critical history of Marxist aesthetics from its first moment (in the middle of the nineteenth century) to its restoration (in the mid-to-late twentieth century). My focus in the first chapter is the role of the senses in promoting (or delaying) the Marxist revolution. I begin by outlining the ontology of the commodity form because Marx's conceptual framework is

important for understanding not only the directly economic tensions within capitalism between worker and capital but a number of reflected tensions: for example, between the philosophical positions of materialism and idealism, and between the lived experience of subjects and the ‘authentically’ sensuous world (i.e. reality conceived as independent, prior to, or innocent of superstructural or ideological distortions). I then proceed to examine Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1932) and Terry Eagleton’s *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990) and contend that the resolution of the tension between subjects vis-à-vis the sensuous world becomes the fundamental preoccupation of Marx’s theoretical system. Through a praxis of sensuous engagement—what I have termed *sensuous materialism*—the human “species being” (as Marx describes an innate sensuous potential working through the dialectic of human history) will recognize a world that we have ourselves produced through the struggle with and against nature.<sup>1</sup> At that moment, it could be said that the form and content of a society interfuse, or more precisely, that the content (sensuous materialism) has created its *own* form, a society organized by and for the principles of sensuous engagement.<sup>2</sup> On this basis, I suggest that Marx’s political, economic, and social formulations produce an aesthetic ideal centered on the dissolution of the commodity and an overcoming of the dualist divide between appearance (form) and reality (content).

The second chapter turns to Marcuse by way of registering a change in Marxist thought and aesthetic practice that occurs in late or post-industrial capitalism. In this second Marxist moment, post-industrial capitalism serves as a periodizing concept to describe a momentous shift from an industrial to an informational economy; from a still-nationalist/imperialist order to an

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (New York: Prometheus, 1988), 111.

<sup>2</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Malden: Blackwell, 1990), 215.

economy of transnational, global flows; from a print-based media-scape to a digital environment. Following Fredric Jameson's diagnosis in *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), I start from the assumption that many of the commodity's reflected tensions have disappeared, or, at least, they have been rearranged and/or forgotten. This is not, of course, to declare victory for the Marxist revolution. To the contrary, the relation between subjects and authentically sensuous reality appears to be more thoroughly obstructed than it was in Marx's time, with the abstractive quality of the commodity, exchange value, generalized to such a degree as to outstrip its material and sensuously-anchored counterpart, use value.<sup>3</sup> My point is that, whereas in industrial capitalism subjects confronted and consumed objects of labor that were apparently equal parts concrete and abstract, real and apparent, in post-industrial capitalism subjects confront and consume simulations, reproductions, interchangeable units of exchange value in a culture that has turned historicity into pastiche. It is, I suggest, to combat this disabling and absorptive logic and to keep alive the possibility of a qualitatively different reality (such as the Marxist utopia), that Marcuse suggests the revival of the *negative*.<sup>4</sup> Marcuse's Hegelian term, the *negative*, translates into an understanding of the need to apply dialectical pressure to the dominant relations of production. For Marcuse, utopia is not an achieved state so much as an active, self-consciously implemented force of negation, directed at the false reality principle perpetrated by the conditions of post-industrial capitalism.<sup>5</sup> Under conditions of the second Marxist moment, then, thinking a utopian energy or moment is not an ideologically absorptive move (not, that is, a phantasmatic alternative to the real conditions of the historical moment);

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<sup>3</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 108.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 72.

paradoxically, the thought of utopia can emerge as a deeply *affective*, and thereby effective, tool for social criticism.

Let me pause here to spell out the stakes of this study. Marcuse's restoration, or, as I will later describe it, salvaging of the aesthetic for the late-twentieth century depends on a particular kind of aesthetic practice from the early twentieth century. Some of the problems arising from Marcuse's attempt to turn this notion of a reinvigorated utopia into a doctrine for aesthetic production are evident in *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1979). Herein, Marcuse ironically reverses the Marxist position that art is ideology and thereby a threat to the truth of praxis. He suggests that art's "transcendent relation to the 'basis'"—evidenced in the very ideological, transhistorical, universal qualities projected upon it—is what gives art its ability to envision a qualitatively different reality from the one in which it was produced.<sup>6</sup> To defend this position, Marcuse draws upon psychoanalytic theory. Conceiving the imagination as a universally human faculty, Marcuse argues that it is indeed possible to produce works of art that, through subjective and imaginative distortion, present transhistorical human truths.<sup>7</sup> This thesis directly contradicts the Marxist thesis that artworks reflect, in idealizing fashion, the contradictions of their social formation and moment. Such an exaltation of the imagination for its supposed identity as *the* authentic human reality—not yet colonized by capital and thereby representative of a pure, ahistorical human order—would seem to align squarely with André Breton's Surrealism, and this is no coincidence.

In *An Essay on Liberation* (1969), published shortly after the student protests in France in May of 1968, Marcuse declares Surrealism an example of his own aesthetic ideal, citing its ability to free "the liberating exigencies of the imagination" from the deadening and rationalizing

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 3.

operations of post-industrial capital and thereby serve in humankind's pursuit of a qualitatively different reality.<sup>8</sup> However, this position contains a major historical contradiction: namely, the fact that, as an aesthetic doctrine born in Europe in the 1920s, Surrealism is designed to combat the conditions of *industrial* capitalism.<sup>9</sup> It is built on a mode of production that still realizes the traditional form of the commodity, and as such it is poorly suited to reflect (and refract) the post-industrial landscape wherein use value has been effaced. Thus, I argue that Marcuse's thesis for (negatively) utopian art, for which he resuscitates Surrealism as an example, introduces additional abstractive conditions for aesthetic production within a social formation and moment that is already exceedingly abstract. This is to say that Marcuse's aesthetic ideal does not negate, but rather affirms the given reality of generalized exchange value.

Turning to Part II, then, I will argue that some features of our current moment (ironically, the intensification of the pathology that Jameson identifies) offer possibilities for adapting Marx's and Marcuse's thinking to new modes of artistic production. The third chapter presents the black cultural concept of sonic fiction as just this aesthetic mode. Here is an art practice that, contrary to the abstractive tendencies of earlier art movements, encourages precisely what is most lacking and thereby most functionally negative in post-industrial society: namely, sensuous materialism. To make this point, I introduce Fred Moten, whose creative and theoretical work considers the emancipatory potential that sound affords to afrodiasporic people. Contrasting Breton's poem, "WORLD," with Moten's poem, "michael' dog," I make the following case: whereas Surrealism relies on the semantic, the conceptual, and the optical for its emancipatory effect (and affect), sonic fiction, by virtue of the mechanics of sound, the physiological (and thereby cognitive) experience of hearing, and the agnostic organizational principles of music, is

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<sup>8</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 30-1.

<sup>9</sup> Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 104.

able to deliver the spark of a utopia, rooted in sensuous and changing reality, straight to the body. This thesis brings with it both the Marxist demand for sensuous engagement and the Marcusean reversal of the utopian ideal.

In the fourth and final chapter, I further develop this literary and conceptual analysis by pulling together (so as to pull apart) the respective historical conditions that produce Surrealism, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, and sonic fiction. I assert that an exclusively industrial-dialectical conception of history fails to explain why Marcuse, thinking, reading, and writing within post-industrial capitalism, deemed a movement born of a bygone iteration of capitalism to be the salient example of a revolutionary aesthetic for his time. This is to say, in the first place, that exclusively industrial-dialectical principles break down, and, in the second place, that there must be other forces at work that determine the cultural preferences of a given social formation and moment. To this concern I suggest that the disposition toward abstraction for Surrealism, as well as for Marcuse resuscitating Surrealism to craft his aesthetic ideal, is the result of what Moten terms *a geographical-racial or racist unconscious*. This term is historically materialist insofar as it describes the unacknowledged or unconscious intellectual surplus afforded to the Northern and Western hemispheres by the global productive significance of chattel slavery.<sup>10</sup> From this standpoint, it becomes apparent that Surrealism and *The Aesthetic Dimension* participate in an ideological constellation that favors the mind (and its ideational products) as the most necessary mediator between subjects and the world of objects. To make such a claim, one must also acknowledge Marx's role in this problematic, most evident in his appreciation for Hegel's historical-dialectical formulations. With race, not just class, firmly established as a force in the history of humankind's struggle with and against nature, the door is open to realize the

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<sup>10</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 31.

emancipatory potential of an aesthetic whose dynamic internalization of our own conditions of real (i.e. economic and social) possibility is authentic, accurate, and, perhaps above all, reflective of our current historical moment.

## **PART I: PROLOGUE**

## 1. Form of the Content: Dissolution of the Commodity as Marx's Aesthetic Ideal

*It is not the unity of living and active humanity with the natural, inorganic conditions of their metabolic exchange with nature, and hence their appropriation of nature, which requires explanation or is the result of a historic process, but rather the separation between these inorganic conditions of human existence and this active existence, a separation which is completely posited only in the relation of wage labor and capital.<sup>11</sup>*

Marxian analysis is concerned with contradictions, antagonisms, polarities, splits—sets of two. More specifically, it is concerned with revealing these contradictions in places where there appear to be none, where unity, harmony, completion—or oneness—is assumed or widely accepted. The assumption is that a contradiction of this sort, better imagined as *duality* that contains opposed forces in a single body, is rife with tension and thereby unstable. Exposing such contradictions to release tension and achieve stability, especially as regards the lived experience of subjects in a society, is taken to be just and imperative. As such, Marx takes to task the beautifully autonomous system of market capitalism posited by Adam Smith, supposedly the culminating unity of opposing economic forces that distributes wealth and resources under the guidance of the liberal spirit of the Enlightenment.

Within the system of market capitalism, virtually all of the dualities Marx observes reflect a fundamental one: the concrete and the abstract. Whether construed as material and immaterial, particular and universal, private and social, these dualities reflect the same general relationship between one thing resembling singularity and another thing resembling multiplicity.

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<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 643.

To clarify: this duality is a single set or body that contains two opposed or contradictory forces or ideas. What must be scrutinized, according to Marx, is the transformation of a mode of production into a framework for human social relations; that is, capitalism's propensity to operate on and reproduce—but also conceal—a division between real, bodily human conditions and unreal, spiritual or idealistic concepts. The necessity of Marx's investigation is especially salient given the passion among his political-economist contemporaries, like David Ricardo and Thomas Malthus (and Smith before them), for market capitalism based on its supposed ability to function on and reproduce human unity.

### Value

In Part One of *Capital: Volume One* (1867), Marx grounds his entire analysis of the capitalist mode of production on the commodity, a historically determined product of human labor that internalizes and conceals a contradiction between the concrete and the abstract. Before proceeding to the historical character of the commodity, however, we must consider it in its most conceptual form as an embodiment of two other Marxian concepts: use value and exchange value. The most rigorously theoretical analysis of *Capital*, the commodity form nevertheless provides an essential framework to explain how the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production manifest in ways that have implications for the lived experience of human beings.

What does it mean for something to be concrete? On the one hand, a commodity is an object of utility, created by useful human labor, and can be used for specific purposes given its tangible materiality.<sup>12</sup> I can move this particular shovel with my hands, and by doing so I can use

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<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume One: A Critique of Political Economy* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 126.

it to move this pile of dirt; this shovel is a use value. On the other hand, a use value must be subject to exchange on the market in order to be considered a commodity.<sup>13</sup> A shovel that I have crafted myself for my own private use, while certainly a use value, is not a commodity, as it lacks the necessary character of being simultaneously an object of utility and an object of exchange.<sup>14</sup> As a bearer of exchange value, that is to say, abstract value for others, interchangeable with all other such units of value, my material shovel assumes all of the immaterial characteristics of the suprasensible web of social relations in which it is exchanged: namely, the market.<sup>15</sup>

Let me extend the above example. Instead of crafting my shovel myself—which would require not only an impressive amount of time, but also access to raw materials such as wood and iron and the necessary tools to transform those materials into a shovel—I have purchased it from Home Depot. I have stumbled upon it fully formed in aisle six—how fantastic! The time, materials, and tools that went into producing it have therefore been handled by *someone else*. But at this point a number of dizzying questions arise. How much time? What materials and tools? Which people, and where? What kind and quality and conditions of labor? Once I begin to contemplate the material history of the shovel glistening beautifully in aisle six of Home Depot, I realize that I have absolutely no idea how it arrived there.<sup>16</sup> The market tries to compensate for this mystery through *price*, which translates the value of my shovel—determined by a myriad factors like time, materials, and people—into a universally understood and comparable symbol. But price is merely an additional layer of unintelligible abstraction, and behind it the labor

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 164.

process which produced my shovel, as well as the people involved in this process, remain completely invisible.<sup>17</sup>

Now, many historical developments have made my shovel exchangeable, but the most important one for our purposes is private property.<sup>18</sup> As something that belongs to someone, a shovel can be exchanged only if it becomes *separate* from that person, business, etc. As such, it must be made transferrable to an objective network of human social relations, i.e. the market. In other words, for my shovel to be exchanged, there must be some movement from private ownership to a kind of public non-possession or pre-ownership, from particular to universal; exchange value is an expression of this movement, and price is an expression of exchange value.<sup>19</sup>

The tension between a commodity's concrete singularity as an object of utility and its abstract multiplicity as the product of a hidden labor process is, in fact, a tension between *appearance* and *reality*, which, in turn, develops into what Marx calls *commodity fetishism*: "The mysterious character of the commodity form consists ... simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves."<sup>20</sup> My shovel appears before me as already having, naturally, the characteristics which make it a useful shovel, when, in reality, these characteristics were developed through a labor process involving many people, under conditions of which I am completely ignorant. My shovel therefore figures as a kind of ghost, an enigmatic image or free-floating phantasmagoria whose relation to the world of objects, to nature, to sensuous

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 182

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 164.

concrete reality, etc., is almost entirely unknown.<sup>21</sup> In this way, commodity fetishism introduces a phenomenological rift between living subjects and their environments, a metaphysical mask concealing an authentically sensuous reality. The problem with capitalism, then, is that, as a system built on commodity production, it fractures the sensory life of subjects into the antithetical directions of the material and the immaterial.<sup>22</sup> In other words, subjects experience abstractions like ‘the rule of the marketplace’ as concrete and natural determinants—facts of nature, in effect—while their own concrete and specific labor vanishes, for them, into the objectified abstraction of the commodity. These dynamics pose a problem for the fundamental Marxian assumption, which is that, as Eagleton notes, “the exercise of human senses, powers and capacities is an absolute end in itself, without any utilitarian justification.”<sup>23</sup> Achieving for the first time in human history a ‘genuine,’ which is to say autotelic, relation to the sensuous world thus becomes the ultimate goal of Marxism, and such a feat requires the dissolution of the commodity.

### 1844/1858: Sensuous Life

Fetishism of the commodity, as well as the analysis which reveals it, is foundational to the Marxian project. Marx’s elaboration of the commodity form is an effort to, as David Harvey puts it, “get behind the fetishistic representation of the world that comes out of a naturalistic approach

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>22</sup> Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 199.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 202.

to that world.”<sup>24</sup> In the context of my example, it is an attempt to locate my shovel in its material history: to assert that the qualities of my shovel belong not to the shovel itself, but to the labor process that produced it; and to demand a thorough explanation for the existence of my shovel, rejecting any and all attempts to mystify—either my naturalizing or theologizing—its origins. This method of inquiry is Marxian materialism, and it has its antithesis in the philosophical position of idealism.

For Marx, the only way to get at the ontology of the commodity, and accordingly the reality problem of a system built on the production of commodities, is to establish allegiance to the sensuous aspects of lived experience. “*Sense-perception*,” he writes in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, “must be the basis of all science.” And he continues:

“Only when it proceeds from sense-perception in the twofold form both of *sensuous* consciousness and of *sensuous* need—that is, only when science proceeds from nature—is it *true* science. All history is the preparation for ‘*man*’ to become the object of *sensuous* consciousness, and for the needs of ‘man as man’ to become [natural, sensuous] needs.”<sup>25</sup>

These remarks target the philosophical school of idealism that seeks to know the nature of reality by thought alone. One envisions Descartes alone in his room, thinking up ways to prove his own existence, or even Hegel, listening to cannon shots at the Battle of Jena and concluding that the

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<sup>24</sup> David Harvey, “EDUCATION | Part 2 | Reading Marx’s ‘Capital’ Volume 1 with David Harvey,” The People’s Forum NYC, video, 1:18:03, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Sgo9I61gOI&feature=emb\\_logo&ab\\_channel=ThePeople%27sForumNYC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Sgo9I61gOI&feature=emb_logo&ab_channel=ThePeople%27sForumNYC).

<sup>25</sup> Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 111.

ideal state of man exists only as a concept in published philosophical works.<sup>26</sup> For Marx, this strain of rational inquiry trades practical action for theoretical contemplation, and thereby delights in the same “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” as the ghostly commodity. As he elaborates in the famous “Theses on Feuerbach,” appended to *The German Ideology*, (written in 1858 and published in 1939): “The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth—i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question.”<sup>27</sup> It is important to note that Marx does not introduce an *a priori*, universal, transhistorical, or absolute model of sense perception as something that ought to be achieved. Rather, his view is that in order for man to realize a fully liberated sensorium—vague as that notion may (necessarily) be—she must always be attending to the faultlines or contradictions within sensuous experience at a given historical moment. In other words, Marx privileges means over ends, if only to arrive at an end whose character reflects the scientific—which is to say sensuous—integrity of the means by which it is achieved.

The upshot of this position is that, as Eagleton explains, everything—ethics, history politics, rationality—must be reconstructed from “a bodily foundation.”<sup>28</sup> That is, sense perception must serve as the basis for all knowledge. Ethical, historical, political, and rational institutions and traditions must therefore be understood as products of an evolving material (industrial) history rather than transcendent, isolable regions whose laws can be rationally inspected to reveal a supposedly invariable relationship between subjects and the world of

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<sup>26</sup> Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 34.

<sup>27</sup> Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus, 1998), 569.

<sup>28</sup> Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 197.

objects. The immaterial thoughts and ideas of a society, like the exchange value of a commodity, have a material substratum in man's relation to nature, i.e. authentically sensuous reality, a relation which is mediated by technology and industry. This thesis is the Marxist conception of base and superstructure: "Technology reveals the active relation of man to nature, the direct process of the production of his life, and thereby it also lays bare the process of the production of the social relations of his life, and of the mental conceptions that flow from those relations."<sup>29</sup> So, while sensory life is foundational, even sense perception itself, as a mental conception contained within an immaterial consciousness, must be redefined as a reflection of man's historically-conditioned relation to the material world. In short, the way we perceive, think, and feel depends on how our lives are produced for us in the network of material causes to social relations. In our current moment, we do this through the production and consumption of commodities, and therefore our social arrangements and mental apparatuses, as well as our sensations and perceptions, are ideological correlatives of this basic and fraught form.

But this mode of production can change, as it has throughout human history. Think: Stone Age, Iron Age, feudalism, slavery, and now capitalism (a problematically linear conception of the history of modes of production, but such is the way Marx conceived it)—all of these terms mark different periods in the history of man's appropriation of natural resources in order to sustain life. The ultimate goal of Marxism, then, is not simply a rootedness in sensory life for its own sake. Rather, such a foundation is a precondition for transforming the material world so that the human sensorium no longer reflects the bifurcated ontology of the commodity, but instead may flourish into something properly *human*:

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<sup>29</sup> Marx, *Capital: Volume One: A Critique of Political Economy*, 493.

Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man's essential being is the richness of subjective *human* sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form—in short, *senses* capable of human gratifications, senses confirming themselves as essential powers of *man*) either cultivated or brought into being. For not only the five senses but also the so-called mental senses—the practical sense (will, love, etc.)—in a word, *human* sense—the humanness of the senses—comes to be by virtue of its object, by virtue of *humanized* nature.<sup>30</sup>

For Marx, only through the objective transformation of material conditions can the subjective faculties of humankind be fully realized. Buried within this notion is an assumption: namely, the foundational and also normative reality of what Marx terms our “species being,” an innate sensuous potential to be actualized through the dialectical workings of human history. Through the working-out of material history, she will be able to unlock this potential, relating more immediately to authentically sensuous reality (i.e. reality without consideration for the distorted formations of the superstructure) and thereby maximizing pleasure, enjoyment, felicity, etc. For Marx, such an achievement is autotelic, requiring no utilitarian justification. According to Marxist orthodoxy, a crucial step in this process is the abolition of private property, which, as noted earlier, is the historical development responsible for the advent of the commodity. As Eagleton puts it: “If communism is necessary, it is because we are unable to feel, taste, smell, and touch as we fully might.”<sup>31</sup> This liberation of the senses is where the doctrine is at its most Romantic. For all its insistence on materialism, at the heart of Marxism is a dream that one day man might achieve a built world free from contradictions in lived experience.

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<sup>30</sup> Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 108.

<sup>31</sup> Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 201.

## Revolution

Achieving such a dream requires a special kind of revolution, with an equally special representational aesthetic. This aesthetic, if it is to have any shot at being compatible with Marxism, must be sensitive to the bourgeois tendency to favor thought over practice. That is, it must not be thought before it has been practiced; it must grow out of itself to avoid too much of an imposition of contemporary theories on what is meant to be an authentically material evolution. While notoriously quiet on the subject of aesthetics, Marx does explain how literature ought to relate to his own rendering of autogenic social attainment in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852):

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition in regard to the past. Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to drug themselves concerning their own content. In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead. There the phrase went beyond the content; here the content goes beyond the phrase.<sup>32</sup>

This dichotomy between the seesawing poles of phrase (that is, form) and content represents, with a semiotic spin, the political distinction between idealism and materialism. The thought is that hackneyed forms have no place describing the content of a utopia that must be, from a historically materialist perspective, indescribable and unimaginable from within any moment

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<sup>32</sup> Karl Marx, cited in Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 214.

prior to its own emergence. This means, as Eagleton explains, that thinking a Marxist utopia “is less a matter of discovering the expressive forms ‘adequate to’ the substance of socialism, than of rethinking that whole opposition—of grasping form no longer as the symbolic mould into which the substance is poured, but as the ‘form of the content.’”<sup>33</sup> In other words, content *becomes* form, and vice versa, in an overcoming of the dualist divide between ‘being’ (i.e. *what is the case*) and ‘meaning’ (i.e. the significance of *what is the case*). This same divide can be construed as any version of that divide which is contained within the commodity—be it concrete and abstract, real and apparent, material and ideal, or particular and universal.

It is noteworthy that Marx turns to the complex of language to explain the identity (or, non-identity, considering the boundlessness of going beyond the phrase—that is, beyond all signifiers) of his nebulous revolution; that Marxist liberation can also be understood as a breakthrough in the relationship between signifier and signified, such that the latter no longer has any need for the former. This revolution, as well as its resulting topos, is free from representation. As Eagleton puts it: “It is unrepresentable by anything but itself, signified only in its ‘absolute movement of becoming.’”<sup>34</sup> This is to say that there is a way in which understanding the human relation to language can inform a Marxist revolution, for both exist in a kind of twilight zone between protocol and necessity, on the one hand, and formless possibility, on the other. Take, for instance, the fact that language is deeply social, historical, and local, and as the principal method of communication, it calls for standardization and regimentation. One cannot communicate without some grasp of contemporary lexical culture. To use language requires familiarity with the here and now. However, within language lies the potential for subversion or extension—what might be better understood as *inflection*—that can generate entirely new terms,

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<sup>33</sup> Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 215.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

new ways of communicating and thereby relating. The challenge comes when navigating this boundary between intelligibility, on the one hand, and the authenticity of felt experience at a given historical moment, on the other. If one ventures too far into foreign or experimental regions, without a common vocabulary or grammar of any sort, one runs the risk of uselessly alienating listeners or readers and thereby abandoning the cooperative goals of communication altogether.

In much the same way, Marxism must remain anchored in the present as it steals cursory glances at its vague and incomplete future. Such is the case for a doctrine whose thesis demands that attention be paid primarily to a society's material conditions, with 'material' understood, of course, as the economic and social arrangements defining existence for that moment and group. "It is in this sense," as Eagleton writes, "that there is for Marxism both rupture and continuity between present and future."<sup>35</sup> The Marxist aesthetic, accordingly, requires just such a dialectical lading, a task that Herbert Marcuse takes up in his writings on the topic.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 229.

## 2. Marcuse's Vexed Aesthetic: Subjectivity and Sensuality as Competing Utopian Forces

*Appropriately enough, the culture of the simulacrum comes to life in a society where exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use value is effaced.<sup>36</sup>*

For Fredric Jameson, Plato's "simulacrum," an identical copy of something that has never existed, is a concept useful for analyzing the cultural products of late or post-industrial capitalism, a broadly periodizing concept that includes our own moment. Images with no origin, exchange value without use value: the theory of simulacrum as a free-floating signifier borrows from Marx's analysis of the commodity. However, in Jameson's diagnosis of post-industrial capitalism, many of the commodity's reflected tensions have disappeared, or at least been rearranged or forgotten, though not as the result of a satisfactory conclusion to material history, as Marxism (and Marx) would demand. Instead, a total embrace of exchange value has taken place, and subjects (if they are, indeed, subjects anymore: Jameson is not sure)<sup>37</sup> confront and consume simulations, reproductions, interchangeable units of exchange value in a culture that has turned historicity into pastiche (that is, the self-conscious repetition of icons of pastness).<sup>38</sup>

Roughly coinciding with the discovery and publication of two important works by Marx, the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and the *Grundrisse* (1858), in 1932 and 1939, respectively, Marcuse's work contributed to the twentieth century Marxist hermeneutic that—in light of both the Western shift to post-industrial capitalism and the humanitarian horrors

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<sup>36</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 18.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

of the Soviet Union—rearticulated the relationship between the Marxist notion of freedom and the freedom of the individual subject that we had come to know in the bourgeois era.<sup>39</sup>

Hermeneutic, rearticulation—these are terms that can indicate the presence of *dialectical* thought.

To establish an understanding of dialectical reasoning as it applies to history and to my comments on Marcuse, let me offer a passage from Eagleton. Herein, Eagleton addresses the trend in Marxism to disavow any and all bourgeois concepts, including the aesthetic, because they spring from the liberal-humanist ideology of the Enlightenment—which is particularly guilty of framing human beings as free subjects that have the power to resist historical forces such as class—and reminds Marxists that a properly dialectical conception of history must not ignore the historical necessity of subjectivity:

Those who have now been correctly programmed to reach for their decentered subjectivities at the very mention of the dread phrase ‘liberal humanist’ repressively disavow the very history which constitutes them, which is by no means uniformly negative or oppressive. We forget at our political peril the heroic struggles of earlier ‘liberal humanists’ against the brutal autocracies of feudalism. If we can and must be severe critics of Enlightenment, it is Enlightenment which has empowered us to be so. Here, as always, the most intractable process of emancipation is that which involves freeing ourselves from ourselves. One of the tasks of radical critique, as Marx, Brecht, and Walter Benjamin understood, is to salvage and redeem for left political uses whatever is still viable and valuable in the class legacies to which we are heirs.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Russell Rockwell, “Marcuse’s Hegelian Marxism, Marx’s *Grundrisse*, Hegel’s Dialectic” (Radical Philosophy Review Vol. 16, Issue 1, 2013), 290.

<sup>40</sup> Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 8.

A dialectical negation is one that includes and brings with it the most essential parts (or possibly non-essential or latent parts) of that which is being negated. As such, Marcuse's contribution to Marxist discourse can be understood as an effort to regain a dialectical understanding of history, which would include an undogmatic reexamination of concepts, such as utopia, that in the past, given the intellectual conditions of the time, had a different theoretical flavor and thereby a different relation to praxis. In other words, as Jameson suggests, Marcuse's basic theme is "the nature of the *negative* itself."<sup>41</sup> Marcuse observes that post-industrial society "has lost the experience of the negative in all its forms, that it is the negative alone which is ultimately fructifying from a cultural as well as an individual point of view, that a genuinely human existence can only be achieved through the process of negation."<sup>42</sup>

To regain the negative, Marcuse suggests the "revival of the Utopian impulse."<sup>43</sup> In contrast to orthodox Marxism, which saw the utopian ideal as a "a diversion of revolutionary energy into idle wish-fulfillment," in post-industrial capitalism "the very nature of the utopian concept has undergone a *dialectical reversal*. Now it is practical thinking which everywhere represents a capitulation to the system itself [my emphasis]." In a world deadened by exchange value and depthless pastiche, the utopian idea "keeps alive the possibility of a world qualitatively different from this one and takes the form of a stubborn negation of all that is."<sup>44</sup> This updated utopia is not an achieved state so much as an active, self-consciously implemented force of negation directed at the false reality principle perpetrated by the conditions of late capitalism. As such, it recasts the relationship between aesthetic production and praxis, affording the possibility

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<sup>41</sup> Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 108.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

that art with no directly polemical content can, through its deeply *affective* qualities, be an effective tool for social criticism.

### 1977/1937: Salvaging the Aesthetic

In *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Marcuse endorses the central Marxist position: praxis, that is, practical action taken by subjects to reform their material conditions, is the only means to achieve the transformed or re-humanized state that would liberate mankind. However, he challenges what might seem to be the upshot of that position: that art must directly address class and class conflict if it is to have a transformative or re-humanizing effect. For Marcuse, the aesthetic best protests against the deadening operations of capital by envisioning a different reality, one wherein the values depicted in the artwork can be directly experienced, both in the reader/viewer's immediate response and in the form and content of the work itself. Art offers an image of liberation when it presents something other than what is, when it alienates or estranges the subject, when it *negates*: "The encounter with the truth of art happens in the estranging language and images which make perceptible, visible, and audible that which is no longer, or not yet, perceived, said, and heard in everyday life."<sup>45</sup> In other words, the truth of art lies in its non-identity with the given reality.

If the given reality is plagued by a bourgeois idealism that persists stratospherically with no relation to its material basis—as Jameson's diagnosis of post-industrial society suggests, even more so than in the time of Marx's writing—it follows that a negation of this reality calls for a negation of such an idealism: namely, sensuous materialism. If, as Marxist aesthetics suggests,

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<sup>45</sup> Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, 72.

form and content are misaligned for all moments of human history except that in which authentic utopia finally emerges, then, by Marcuse's analysis, the conscious unification of form and content in an artwork would present a starkly different (and desirable) reality—a figure of utopia. A work of art that presents the content of a different reality, but through the communicative, literary, or semantic norms of the given reality—as in the case of, say, a fantasy novel—runs the risk of not fully estranging the subject. This is to say that a revolutionary work of art must figure as a world not only of radically different materials, physical laws, and categorical associations, but also of radically different ways of sensing, of mediating between the subject and the world of objects, beginning with the exact moment wherein the subject interacts with the art object. Put more simply: revolutionary art challenges not only what lived experience looks like, but also what it *feels* like. This experience can be understood as content becoming form, that is, when the estranging form of a work of art is *in itself* the work's radical content. This fixation on form as the actively estranging quality in art relies on a relationship between form and feeling, which Robert Lehman establishes in his description of formalism:

At its most basic, I mean an approach to art objects—literature, film, painting, and so on—grounded in an attention to these objects' spatiotemporal qualities, their *phenomenal* qualities, which might allow for the transmission of a content or a meaning but that are not themselves *intrinsically* meaningful. As a critical practice, then, formalism would prescribe consideration of meter, line, composition, rhythm, movement, shape: all those characteristics that are supposed to make an art object what it is. (Lehman 246)<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Robert S. Lehman, "Formalism, Mere Form, and Judgement," *New Literary History* 48, no. 2 (2017): 245-63.

By Lehman's account, an art object's form is its most sensuously immediate quality. It is the quality that describes the object's relation to physical space and time: its *spatiotemporality*. As such, it ought to be the focus for an aesthetic doctrine that is concerned with forging a more immediate relation between subjects and the sensuous world. This kind of art presents itself as its own self-contained universe, thus, in a sense, a reality from another dimension. Marcuse, in the preface to *The Aesthetic Dimension*, allows this line of thought: "Literature can be called revolutionary only with reference to itself, as content having become form. The political potential of art lies only in its own aesthetic dimension."<sup>47</sup> With these comments, Marcuse opens the door for a dialectical marriage of his own radical, utopian aesthetic and Marx's sensuous materialism, with the result being an aesthetic that negates the given reality through its sensuous qualities.

The rest of *The Aesthetic Dimension* follows a slightly different trajectory, for Marcuse ends up championing something other than an aesthetic driven by sensuous materialism: namely, a weaponization of the commodity form itself. Through what Marcuse calls aesthetic *sublimation*, that is, the process by which components of the given reality are stylized into a work of art, a *desublimation* in individual perception takes place. The subject experiences "an invalidation of dominant norms, needs, and values," and the reified reality is exposed as a mere moment in the as yet incomplete process of human history.<sup>48</sup> Ironically reversing the Marxist position that art is ideology and thereby a threat to the truth of praxis, Marcuse suggests that its "transcendent relation to the 'basis,'" its ability to envision a qualitatively different reality than the one in which it was produced, is precisely what gives art its emancipatory character.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, xii.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

Without a mechanism to present and view the given reality as something other than it appears, subjects would remain unknowingly trapped in the echo chamber of exchange value. Only an object with the ideological power of the commodity can transcend a reality dominated by commodities. But the question remains: where does the transcendent autonomy of the aesthetic originate? Here, Marcuse appears ambivalent, for reasons that I shall attempt to reconstruct.

First and foremost a student of Marx and Freud, Marcuse would likely think twice before suggesting that the transcendent character of art comes from a place transcendent to *humanity*, or in other words, that the ‘other’ reality which a properly emancipatory art object envisions is imported from outside the scope of human experience, say, from the cosmos, God, Nature, etc. Instead, the power of art comes from a place transcendent to the world of *objects*, but embedded within the human subject: namely, the imagination. To give momentum to this claim, Marcuse dialectically inverts the vulgar (indeed reductive) Marxist conception of base and superstructure dominating the early twentieth century:

In contrast to the rather dialectical formulations of Marx and Engels, the conception has been made into a rigid schema ... The schema implies a normative notion of the material base as the true reality and a political devaluation of nonmaterial forces particularly of the individual consciousness and subconscious and their political function ... If historical materialism does not account for this role of subjectivity, it takes on the coloring of vulgar materialism.<sup>50</sup>

In other words, as discussed above, subjectivity must be understood as more than a bourgeois

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 3.

value (and more than mystification of the subject's real conditions of being). One sees in vulgar Marxism a general devaluation of the conscious and subconscious, the *ego cogitans* and the imagination. To think in this fashion is to dissolve subjectivity into class consciousness and thereby minimize a "major prerequisite of revolution": namely, the fact that radical change must be rooted in individuals themselves.<sup>51</sup> To be sure, artworks (and art-making), like all other cultural products and processes, reflect the material base, that is, the modes and relations of production dominant for that social formation and moment, but this reflection does not necessarily preclude subjective or imaginative distortion. By embracing the creative power of subjectivity, we can view art objects as semi-autonomous creations that have the power to resist complete historical determination. Marcuse's interpretation of the aesthetic differs from both the nineteenth-century bourgeois conception and the twentieth-century Marxist conception. It is neither affirmative in the sense that it is meant to subdue or conceal the tensions between subject and object in bourgeois society, nor is it grossly material in the sense that it is meant to deny the revolutionary force of subjectivity or inwardness.

The praise which Marcuse gives to subjectivity and the imagination often slips, however, into meditations on art as transhistorical or universally human. When Marcuse invokes these terms, he is primarily concerned with demonstrating the ability of works of art to be reflexive—that is, to resist historical determinism to such a degree as to be politically effective. In order for a work of art to be critical of and indeed negate the given reality, it must exist to some degree *outside of* the given reality. This fact is paramount for Marcuse: without reflexivity, art maintains the status quo. He attends to the imagination for this reason, as the endless and jumbled domain of the human creative consciousness seems like the likeliest of all candidates to

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

resist capitalist reification. When he writes, however, that Dostoevsky's *The Humiliated and the Offended* and Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* are politically viable works because their protagonists "suffer not only the injustice of a particular class society, they suffer the inhumanity of all times; they stand for humanity as such," one wonders whether Marcuse means to suggest that art is able to resist historical determinism not only because it is a product of the uncommodified imagination, but also because it is born out of and represents a universal human spirit.<sup>52</sup>

This quasi-essentialism seems to be perplexingly at odds with some of Marcuse's earlier work and specifically "The Affirmative Character of Culture" (1937), wherein he denounces culture that diverges from material practice. Against the thesis of the universally valid values of a society as embodied in products of enjoyment (including, but not limited to, works of art), Marcuse argues, following Marx, that the bourgeois epoch has perpetuated and intensified a separation between the necessary and the beautiful, and, in turn, between the material and the ideal. The anarchic and insufferable reality of bourgeois practice goes on, and subjects must discover happiness and enjoyment within the mind only.<sup>53</sup> The spiritual world, which encompasses so-called universal values such as love and the soul, is "lifted out" of social reality, impossible as it is to maintain in the market-driven world. In this position the spiritual world becomes *the* authentic world, that is, the truth of all humanity. The material world is then absolved from any duty to represent this truth.<sup>54</sup> It follows that this kind of art, this affirmative art, perpetuates the commodity form. *The Aesthetic Dimension*, with its rights to transhistorical,

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 23-4.

<sup>53</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (London: MayFlyBooks, 2009), 65.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 70.

universal truths, appears in danger of devolving into an example of this idealist culture. In fact, it seems difficult for Marcuse to grant political power to art without waxing universal.

There is also a sense in which this kind of transhistorical art would challenge Marcuse's thesis that content ought to become form. Transhistorical, universal truths certainly cannot be expressed through the particular, material shapes or sounds of art objects without ideation or projection. In such cases, form may transmit universalist or essentialist content, but it would not itself *be* the content, as it is categorically impossible for something material, such as form, to be simultaneously something immaterial and conceptual, such as a transhistorical, universal truth. Against this, "The Affirmative Character of Culture" hints, but only hints, at something promising: a counterculture driven entirely *by, through, and out of* the body. As Marcuse explains:

The artistry of the beautiful body, its effortless agility and relaxation, which can be displayed today only in the circus, vaudeville, and burlesque, herald the joy to which men will attain in being liberated from the ideal, once mankind, having become a true subject, succeeds in the mastery of matter.<sup>55</sup>

To be clear, the idea of a universal humanity or a fully realized humankind still underwrites this particular suggestion of an embodied aesthetic. Nevertheless, the method by which to achieve this utopia—namely, exposure to the fleshly and corporeal—avoids ideation. Instead, Marcuse gestures toward an aesthetic that is simultaneously sensuous and utopian—or, more precisely, an aesthetic that is utopian *because* it is born out of and rooted in sensuous and changing reality, as

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 86.

opposed to the bourgeois realm of frozen ideas. While never fully fleshed out in the essay, this concept of a sensuous aesthetic, which combines the bodily and the beautiful, the somatic and the semantic, contrasts with his later, outspokenly utopian work and anticipates both a satisfying corollary to Marx's sensuous materialism and a promising mode of resistance to the lifeless simulacrum of post-industrial capitalism.

Given its balance of materialism and idealism, which is a result of its weaponization of the commodity form, Marcuse's aesthetic is only viable if we take it as a *figure*, as opposed to a real example, of utopia. As Jameson points out, "its political implications can only be clear when it is itself understood as a dress rehearsal of utopia, as a foreshadowing of ultimate concrete social liberation."<sup>56</sup> The point is that praxis—collective, social praxis—must be the bottom line if Marcuse's take on the aesthetic is to avoid slipping into bourgeois idealism that is content with mere *visions* of a different reality. The reader/viewer must make the move from her particular aesthetic experience to the project of reforming the world of objects such that it better reflects that experience. Marcuse acknowledges this limit to the aesthetic: "Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world."<sup>57</sup> A change in the consciousness of one or another being, while a necessary precondition for revolution, does not by any means guarantee a change in the material conditions of human beings generally.

This position brings out the Romantic strain within Marxism, and indeed, Marcuse's plea in defense of art's universal qualities sounds a lot like Marx's musings on the human "species being" that will find a world attuned to its humanness at the end of history (or, prehistory, as Marx would call it). Marcuse's insistence on the revolutionary and/or utopian possibilities of art

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<sup>56</sup> Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 111.

<sup>57</sup> Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, 32.

do not follow from Marx's comments on art, but they do amplify the line of Romantic humanism running throughout the Marxian corpus. That said, in *The Aesthetic Dimension* Marcuse falls short of articulating the embodied art or corporeal aesthetic that a pairing of his own reinvigorated utopia with Marx's sensuous materialism would allow. This fact becomes even clearer when we examine Surrealism, the artistic practice that Marcuse considered to be most reflective of his own aesthetic ideal.

### A Surreal Revolution

Marcuse's thesis of an aesthetic practice that is fueled by the imaginative potential of subjectivity to exhibit a non-identity with the given reality no doubt springs from his interactions with Surrealism. In *An Essay on Liberation* (1969), published shortly after the student protests in France in May of 1968, Marcuse praises Surrealism for its ability to kindle a revolutionary spirit by interfusing activism and aesthetics:

The imagination ... becomes 'productive' as it becomes practical: a guiding force in the reconstruction of reality—reconstruction with the help of a *gaya scienza*, a science and technology released from their service to destruction and exploitation, and thus free for the liberating exigencies of the imagination. The rational transformation of the world could then lead to a reality formed by the aesthetic sensibility of man ... André Breton has made this idea the center of surrealist thought.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 30-1.

Implicit in this praise of both Surrealism and the imagination is a sense that the precise way in which the imagination can liberate subjectivities within post-industrial, highly regimented capitalism is through its apparent ability to function beyond or unconstrained by the norms of rational logic. However, Marcuse's assumption that Surrealism, a movement born in Europe in the 1920s, is built to take on the project of reflecting (and refracting) lived experience within the global, post-industrial landscape of the latter half of the twentieth century is a flawed one, a reflection of his own transhistoricizing aesthetic ideal.

In the *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), André Breton proposes Surrealism as the corrective to what he sees as the waning of human psychic energy in the face of an intensifying industrial capitalism. The increased organization of the market system in the twentieth century dramatically extended the reach of the commodity form, reaching a point where synthetic materials and the equally synthetic desires of consumers had begun to outstrip more traditional and biologically-anchored relations between culture and nature. This transformation represents a *rationalization* of daily life, moving away from the pulpy irregularities of pre-industrial human life and into the cold and efficient assembly line of industrial production. Born of these conditions, Surrealism opposes rationalization, or as Jameson puts it, "*logic* in the widest sense of the word," and instead demands that its practitioners, primarily poets and artists, present the surrounding world of commodities in all of its contradictions and disorders. The human psyche, which Breton (like Freud) considers to be "an endless, uninterrupted fantasy," becomes the instrument for crafting and thereby discovering uncanny juxtapositions of thoughts and images that jolt the mind into awareness of its difference from the mechanical forms dominating the world outside.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 96.

ENCYCLOPEDIA. *Philosophy*. Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of the dream, in the disinterested play of thought.<sup>60</sup>

For Breton, the subconscious mind is the only region to have resisted total commodification. It thereby provides a clue as to how we might live otherwise in a world that reflects the *aesthetic sensibility of man*—that is, in a world built in accordance with the human (i.e. not mechanical) senses that the art object acknowledges or reveals. Thus Surrealism, with its exaltation of an imagination that plumbs the unconscious for its creative materials, is a practice of resistance that opposes the existing order while envisioning a new one.

According to Marxist aesthetics, Surrealism's capacity to envision a new order must be profoundly tied to its emergence in an era of capitalism wherein the traditional form of the commodity—a product that is equal parts concrete and abstract as a bearer of exchange value, on the one hand, and use value, on the other hand—is still recognizable. Such an assertion requires a Jamesonian account of the relationship between form and content. For Jameson, it would be a logical error to suggest that the form of an artwork could be at all separate from its own content. It is not a question of potential, that is, of whether form and content do or do not align, and if they do not, that they could. Rather, it is always the case that form is the form of 'that' (particular) content. Organic form can serve as a prototype of this interdetermination; take the peculiarly integral relation of part to whole, and of form to content—where the leaf just *is* the form of that 'particular' content, each enabling the expression of the other. Given this interdetermination, there is a way in which form can be, as Jameson puts it, "apprehended as

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<sup>60</sup> André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 26.

content”: that is, form (with all of its deformations) can be inspected for the ways in which it embodies the contradictions that define a historical moment. This conception is what Jameson terms *the ideology of form*. In his own words, it describes “the determinate contradiction of the specific messages emitted by the varied sign systems which coexist in a given artistic process as well as in its general social formation.”<sup>61</sup> For Jameson, then, content is less the references in an artwork that must be cognized or imagined than it is the *way* in which those references are fashioned into the form of the artwork. From this standpoint, it is possible to discern what can be called the content of the form, or more precisely, to explain the contradictions of a particular form “as sedimented content in their own right,” as dynamic transcriptions of the systemic and social contradictions of a given moment.<sup>62</sup>

Thus Surrealism’s aesthetic representation of its conditions of emancipatory possibility brings with it the contradictions of the commodity form. One such reflection is evident in Surrealism’s trademark practice of automatic writing: Surrealism is too easily given over to a kind of pure formalism in which practitioners idealize the art object itself, the effects of which depend heavily on “accidents of our own fantasies and our own fascinations.” Breton names the Surrealists “right-wing deviationists” who delight in the creative products of their own minds while neglecting Surrealism’s role in larger political projects.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, there is the contradiction that a literary doctrine espousing the infinite freedom of image association is limited by the scope of human cognition and language, not to mention the limitations imposed by the personal histories and implicit worldviews of any individual author. Accordingly, all Surrealist works remain “local and contingent,” confined in their form and content to the time

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<sup>61</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 84.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 101.

and place of their creation. This locality is not necessarily a problem in itself; it is simply not compatible with Surrealism's stated aim to present a universally accessible and essentially true human reality of imaginative associations. In other words, actual Surrealist works cannot *really* do what Surrealism wants them to do. As Jameson puts it: "It is only when they are perceived as *examples* of Surrealism that they ... take on the stronger colors of their origin. This is to say, if you like, that the *idea* of Surrealism is a more liberating experience than the actual texts."<sup>64</sup>

Jameson goes on to argue that this quality can be understood as a tension or difference between Surrealism understood particularly, that is, through its specific examples, and Surrealism understood universally, or, as an immaterial concept that underwrites, but is superior in efficacy to, its material examples. This duality clearly mimics the ontology of the commodity.

Such an internalization of the commodity form, however, does not disqualify Surrealism as a revolutionary aesthetic in its *own* time. Jameson uses the contradiction between Surrealism's theoretical formalization and its actual praxis to sketch a new way to think about the political benefits of abstraction, contrary to the Marxist tendency to avoid abstraction at all costs:

We are accustomed, in our time, to make a fetish of the concrete, by which we normally understand the particular: yet the effects in question here demonstrate, on the contrary, that the particular can be an enslavement under certain conditions, and that under those conditions it is precisely the movement of abstraction that can come as liberation.<sup>65</sup>

In this light, it is especially easy to see how Surrealism figures as an example of Marcuse's aesthetic ideal. But in the post-industrial era, defined by its disabling and absorptive logic of

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 102.

abstraction, is the rift between particular Surrealist works and their conceptual backing still emancipatory? The answer is most assuredly no, for just as the mode of production has undergone a momentous transformation, so too has Surrealism's efficacy as a *negative* art practice undergone a dialectical reversal. Construed by Breton as the "prehensile tail" of Romanticism, Surrealism was once directed at reanimating the traces of unmechanized humanity that remained within products of labor.<sup>66</sup> This mission required that these products remained recognizable as objectifications of concrete human labor, as bearers of use value. As Jameson explains, "what prepares [products of labor] to receive the investment of psychic energy characteristic of their use by Surrealism is precisely the half-sketched, uneffaced mark of human labor ... on them."<sup>67</sup> However, in the culture of the simulacrum, wherein subjects confront interchangeable units of exchange value that no longer bear any markings of human labor, those products that Surrealism would otherwise animate appear already psychically (re)animated as free-floating phantasmagoria. Thus Marcuse's thesis for (negatively) utopian art in the post-industrial era, for which he resuscitates Surrealism as an example, introduces additional abstractive conditions for aesthetic production within a social formation and moment that is already exceedingly abstract. As an alternative, I now want to examine the black cultural concept of sonic fiction, embodied in the poetry of Fred Moten, for it can, I think, provide clues as to how art can be suggestive of utopia without relying on abstraction.

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<sup>66</sup> Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 153.

<sup>67</sup> Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 104.

## **PART II: PRAXIS**

### 3. Seeing vs. Hearing: An Analysis of Physiologically Divergent Aesthetics

This chapter presents a new line of thinking that contrasts Surrealism with sonic fiction, a contemporary conception of the epistemological, ontological, and political affordances of sonic performance. The distinction between these two aesthetic doctrines is fundamentally a distinction between image and sound, which is reflected in the physiological—and thereby cognitive and phenomenological—distinction between seeing and hearing. By focusing on the preeminence of the semantic, the conceptual, and the optical in Surrealist works, I want to underscore the incapacity of Surrealism to represent utopia in the post-industrial era. It is the abstractive conditions and effects of these three modalities that make Surrealism poorly suited negate a culture of generalized exchange value. Against this, I want to examine creative work that can only be apprehended sonically in order to explore the divergent political potentials of the semantic and the somatic, or the conceptual and the corporeal, and, in so doing, realize an aesthetic that is suggestive of utopia without relying on abstraction. For the sake of argument and comparison, I will be dealing with Surrealism and sonic fiction in their literary, as opposed to cinematic, illustrated, or otherwise nonliterary forms.

Surrealism, with its focus on the *imagination*, is a deliberate perversion of logocentric image association. Pierre Reverdy, as quoted in the first *Manifesto of Surrealism* from 1924, explains its method:

The image is a pure creation of the mind. It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities. The more the relationship between the

two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be, the greater its emotional power and poetic reality.<sup>68</sup>

Images uncommonly associated with one another, when contorted and smashed together, represent the irrational and supposedly more authentic reality of the human subconscious. Surrealism works by presenting a mixture of images that transgress the associative categories of a reality-trained mind—that is, a mind becoming less aware of its imaginative potential as it becomes more familiar with and influenced by rational industrial machination. But to foreshadow the problem with Surrealism as regards sensuous materialism: these images, as Reverdy states, are purely of the mind—that is, they are entirely cognized. Consequently, Surrealism’s emancipatory capacity for feeling is hampered by the idealist gravity of the image. What are the sensory—and by extension, emancipatory—limitations of this fixation on the image? How does this account of the image and of seeing square with contemporary conceptions of another sensory medium: namely, sound?

### Mixillogic

Sonic fiction is a concept proposed by Kodwo Eshun in *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (1998) and elucidated by Holger Schulze in *Sonic Fiction* (2020). From the standpoint of scholarly research, it is a “black cultural concept with an intrinsically hybrid, politicized and revolutionary agency in an environment of still largely white endeavors in sound research.”<sup>69</sup> While the thesis at its core is deliberately difficult to pin down, sonic fiction can be

<sup>68</sup> Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 20.

<sup>69</sup> Holger Schulze, *Sonic Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 4.

understood as an attempt to introduce and acknowledge ephemeral textures of sound in aesthetic discourse, as regards both theory/criticism and performance. In this way, sonic fiction reacts against “scholarly restraints” often superimposed on writing, thinking, and sensing, while at the same time proposing a new way to think about the future as *with, through, and out of* sound:

Sonic Fiction replaces lyrics with possibility spaces, with a plan for getting out of jail free. Escapism is organized until it seizes the means of perception and multiplies the modes of sensory reality.<sup>70</sup>

Sonic fiction aims to put pressure on our modes of temporal and spatial perception so as to enable an experience of both escape and an unmediated encounter with sensuous reality in all of its multiplicity. This emphasis on escape via resistance to rational perception places sonic fiction in a category similar to Surrealism. However, it is crucially distinct in its insistence on the sensuous immediacy—or, the “this-sidedness,” as Marx puts it—of the art *event*, making it a fitting aesthetic doctrine for an adaptation of Marx’s sensuous materialism.

To materialize sonic fiction as a method of resistance via sound, Eshun introduces a subsidiary concept: namely, *mixillogic*. As the term indicates, a mixillogic is a mutation of logic, “an ill and sick logic out of mixtures” that generates new ways of listening and speaking that do not conform to traditional syllogisms or rhetorics.<sup>71</sup> Instead, it encourages the “open-ended and searching recombination, the excited trial and error, the freaked out and joyful mixing in of ever more different and new and unknown substances and qualities and practices” into both art-making and art criticism.<sup>72</sup> As with Surrealism, the thought is that fervent and *freaked out*

<sup>70</sup> Eshun, cited in Schulze, *Sonic Fiction*, 7.

<sup>71</sup> Schulze, *Sonic Fiction*, 21.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

combinations of things are able to circumvent the rationalizations of the intellect and of logocentrism more generally. A mixillogic is an agnostic logic, acknowledging the aesthetic necessity of an organizational method, i.e. *mixing*, but resisting the convergence of logic onto a single term. However, as noted above, Surrealism and sonic fiction perform their poisoned logics in divergent sensory arenas. Surrealism, on the one hand, fixates on the subversive potential of the irrational image, that is, the image that could not exist anywhere but within the imagination. By doing so, it presents a *visual* mixillogic that tries to free the semantic from industrial rationality and force readers to realize their own cognitive fluidity. Sonic fiction, on the other hand, asks readers to do the literally unthinkable: namely, to abandon the cognitive reasoning processes that translate words into correlative and stable ideas—signifiers into signifieds—and instead to engage with the somatic by way of the malleable and fleeting textures that accompany the sound of phrasing and strings of characters. It is a *sonic* mixillogic, guided by the idiosyncratic and contingent organizational principles of music. This distinction between visual and sonic mixillogics reflects the varying degree to which the mixillogical can infiltrate either content or form, respectively.

Consider the following poem by André Breton:<sup>73</sup>

## **WORLD**

In the salon of Madame des Ricochets

The mirrors are made of beads of pressed and processed dew

The console is constructed out of an arm among the ivy

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<sup>73</sup> Michael Benedikt, *The Poetry of Surrealism: An Anthology* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1975), 135.

And the carpet flows away like waves  
 In the salon of Madame des Ricochets  
 Moonlight tea is served in nightjar eggs  
 The curtains seduce the melting snow  
 And into this pearliness the piano and its vanishing point sink in  
     a single shape  
 In the salon of Madame des Ricochets  
 The lowered lamps beneath the leaves the flickerings  
 Struggle against the firelight in an anteater fuzz  
 When Madame des Ricochets rings  
 The doors burst open to make way for the servants upon their  
     See-saws, sliding-ponds, and swings

The radical edge of the poem is its confounding imagery that resists logocentric image association. The salon of Madame des Ricochets is quite the spectacle, with various category transgressions and semantic mysteries: a carpet undulates like the ocean, melting snow lusts for curtains, and someone serves something called moonlight tea in something called a nightjar egg. With these images and their “*extreme degree of immediate absurdity*,” the poem reacts against what might be called the *visual intellect*, that is, the regulatory force that a reality-trained mind exerts on a collection of images to determine its consistency with lived experience.<sup>74</sup> The reader has never seen *sliding-ponds*, and that such things could ever exist in our world *out there*, governed by its particular physical laws, is absurd. The poem thus envisions a different reality

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<sup>74</sup> Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism*, 24.

wherein matter is free to mingle through the chance interactions and intersections of the imagination.

However, and this is key: the mixillogical content of the poem has no apparent relation to its form, which is comparatively stable and rational. While the poem portrays a world teeming with visual contradictions, it does so through banal—or, at least, predictable—rhetorical patterns. Nouns and verbs arrive when they ought to arrive, with their signifieds serving only as imaginary flare against the abovementioned visual intellect. This is to say that syntactic grammar, one of the pillars of logocentric living, is equally one of the pillars of Surrealism’s visual mixillogic. To take it a step further, each solitary character string is recognizable as an existing signifier in the English language (of course, translated from the French, but the point remains in any language). Even the most puzzling word combinations, such as *see-saw*, have a place to go in the so-called mind’s eye, as the reader recognizes *see* and recognizes *saw* as words in their own right. Thus, Surrealism relies not only on the stable institution of grammar, but also of spelling to present its irrational images. With this disjuncture between form and content, the phantasmagoria of “WORLD”—divorced from the poem’s real body—takes on the color of idealism. To be clear, this critique does not call for a total abandonment of organizational principles or grammars in the widest sense, nor is it meant to suggest that such an abandonment would produce especially liberatory works of art. Rather, it is meant to open the door for more idiosyncratic and fluid—and thereby more corporeal—organizational principles than the stable logics of syntactic grammar and spelling. In other words, this critique is meant to emphasize the potential to deliver mixillogical content in equally mixillogical form. Given the relationship between form and feeling—form serving as the physical body of a text, which the reader engages by sensing, as opposed to thinking or imagining—a mixillogical form would be inescapably embodied. If, as

Marx believes, revolution is born primarily out of an immediate relation to sensuous reality and not out of cognitive play, then injecting subversive and multiple logics into the very site of a reader's immediate relation to the text—i.e. form—would deliver the spark of a sensuously liberated utopia straight to the body. The experience of this utopia would be felt, rather than envisioned or cognized, and this distinction matters because freedom of feeling—the total realization and fulfillment of the senses—is the ultimate goal of Marx's materialist method.

“brack blitish, bend”

Sonic fiction provides a way to confound rational logic without straying from the body. Take, for instance, the following poem by Moten:<sup>75</sup>

**michael' dog**

but I feel my eye and the brlues blood beneath beneatha's maximal  
 breath. I'm british, brack blitish, bend  
 but can't live there. from  
 there but see me in fresh text: lira not lots, lita not lira, the phase is  
 the phage for sho sho to come out to show them. I love them big pots  
 with bubbles behind like a seam seam.  
 my dog ain't no dog and my dog ain't my dog but my bitch singing backup  
 in sunday school. she back up  
 her buzz and her hair dry wind be beat but drifted and permanent curl.

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<sup>75</sup> Fred Moten, *The Service Porch* (Seattle: Letter Machine Editions, 2016), 91.

I'm scarry. you know what it feel like to ask if I'm for this? did all this leave  
our mikes alone make me? is up under that same another thing?

*is up under that same another thing?* Sentences are not formed the way they ought to be, words are not spelled the way they ought to be. Instead, grammar and spelling yield to the sound of musical phrasing, which is innately agnostic toward its organizational principles. Within music there are scales that underwrite melodies and time signatures that organize rhythms, but the art has no stated preference for any one of these methods, and it even allows them to intermingle within a single work.<sup>76</sup> As Schulze writes: “The material and affective substance of sound, the oscillations, the swinging and the percussive rhythms are inextricably melted together.”<sup>77</sup>

Moten’s musical ability is certainly due in large part to his profound familiarity with experimental jazz greats such as Cecil Taylor, Eric Dolphy, and John Coltrane.<sup>78</sup> Guided by the musical logic of this tradition, which is properly a mixillogic, the poem prevents the reader from forming any stable image, as well as any sense of rootedness in place, such as that which the reader feels while situated inside the salon of Madame des Ricochets. Rather, visual associations come in and out of focus to the lively and ephemeral rhythms of the poem’s sound. To put it another way, the poem’s sound—its vibrant quality as a spatiotemporal artefact and a sonic moment—*cuts through* the logocentric and stable binds that Breton’s poem fails to challenge. It’s sonic flows are continuously at work, preventing stasis or clotting of image into meaning. Meaning is never given over to the realm of ideas, embedded as it is within the poem’s sonic texture.

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<sup>76</sup> Kristine Forney and Joseph Machlis, *The Enjoyment of Music: An Introduction to Perceptive Listening*, 11th ed., Shorter Version (New York: WW Norton & Co., 2011), 20-5.

<sup>77</sup> Schulze, *Sonic Fiction*, 135.

<sup>78</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, back cover.

“michael’ dog” offers a kind of paradox: through its intimate and uncompromising engagement with the senses, it refuses to make logocentric sense. Moten, like the Surrealists, is evidently interested in nonsense as a way to meaning, as he explains in a 2004 interview about his poetics:

I think poetry is what happens or is conveyed on the outskirts of sense, on the outskirts of normative meaning. I’m trying precisely to work on that edge, and I assume that the content that is conveyed on that edge, on that fault line, is richer, deeper, and fuller than those things that are given in writing that passes for direct.<sup>79</sup>

The distinction between Moten’s poem and Breton’s is that Moten’s introduces this nonsense—this mixillogic—into form, making it heard and thereby felt in the live and contingent act of reading, as opposed to strictly imagined. By tracing a logic of musical phrasing, the poem refuses normative grammatical structures and rhetorics and consequently suggests new ways of reading, perceiving, and sensing; it is nonsense via *sense*, resisting through its own sonic density the traditional modes of sensory input and categorization that accompany the reading process. In Moten’s words, the poem “disallows reading”—it is opaque to cognition and, indeed, the imagination.<sup>80</sup> As a result, it can only be understood sonically. In this stubborn position, the poem insists on establishing and maintaining a sensuous and direct, rather than a cognitive and indirect, relation to its reader.

Such a practice—one that leverages sound’s resistance to cognition, abstraction, and objectification—can be understood as a *sonic materialism*, and it affords something remarkable:

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<sup>79</sup> Charles Henry Rowell, “‘Words Don’t Go There’: An Interview with Fred Moten,” *Callaloo* 27, no. 4 (2004): 953–66.

<sup>80</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 44.

namely, the opportunity to make and encounter art that is equally hostile toward norms of rational logic as it is material, sensible, and uncognizable.<sup>81</sup> This notion that sound can resist depends on a particular understanding of hearing as physiologically—and thereby phenomenologically—distinct from seeing. As Salomé Voegelin argues:

Sound's ephemeral invisibility obstructs critical engagement, while the apparent stability of the image invites criticism. Vision, by its very nature assumes a distance from the object, which it receives in its monumentality. Seeing always happens in a meta-position, away from the seen, however close. And this distance enables a detachment and objectivity that presents itself as truth ... Hearing does not offer a meta-position; there is no place where I am not simultaneously with the heard ... I cannot hear if I am not immersed in its auditory object, which is not its source but sound as sound itself.<sup>82</sup>

This *meta-position* that one assumes while seeing shares a schema of distance with the commodity form and, by extension, the philosophical position of idealism. According to Voegelin, seeing requires receiving an object in its “monumentality,” that is, in an integral and stable state. Process—the process of the object’s creation, or, its unfolding—is thereby concealed, causing a rift between seer and seen that nonetheless presents itself as truth. That one assumes a distance from an object’s real nature, from its historical background and material development, is precisely Marx’s critique of the commodity. It is also the core of his critique of idealism, and the meta-position that accompanies seeing shares its vacuous objectivity with, predictably, metaphysics. By contrast, hearing is immersion in process, and it is thereby a fitting example of the materialist method. Put this way, it is easy to spot the issue of Surrealism’s

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<sup>81</sup> M. Cobussen, Holger Schulze, and V. Meelberg, cited in Schulze, *Sonic Fiction*, 31.

<sup>82</sup> Salomé Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds: Hearing the Continuum of Sound* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), xi-ii.

reliance on the visual—which is responsible for the doctrine’s dependence on the semantic and its consequent decoupling of content and form—vis-à-vis a political ideology that wants fundamentally to banish the commodity. Similarly, Voegelin’s analysis makes clear that the achievement of sonic fiction, with “michael’ dog” serving as an example, is that it maintains its radically compressed form and transcends rational order. By flattening itself into a weave of sound, it simultaneously subverts semantic logics and transmits its idiosyncrasies and contingencies directly to the reader.

So, if Breton’s poem offers readers challenging imagery, Moten’s exchanges reading—in the traditional sense of the word, i.e. translating image and sound into meaning—for feeling that is the result of a somatic and improvisatory engagement with the task of organizing sound. As Moten puts it:

A poetry, then, that is of the music; a poetry that would articulate the music’s construction; a poetry that would mark and question the idiomatic difference that is the space-time of performance, ritual, and event; a poetry, finally, that becomes music in that it iconically presents those organizational principles that are the essence of music. The thing is, these organizational principles break down; their breakdown disallows reading, improvises idiom(atic difference) and gestures toward an anarchic and generative meditation on phrasing that occurs in what has become, for reading, the occluded of language: sound.<sup>83</sup>

Against Moten’s thesis, Breton’s poem *occludes* sound because of its reliance on the semantic, the conceptual, and the visual. To be clear, this is not to suggest that the poem is silent. Writing is

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<sup>83</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 44.

closely related to speech; any reader can turn it into sound by reading aloud, and it begins as a practical transcription of speaking. In addition, poetry has traditionally stipulated that it be read aloud, unlike prose and prose fiction. Nevertheless, “WORLD” is not organized by its sounds, but by its pursuit of the subversive image; it aims to do its work in the mind. The sounds within the poem are feeble appendages of its traditional semantic tools, i.e. its words and the items they signify. They constitute background radiation, muted murmurs from within what Schulze calls the “black prison of signs and characters.”<sup>84</sup> By occluding sound, Breton’s poem binds meaning to the binary relation between signifier and signified, and it is thereby limited in its sensuous reach. It may free the mind, but it fails to engage the body. Moten explains the limit that word-driven semantics imposes on expression, and he suggests that sound, conversely, affords an excessive—suprasemantic—ability:

Words don’t go there: this implies a difference between words and sounds; it suggests that words are somehow constrained by their implicit reduction to the meanings they carry—meanings inadequate to or detached from the objects or states of affairs they would envelop. What’s also implied is an absence of inflection; a loss of mobility, slippage, bend; a missing accent or affect; the impossibility of a slur or crack and the *excess*—rather than loss—of meaning they imply.<sup>85</sup>

Sound implies an *excess* of meaning. By allowing affect to overflow into the corporeal, sonic fiction allows meaning to become embodied; sound directly translates the somatic into the semantic without making it pass through a conceptual code. Surrealism’s reliance on this

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<sup>84</sup> Schulze, *Sonic Fiction*, 98.

<sup>85</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 42.

conceptual code makes it an ill-fitting doctrine for our own *state of affairs*. What I am suggesting is that Moten's poetry answers the need for an aesthetic that liberates the senses from the logocentric constraints imposed by capital in order to establish a more genuine—more immediate—relation to the sensuous world. This, then, is an aesthetic that moves away from ideas and concepts and into the realm of corporeality, sensuality, and materiality—an aesthetic that obstructs commoditization.

#### 4. Content of the Form: A Geographical-Racial (Un)conscious

At this point, I have established that sonic fiction can be understood as an adaptation of Marx's sensuous materialism and Marcuse's negative utopia, resisting through sound the rationalizing logic of post-industrial capitalism. What, then, can be made of Marcuse's endorsement of Surrealism? Why is he caught between two worlds, the one a traditional industrial economy of a nationalist/imperialist order, the other an unexpectedly emerging informational economy of transnational, global flows? Marcuse's status as a transgenerational figure affords the opportunity to put pressure on industrial dialectics, to question the capacity of such an overdetermined paradigm to account for all of the forces that mediate the cultural preferences of a given social formation and moment. One such overlooked force is, of course, biography. Marcuse was born in 1898; the Frankfurt School in 1922; Surrealism in 1924; and *The Aesthetic Dimension* in 1977—two years before Marcuse's death. In other words, Surrealism can be understood as the art form of Marcuse's youth, and thus the unevenness of the sedimented historical moments within a given life can explain one's preference for outdated culture.

There is, however, another cause beyond the biographical. While it is certainly the case that Surrealism and sonic fiction occupy distinct moments in industrial history, they are also cultural products of distinct geographical and racial groups, represented by Breton, a white European, on the one hand, and by Moten, a black American, on the other hand. Thus, contrary to the tendency in Marxist aesthetics to ignore these forces, I want to suggest that the disposition toward abstraction for Surrealism, as well as for Marcuse resuscitating Surrealism to craft his aesthetic ideal, be rethought from the standpoints of geography and race. To put it another way: both the abstractive modalities of Surrealism and the historical contradiction of *The Aesthetic*

*Dimension* are better understood as products of a geographical-racial ideology that pervades the European theoretical tradition and carries over into its aesthetic correlatives (Surrealism, of course, being one of them, given both its immediate indebtedness to Freud and its Parisian roots). In fact, recalling Jameson's thesis of the ideology of form, it is precisely this theoretical tradition, this tradition of theorizing, that drives a wedge between the idea of Surrealism and its actual works, and between Marcuse and his changing moment.

### Black Marxism

This notion of a geographical-racial ideology draws in part on Moten's own assertion that the European or Euro-American avant-garde is born out of a white cultural surplus that has its productive base in the exploitation and enslavement of the global periphery. This relation of cultural surplus to exploited base subsists on what he calls *a geographical-racial or racist unconscious*:

The idea of the avant-garde is embedded in a theory of history. This is to say that a particular geographical ideology, a geographical-racial or racist unconscious, marks and is the problematic out of which or against the backdrop of which the idea of the avant-garde emerges. The specter of Hegel reigns over and animates this constellation. His haunting, haunted formulations constitute one of the ways racism produces the social, aesthetic, political-economic, and theoretical surplus that is the avant-garde. There is a fundamental connection between (re)production and performance of the surplus and the avant-garde.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 31.

Here, surplus is taken to mean the stolen labor and labor-time—the surplus value—afforded to the Northern and Western hemispheres by the global productive significance of chattel slavery.<sup>87</sup> The thought is that in order to understand the avant-garde, which, as Moten notes, can be “fundamentally determined by its expendability,” one must look to the historical conditions that make expendable culture possible.<sup>88</sup> In this case, the scholastic vigor that delivers the avant-garde is a largely unnoticed and unquestioned—*unconscious*—luxury afforded to those maintaining the dominant position in Northern and Western hegemony. It is for this reason that Moten deems the idea of a black avant-garde oxymoronic, “as if black, on the one hand, and avant-garde, on the other hand, each depends for its coherence upon the exclusion of the other” (though he goes on to insist that the two terms are, in fact, synonymous).<sup>89</sup> As for Hegel’s role in this problematic, Moten casts Hegel as the source of this perceived mutual exclusivity of blackness and the avant-garde. For Moten, the attack is that Hegel takes Europe’s cultural surplus for granted, that is, as having no relation to the economic and social conditions of his moment and past moments, and from this privileged position he charts a linear conception of Eurocentric reality into a totalizing prototype for the rest of history. What results is a codified and systematized indoctrination of what is, in fact, a reified and fetishized understanding of the world.

This mixture of blindness and insight on Hegel’s part should come as no surprise, given the previous discussion of the pitfalls of European idealism vis-à-vis Marx’s historical materialism. What does surprise, however, is Marx’s own attraction to the systematizing moves—the normalization and thus idealization—so characteristic of Hegel. Consider the

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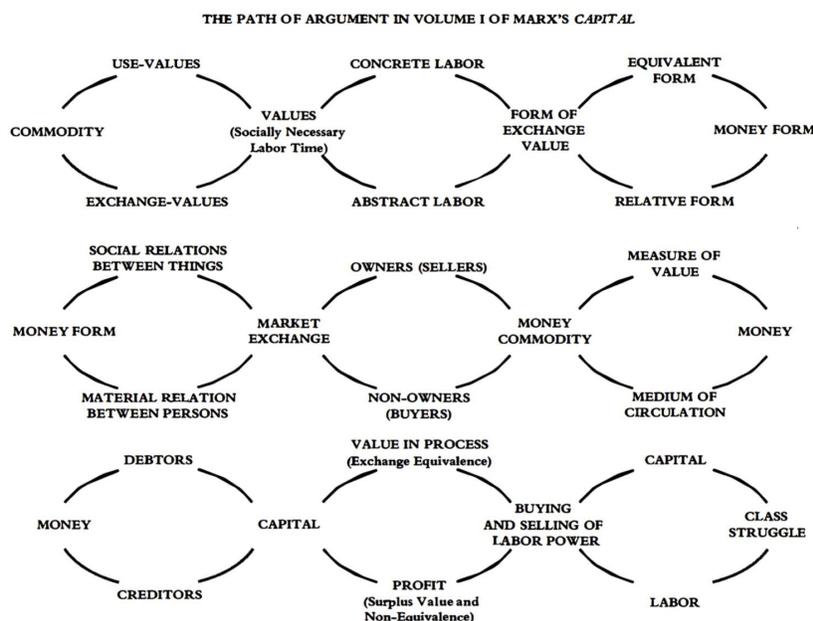
<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 32.

following diagram, developed by David Harvey, that describes the path of argument in *Capital*:

*Volume One*.<sup>90</sup>



A diagram of the argumentative shape of *Capital* might not be necessary to stake the claim that Marx believed in the capacity of dialectical logic to explain material history (such is, after all, the thesis of the chapter, “Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a Whole,” in the *Manuscripts*); however, it is a remarkable experience to behold the uniform circuitry of his system in a single image.<sup>91</sup> One sees in Marxism a kind of theoretical overlay or lattice of abstraction superimposed upon lived experience. I make this observation not to discredit Marx’s critique of Hegel—not to depict Marxism as itself an idealism—but to provoke more precise and

<sup>90</sup> Harvey, “EDUCATION | Part 2 | Reading Marx’s ‘Capital’ Volume 1 with David Harvey,” The People’s Forum NYC, video, 9:25, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Sgo9I61gOI&feature=emb\\_logo&ab\\_channel=ThePeople%27sForumNYC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Sgo9I61gOI&feature=emb_logo&ab_channel=ThePeople%27sForumNYC).

<sup>91</sup> Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 141.

careful thought about my governing topic throughout this thesis: namely, the relation of form (here, Marx's Hegelian 'lattice of abstraction') and content (Marx's materialism). Despite his sharp ridicule of the philosophical position of idealism, Marx assumes that a singular logic (a pattern as predictable as it is discernible) underwrites both human experience and the scientific or philosophical understanding of that experience. To that extent, Marx must be set squarely within the tradition of thought spearheaded by Immanuel Kant and Hegel.

There is more to this issue. Marxism's quest for an authentic, dynamic materialism largely ignores the organizational and oppressive—and, by the same, dialectical token, the *revolutionary*—force of race. By relating the ills of modernity strictly to the operations of capital, Marx falls prey to a methodological essentialism that sees him theorizing from the standpoint of a rapidly progressing, as well as racially homogenous, industrial global North. As such, he fails to consider that the structural dynamics of race, not just class, can affect the trajectory of a society. Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism* (1983) speaks directly to this point:

The Italian financiers and merchants whose capital subsidized Iberian exploration of the Atlantic and Indian oceans were also masters of (largely "European") slave colonies in the Mediterranean. Certainly slave labor was one of their bases for what Marx termed "primitive accumulation." But it would be an error to arrest the relationship there, assigning slave labor to some "pre-capitalist" stage of history. For more than 300 years slave labor persisted beyond the beginnings of modern capitalism, complementing wage labor, peonage, serfdom, and other methods of labor coercion. Ultimately, this meant that the interpretation of history in terms of the dialectic of capitalist class struggles would prove inadequate, a mistake ordained by the preoccupation of Marxism with the

industrial and manufacturing centers of capitalism; a mistake founded on the presumptions that Europe itself had produced, that the motive and material forces that generated the capitalist system were to be wholly located in what was a fictive historical entity. From its very foundations capitalism had never been—any more than Europe—a “closed system.”

Necessarily then, Marx's and Engels's theory of revolution was insufficient in scope: the European proletariat and its social allies did not constitute the revolutionary subject of history, nor was working-class consciousness necessarily the negation of bourgeois culture. Out of what was in reality a rather more complex capitalist world system (and one to which Marx in his last decade paid closer attention), other revolutionary forces emerged as well.<sup>92</sup>

With a more appropriately global conception of the evolution of capitalism—which, by Robinson's account, is less a programmatic evolution than a series of mutations unanchored to an originary class or group—Robinson critiques Marxism on its own terms. The facts of the case—that primitive accumulation extended beyond the boundary drawn for it in history, that revolution occurs or can occur along the lines of race and without exclusive consideration for class—expose Marx's exclusively industrial dialectic as frozen theory. Indeed, one might go so far as to suggest a parallel between Marx's own formulations and the ossified deadness of the commodity. To say this is not to discredit the demand for a rigorous materialism, nor to find fault with Marx's way of imagining or even presenting it, but to point out the historical blindness of all acts of insight; all have the defects of their virtues.

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<sup>92</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 4.

What does this mean for Surrealism? While Surrealism does not, of course, follow directly from Hegel's or Marx's comments on the dialectical character of history, it is a movement that is geographically and economically linked to those formations that produce the European disposition toward theory. A period in the European avant-garde, Surrealism nonetheless participates in an ideological constellation that favors the mind (and its ideational products) as the most necessary mediator between subjects and the world of objects. Thus, as I have tried to show, Surrealism's revolutionary technique relies on the primacy of conceptual cognition, over and above the sensuous particulars of lived experience.

#### 2003/2013/2016: Surplus Lyricism

For Moten, black performance, by which he means the art and culture of afrodiasporic people, has already achieved, or more precisely, *has always been*, the sensuous and political (political in that it is sensuous) aesthetic that Marx and Marcuse theoretically allow and that Surrealism fails to actualize. He identifies a *surplus lyricism* in black performance that generates a culture of sensuously-engaged form, which he terms *radical sensuality*:

See, black performance has always been the ongoing improvisation of a kind of lyricism of the surplus—invagination, rupture, collision, augmentation. This surplus lyricism ... is what a lot of people are after when they invoke the art and culture—the radical (both rooted and out there, immanent and transcendent) sensuality—of and for my people. It's a lyricism that Marx was trying to get to when he envisioned theoretical senses.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 26.

Despite what might seem like racial essentialism here (that is, the claim that sensuousness is an innately racial quality), there is truth to the fact that this so-called radical sensuality, a resistant, subversive, disruptive energy driven *from* and *by* the body (and resistant to formalization after the fact), can be a critical mode of being for afrodiasporic people who have been ontologically restricted to and defined by their bodies. Eric Steinskog, quoting Tavia Nyong'o in *Afrofuturism and Black Sound Studies* (2018), notes that music is widely understood within black studies to be “central to the lived experience of black people.”<sup>94</sup> Perhaps, like Moten's quote, essentialist on its surface, this idea is supported by a historical truism of the African diaspora: namely, the “question of literacy in the historical period of slavery, and whether music/sound in one way or another became the primary medium for communication (broadly understood) rather than the focus upon words/letters/language.”<sup>95</sup> The fact that slaves used drums to communicate over distances is sometimes used to support such a claim.<sup>96</sup> However, this discussion is not meant to suggest that black people simply *made do* by using sound, that sound offers a reduced ability to communicate, or that sound is in some mysterious way the privileged sense modality of black people. Rather, the claim should be “seen as facilitating discussions about how sound could function similarly as words, that is to say, challenging the previously understood divisions rather than keeping them.”<sup>97</sup> But even further, it suggests that within certain situations or at certain moments, sound's ability to resist white, Western knowledge practices can outstrip that of language. At such moments, sound can not only resist but also elude the decoding and objectifying tendencies of the dominant culture.

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<sup>94</sup> Tavia Nyong'o, cited in Eric Steinskog, *Afrofuturism and Black Sound Studies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 11.

<sup>95</sup> Steinskog, *Afrofuturism and Black Sound Studies*, 11.

<sup>96</sup> *The Last Angel of History*, directed by John Akomfrah (1996; United Kingdom: Black Audio Films), 25:17, streaming service.

<sup>97</sup> Steinskog, *Afrofuturism and Black Sound Studies*, 11.

If to be black, historically speaking, is to be defined by use value and exchange value, to be viewed more than any other laboring body as pure machinery in the production process, then the struggle against social death and non-being that black radicalism enacts is reflexively a struggle against becoming the commodity, against the commodification of being and the subsequent erasure of the most precious prerequisite for freedom and resistance: namely, subjectivity. As Moten famously puts it: “The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist.”<sup>98</sup> Black performance is the surprising animation, the *freaked-out* awakening of the object. It is the drive to uncover the horrifying injustice that the commodity is not a commodity, but a living body. As such, there is a preeminent need in black art to establish an immediate and authentic relation to sensuous reality that insists on both the bodily existence of the subject and the embodied presence of the art object.

By the same token, universalist, essentialist, and transhistorical concepts that resemble the commodity in their distance from social and material conditions of a historical moment threaten to dehumanize black subjects, primarily because these transcendent proclamations are born out of a white, Euro-American culture that has its productive base in enslavement and exploitation. Moten notes this tension—the inherent antagonism between afrodiasporic people and the Western, theoretical tradition—in his discussion of the avant-garde. On the whole, this resistance to the white tendency to universalize, essentialize, and transhistorize is as a refusal to be cognized, a refusal to be subsumed into that aspect of white intellectualization which is, in effect, a kind of colonization. As Tina Campt puts it:

It’s the refusal to be a subject to a law that refuses to recognize you. It’s defined not by opposition or necessarily resistance, but instead a refusal of the very premises that have

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<sup>98</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 1.

historically negated the lived experience of Blackness as either pathological or exceptional to the logic of white supremacy.<sup>99</sup>

For members of the African diaspora, sonic materialism is, then, not only a refusal of all white—and thereby *given* or *naturalized*—modes of making, sensing, and thinking about sound, it is also a refusal of the racist, capitalist, and colonialist histories that underwrite those modes.

Sonic materialism does more than simply prove one's corporeality in light of these oppressive structures. True to Marx's conception of epistemological and ontological evolution by way of sensuous engagement, sonic materialism actively reshapes traditional notions of the human. By calling attention to the mechanics of sound, along with the experience of hearing, sonic materialism lends itself to epistemologies and ontologies that emphasize malleability, movement, ephemerality, and temporality:

Instead of fixed identities and meanings, stability, nouns, and stasis, the sonic exposes us to action and movement, to fleeting understandings, verbs, and contingent possibilities.

The ear's focus is on process, on objects and events existing in time. A sonic materialism is a temporal materialism, grounded in a contingent encounter of listening.<sup>100</sup>

*The ear's focus is on process.* Here, as Schulze notes, one draws comparisons to Deleuzian or Spinozist notions of thinking and being as unstable and multiple. Such fluid epistemologies and ontologies afford the ability to conceive of lived experience as a loose matrix of fleeting moments of sensory excitation, as the state of sonic flux that one enters (and that enters into the

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<sup>99</sup> Tina M. Campt, cited in Schulze, *Sonic Fiction*, 68.

<sup>100</sup> Cobussen, Schulze, and Meelberg, cited in Schulze, *Sonic Fiction*, 31.

‘one’) while performing or hearing music. Unsurprisingly, these epistemologies and ontologies elude traditional conceptions that frame thinking and being as stable and universal. Instead, they insist on an understanding of lived experience from a bodily, which is to say idiosyncratic, contingent, and located ground. From a more explicitly political standpoint, these idiosyncratic accounts/episodes of lived experience resist, as Marie Thompson puts it, “secular ontological accounts of the human [that] emerge with colonial conquest.” By these accounts, “being ... is equated with the overrepresented ethnoclass of western, bourgeois man, resulting in the obfuscation of other modes and possibilities of being” (“Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies” 267).<sup>101</sup> On this basis, then, sound’s resistance to physiological objectification also carries over into the possibility of cultural and political resistance to colonialist objectification, which is of a fundamentally ontological sort.

### Black Fugitivity

The present need for this kind of ontology is especially apparent when considered alongside what Moten calls *black fugitivity*. This condition describes “a predisposition to break the law” among victims of colonial history who have been forced into white (which is to say nonnative or alien) cultures.<sup>102</sup> As Schulze writes in his description of Moten’s term: “It is almost necessarily so, that deported persons, not familiar, not educated and neither learned, trained, or introduced into all the meticulous details of this alien culture, must get recurrently into conflict with the culture and its arbitrary regulations, laws and etiquettes”.<sup>103</sup> I refer to this issue as ‘present’ for two reasons:

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<sup>101</sup> Marie Thompson, “Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies,” *Parallax* 23, no. 3 (2017): 266–82.

<sup>102</sup> Fred Moten, cited in Schulze, *Sonic Fiction*, 126.

<sup>103</sup> Schulze, *Sonic Fiction*, 126.

first, this study has been largely concerned with tracking the ways in which sonic fiction transgresses or *gets into conflict* with the industrial-dialectal laws of Marxist aesthetics. At this point, it should be clear that this theoretical and cultural conflict is born of a geographical, racial, historical conflict, which brings me to the second reason for my use of ‘present’: it remains the case that afrodiasporic people are still, racially and geographically, afrodiasporic. Such is the consequence of the forced and thorough displacement of an entire population. Thus, in the centuries since the Atlantic slave trade, alienation, or, exclusion from the dominant network of social formations to cultural values, has been and continues to be a major facet of the lived experience of blackness.

This alienation, however, becomes a catalyst for black resistance. As Laboria Cuboniks writes: “The construction of freedom involves not less but more alienation; alienation is the labour of freedom’s construction.”<sup>104</sup> Ironically a rather Hegelian point, it is precisely the experience of estrangement for afrodiasporic people, their confrontation with the *negative*, that makes possible their achievement of a politically positive topos. Specifically, the collective uprootedness of blackness, what Moten and Stefano Harney variously describe as a “being together in homelessness” or an “undercommon appositionality,” is rethought as an opportunity to self-organize, that is, to develop a social organization whose content produces its own form. Jack Halberstam, in his introduction to Moten’s and Harney’s *The Undercommons* (2013), explains this reversal:

Fugitivity is not only escape, “exit” as Paolo Virno might put it, or “exodus” in the terms offered by Hardt and Negri, fugitivity is being separate from settling. It is a being in motion that has learned that “organizations are obstacles to organising ourselves” (The

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<sup>104</sup> Laboria Cuboniks, cited in Schulze, *Sonic Fiction*, 62.

Invisible Committee in *The Coming Insurrection*) and that there are spaces and modalities that exist separate from the logical, logistical, the housed and the positioned. Moten and Harney call this mode a “being together in homelessness” which does not idealize homelessness nor merely metaphorize it. Homelessness is the state of dispossession that we seek and that we embrace.<sup>105</sup>

In other words, black fugitivity becomes black futurity. By Halberstam’s account, built into the estranging reality of afrodiasporic blackness is the capacity to notice the absorptive character of the dominant culture, a capacity that those within this culture lack. This critical distance from the common (white) order is, in turn, a necessary precondition for a spontaneous self-ordering, an interfusion of form and content. Sonic materialism and its performative expression, surplus lyricism, are a praxis for achieving this autogenic arrangement. Sound is, in a way, perpetually autogenic, impossible as its invisible textures are to objectify. Indeed, given sound’s innate temporality, its order can neither be anticipated nor imposed, but only recognized from within its own moment of emergence. It is, as Moten puts it, “anarchic and generative.”<sup>106</sup> Thus, through the experience and production of sound (as content), it becomes possible to sense—no, to *actualize*—a world (as form) that reflects the very freedom of sensibility immanent in sonic experience.

As Eshun writes: “Sound set the terms for looking ... to shape the contours of [some] terra incognita.”<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Jack Halberstam, cited in Schulze, *Sonic Fiction*, 137.

<sup>106</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 44.

<sup>107</sup> Kodwo Eshun and A. Sagar, cited in Schulze, *Sonic Fiction*, 109.

## Conclusion

The ethos of this study would seem to preclude a conclusion. I started this project with a naïvely simple goal: to demonstrate the possibility of reading justice as an image of beauty and beauty as an image of justice. Quite literally, I thought I was going to write the thesis of all theses, one that would show the world (yes, the entire world) that the key to the problem of justice, i.e. the reason humanity has not yet achieved it, is beauty. That's it! If more people were exposed to beauty, real beauty, the kind of beauty that transcends history, the beauty of *nature*, a special beauty that belongs not exclusively to humans but rather to this divine whole of which we are a part, then it would be impossible for humanity to perpetuate injustice, which I took to be a kind of inverse of beauty. The consciousnesses of the people exposed to this beauty would be so magnificently transformed that not only would injustice be easier to spot, it would also be revolting and unbearable. Encountering the perfect tree, the mightiest tree in the forest that displayed the power of organic matter, or just a meek tree that evoked something like humility, would spin the subject's head around and force her to realize that *balance, harmony, unity* are possible in lived experience and can afford a certain kind of elevated, happier existence. Sheesh!

Given my lefty leanings, I also thought, more specifically, that this harmony which the subject encounters in a beautiful image would promote a kind of justice of fairness, which the doctrine of Marxism (communism is basically fairness, right?) could illuminate. Although I hadn't read Elaine Scarry when I conceived my thesis, I later realized that my thinking closely converged with her line of thought in *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999). There, she comments on beauty's tendency to reproduce itself or to promote copies of itself either the mighty tree or the meek one is so compelling in its expression of wholeness or universality that I *must* share it with

someone, a friend, who in turn shares it with her friend, and so on and so forth until everyone has seen the tree or some version of it, and we all realize that we exist in a network that by nature demands concern for the other, a network that is incompatible with private property and the spirit of rugged individualism.<sup>108</sup> Scarry calls this phenomenon “radical decentering,” and it refers to a momentary feeling of ego-loss and lateral awareness one experiences when she encounters a beautiful image.<sup>109</sup> So, I was fairly confident that I could get from trees to Marx.

At this point I am sure that anyone who has any familiarity with either aesthetics or with Marxism is already moaning or vomiting. After beginning my research, I soon learned that not only were these ideas wildly unoriginal (see: the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, Hume, Schiller, and many others),<sup>110</sup> but they were also, more alarmingly, a part of the problem that I was trying to solve. I had fallen into the ravenous and plushy snares of *bourgeois idealism*. In an attempt to discover or create solidarity among people, I turned to the mysticism of aesthetic artefacts like paintings or pieces of music or tree, and, in so doing, I twisted the whole pursuit of justice into something like the commodity form. But I had not yet learned about the commodity form, which would provide a theoretical framework for understanding my desire to resolve concrete problems (injustice, disunity, etc.) through abstract means (beauty). I had not yet learned about the distinction between materialism and idealism, and with that the analytical framework of historical materialism, which would explain my thoughts about beauty, as well as those of Shaftesbury, Hume, Schiller, and many others, as historically conditioned products of the bourgeois epoch, an epoch characterized by a contradiction between theoretical equality and actual inequality.

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<sup>108</sup> Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>110</sup> Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 31-69.

What I have tried to show is the historicity of, first, the *character* of art or ‘the aesthetic.’ By character I mean art’s formal characteristics, its rhetorical orientation, its way of projecting its designs upon the reader/viewer, its way or style of rendering its social conditions of being into itself. In other words, I have tried to show how the art forms within a given historical moment internalize the felt freedoms and limitations of that moment. Second, I have tried to show the historicity of the *effect* of art or ‘the aesthetic.’ By effect I mean art’s potential to either awaken revolutionary impulses or maintain the status quo. Finally, I have tried to show the historicity of *ideas* about the character and effect of art or ‘the aesthetic.’ By ideas I mean the philosophical disposition toward art forms within a given historical moment, the claims made by those of a specific economic, but also geographical and racial, history about what kinds of works are emancipatory and why or how they are emancipatory.

This is to say that in the realm of Marxist aesthetics, more so than in other realms of theoretical inquiry, time (history) is really going to contort ideas, including those presented in this study, in unpredictable ways, so there is no lasting way to ‘conclude.’ Nevertheless, I have tried to signal, albeit through a limited synopsis of the long history of Marxist aesthetics and a brief investigation into the equally historical genre of sonic fiction, a new trajectory by which we can better understand the poem, the painting, the musical composition, as well as our sense of pleasure in the encounter, as indelibly rooted in, but not limited to, the histories of economics, geography, race, and human sensibility.

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