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# Marx and Art: Use, Value, Poetry

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**Abstract:**

Despite Karl Marx's overwhelming focus on economics and politics – culminating in *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* – his philosophy has inspired an array of Marxist or Marxian theories regarding the arts. Yet, the key tenet of these theories has not been Marx's radical emphasis on the foundational role of production in human subjectivity. Marxist theories of art have, generally speaking, either examined the arts' capacity for signifying social relations and class struggle – as seen in many a Marxists' penchant for realism – or they have seen the arts as little more than aesthetic legitimations of ruling class ideology, a view which, in its most positive manifestation, can be found in the experimental and modernist tendency to undermine the morals and mores of the bourgeoisie by committed artists. Neither of these approaches, at any rate, sees art as a form and outcome of production in itself. In this article, I wish to present a Marxian theory of art, based on Marx's entire oeuvre, from his earliest journalistic writings to *Capital*, which presents art as neither an aesthetic mimesis nor an ideological alibi of production. I would like to propose that for Marx art was, first and foremost, a use-value produced by concrete human labour.

**Keywords:** art, Marx, value, use, labour

## Art – What Is It Good For?

In what must be one of the more convoluted policy statements spouted by a contemporary government officialdom, the United Kingdom's national body for funding and promoting the arts in England, Arts Council England, declares on its website:

The value of arts and culture to people and society outlines the existing evidence on the contemporary impact of arts and culture on our economy, health and wellbeing, society and education.<sup>1</sup>

It would require a good degree of fortitude and perseverance to untangle the meaning of this brazenly overwritten sentence. Note, for instance, the sheer opacity of the verb “outline” in denoting the nature or substance of the relationship between “the value of arts” and “impact of arts”. This and other linguistic oddities of the statement – such as the tautological formulation of saying that something in society outlines something in, yes, society – indicate that this sentence, as with other policy and politician-spoken statements of our era, is an exemplar in the craft of constructing elaborate verbal utterances without saying much at all.

However, if an unambiguous communication of its authors' understanding of the value of art is not one of the functions of this statement – an understanding which, at any rate, may be lacking in the first place – the combination of important-sounding nouns (“people,” “society,” “health,” and “education”) does convey the authors' general belief in the significance of art. The meaning of saying that the value of something *outlines* the evidence on the impact of that thing is utterly mysterious to me; but the desire of the speakers of this utterance to be seen to have something publicly and socially important to say on the topic is not so opaque. All modern democratic governments – and anti- or pre-modern autocrats too, for that matter – often wish to be seen to care about the value of art, even if articulating the reasons behind this desire is an insurmountable challenge for them, or at least for the English government.

The purpose of this essay is not to mock politicians' – or, most probably, a poorly-paid and overworked lower arts administrator's – ineptitude with written language. Indeed, semantic ambiguity and incomprehensibility may be a

requirement of the genre of contemporary political communication, freeing the speaker from a difficult – and assessable – commitment to the message or promise of the statements made. At any rate, I do not wish to dwell any further on Arts Council England's inability or unwillingness to articulate a view apropos of the question of the value of the arts. What I instead wish to focus on is the challenge of formulating a perspective regarding the value of art beyond alluding to a vague belief in the general "impact" of art on society and on societal motifs such as "health" and "education."

And, importantly, this challenge is not at all unique to politicians and their copywriters. In the preface to a series of essays on the theme of artistic value published in *Arts21 Magazine*, the author has described both "the relationship between art and money, and ... the value of art in our individual lives" as "deeply complicated."<sup>2</sup> In an opinion piece published in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, the author Toni Hassan chides the Australian politicians whose laudable acknowledgment of the value of the arts – as seen in public statements uncannily similar to those of Arts Council England – have "spruiked the economic benefits of the arts but said little about the delivery costs."<sup>3</sup> Even a scholar of marketing and economics – who should, one would assume, be rather *au fait* at measuring the value and costs of things – such as Kim Lehman of Tasmanian School of Business and Economics isn't quite sure how to address this dilemma.<sup>4</sup> After distinguishing between the instrumental and intrinsic values or benefits of art, Lehman confuses the two terms by saying that both types of value must have discernible economic expressions if they are to be measurable and understandable. He claims that an example of the instrumental value of art may be seen in a public visual arts project which, in "an economically depressed region" could result in "increasing local employment;" but his example of the intrinsic value of art is also economic – he cites an instance of the evaluation of intrinsic value in performing arts companies' desire to gauge audience satisfaction because the companies' "revenue streams rely on a paying audience, and indeed one that returns for future performances." One may forgive Lehman's preoccupation with all things financial as an aspect of his research expertise, but his inability to truly differentiate between an instrumental and an intrinsic value of art – reducing both to the milieu of finance, capital and consumption – results in him failing to provide an answer to the question of art's value. He ends his piece by wondering if the true value of art can at all be discussed – by asking rhetorically, "How do you measure intellectual stimulation? Emotional engagement?" – before concluding that perhaps "the arts will continue to be valued more for its role

as a driver of economic development than as a cure for the soul – or, worse still, not valued at all.”

I must admit, from the outset, that the purpose of my own essay is not to propose a scientific method for measuring the value of art. Such a quixotic task would require that I assign to art only an instrumental value, something that, as mentioned above, even a finance-driven economist is not prepared to do. Nor do I wish to make a case for art as simply “a cure for the soul,” despite the fact that I would like to think of myself as a rather *soulful* practicing artist, and that, as I will discuss later, I have no issue with acknowledging catharsis as one of the uses of art. What I instead wish to do is to approach the question of the value of art – and, indeed, the question of the very definition, nature and capacity of art, or a philosophy of art – from a perspective occasioned by the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of Karl Marx’s *Capital, Volume I*.

Marx, perhaps the most famous and also most infamous theorist of value and production, has been abundantly praised and criticised for his theories regarding both the material or economic and the ideological or mental dimensions of our modern capitalist world. But can he also provide us with a theory of art, one which may help us better understand, reframe and, perhaps even – after Marx’s own revolutionary ideals – transform the question of the value of art?

There is, of course, nothing new in considering art from a Marxian or Marxist perspective. As we shall see, despite his frankly undeserved reputation as an uncompromising *economic determinist*, Marx’s philosophy is heavily conversant with the question of art, even if the philosopher did not produce a sustained, stand-alone study of the artistic phenomenon. His views on art – as scattered across his many writings and publications, and as ascertained by Marxist scholars after his own life – have resulted in entire schools of artistic theorisation, such as the Marxist literary theory associated with the likes of Pierre Macherey and Terry Eagleton. It is my view, however, that a fresh consideration of Marx’s own published writings, from his earliest editorials in the newspaper *Rheinische Zeitung* to the intricate theorising of *Capital*, can provide us with a theory of art which is capable of both addressing the question of artistic value as well as offering a powerful and radical philosophy of art, one which does not exhibit what I see as the aporia of the existing Marxist theories of art.

In what I may describe, however simplistically, as a realist Marxist theory of art, one may find – in the work of theorists such as György Lukács – art seen as a medium capable of representing an external truth (e.g. the conditions of work in the

modern society) but lacking its own truthfulness. Or, put differently, it can be said that such a conception of art reduces art to the status of representing – but not itself being – social reality. On the other hand, the type of Marxist literary or artistic theory primarily concerned with the non-material or the ideological – which, as noted previously, can be seen in the work of Macherey and Eagleton – depicts art as an actual participant in the reality of ideology; and yet such a depiction can result in art becoming almost irreversibly detached from the milieu of material artistic production and aesthetic labour. Put differently, the view of art as something made up of ideas and attitudes towards ideology does not necessarily help with understanding the processes involved in the creation of art and the values that may be immanent to such acts of creation.

I believe, in short, that the dominant Marxian approaches to the question of art have either reduced art to a secondary mimetic role vis-à-vis the socio-economic, or they have extracted and divorced art from the socio-economic world of labour and production. To put things somewhat reductively, according to both these approaches art has little more than instrumental value. But I believe that Marx's own views on art, irrespective of his influential future interlocutors' interventions, proposes a far more sophisticated and startling theory of art. I would like to argue that Marx's theory of production, and his view of the indispensable centrality of use-value production in labour, provides us with a theory of artistic value which neither assigns to the work of art an entirely metaphysical, undefinable intrinsic value, nor reduces the work to a monetised exchange-value. What I aim to outline in this essay is the contour of an understanding of the work of art as, indeed, the *work* of producing *intrinsic use-value* through work and concrete, definable human labour.

## Art and Value before Marx

I would like to begin by sketching an outline of some of the key theories of art and of artistic value prior to Marx. This will, I hope, help with both grounding Marx's approach and discoveries in the works of philosophers which directly influenced him – Marx's fellow-German near contemporary G. W. F. Hegel, most notably – and also set the parameters of the specific discussion in the terms proposed by the tradition of Western philosophy, which, despite Marx's non-philosophical political and economic commitments and interests, is arguably the first and foremost context for the manifestation of his own ideas.

Whilst so much of the discussions of the value of art in our contemporary late capitalist world is almost entirely focused on the monetary instrumental value of art – either to do with funding for the arts, artists pay, or art as either investment or as commodity – in much of the canon of Western philosophy the dominant discussions of art have been premised upon the recognition, either appreciative or critical, of the intrinsic and hence non-instrumental value or qualities of art. This is not to say that Western thinkers have all viewed art as intrinsically *useful* in the common understanding of the word – that is, as something with ostensibly beneficial qualia – but that their perspectives have depicted the value of art (be it a positive or a negative value) as a quality inherent or intrinsic to the work's immanent manifestation – or its creation – and not to its socio-cultural evaluation.

Indeed, in what can be easily described as the first serious and perhaps most foundational discussion of art in Western philosophy – Book X of Plato's *Republic* – art is presented as very much useless and also valueless precisely because it is, according to Plato, devoid of an instrumental value. After arguing that all art is more or less a genus of representation, and that all representation is quite far removed from reality, Plato asserts that the supreme literary creator of the ancient Hellenic world, Homer, would not be able to “explain medicine or any similar skilled activity to us” even if he is able to “imitate doctors’ talk” in his poetry.<sup>5</sup> This allows Plato to advance that the poet, therefore, has no “practical skill” and can do “no public service.”<sup>6</sup> To substantiate this potentially scandalous view of a much-loved poet, Plato argues that the key reason for the artist's inability to perform an ostensibly beneficial task in the society is that, in representing objects such as the horse's bit and bridle or a human subject such as the harness-maker, the artist displays, in addition to an ignorance apropos of the practical skill required for making the bit and bridle, no knowledge of how to *use* the represented objects because “only a horseman [...] knows how to use them.”<sup>7</sup> This brings Plato to conclude, apropos of this part of his observation on the arts, that “the artist knows little or nothing about the subjects he represents and that his art is something that has no serious value.”<sup>8</sup>

Before trying to unravel what Plato means by *serious value* – something that I believe is actually quite different to an instrumental value – let us note that he has limited his conception of use to the sphere of professional practice and that he does not see it connected, as Marx will later discover, to the sphere of general human needs. The bridle or the flute (one of Plato's other famous examples) are only useful to the horseman and to the flutist, and it is therefore only these ascribed users who can truly know the value of the object, not the artists who paint pictures or write

poems about bridled horses and flutes and also, interestingly, nor the producers of the bridle and the flute, the harness-maker or the flute-maker. In other words, for Plato, use is very much conflated with consumption and also with an instrumental social benefit. The supposed resulting uselessness of art, however, is not Plato's major concern with art. Later in Book X of the *Republic*, he argues that art, whilst benefit-less and useless, is not entirely ineffective, for it appeals to an "inferior" dimension of the human subject which the philosopher would "call irrational and lazy and cowardly."<sup>9</sup> This claim leads to Plato's "gravest charge against poetry," his accusing poetry – and, by extension, all art – of having "a terrible power to corrupt even the best characters" as it draws us (the consumers or, in Plato's sense, users of poetry and art) into a vortex of sinister, excessive emotionality – "the poet gratifies and indulges the natural instinct to give full vent to our sorrows" and diverts us from "the interests of our own welfare and happiness."<sup>10</sup>

What are we to make of the *terrible power* of art if we are to also acknowledge its uselessness and valuelessness? Can't such a power be seen as a kind of value – in so far as both power and value denote a capacity or the means for developing a capacity – or can't such a destructive power actually have its uses (against, say, an enemy)? Detecting the creeping emergence of a contradiction in his polemic against art, Plato ends this discourse by acknowledging somewhat begrudgingly, albeit unambiguously, that there are a few instances in which poetry may be seen to have an instrumental potential – "hymns to the gods and paeans in praise of good men"<sup>11</sup> – and that he would be open to hearing poetry's defenders argue that poetry "brings lasting benefits to human life and human society."<sup>12</sup> Plato claims, however sincerely, that he "shall be glad if [art and/or poetry] proves to have a real value," although, until such a time as this proof has been offered – and accepted by the hard-nosed philosopher – he will insist that "poetry has no serious value or claim to truth."<sup>13</sup>

We can now understand what Plato means by *real* or *serious value* when it comes to art and poetry. Instrumentally beneficial artistic products – such as religious songs and moral tales – may be allowed in Plato's ideal society despite art's generally and/or mostly harmful capacity, but whatever (supposedly minor and ephemeral) benefits are to be accrued socially from such allowance, these are not real or serious values. To bring *lasting* benefits to society, art must make *a claim to truth* instead of either representing people and things (doctors, bits and bridles, etc.) or indulging in overt, obsessive sentimentality and aestheticised pathology. Plato does not elaborate on how art may make a claim to truth, or what genus of truth would be considered artistic, but it seems clear that for him the real and serious

value of art would be an intrinsic value, because any claim to truth is entirely immanent to the claim itself or, in this case, to the work of art, prior to the societal and extrinsic instrumentalisation of the truths to which the work has claimed. Put differently, for Plato, art's value – illusive, rare and perhaps impossible as it may be – can be established if and when art is shown to possess not power *per se* but the power to produce truths and knowledge *à la* science and perhaps philosophy itself.

Plato's student and the next major Western philosopher to offer a significant theory of art and of artistic value, Aristotle, is much less interested in making a case for the truthfulness of art than in arguing that the very intrinsic artistic powers which Plato found so terrible – art's commanding appeal to emotion as opposed to reason – are in fact useful. Aristotle writes, in the *Poetics*, that, despite Plato's renunciation of supposedly valueless artistic representations, the most basic unit or *technē* of representation, imitation, is something that "comes naturally to human beings from childhood" and so does "the universal pleasure in imitations."<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, this pleasure is not an end in itself, but the means for us "to understand and work out"<sup>15</sup> the subject or the real world signified or imitated in the work of art. Art, then, can be said to have the use of providing us with an accessible, aesthetic medium for coming to terms with the world. Aristotle also, famously, proposes that art – or, more specifically, tragic drama – has the capacity for "effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions" in an audience;<sup>16</sup> and that the art of poetry even possesses the capacity to be "more philosophical and more serious" than the work of a historian because the poet's function is not to simply "say what *has* happened, but to say the kind of thing that *would* happen."<sup>17</sup>

From a contemporary perspective, the theme of *the purification of undesirable emotions* or catharsis may be best approached via a psychoanalytic prism. But, for the purposes of setting the context for Marx's interventions in the Western philosophy of art, I'd like to emphasise that Aristotle's take on imitation, whatever the structure of its psycho-semantic function may be, grants art a psychological use and an intrinsic value (with an instrumental capacity) denied to it by Plato. For Aristotle, imitation is an inalienable aspect of the nature of our species, and participation in it has universalising consequences, qualities which, as we shall see, Marx will find in the act of production. Furthermore, for Aristotle, art has the power to counter the feelings of *distress* – which may be seen to anticipate Marx's *alienation* – engendered by the fearsomeness of our reality. When discussing the universal pleasure of artistic imitation, Aristotle proposes that: "we take delight in viewing the most accurate possible images of objects which in themselves cause distress when we see them



(e.g. the shapes of the lowest species of animals [by which Aristotle most probably means spiders, snakes and scorpions], and corpses).”<sup>18</sup> As such, art has the value of helping us overcome the terror and abjection aroused by what seems absolutely alien to us, and it can be valued for its capacity to produce delight in place of fear in the human subject.

The final philosopher whose theory of art I’d like to briefly note prior to exploring Marx’s thoughts on art, is a thinker who responded to Plato’s and Aristotle’s foundational theories of art and who also directly influenced Marx’s philosophy. In his *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel considers and finds insufficient both the Platonic view – which, by presenting art as a “the purely formal imitation of what we find given [...] can bring to the birth only *tricks* and not *works* of art”<sup>19</sup> – and also the Aristotelian defence of imitation, because “the doctrine of the purification of passion suffers indeed under the same defect”<sup>20</sup> as the Platonic position: in both cases “the purpose of art” has been “limited” to that of “utility” – or that of a pure instrument – and “its conception is rooted in something else, to which it is a *means*.”<sup>21</sup> Hegel’s own project consists of a theory of artistic value which views art as *an end in itself*, and I believe, his most important contribution in this regard is to propose that art possesses a genuinely intrinsic value. Hegel, in other words, proposes that art has a *real and serious value* vis-à-vis Plato’s injunction. And, also importantly, Hegel argues that art satisfies human needs. Such needs are, for Hegel, “the higher needs”<sup>22</sup> and their satisfaction in a work of art produces “spiritual value.”<sup>23</sup>

It is important not to conflate Hegel’s view of art as a capacity for producing *spiritual value* with Plato’s (minimal) interest in religious cultural products such as religious hymns. For Hegel, even an explicitly spiritual art should not be seen to “have value as a useful instrument in the realisation of an end having substantive importance *outside* the sphere of art,”<sup>24</sup> such as moral or religious education. Art should instead be seen to have “the vocation of revealing *the truth* in the form of sensuous artistic shape” and “having its purpose in itself.”<sup>25</sup> So, unlike Aristotle but in agreement with Plato, Hegel sees *truth* as a key criterion to which art may aspire. However, unlike Plato, he does not see the relationship between art and truth as *the making of a claim* but as *a revelation*, suggesting that truth for Hegel is a pre-existing generality – *the truth* – and not a singularity to which every specific work of art has to make a fresh claim. Also importantly, he emphatically does not see art’s crucial capacity for the satisfaction of spiritual needs as a use, but as *a vocation*. I find it a little difficult to quite understand what Hegel means by this term, and one may have to resort to properly metaphysical themes – *destiny*, *calling*, etc. – to distinguish a

vocation from a profession or from what Hegel derides, earlier in his celebrated lecture, as mere “formal activity in accordance with given determinations.”<sup>26</sup> As such, one can easily anticipate the materialist (and strongly atheist) Marx’s misgivings about Hegel’s description of art, despite the very well-known influence that the older German thinker exerted on a young Marx. But it is important to emphasise that, despite Hegel’s unwillingness to see usefulness as anything other than instrumentality, and his determination to see art as having almost a purely transcendent orientation, his connection of art’s value with the satisfaction of human needs, and his emphasis on the intrinsic value of art, are key to understanding Marx’s own approach to both art and, more generally, to the questions of labour and production.

### The Intrinsic Freedom of Writing

Karl Marx was as much an heir to the philosophical traditions of the West as he was a heretic apropos of these very traditions. His views of art are both expressed in the terms proposed by earlier philosophers – in Hegelian dialectics, most notably, but also in the Aristotelian defence of the naturalness of art – and are also deeply at odds with the intentions, provenances and consequences of these terms. In keeping with the well-known – albeit, in some ways, problematic – naming of Marx’s philosophy as *dialectical materialism*, one could say that Marx’s theory of art reconciles a Hegelian dialectical view of art (art as an object with inherent, non-social value) with his own potent take on materialism, a materialism not merely of atheism and scientific rigour, but one premised on the recognition of the foundational role of labour and production in all human phenomenon.

This approach to art is, to my mind, one of the most challenging but rewarding theories of art as yet proposed by a philosopher. It is challenging because it breaks both with our contemporary capitalist, instrumentalist views of art – that is, our view of art as, first and foremost, either a commercial or ideological value – and also with our Romantic, metaphysical notions of art which present the work as a quasi-mystical spiritual negation of the materiality of human life. According to my reading of Marx, art can be seen as the condition which possesses both the power for producing capacities or uses that are not reducible to the money-form, and it is also, at the same time, the product of the labour of real people – and definitely not the result of inspiration courtesy of abstract spirits, muses, cryptic unconscious urges,

and the like – working in societies dominated, but never entirely possessed, by the social relations and ideologies.

The *genius* of Marx – if I may use the term without allusions to the cults of aestheticism or Romanticism – can be seen in his ability to show that these two qualities are not contradictory but that they are in fact absolutely complimentary and even symbiotic: art's infinite or indefinite uses exist precisely because they spring from material human labour which, as *concrete* labour – prior to its reification to homogenous *abstract* labour for the purposes of exchange and commodification – seeks to produce nothing other than pure usefulness, i.e. the satisfaction of humanity's most basic needs. Art, therefore, is absolutely essential, useful and valuable, and it is also absolutely resistant to commodity fetishism and an exchange economy. According to my reading of Marx's philosophy of art, he attempts the highly challenging but supremely radical task of showing that art has an *intrinsic use-value*, and arguing that this value, whilst not determined by the (hugely instrumentalising) milieu of exchange-value commodification, is still very much based in our drive to satisfy the very real and serious needs of our species through finite and socially situated human labour.

Whilst the discovery of the two-fold nature of a product's value – the division between use-value and exchange-value – is something that Marx does not elucidate explicitly until *Capital*, and a full account of a theory of art as *produced non-instrumental use-value* is something that will develop alongside Marx's gradual, life-long development as one of the most important and original thinkers of the modern world, his belief in (the Hegelian concept of) art as non-instrumental value, as present in Marx's work from very early on, is already conversant and unsettled by the questions of labour, commerce and use-value. In an editorial published in 1842 in response to the debate about press freedom in *Rheinische Zeitung* – the liberal progressive newspaper which Marx edited until the publication's closure by Prussian government censors in 1843 – Marx's argument may at first appear very much like a Hegelian celebration of the value of writing as something *higher* than that of any manual metier; but it is also evident that Marx does recognise that this evaluation is not based on a concrete difference between the modes of mental (e.g. artistic and literary) as opposed to physical production, but dependent on an abstract quasi-religious *belief* in the superiority of art's intrinsic value, and hence in the categorical need for the maintenance of press freedom.

The young Marx, after having tried his hands in literary writing – having written poems, fiction and drama – and having failed to secure a position as a philosopher at

a university due to his political leanings, has been employed to edit the liberal, anti-authoritarian publication and advance the agendas of the progressive Prussian intellectuals of this era. It should not surprise us then that he champions free speech, one of the key ideals of the highly Enlightened German Idealists. But the manner of Marx's early discourse, if not its intentions, already hints at the thinker's emerging understanding of both the dynamics of capitalism and the role of the writer as a producer or a worker, themes that are almost entirely absent from the bourgeois liberal discourses of Marx's immediate social and intellectual milieu. The young liberal Marx is clearly a believer in the absolute generality and essentiality of freedom – "freedom of trade, freedom of property, of conscience, of the press, of the courts, are all *species* of the same genus, of *freedom without any specific name*"<sup>27</sup> – and attempts to defend press freedom by showing the absurdity of the Prussian rulers' penchant for, on the hand, accepting free trade and, on the other hand, suppressing free speech:

One could also [put the question of freedom] the other way round and call freedom of trade merely *a variety of freedom of the press*. Do craftsmen work only with hands and legs and not with the brain as well? Is the language of words the only language of thought? Is not the language of the mechanic through the steam-engine easily perceptible to my ear, is not the language of the bed manufacturer very obvious to my back, that of the cook comprehensible to my stomach? Is it not a contradiction that all these varieties of freedom of the press are permitted, the sole exception being the one that speaks to my intellect through the medium of the printer's ink?<sup>28</sup>

Marx's attempt to equate a writer's freedom to do his/her job with another producer's freedom to do likewise, with the aim of showing the irrationality of suppressing a writer's freedom through censorship, may be seen as a mostly rhetorical and perhaps far-fetched device used for proving an argument; but one must not gloss over the deeply non-Hegelian implications of Marx's approach. As mentioned before, key to Hegel's view that art possesses, first and foremost, a spiritual value is the assumption that art is not *formal or mechanical activity in accordance with given determinations*. But if as Marx has shown, the engine operator, the bed-maker and the chef also produce aesthetico-linguist objects, then does it not follow that the writer too produces *useful* objects *à la* the bed-maker and the chef? If, as Marx would have it, manual workers do not "work only with hands and legs and [...] with

the brain as well”, then can’t it also be said that writers and mental workers do not only work with the brain but use hands and legs as well?

Perhaps aware of the deeply anti-spiritual, anti-Idealist direction that his argument has taken, the young Hegelian Marx asserts, immediately after the above-quoted passage, a belief in “the nobility of [the] nature” of journalism and the press, and warns against the press “degrad[ing] itself to the level of trade.”<sup>29</sup> However, even here, Marx does not shy away from stating that this degradation is not the consequence of a *high* spiritual mental activity being brought down to the lower level of *low* physical production – the degradation occurs when mental activity is reduced to a merely *commercial* activity. Marx is already breaking with the commonly accepted teleology of commodity-value production, the dominant economic ideology of the same bourgeois intellectuals and progressives with whom he has identified thus far in his life, when he writes: “The writer, of course, must earn in order to be able to live and write, but he must by no means live and write to earn.”<sup>30</sup> He repeats – and clearly sincerely agrees with – the Hegelian injunction against instrumentalisation, but he is also suspecting that the specifically Hegelian appraisal of the intrinsic value of art may be akin to a religious piety:

The writer does not at all look on his work as a *means*. It is an *end in itself*, it is so little a means for him himself and others that, if need be, he sacrifices *his* existence to *its* existence. He is, in another way, like the preacher of religion who adopts the principle: “Obey God rather than man,” including under man himself with his human needs and desires. On the other hand, what if a tailor from whom I had ordered a Parisian frock-coat were to come and bring me a Roman toga on the ground that it was more in keeping with the eternal law of beauty!<sup>31</sup>

There is much that can be said about the above passage, and one can note the young Marx’s self-identification as a bourgeois consumer (of a Parisian frock-coat, of all things) prior to his losing his paid job as a journalist and his move to France where he becomes conversant with, among other things, revolutionary socialism and communism and begins his pivotal life-long collaboration with the exceptionally insightful young labour theorist, Friedrich Engels. What is important to note, in the context of our discussion, is Marx’s understanding that, whilst art may have an intrinsic value similar to a religious vocation, it lacks an actual use only in so far as it can’t be *ordered* from a producer. The problem with the Roman toga is not

only that it has artistic pretensions beyond the tangible instrumental value of a modern coat, but that in the process of a consumer's ordering of a product from a producer, *the eternal law of beauty* has been reified and reduced into an object with only an exchange-value. However, how is art supposed to resist such *degradation* if it is, unlike religion (which is, finally, the work of god) the work of men? The young Marx is not able to provide an answer to this question yet.

## Art, Speculation and Ideology

I am, admittedly, reading a mature Marx's theories of value into his earlier work, but I don't at all feel that by doing so I am misrepresenting the direction and tendencies of his thought, since the genesis of the mature Marx's theories are not so temporally removed from the younger Marx's career. Indeed, it is almost immediately after leaving Rhineland, and still in a relatively early stage of his intellectual development, that Marx openly, and often with open hostility, rejects the Hegelian Idealism of his youth, and starts to propose an explicitly materialist philosophy that is absolutely antagonistic to bourgeois liberalism. In his first major collaborations with Engels, *The Holy Family* (1844) and *The German Ideology* (1845), Marx forcefully attacks many of the key Hegelian intellectuals, including Max Stirner, Bruno Bauer, and their disciples, such as a Prussian soldier called Franz Zychlin von Zychlinski who, under the pseudonym Szeliga, had written a rather effusive appreciation of a popular French novel of the period by Eugène Sue.

Marx lambasts what he sees as the Hegelians' untenably speculative and abstract – and, in short, non-materialist – understanding of art and literature, by noting that Szeliga's view of the literary work depends upon a belief that the work is a manifestation of the theme of *mystery*. This perspective is not only due to the title of Sue's novel – *The Mysteries of Paris* – but also due to the Hegelian view of art as *spiritual revelation*. As quoted by Marx in *The Holy Family*, a garish Parisian ballroom scene in the novel is interpreted by Szeliga as “the miracle of the divine presence in the breast of man, especially when beauty and grace uphold the conviction that we are in the immediate proximity of ideals.”<sup>32</sup> Marx is quick to mock Szeliga's rather fanciful reading – and calls the Hegelian an “inexperienced, credulous *Critical country parson!*”<sup>33</sup> – but, despite the scathing tone of Marx's attacks on his former fellow-Hegelians, this condemnation is not personal and is in fact based on a

patiently developed argument against some of the key assumption of the Hegelian philosophy or what Marx calls “*speculative Hegelian construction*.”<sup>34</sup>

According to Marx, key elements of the Hegelian philosophy – among which we may include Hegel’s belief in the non-utilitarian value of art qua the satisfaction of a spiritual need – are based on a system of abstraction or speculation that, in trying to understand the world and its profane realities, commits the error of imposing an *essential* configuration over *substantial* corporeality. The practitioner of such a philosophy, having concocted a purely abstract mental image or ideal from encounters with the tangible components of the world – having posited “the general idea ‘Fruit’” for example, as “the *true* essence of the pear, the apple, etc.”<sup>35</sup> – is then forced to move in “a speculative, mystical fashion”<sup>36</sup> in accounting for the concrete and diverse actualities of the world. Such thinkers come to think that fruits “have a higher mystic significance, which are grown out of the ether of your brain and not out of the material earth.”<sup>37</sup> And it is this systemic ignorance apropos of the material which marks the Hegelian literary critic Szeliga as *credulous* and *inexperienced*. Szeliga has imposed his own essential trope or general idea of mystery on the topics and aesthetics of the novel, mistaking *The Mysteries of Paris* for a mystical and altogether uplifting account of man’s moral and spiritual journey, instead of seeing it, as Marx does, as an account of an aristocratic protagonist’s duplicitous and self-serving trickery and his ability or privilege to disguise himself as a commoner and, by so doing, gain “entry into the lower sections of society” so that he can later claim “how extraordinarily interesting he finds himself in the various situation.”<sup>38</sup>

Marx, in short, sees ruling class vanity and egoism in the discourse of a literary work that the high-minded, progressive Hegelians find ethical or spiritual. It would be tempting to see Marx’s shift of focus away from the liberal preoccupations of the German progressives towards socialist concerns with class as occasioned by his move to the radical milieu of French activism and also his growing awareness and study of English economic theory, and it would be as equally convenient to see Marx’s irreversible move in a socialist direction in mid 1840s as a consequence of the revolutionary zeitgeist which anticipated the 1848 European revolutions, political conflicts which pitted not only the bourgeois liberals against the conservative nobility, but also brought the bourgeoisie in direct conflict with the proletariat. However, Marx’s own claim would be that, irrespective of one’s political affiliations – Marx’s increasingly uncompromising socialism *vs.* the Hegelians’ increasingly commonplace liberalism – there is something inherently untenable, irrational and,

finally, *ideological* about the Hegelian view of art qua something that has a non-instrumental albeit moral or spiritual value.

Marx's sensational discovery of modern ideology in *The German Ideology*, which, as is well-known, could be said to mark his final *epistemological break* with Hegelian philosophy, has been too extensively written about by the recent proponents of Western Marxism to require explanation here. For the purposes of our mapping and investigation of Marx's philosophy of art, it is important to point out that in *The German Ideology*, alongside the continuation of his philosophical disparagement of individual Hegelians, he and Engels are now proposing an alternative and economic-materialist theory of historical progress, one which accounts not only for why liberal bourgeois intellectuals make the laughable and mistaken assumptions exposed and lampooned in *The Holy Family*, but also strives to locate the material origins and social locality of the class for which these intellectuals speak. Marx and Engels' seminal, dramatic identification of the modern upper middle-classes or the bourgeoisie as the ruling class of the modern world, and the shift of the target of the revolutionaries' ire from conservative *ancien régime* nobility and clergy towards the industrial and financial bourgeoisie, is articulated both in a class theory, founded on an analysis of the modes and relations of physical and monetised production (such as manufacture, property ownership, agriculture, etc.) and also in a theory of the modes and relations of *mental and ideological production* which includes, among other things, what could be seen as an understanding of art as a feature or outcome of ruling class ideology.

Indeed, it would not be difficult to say that, based on a somewhat superficial reading of *The German Ideology*, Marx, who once had rather exultant things to say about the arts – who, as a would-be young Prussian poet, had claimed that one lives and earns to write and not the other way around, and that one should be ready to forfeit one's existence for art – is now, as a would-be internationalist revolutionary who will soon be drawn to the world of real, violent anti-governmental agitation and political activity, has come to question the value and the usefulness of art. If, as he and Engels now famously claim, “the ideas of ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force”<sup>39</sup> then can't it be said that artistic production, as a species of intellectual production, is determined or at least enlisted by ruling class forces, and that it has no real or serious intrinsic value for a position opposed to the power of the ruling class? In support of such a view – which more than brings to mind Plato's injunction against the arts – we may cite Marx and Engels' continued



preoccupation with the hapless Hegelians in *The German Ideology*. Here, they ridicule the “lofty moral postulate”<sup>40</sup> of one of the chief Hegelian public intellectuals, Max Stirner, for whom “creative activity is [...] only a paraphrase of speculative reflection or pure essence.”<sup>41</sup> Is *creative activity* as such not the problem, then, if it is so easily coopted in the faulty speculative, moralist enterprise of a bourgeois intellectual? And does Marx and Engels’s view, further on in the book, that it is the former aristocratic ruling classes’ “direct, naïve outlook on life which finds expression in memoirs, poems, novels, etc.”<sup>42</sup>, not an unambiguous dismissal of so many genres of literature as mere *expressions* of a ruling class ideology?

I believe that such a reading of Marx is almost entirely mistaken, and that Marx is not at all deriding art qua art (or art as intrinsic value) but elucidating art’s crass ideological instrumentalisations, and finally denouncing the Hegelians (and perhaps Hegel himself) for their inability to offer a genuinely non-instrumental theory of artistic value. Whilst Marx by mid 1840s has come to reject the fanciful, Idealist views of art, he has not come to do so as a political militant suspicious of the arts and their potential guilt of collusion with repressive ideologies. He has instead developed, in concert with his attacks on liberalism and his exposition of bourgeois liberals’ material economic interests, a powerful theory of labour and production, and has come to not criticise the proponents of *creative activity* per se but to criticise those who see creative activity as a metaphysical, mystical enterprise and not as socially situation *laboured* production.

He and Engels dismiss as “nonsense” Stirner’s belief that one can be a *born poet* or a *born musician* not because Marx thinks that one cannot be a great poet – or that one cannot develop qualities, skills and values that could constitute the art of poetry from the time of birth – but because of the blatant logical inconsistency in the Hegelian’s argument which tries to prove

on the one hand, that a born poet, etc., *remains* what he *is* from birth – namely a poet, etc.; and, on the other hand, that the born poet, etc., in so far as he *becomes*, develops, may “owing to unfavourable circumstances,” not become what *he could become*. His example, therefore, on the one hand, proves nothing at all and, on the other hand, proves the opposite of what it was intended to prove.<sup>43</sup>

Against a naïve belief in natural artistic genius and a negative view of the world as an obstacle to the becoming of natural artistic genius, Marx argues that the

world is the material context for artistic development, and the circumstances of the world, instead of being seen as either positive or negative apropos of the development of talent, should be seen as the basic conditions for the existence of all phenomena associated with arts and human creativity, including talent. This theory of talent is something that Marx explicates two years after *The German Ideology*, in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, his 1847 polemic against French socialism – as part of yet another of Marx's Leftward politico-philosophical shifts, this time away from socialism and towards communism – where he approvingly quotes the 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish economist Adam Smith's view that perceived “differences in natural talents in different men” are “the effect of the division of labour.”<sup>44</sup> But what precisely are the effects of material production on art? And what exactly is a theory of art as labour or productive human activity? The answer, I believe, can be found in Marx's understanding of alienation, human nature, and the production of use-values, key themes of the writings of an older, mature Marx.

### Art as Produced Use-value

It has been suggested that Marx's break with Hegelianism, and the deep engagements with economic theory that characterise his latter work, mark a break with humanism. There is, as I shall suggest in the conclusion to this essay, indeed a potential for Marx's theory of art to be extended in directions that are not grounded in human subjectivity; but I believe it to be a mistake to see Marx, even after his departure from Continental Europe and his seeking refuge from Prussian, French and Belgian authorities in the Victorian London, as an anti-humanist. There is no doubt that, from the publication of his and Engels' most politically significant and inflammatory pamphlet *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx would no longer directly or extensively engage with the Hegelians and their view of the arts and culture, but he would not go on to focus solely on the questions of class and economics and, by so doing, reduce human subjects to mere objects or data for economic analysis – as many a modern economist would be inclined to do – nor would he forgo his interest in the humanities.

Indeed, one of Marx's most explicit reflections on the arts can be found in the unfinished manuscript *Grundrisse*, written in 1857-8, in the midst of Marx's struggles with extreme poverty, family tragedy and the travails of revolutionary political activism and organisation in London. Here, an older and perhaps somewhat more

critical Marx, reiterates a point made more than a decade earlier apropos of the difference between the products of artistic production and those of non-artistic production, but he now firmly places the arts in the context of his increasingly elaborate theory of historical materialism. Putatively, he sets out to “clarify” and make “less puzzling” the paradoxical phenomenon of highly developed forms of artistic production (e.g. Homeric epics or Shakespearian drama) as found in rather “undeveloped” pre- or early-modern societies of ancient Greece and renaissance England.<sup>45</sup> Marx then seems to try to resolve this contradiction – in a language that clearly recalls Aristotle’s *Poetics* – by suggesting that classical works of art can “still afford us artistic pleasure” – despite our modern capitalist socio-economic, technological and ideological conditions being vastly different to those of the early poets – because these works come from “the historic childhood of humanity;” and, in the same way that an adult may “find joy in the child’s naïveté,” a subject of the more historically and materially advanced society may find oneself under “the eternal charm” of the artistic products of “the unripe social conditions” of ancient Greece.<sup>46</sup>

Whilst I believe the above summary of Marx’s theory of art as put forward in the *Grundrisse* is accurate – and it clearly conforms to some of the commonly held views of Marx’s supposedly *stageist* and progressive theory of historical materialism – I must emphasise that it is an (intentionally) incomplete summary. What I have left out of my deceptive précis is Marx’s crucial discussion of artistic production, nestled between his proposal of the art’s paradoxical charm and his frankly unconvincing and ostensibly Romanic resolution of this paradox by resorting to the clichéd image of infantile innocence. It would surely not suffice to present a crass caricature of Marx – the most important theorist and organiser of working class political power in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and one of the key historical champions of the indispensable force and integrity of work and production in the world – as a thinker who would only discuss the *pleasurable* or *charming* effect of art on future readers and consumers, without first emphasising the arts’ pivotal value as that which is *produced* by real people.

It is precisely such a frankly bizarre depiction of Marx – Marx as a theorist and advocate of bourgeois consumption, culture industries and commercialisation – which, I believe, has plagued so much of our understanding of Marx’s labour theory of value, and also of his approach to art. If value is nothing but that which is demanded and determined by a consumer or by the market, then Marx’s labour theory of value – which posits labour-time at the heart of a product *qua* an exchange-value – can indeed be shown to be wrong, as has been argued by so many economists, political theorists and even Marxists since the publication of *Capital*,

since the prices of things in our world are clearly not the expression of the time or labour spent in producing them – as we all know, a simple ink sketch by a famous artist has much greater price or exchange-value than an entire life's worth of sumptuous oil paintings by an unknown artist. But this irregularity or “the whole mystery of commodities”<sup>47</sup> is *precisely* what Marx diagnoses, criticise and confronts in his critique of capitalist political economy. Marx is never less than emphatic about the *complete* value of work or of the product of work never being only an exchange-value expressed in the universal equivalent form of money or in price; and that real people's labour power and labour-time only become abstract (and, ultimately, hidden, distorted and minimised) for the purposes of surplus-value extraction, exploitation and commodification in accordance with the interests of the bourgeois ruling class – bosses, consumers, highly successful individuals such as famous artists, etc. – and against the interest of the ordinary workers and producers themselves. And I believe that such a misunderstanding of Marx and misreading of *Capital* is greatly assisted by what I've argued is a faulty belief in the mature Marx's supposedly fundamental break with all the tropes of humanism found in his younger philosophy, including the crucial concept of alienation or estrangement.

Both terms *alienation* and *estrangement* have been used for translating the German words *entäussern* and *entfremden* as found in Marx's writings, notably in the essay titled, posthumously, ‘*Die Entfremdete Arbeit*,’ (Engl. ‘Estranged/alienated Labour’) written during the younger Marx's formative years in Paris, in 1844. Here, in tandem with his gravitation towards communism, working class radicalism, Anglo-Scottish economic theory and his growing awareness of the foundational albeit suppressed capacity of the worker in the modern world, Marx proposes that the bourgeoisie – employers, investors and financiers – make money and extract profit from workers and employees not through forced labour or the collection of feudal seigniorial dues, but via the less detectable but far more effective and modern method of commodification. When what the worker has produced (an object, a service, etc.) is removed from the worker's immediate sphere of production and is entered into the market of consumer demands as something with a price, its value becomes subject to the law of supply and demand, as a result of which “the worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and range.”<sup>48</sup> And, hence, “the object which labour produces – labour's product – confronts it as something *alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer.”<sup>49</sup>

Whilst earlier German Idealists had associated alienation with the basic premise of social existence – and with concomitant phenomena, such as dogmatic religious faith – Marx locates it in the specific milieu of the capitalist mode of production. And in order to explicate how precisely the capitalist appropriation of labour functions and results in deep and debilitating alienation – in which “man (the worker) no longer feels himself to be freely active”<sup>50</sup> – Marx begins with a crucial definition of *concrete* or *non-alienated* human labour. Seen in the context of this definition, production is not primarily a professional or commercial activity, but what we as a species do due to our basic dependence on both organic nature (animals, plants, etc.) and inorganic nature (earth, water, air, etc.) for survival. As such, production is what we do to make the objects of nature *useful* for meeting our most immediate and pressing needs. Furthermore, we participate in this concrete and non-alienated production consciously and freely because, whilst engaged in satisfying our basic needs like animals, we are, unlike animals, aware of our actions and our needs, due to our *universality* or our cognitive ability to recognise ourselves as members of our species.

It is in the course of making this perhaps complex definition of the origins of non-alienated production that Marx provides a highly pertinent and startling observation apropos of the work of art:

The life of the species, both in man and in animals, consists physically in the fact that man (like the animal) lives on inorganic nature; and the more universal man is compared with the animal, the more universal is the sphere of inorganic nature on which he lives. Just as plants, animals, stones, the air, light, etc., constitute a part of human consciousness in the realm of theory, partly as objects of natural science, partly as objects of art – his spiritual inorganic nature, spiritual nourishment which he must first prepare to make it palatable and digestible – so too in the realm of practice they constitute a part of human life and human activity.<sup>51</sup>

A quick reading of this passage would suggest that Marx is merely advancing a somewhat more scientific version of Hegel's belief in the spiritual value of art. But a closer analysis suggests something else entirely. Spirituality, according to Marx, is part of our inorganic nature, on par with other objects of inorganic nature (e.g. stones) which we, through practical productive activity (such as stone-cutting), turn into things that are useful to us (say, stone bricks). Spirituality is not in itself *palatable*

and *digestible* to us, and art is the task or process of the preparation and transformation of spirituality into something that we can use in *the realm of theory*. We may seek spiritual nourishment in the same way that non-universal organic beings (animals, plants, etc) would live on inorganic nature (drink water, breathe air, etc) but, as universal beings, we need to subject the inorganic objects of our non-material or spiritual encounters with nature to a process of *theoretical* production in concert with our practical activities; and we satisfy this need for understanding, theorisation, ideation and, finally, assimilation or integration with the world – and, indeed, with nature – through practicing art (and, interestingly, also science.) The intrinsic value of art, therefore, results from art being the production of theoretical or intellectual usefulness or use-value out of the (non-scientific and non-artistic) spiritual interface between our human consciousness and the immediate non-humanity of nature.

I don't want to simplify this frankly extraordinary theory of art any more than is necessary for the purposes of clarification. But I would like to attempt, one more time, to put Marx's view of art in as succinct a formulation as possible: art produces real, concrete human uses out of our spiritual, mythological and ideological environments, in the form of theories and ideas (or, as Plato might have it, *truths*) which enable us to comprehend, engage and integrate with the world. If both capitalism and organised religion produce alienation, then art has the power to de-alienate, or make the world assimilable and familiar. And, importantly, this capacity is not brought about by the instrumentalisation of art, but is the very *raison d'être* of art.

I would also like to emphasise that his view is not solely that of a humanist young Marx, but is one which is confirmed and elaborated upon by the mature, supposedly anti-humanist Marx during the apparently more scientific, less artistically focussed period of his latter work. In the *Grundrisse*, for example, in the passage which I neglected in my discussion of this work earlier in this essay, he notes that "Greek mythology is not only the arsenal of Greek art but also its foundation,"<sup>52</sup> in precise agreement with his view from more than a decade earlier, which depicted spirituality as the basic inorganic condition upon which art is premised and from which art draws its material. He puts this point even more directly when distinguishing between the conscious – and universal – practices of Greek poetry and "Greek mythology, i.e. nature and social forms already reworked in an unconsciously artistic way by the popular imagination."<sup>53</sup> Mythology and spirituality are different from each other, and the former can be seen as the more advanced stage of the latter, or mythology can be said to be spirituality subjected to *popular*

*imagination* and even aestheticised – and yet neither is an art but only art's "material."<sup>54</sup>

I maintain that Marx's conclusion in the *Grundrisse* apropos of the paradox of art's *eternal charm* remains unconvincing, not because I – as a practicing artist – have a personal aversion to accepting his conclusion that "the unripe social conditions [of highly mytho-spiritual milieus such as ancient Greece or Elizabethan England] under which [great *flowerings* of art] arose, and could alone arise, can never return."<sup>55</sup> If art is defined as mental or theoretical use-value produced from mythology and spirituality, then can't it be said that art can continue to be produced out of the raw material of the myths or beliefs of the dominant bourgeois ideologies of our own modern capitalist world? It may be countered that the mature Marx had abandoned an interest in the theme of ideology altogether – in keeping with the thesis apropos of Marx's break with humanism – but this is not plausible, since an ideological function, if not ideology *per se*, can be clearly discerned in the form of the "metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties"<sup>56</sup> of commodity fetishism in the last major book of Marx's to be published during his life, *Capital, Volume 1*.

Marx does not directly address the topic of art in *Capital, Volume 1*; but seeing as we have now defined his theory of art as one premised upon the production of inalienable, universal use-values, the influential and revealing depictions of use-value production – as opposed to fetishised, capitalist exchange-value accumulation – in his 1867 magnum opus may help with further elucidating the process and value of artistic production. In the very final section of the first part of the book, for example, he provides an account of forms of production different to capitalist commodification of labour-power, to highlight "all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour" under capitalism, as a result of which the exchange-value of a commodity is no longer rationally measured in accordance with the labour-time expended in the production of the commodity. The first of his examples is both from a work of literature and, I suggest, a demonstration of the kind of un-alienating use-value entailed in the process of rational, non-magical artistic production:

Since Robinson Crusoe's experiences are a favourite theme with political economists, let us take a look at him on his island. Moderate though he be, yet some few wants he has to satisfy, and must therefore do a little useful work of various sorts, such as making tools and furniture, taming goats, fishing and hunting. Of his prayers and the like we take no account, since they are a source of pleasure to him, and he looks upon them as so much recreation. In

spite of the variety of his work, he knows that his labour, whatever its form, is but the activity of one and the same Robinson, and that it consists of nothing but different modes of human labour. Necessity itself compels him to apportion his time accurately between his different kinds of work. Whether one kind occupies a greater space in his general activity than another, depends on the difficulties, greater or less as the case may be, to be overcome in attaining the useful effect aimed at. [...] All the relations between Robinson and the objects that [he has produced, which] form this wealth of his own creation are here so simple and clear as to be intelligible without exertion [...] And yet those relations contain all that is essential to the determination of value.<sup>57</sup>

It would be tempting to read this passage as a dismissal of the labour value of art, since Robinson's *prayers and the like* are not included alongside the laboured activities conducted for producing use-values. But, as I've already argued, the Marxian notion of art, despite depicting religion and spirituality (and ideology, more generally) as the raw material which artists work with and transform, does not preset art itself as *prayers and the like*. Indeed, there is a marked difference in the above passage between *recreation* and *creation*. The former, associated with spirituality and simple pleasures, may indeed not be seen as labour, and would therefore not have a labour value. But Marx clearly identifies *creation* as the very heart of productivity and material existence; and if, as I've argued throughout this essay *à la* Marx himself, artistic creation is a form of production (albeit of the mental and non-physical kind) then it too may contribute towards the satisfaction of the subject's *few wants*, produce *useful effects* and, finally, have *determinable value*.

## What Is to Be Done (About Art)?

My methodology in writing this essay, and the basis for my analyses of Marx's writings on art, has been to refer only to Marx's own writings, and not to those of his many interpreters who have drawn on his writings to offer their own, at times highly pertinent, theories of art. This approach has been in keeping with my view that a fresh return to Marx's own primary comments on art would obviate the imperative to account for, respond to and incessantly reaffirm or negate the assumptions and consequences of countless thinkers whose oeuvres constitute, directly or otherwise, a rather unwieldy and at times inconsistent system of thought referred to as *Marxism*.



That said, there is much that can be learnt from many of Marx's followers, particularly if one were to expand a Marxian theory of art beyond the contours of what I have described as a theory of art qua produced use-value, for the purposes of constructing a poetics, or a framework that may be used for exploring modern and contemporary works of art, beyond, for example, Marx's own personal interest in Greek poetry and Shakespeare.

Walter Benjamin's 1934 paper 'The Author as Producer,' for example, provides an invaluable proposal for artistic *operations* – with concrete examples such as the *epic theatre* of Bertolt Brecht – which contribute directly towards improving artistic *apparatuses* or mediums in tandem with the communist drive for improving the life of the common person.<sup>58</sup> Louis Althusser's writings on art from the 1960s – such as 'Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract' – illustrate how the work of art relates to and simultaneously distances itself from modern capitalist ideology, very much in keeping with Marx's view apropos of art's relationship with spirituality in earlier stages of historical development.<sup>59</sup> And Alain Badiou's 1998 book *Handbook of Inaesthetics* advances a detailed understanding of art as production in the Marxian *realm of theory*, as a condition with the capacity for offering immanent and singular truths in the finite form of the work of art, with the potential for a non-humanist Marxian theory of art.<sup>60</sup> Highly influential to my own version of a Marxian theory of art in this essay has been the Soviet philosopher Mikhail Lifshitz's *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx* (1933), which also advances its arguments by referring to Marx's own writings.<sup>61</sup> Whilst my selection of texts and interpretations are quite different to Lifshitz's altogether more teleological or stageist – and in indeed, *statist* – version, I would not hesitate to acknowledge that my intention in writing this essay has been to revivify and provide for my own intellectual milieu something not so dissimilar to Lifshitz's work in scope and purpose.

What I've written also differs to the abovementioned existing Marxian theories of art in that the starting point as well as the focus for my investigation has been the question of artistic value. It is, of course, not possible for me to presume what effects, if any, an explication of Marx's belief in art's inherent use-value may have on the contemporary discussions apropos of artistic value. One conclusion that can be drawn is that, despite what I find to be a rather understandable desire on the part of many contemporary artists to be paid and be paid fairly for their work – particularly in the context of the problem of the free movement of artistic content across electro-digital media – there is very little in Marx's thoughts that would automatically vindicate such a desire. As we have seen, for Marx art has an intrinsic labour value

which is radically opposed to the alienated-labour or exchange-value of a commodity. This does not mean that the products of artistic labour – or artistic labour-power itself – cannot at all be sold for a price, particularly if the artist him or herself is determined to be subjected to such a social relation; but in such a process the un-alienating value of art would disappear, and art would become commercially instrumentalised as a commodity such as *entertainment* (as Benjamin would have it) or be conceptually instrumentalised and be reified as *culture* (as Adorno or Badiou may have it). Despite the (frankly, remote) possibility for (elite) professionalised artists to develop working-class consciousness and even class subjectivity, it seems indisputable to me that, as Marx and Engels clearly and famously state in *The Communist Manifesto*, the “conversion” of “the poet” into “paid wage-labourer” is nothing other than an aim or outcome of the bourgeois domination of the world,<sup>62</sup> and I can't see this *conversion* – or perhaps *degradation* – as anything other than something to be resisted by anyone with any affinity with Marx's philosophy.

I am not suggesting that art does not take time and labour to produce, or that the artist does not require material sustenance. My conclusion, based on the exploration of Marx's writings on art, is that art's innate value, precisely as it is located in the course or at the time of its production – that is, as it is being created by the artist – is in itself a *real and serious value* of *theoretical* or mental productivity, producing in us the capacity to understand, familiarise ourselves with and perhaps in due course change our world and its beliefs and ideologies; and therefore it should not be lost or occulted in the field of our equally real and serious *practical* activities that are conducted for accruing the means for physical sustenance.

I have sought to show in this essay that Karl Marx, often narrowly seen as solely the theorist of wage-labourer class rights and politics, was not concerned only with those workers whose product of labour is produced in accordance with the commercial needs of modern capitalist economies (or the *industrial working class*); but also those workers, such as poets, whose labour, whilst not necessarily amenable to commodification and not produced industrially, produces true use-values that might, in final consideration, provide a capacity for opposition and resistance to bourgeois capitalist ideology *on par with* – and *not* in spite of, and *not* in subordination to – the antagonism of waged workers and employees towards bourgeois capitalist economy. One must work and, when necessary, fight for one's integrity and equality as a worker, both in satisfying material needs which, in our capitalist world – and until this world changes – demands that one sells *some of* one's labour-power and labour-time to employers or consumers, and also, at the

same time, in satisfying one's subjective and mental needs through allocating *time and labour* towards producing art for oneself, one's loved ones, and one's society. If such a state of existence seems unrealistic or even idealistic in our late capitalist world of overwork, underpayment, underemployment and unrestrained rises in the cost of living, then perhaps our inalienable demand to have time and the means to produce use-values as artists (alongside our demand to be remunerated fairly for the time we spend producing exchange-values for the bourgeoisie) will compel us towards a revolutionary break with capitalism. And if this demand does have a revolutionary potential, then it can be said – and I think Marx and even Plato may agree – that art also has a powerful, *real and serious* instrumental value.

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<sup>1</sup> Arts Council England, "The Value of Arts and Culture to People and Society," *Arts Council England*, 21 July 2017; <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/exploring-value-arts-and-culture/value-arts-and-culture-people-and-society>

<sup>2</sup> Nicole J. Caruth, "What Is the Value of Art?" *Art21 Magazine*, 21 July 2017; <http://magazine.art21.org/2014/05/28/flash-points-what-is-the-value-of-art/>

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