

**The Fractures of Frankfurt:
The Aesthetic Theories of Marcuse, Benjamin, Rorty,
and Popular Culture's Potential to Enable Individual
Political Change in Industrial-Capitalist Societies.***

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Hip-Hop, Ballet, the Great War, Popular Culture, and Politics

In *Rites of Spring*, Modris Eksteins' excellent cultural history of World War I and the west's march towards modernism, the author describes the riotous debut of Stravinsky's avant-garde ballet *Rite of Spring*. The Stravinsky piece featured dancers that performed *disjunctively* to cacophonous music. "When the curtain went up and the dancers appeared, jumping up and down and toeing, against all convention, inward rather than outward, the howling and hissing started" (Eksteins 1989: 12). As is suggested by this passage, the crowd *rioted* when confronted with Stravinsky's piece. The audience was startled, truly shocked, by the piece of art. Eksteins links the disjunctive nature of *Rite of Spring* to the race to "modernism" that helped establish the groundwork for the World War I. As one reviewer wrote: "Eksteins argues that this 1913 ballet ... has a special relationship to the war that broke out a year later. The primeval blood sacrifice in the art symbolizes a set of cultural values that carried over ... into the barbarity of the trenches and, indeed, as far as the apocalyptic rhetoric and deeds of Adolf Hitler and his followers" (Marquis 1990: 1527). Eksteins writes: "Stravinsky intended initially to entitle his score *The Victim*. ... The unknown soldier stands front in center in our story. He is Stravinsky's victim" (Eksteins 1989: xiv – xv).

Leaving aside Stravinsky for now, I would like to convey a *personal* story. A few years ago I attended a Christmas party. For most of the night the dance floor was packed with people who could dance in an acceptable manner—not amazing, but competent. Late in the evening, the DJ played Missy Elliot's (then) new single called "Work It." Missy and producer Timbaland described "Work It" as "anti-dance, dance-music," and it is not hard to see why. Though it is structured like a dance-oriented hip-hop joint, its pieces are unsettling. Full of strange rhythms, backward beats and lyrics, sound effects that break the flow of the (already disjointed) beat, as well as a vaguely "middle-eastern" or "Indian / Bollywood" melody that sounds "wrong" to western ears, "Work It" is—to say the least—a

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difficult song to which to dance. And though the lyrics contained traditional (for hip-hop) clever bragging and wordplay, the sound of the song is so strange that the rather conventional (but effective) rapping is drowned out in the overall sound.² The dancers at the above-mentioned Christmas party *at first* did not know how to “dance” to the Missy track. Yet, they knew they “should” be dancing to it. Slowly, as the track progressed, each individual dancer found his/her own unique way to dance to this one song. To my eyes, these dancers engaged in sort of a modern, and spontaneous, hip-hop *Rite of Spring*. Like a pluralistic Stravinsky, the partygoers were inventing new aesthetics in reaction to the grounding-breaking art that had been created.

Since that Christmas party, I have been trying to adequately explain the dancers’ reaction to the Missy Elliot song. My sense of the “event” is that something aesthetic, artistic, *and* political took place. Aesthetics itself is inherently political “by their very nature because they involve the contestation between individuals and groups over ways the world is understood” (Ferguson 1999: 1). Yet, not only is aesthetic judgment political; politics and aesthetics are linked. Benjamin Barber writes that

both are forms of *public seeing*. Each rests on the paradoxical claim that the real can be unmasked and unmasked only through the donning of masks, that public perception depends on the surrender of private roles, that to see truly is first to be blinded (Barber 1982: 1).

In fact, aesthetic forms provide “a way to understand the complex and enigmatic patterns of political identities” (Ferguson 1999: vii).

Being inclined towards philosophy and political theory, I naturally tried to ground my reactions in such thought. However, such literature is not very helpful because it is either generally dismissive towards popular culture, or it looks at such culture as a “mirror” of society.³ Few thinkers take seriously the impact of popular cultures’ aesthetics on society. In fact, intellectuals have bemoaned “popular” or “mass” culture since the beginning of the commercial age (Strinati 2004). The standard complaint is that in capitalistic societies, innovative or radical art is always

² To be honest, “Work It” was anticipated by “Get Yer Freak On,” the previous Missy / Timbaland track, which also played with form by incorporating a “middle-eastern” style melody and lop-sided beats. “Work It,” however, is a much more drastic attack on the conventions of hip-hop, and pop music in general.

³ These are the types of articles that ask “How does Madonna affect or reflect society?”

co-opted by the “powers that be.” Art that offers criticism is immediately seduced by the capitalistic system; “the rebel [becomes] a paragon of consumer virtue” (Frank 1997: 209).

The most influential critics of mass culture stemmed from the so-called “Frankfurt School” of Marxist thinkers. One of the founding members of the Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno discussed the “lowering” of culture, and how such lowering destroys the value of art:⁴ “The man who in the subway triumphantly whistles loudly the theme of the finale of Brahms’ First is already primarily involved with its debris” (Adorno 1991: 41). Similarly, Max Horkheimer (who was sort of “Robin” to Adorno’s “Batman”) strongly objected to any cultural or aesthetic education because “the latter took popularity to be a criterion of artistic greatness” (Reitz 2000: 150). To these critics, mass culture was a problem unique to industrial societies, and one that helped drown out other “legitimate” forms of culture (Reitz 2000 148). By “mass” culture, most intellectuals really mean “popular” culture: “It is commercial culture, mass produced for a mass market” (Strinati 2004: 10).

On the account of certain Frankfurt School thinkers, and many other intellectuals, such mass culture is essentially bad for society. In this sense, the “worthwhile” aesthetics of the “inspired genius ... individual artist working outside the constraints of the commercial market” are never allowed to have a transformative affect on society (Strinati 2004: 11). Hence, Adorno writes, mass culture is always “attached” to reality and never able to overcome the material basis of society: “The mass culture which is so true to the facts absorbs the truth content and expends itself in the material but all it has left as material is itself.” (Adorno 1991: 65). Society is then subject to, or “forced”⁵ to “enjoy” a mass culture that is “standardized, formulaic, repetitive and superficial” instead of an art that celebrates “serious, intellectual, time-honoured and authentic values” (Strinati 2004, 12).

For critics of mass culture in capitalistic societies, the situation is particularly bleak since such culture is by far the most common type of aesthetic experience (Carrol 1997). “The jargon of American television culture already has

⁴ Adorno’s criticism here is rooted in Marx’s notion of the commodity fetish; I will discuss this in greater depth later in the paper.

⁵ As suggested above, according to such critics, the individual voices of “true” artists are either never allowed to be heard, or are immediately co-opted into consumer society. Thomas Frank chronicles how this happened to the “hippies” in the 1960s: “In 1967, the menswear industry discovered the perfect symbol with which to unit its fantasies of youth and rebellion: the counterculture” (Frank 1997: 21).

become the lingua franca of the world” (Twitchell 1992: 258). Like the zombies in a George Romero film, the “plague” of mass culture spreads to all areas of culture. Eventually, on the account of some modern critical theorists, mass culture even absorbs some of the sacred academy (Twitchell 1992). All social contexts are intertwined with mass culture (Rosa 1998). With the rise of mass culture, intellectuals, even left-wing intellectuals, began to be more influenced by market forces. In fact, “scholarly ideas and debates began to be taken up in the mainstream press, and young, chic, professors were glamorized in the media as stars or celebrities” (Rosa 1998: 204). In this new intellectual-celebrity culture, the “personality” of thinker means more than his / her ideas (Sanbonmatsu 2004). This trend towards consumer culture will likely continue for the foreseeable future (Twitchell 1992: 258).

Given this understanding of culture in industrial capitalism, many intellectuals mourn the passing of a “true” aesthetic that can be both illuminating and revolutionary. Probably the most powerful advocate of this line of analysis is the later Frankfurt thinker Herbert Marcuse. In his excellent book *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse attempted to synthesize the cultural Marxism of his Frankfurt school comrades with the intellectual implications of Freud’s theories of psychoanalysis. In doing this Marcuse crafted one of the most persuasive and well-written critiques of culture in modern “liberal,” “democratic,” capitalist society. Due to the power of the argument, Marcuse’s work became a foundation of radical politics and the self-styled “new left,” who often reveled in their condemnation of popular, or bourgeois, culture.

This denunciation of popular culture, though prevalent, is not the *only* intellectual view of mass culture in modern society. Some intellectuals have actually *welcomed* the changing aesthetics of the industrial age. In particular, the so-called postmodernists⁶ reveled in the “non-fixed” status of contemporary art: “There are no longer any agreed and inviolable criteria which can serve to differentiate art from popular culture.” (Strinati 2004: 207). Hence, to many of the postmodernists, Marcuse’s criticism of popular culture rests on out-dated epistemological and metaphysical foundations. In other words, in a post-modern world a distinction between “high art” and “popular art” is just silly and pretentious (Strinati 2004, 208).

⁶ I will use the term “postmodernist” to refer generally to thinkers that, in accordance with Lyotard’s definition, reject the notion of a “meta-narrative.” This is only *one* way of viewing postmodernism, and the term actually has many meanings in different fields (especially different *artistic* fields). That being said, a discussion of the minutiae of the definition of postmodernism is not appropriate in the context of this paper.

Of course, one does not need to wait—historically speaking—for the postmodernists to discover intellectuals who embrace popular culture in industrial capitalism. For example, Walter Benjamin, who “for a while was involved in the intellectual activities of the (Frankfurt) school,” rejected the overly negative view of popular culture articulated by Adorno and his Marxist crew (Strinati 2004: 73). In his lovely essay “The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” one of the most perceptive (and discussed) works on aesthetics of the twentieth century, Benjamin interprets the rise of “popular” culture as a move towards democratization of art. The essay (hereinafter “Artwork essay”), which was published by a Frankfurt school journal and was edited by Horkheimer, was much criticized for breaking from a traditional Marxist stance (Leslie 2000: 130). In this sense, Benjamin anticipated both postmodern aesthetics, as well as postmodern art such as Andy Warhol’s multi-image prints (Strinati 2004: 208). He also carved out an intellectual space as Marxism’s “patron saint” of popular culture—a sort of a passionate jester in contrast to the “serious” Marxism of Adorno.

Walter Benjamin is not the *only* left-leaning thinker to embrace the popular culture of industrial⁷ capitalism. As noted above, many postmodernists embrace popular culture. For instance, grounded in the *postmodern* tradition, as well as in American pragmatism, the contemporary philosopher Richard Rorty offers a compelling version of the role of art in modern society. As the following discussion will show, Rorty thinks that individual artistic creation is the key to existence in a world without foundations. For Rorty, attempting get at the “true” needs of an “un-dominated” self is a fruitless enterprise. The self is socially constructed. The best we can do—the only thing that can be done in a liberal society—is to attempt self-creation with aesthetics as a guide. In this sense, mass culture, for Rorty, can be seen as just another way that the self is created (i.e part of socialization). To say that mass culture is based in “false” needs is to cling to an outdated and non-useful epistemology.

I believe the tensions between the aesthetic / political philosophies of Marcuse, Benjamin, and Rorty are still relevant today. Many thinkers, on both the left and right of the political spectrum, reject *out-of-hand* the relevance and merit of contemporary popular culture. However, this popular culture is the soundtrack and backdrop of life in modern industrial society. In this paper I will argue that Rorty and Benjamin are much closer to understanding the way popular culture “works” than Marcuse (or Adorno). To explore this issue, I will first discuss (briefly) Adorno’s aesthetics, for I do not believe a full explanation of Marcuse can be

⁷ Or post-industrial.

offered without some consideration of “grouchy uncle” Adorno.⁸ Then I will discuss Marcuse’s theory of art in capitalist society. Next I offer some brief criticisms of Marcuse’s theory; this section will be short because such “criticisms” are often implied by my following discussion of Benjamin, Rorty and other thinkers. After examining Marcuse, I shall observe how Benjamin saw a liberating affect of mass culture even in the context of Marxism. Then—given that we are discussing liberal-capitalistic societies—I will discuss Rorty’s theory of artistic self-creation in modern capitalism. Then I will point to some *problems* in Rorty’s theory. To address these problems, I will briefly talk about communitarian political theory, as well as the thought of French philosopher Jacques Ranciere. I believe that the communitarians and Ranciere offer us a “way out” of the problems in Rorty’s theory. Finally, using Rorty, the communitarians, and Ranciere as an underpinning, I will offer my own brief interpretation of the way art functions in modern liberal-capitalist societies.

Adorno’s Aesthetics; or Why “Grouchy Uncle Ted” Hates Miles Davis

Adorno often writes about music, as well as the “culture industry” in general. He argues that popular music slowly sounds more and more “*the same*” over time (Strinati 2004). For Adorno, popular music is inherently banal, sacrificing all meaning and relevance at the alters of accessibility: “This change of function affects all music, not only light music, in whose realm it could comfortably be made innocuous” (Adorno 1991: 34). For Adorno, music is no longer liked for its inherent worth, but because it reflects a recognizable part of the listener or society. In this sense, the “self-reflection of culture brings a leveling down process in its wake” (Adorno 1991: 67). Given this “self-reflection” of culture, Adorno asserts that culture in capitalism distorts the evolution of time and is always “comforting” and never “challenges” society via an aesthetic dialectic:

Mass culture which tolerates neither conflict nor any obvious form of montage must pay tribute to time in every one of its products. This is the paradox of mass culture. The more ahistorical and pre-ordained its procedures are, the less temporal relationships become a problem for it and the less it succeeds in

⁸ Of course, one could argue that a full understanding of Adorno and Marcuse cannot be had without an exploration of Marx. I am sympathetic to such a statement, but the confines of this paper limits my “contextualization” of Marcuse (One could also argue that one cannot understand Marx without understanding Hegel; and one cannot understand Hegel without understanding Kant, and one cannot understand Kant without understanding Hume, etc ...).

transposing these relationships into a dialectic unity of temporal moments, the more craftily it employs static tricks to deceive us into seeing new temporal content in what it does, then the less it has left to oppose to the time beyond itself and all the more fatally does it fall victim to that time. Its ahistoricity is the tedium which it affects to relieve (Adorno 1991: 75 – 76).

Mass culture, on Adorno's account, *appears* to offer constant novelty and change. Yet this change is superficial; it does not allow for the natural dialectic to unfold in a way that allows for radical shifts our relations to the modes of production. Hence, according to Adorno, the world is filled with “new and improved products,” but society never changes its core structure. All mass culture is a placebo for the tedium of consumer-based societies. For Adorno, the above-cited quotation strikes at the heart of popular culture, and it explains his hatred of said culture.

Robert Witkin, in his excellent essay “Why Did Adorno Hate Jazz,” explains Adorno's position vis-à-vis bourgeois culture: “Adorno's vision of truth is of experience configured by a desire and longing for reconciliation between part and whole that is impossible in modern conditions” (Witkin 2000: 148). These modern conditions were the product of the “culture industry” produced by capitalism. Mass culture is not, on Adorno's account, merely an innocuous pass-time, and it is certainly not—as Benjamin would suggest—a new form of truly *democratic* art. The culture industry keeps people interested in the “banality” of ideas and conformity of the market system (Strinati 2004). The culture industry is one huge assimilation machine: “The familiarity of the piece is a surrogate for the quality ascribed to it. To like it is almost the same thing as to recognize it” (Adorno 1991: 30).

This notion of the culture industry is tied to Marx's idea of the “commodity fetish.” What Adorno, and the Frankfurt school in general, do is “extend Marx's analyses of commodity fetishism and exchange to cultural goods or commodities” (Strinati 2004: 51). Hence, cultural goods are produced by the market, and are ultimately decided by the market. Therefore, such cultural “products” can never do anything but re-enforce the ruling order of market capitalism and art forms such as music become dominated with concerns of popularity and consumption. “The star system becomes totalitarian. The reactions of the listeners appear to have no relation to the playing of music” (Adorno 1991: 35). Commodity fetishism is the key to understanding Adorno and the Frankfurt school's complaint regarding popular culture in capitalist societies. “Adorno's argument is that money—the price of commodities or goods, including a ticket to a concert—defines and dominates social relations in capitalist societies” (Strinati 2004: 50). Of course, this argument is rooted in Marx's notions of “exchange value” and “use value.” The exchange value is what a commodity can be bought or

sold for, whereas its use value is based on the products actual practical value to the consumer.⁹ Commodity fetishism occurs when the exchange value completely dominates use value. However, the distinction between exchange and use value in cultural “commodities” is difficult to isolate because the two categories often (apparently) collapse into one. Adorno writes that the “more inexorably the principle of exchange value destroys use values for human beings, the more deeply does exchange value disguise itself as the object of enjoyment.” (Adorno 1991: 39).

In this sense, *the purchase of art is always the celebration of the ability to purchase art, and not the art itself*. “This is the real secret of success. ... The consumer is really worshipping the money that he himself has paid for the ticket to the Toscanini concert.” (Adorno 1991: 38). On Adorno’s account, the commodity fetish infects culture precisely because it *appears* that art is immune from such falsities. In a sense, like Kaiser Soze in Bryan Singer’s *The Usual Suspects*, the greatest trick the culture industry has pulled on modern society is to convince people it does not exist. Consequently, the bottom-line for Adorno is that the masses are completely impotent in the context of the monolithic culture industry that helps perpetuate the capitalist regime. The products of popular culture are not “art,” but a series of “commodified” lectures on conformity and obedience.

Marcuse’s Theory of Mass Culture in Capitalist Society: or “How Can One Man Be This Much of a Curmudgeon?”

Marcuse echoed and developed Adorno’s basic argument concerning the emptiness of culture in capitalist society. On most accounts Marcuse is a much better stylist than Adorno, and he devoted much more time to the exploration of the cultural market in a capitalist society. However, if anything, Marcuse is *even more* pessimistic about the ability for popular art (or maybe *any* art) to provoke *real* change in the context of a market economy. In fact, the ability of the market society to absorb change is “perhaps the most singular achievement of advanced industrial society” (Marcuse 1991: xlv). The working-class is perpetually pacified with cultural goods and very slight improvements in standards of living.

Marcuse argues that technological rationality has completely erased any other forms of rationality. The “technological universe ... is a *political* universe.... Technological rationality has become political rationality” (Marcuse 1991: xlviii). Marcuse states that this dominance of technological rationality is a historical choice based on semi-contingent circumstances. Marcuse would eliminate the dominance of a technological rationality: “No longer technology for its own sake (and the sake

⁹ This distinction is, of course, based on questionable normative values premised upon a very foundationalist and materialist notion of human life.

of its representatives), technological rationality would be replaced by a humanist rationality” which would service the best interests of humanity (Lukes 1985, 31). If society was organized by such a rationality, we could “eliminate scarcity” and allow for a fulfilling human existence with the ability of creative thinking (Lukes 1985: 31).

Despite this wish for a humanistic rationality, Marcuse states we are *stuck* in a totalitarian technological rationality that serves the interests of the few, as opposed to the many. In this technological world, popular culture serves as a re-enforcement of the status quo. Whereas, in Marcuse’s ideal functioning society art would serve as a catalyst for change, in modern industrial capitalism it is merely a Marxist opiate.¹⁰ Marcuse laments the state of popular culture in the modern world: To see how intellectually bankrupt contemporary society is, Marcuse suggests “looking at television or listening to AM¹¹ radio for one consecutive hour” (Marcuse 1991: xlix).

Marcuse’s theory of the ineffectual nature of art in capitalism stems from his notion of “true” and “false” needs. Linked to the traditional Marxist idea of “false consciousness,” Marcuse’s asserts that humans have “true” needs that can never be addressed by modern capitalism. The false needs, which are perpetuated in the market economy, always triumph over the true needs. Marcuse writes:

We may distinguish between true and false needs. “False” those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice. Their satisfaction might be most gratifying to the individual, but this happiness is not a condition which has to be maintained and protected if it serves to arrest the development of the ability (his own and others) to recognize the disease of the whole and grasp the chances of curing the disease. The result then is euphoria in unhappiness. Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to thing category of false needs (Marcuse 1991, 5).

¹⁰ Marcuse’s view of art in capitalism would change as he grew older, and later in his life he was more willing to allow for “radical” art in the context of the modern industrial society (Lukes 1985, 13). That being said, in this paper I am addressing Marcuse’s argument as it is presented in *One-Dimensional Man*.

¹¹ Prior to the late 1970s / early 1980s, AM radio broadcast mostly commercial pop music.

Marcuse argues that modern man cannot even distinguish between false and true needs. The false needs are *so ingrained* in the individual:

No matter how much such needs may have become the individuals own, reproduced and fortified by the conditions of his existence; no matter how much he identifies himself in them and finds himself in their satisfaction, they continue to be what they were from the beginning—products of a society whose dominant interest demands repression (Marcuse 1991: 5).

“True” needs, in contrast to the imposed false needs, stem from individuals *themselves*. They are initially based on vital needs and the “progressive alleviation of toil and poverty,” which are the only types of needs that have an “unqualified need for satisfaction” (Marcuse 1991: 5 – 6). After vital needs are satisfied, “individuals” must decide what their true needs are, but only “if and when they are free to give their own answer” (Marcuse 1991: 6). This “true need” / “false need” theory is predicated on the assumption that “people have true or real needs to be creative, independent, and autonomous agents in control of their own destinies” (Strinati 2004: 54). Marcuse, then, is concerned with the ability of individuals to make decisions based on *true* autonomy, which is a state of freedom that is not possible in modern capitalist societies. “Marcuse wants to make possible the genuine determination of need by demonstrating how to locate and to retrieve the *sources of human autonomy*” (Reitz 2000: 146). This true need is to be found in man’s “second dimension,” but modern capitalism forces into a one-dimensional existence. In this sense, the “individual” as *qua individual* is destroyed in industrial societies by the consumer’s obsession with false needs and the invasion of the capitalist society into the individual’s “inner freedom” (Marcuse 1991: 10). This obsession with false needs causes people to not question the “irrational” elements of society. The “satisfaction of ‘false needs’ . . . erodes the individuals’ drive to challenge the present” (Lukes 1985: 32). On Marcuse’s account, people are so concerned with buying the latest car, appliance, or stereo that they lose any notion of their “true” self in the process: “People recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their souls in their automobiles, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. . . . [S]ocial control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced” (Marcuse 1991: 9).

Art and popular culture play a very insidious role in Marcuse’s version of modern capitalism. Essentially, mass culture is a form of social control. Marcuse asks: “Can one really distinguish between the mass media as instruments of information and entertainment, and as agents of manipulation and indoctrination?” (Marcuse 1991: 8). Traditionally, Marcuse argues, art’s role was to criticize the social

order, and shine a light of reality upon society. However, that role is destroyed in modern capitalism. Ideally, on Marcuse's account, art allows the actual circumstances to be "placed in another dimension where given reality shows itself as that which it is." (Marcuse 1991: 62). In the Marcusian universe, art seeks to expose truth and reality. "The normative ground of reason in art derives from the *substantive universals* that art, like philosophy, is able to express." (Reitz 2000: 152). Marcuse believes that art can "project" existence, and consequently be radical (Marcuse 1991: 239). The critical function of art for Marcuse is its ability to represent the "transcendental truth." (Reitz 2000: 163). Ultimately, Marcuse argues that we *must* turn to the "aesthetic dimension for epistemological, emotional, and sociopolitical insight." (Reitz 2000: 184). Traditionally, argues Marcuse, art was the most effective means of societal protest: "Whether ritualized or not, art contains the rationality of negation. In its advanced positions, it is the Great Refusal – the protest against that which is" (Marcuse 1991: 63).

However, this *aesthetic dimension is impotent* in modern capitalism. Instead of offering critique, popular culture merely creates more false needs that help distract individuals from their true needs. Mass society cultivates and helps create false needs (Strinati 2004: 54). In other words, Marcuse sees most art in capitalism as "ensuring the creation and satisfaction of false needs, and the suppression of true needs. It is so effective in doing this that the working class is no longer likely to pose a threat to the stability and continuity of capitalism." (Strinati 2004: 54). Mass society destroys the "truth value" of art, its true "use value" according to Marcuse, and replaces it with the value of market conformity (Marcuse 1991: 57).

The commodity form of culture in industrial society helps "manipulate subversive imagination" and fortify the ruling order (Marcuse 1991: 23). All forms of "outsiders" are integrated into standard society: "The vamp, the national hero, the beatnik, the neurotic housewife, the gangster, the star, the charismatic tycoon... [serve] as an affirmation rather than negation of the established order." (Marcuse 1991, 59). Art's ability to protest is now destroyed by the integrating notions of mass society; its ability to dissent is now "flattened out" (Marcuse 1991: 64). In liberal-capitalism art becomes purely functional, and Marcuse, like Adorno, bemoans the *instrumental* use of art (Marcuse 1991: 65). In fact, art in liberal-capitalism enforces the ideas of the ruling class (Strinati 2004). It helps *erase* any class resentment or consciousness because the creation of false needs unites the different classes in their ability to "buy" relative satisfaction. On a close reading of *One-Dimensional Man*, it appears that Marcuse invests mass culture with an almost *supernatural* quality that resemble the systems of "power" in Foucault's thought (Brantlinger 1990: 167).

In the final Marcusian analysis, art takes the potentially free and liberal society of modern democratic-capitalism and creates a *totalitarian state*. Marcuse

“explains that society’s social control mechanisms became even more powerful when they integrate sexually suggestive and explicitly erotic and violent content into advertising and the mass media, and infuse this also into the content of mass entertainment and popular culture” (Reitz 2000: 144). This “pluralistic” popular culture actually produces a dehumanizing effect by forcing a sort of totalitarian harmony on society. Hence, by taking Adorno’s criticism of the “culture industry” to its logical conclusion, Marcuse offers a rather pessimistic version of modern capitalism and the potential for substantive art in such a society. Yet people exist who swear that art—both “high” art and “popular” art—has transformed their lives. Are these people deluded by “false needs” created by a “false consciousness?” Or is Marcuse essentially a “wet blanket” when it comes to the possibility of politically and/or socially meaningful art in a late-capitalist, liberal-democratic society?

Marcuse’s Crypto-Platonism and How He Misunderstands Culture

Given the rise of internet culture and the increasing commercial nature of the world, it would be *easy* to view art in capitalist societies in purely Marcusean terms. But what about the people who swear that their life was changed by popular culture? Is this appreciation of the political effects of popular culture a mere fulfillment of a “false” need? To fully illustrate this question, I shall digress into another personal story. When I was an eager undergraduate philosophy student, I had the opportunity to go out to dinner with two of my favorite professors. Both professors were (generally) members of so-called “baby boom” generation of Americans that came-of-age with civil rights, drugs, the Beatles, and Vietnam. However, one professor was white and from an upper-middle-class Boston family; while the other professor was African-American and grew up poor in Nashville. Despite these differences in backgrounds, both professors had very similar philosophies and life-views. As the three of us were enjoying our pad-thai and complaining about the ineptitude of the average undergraduate, the Motown song “Dancing in The Streets” (by Martha Reeves and the Vandellas) began to play over the restaurant loudspeakers. Both “boomers” immediately started to sing-along with the oldie, and they were amazed that I knew the song at all. Soon after the Motown hit was over, the African-American professor commented that “Dancing in the Street” meant so much to him and his young African-American friends during the civil-rights movement: “It was sort of a rallying call.” The white professor was stunned, stating that he always considered the song essentially a “fun” ditty with little or no substantial meaning. The two colleagues subsequently commenced a zealous discussion about the relative meaning (and merit) of the soul

classic. I sat there, callow and green, listening to this exchange as if I had secretly stumbled into a conversation between gods. During that dinner I learned a lot about philosophy, but I also learned an important lesson about the diverse meanings that popular culture can take in modern society.

Watching my two professors argue about a Motown song was refreshing given the generally esoteric nature of academic discussion. It also caused me to consider how these two individuals could have such divergent views of the same cultural artifact. The experience of my African-American professor is not fully accounted for by Marcuse's examination of popular culture. In fact, to a certain extent I think the Marcusean analysis is a bit *too* easy and cannot account for the complexity of culture in late-capitalism. Marcuse's theory is based on a sort of cheap "contingent" Platonism that searches for the "transcendental" truth in arts. This Platonism may be situational, but it is a form of Platonism nevertheless (Lukes 1985: 33 – 34; Reitz 2000: 151). Yet, if Marcuse's thought is based a bastardized Platonism, how would such "true" and "false" needs be tested? Is it just a case of the infamous elitism of the Frankfurt school?¹² (Strinati 2004: 70 –71; Honneth 2000: 116 – 127). In other words "we can still consider meaningful a form of social criticism that owes its standards not to an "immanent" ideas of the good or the just, but to "external" notions of value"¹³ (Honneth 2000: 117).

As the discussion on Rorty below will show, such notions of "external" value are *highly* suspect. I would assert than any search for a "true," unencumbered self is ultimately fruitless. The "self" is contingent on society, hence the notion of "true" and "false" needs is simply a case of *outdated* metaphysics rearing its ugly head. Like Ben Braddick at the end of *The Graduate*, we are always on the other side of the glass looking in to our illusory "true" self. If you "look" hard inside to find the "autonomous" self, and you encounter something, it is likely in the realm of fairies and angels. And though such topics (fairies and angels) are not "off the table" in philosophical discourse, I do not believe it is this type of "self" that Adorno and Marcuse had in mind. In the end, I believe, as section on Rorty below suggests, that the search for a *true* self is an attempt to dominate something that

¹² Honneth writes: "Be it Michel Foucault, Gramsci, or Herbert Marcuse, these intellectuals always remain so foreign to their own society that their diagnostic critique bears features of an arrogance that is dangerous because it cant be utilized strategically." (2000: 120). Of course, Foucault is not associated with the Frankfurt School, but he does have Marxist roots.

¹³ Honneth attempts to solve this puzzle by diagnosing capitalism with a possible pathology. However, I am not sure how this avoids the need for an *external* truth.

people feel is too amorphous for us to live comfortably. Ranciere writes that where “one searches for the hidden beneath the apparent, a position of mastery is established” (Ranciere 2004: 49). I believe the Frankfurt scholars are trying to “master” existence in a world they did not anticipate or desire.

Marcuse’s elitism is also implicitly seen in the “high art” / “low art” distinction of his philosophy. The Frankfurt School clings to a pre-industrial, but also pre-liberal, version of art. This distinction is based on antiquated foundationalism, and is not suited for the American experience. Any “essential and unabridged divide” between high art and popular culture is suspicious (Shusterman 2000: 169). In fact, the whole concept of “high” or “true” art is based on feudal class distinctions; and by evoking such criticisms, Marcuse “reinscribes and reinforces those painful divisions in society, and still more deeply in ourselves.” (Shusterman 2000: 170). On closer examination, one sees that the status of an art form as either “high” or “low” is a historically changing phenomenon: “[T]he popular entertainment of one culture (e.g. Greek or even Elizabethan drama) can become the high classics of a subsequent age” (Shusterman 2000: 169). For example, “novels went from being the most despised form of western culture to the most exalted in the space of a century.” (Cullen 1996: 15). Hence, the status of art is always shifting, and any attempt to rest a theory on the exalted standing of *some* art is intellectually dubious at best, and insidiously elitist at worst. This elitism, along with a groundless Platonism, is at the core of Marcuse’s thought—and it exposes its inherent weaknesses.

Benjamin and Artistic Optimism¹⁴

Not all Frankfurt Marxists view popular culture the same way as Adorno and Marcuse. As noted above, Walter Benjamin was “unofficially” affiliated with the Frankfurt school, and he also famously examined art in the context of mass culture (Strinati 2004: 73). In fact, as also mentioned above, Benjamin’s Artwork essay was edited (rather heavily) by both Horkheimer and Adorno, as well as published in a Frankfurt school publication (Leslie 2000: 130). That being said, Benjamin never really “fit in” with the cultural Marxists at the Frankfurt school. In fact, to a certain extent Benjamin rejected a traditional Marxist interpretation, arguing that it encouraged a conformism via collectivism that was mind-numbing¹⁵ (Leslie 2000:

¹⁴ The irony of Benjamin – who committed suicide – representing “optimism” is not lost on me.

¹⁵ For a good discussion—and debate—about how Benjamin fits into the context of Marxism and the Frankfurt School, see the following two texts: Terry Eagleton,

17 – 19). Benjamin also tended to be less elitist than the other Frankfurt scholars; “Benjamin does not remove himself from the conditions of mass reception ... the change in him comes from a certain provisional acceptance of the conditions of mass society, and not from the wish to dissociate himself from other inhabitants” (Gould 1999: 124). In this sense, Benjamin did not see art as *either* “revolutionary” or “bourgeois;” he was, in fact, the least systematic and analytic of the Frankfurt thinkers (Leslie 2000: 20; Hess 1999: 62). Despite this lack of systemization, Benjamin in his Artwork essay develops a compelling theory of art in modern industrial society.¹⁶

The key to understanding Benjamin’s aesthetics rests in a comprehension of the concept of artistic “aura.” The “aura” of an artwork is its “qualities that accrued to the artwork as a unique subject – its presence authenticity, and authority” (Hansen 1987: 183). For Benjamin, aura is the “strange weave of space and time” and is tied up with the authenticity of the piece of artwork.¹⁷ In this sense, “aura” is the *magical authenticity* of a piece—a feeling which was much more prevalent before the rise of industrial society and mass culture.

Some authors have attempted to equate “aura” with religious significance (Strinati 2004: 73). This is too simple a formulation however. Though “aura” is linked to religion, it is not *dependant* on the notion of religion. “Aura” is, merely, the romantic authenticity of art, a concept that simply had more conceptual traction in the pre-industrial age. Benjamin writes, in the Artwork essay:

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object (Benjamin 1986: 221).

Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism (London: Verso, 1981); and Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

¹⁶ The artwork essay also hints at the ways in which aesthetics in art can lead to fascism via the concept of the mass ornament. I will not, for the most part, address this issue.

¹⁷ It is proper here to note that I am indebted to Esther Leslie for his perceptive reading of Benjamin’s notion of aura.

For Benjamin, art is often based on traditional culture, and surrounds our “rituals” (Benjamin 1986: 223 – 224). In fact, aesthetics itself has its origins in our “corporal” being, and is often based on humans’ animal instinct (Buck-Morss 1993, 6 – 7). That being said, as humans developed “technological” art and methods of reproduction, artists began to attempt to “capture” auras using technology. This attempt failed, but it allowed us a method to truly examine and define the artistic aura:

We define the aura of the latter (natural objects) as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch. This image makes it easy to comprehend the social bases of the contemporary decay of the aura. It rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things “closer” spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming uniqueness of the every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction (Benjamin 1986: 222 – 223).

Though technology can be magical too, *it does not need an aura to convey its meaning* (Leslie 2000: 47, 55). The new art “provides the audience with a new capacity to study modern existence.” (Buck-Morss 1989: 268).

Artistic reproduction, the extension of mass society, carries a drastic re-interpretation of time. Benjamin writes that even “the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place it happens to be” (Benjamin 1986: 220). Art in the age of reproduction does not need an aura, it can now “meet the beholder halfway.” (Benjamin 1986: 220; Leslie 2000: 55). With this new form of art, a new type of sense perception is developed. “As Freud has altered our awareness of language, he argues, cinematic techniques such as close-up, time lapse and slow motion photography and, above all, montage have changed our perception of the visual world” (Hansen 1987: 209).

Mechanical reproduction, the prerequisite of popular culture, on Benjamin’s account, actually frees art:

[F]or the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the “authentic” print makes no sense. But the instant criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it is based on another practice-politics (Benjamin 1986: 224).

Given the new forms of technological reproduction, art is losing its aura.¹⁸ Soon, “art” for “art’s sake” becomes a legitimate reason of creation, and a notion of authenticity becomes meaningless (Strinati 2004: 73 – 74).

Ultimately, Benjamin views the rise of popular culture and mass-produced art as (mostly) a good thing. In other words, Benjamin suggests that the work of art that is reproducible might have lost its aura and autonomy, but it has become available to *more people*. In a sense, Benjamin views the age of mass culture as a “reformation of pre-bourgeois folkloric special relations,” where the tactile and corporal was the basis of aesthetic pleasure (Leslie 2000: 151). Hence, film and other types of modern arts are more representative of “human perception” in the industrial age (Hansen 1987: 184). Given this, the age of mechanical reproduction redeems culture from a “dead-end of cult and social privilege” (Hansen 1987: 184). For Benjamin, the loss of the aura, and the rise of popular culture is essentially a democratic process, and should be embraced by the left. In the final analysis, “Benjamin stresses the democratic and participatory rather than the authoritarian and repressive potential of contemporary popular culture” (Strinati 2004: 75).

Benjamin seems to understand mass culture and the way it works on a fundamental level. He has attempted to fulfill Barthes’ promise to put the “reader” back in experience¹⁹ (Barthes 1977: 148). Whereas Marcuse and Adorno viewed culture, especially popular culture, as a “mirror” to society, Benjamin saw culture more as an interaction. He saw even consumption as an act of re-interpreting culture (Hansen 1987: 222). People “take pleasure” in art, and its meaning is in “context” of society (Melchionne 1999: 247). As people re-direct their lives in this context, such art is transformative. Of course, this effect would be impossible

¹⁸ Though Benjamin is generally optimistic of potential meaning in popular cultures, he is kind of ambivalent about the decline in aura. He is also clear the mere popularity does not make art worthwhile.

¹⁹ Of course, Benjamin predates Barthes.

without the development of popular culture. Mass culture democratizes art, and it does so in powerful ways. In fact, some authors have openly admitted that Benjamin is the only “Marxist” who understood the power of mass culture correctly (Gracyk 1999: 205 – 220). Such popular culture is a vast, complex, interactive system, which helps give meaning to modern life. However, Benjamin offers little in the way of explanation of how an *individual* reacts in the context of revolutionary culture. Benjamin, despite writing from a very personal perspective, paints with a large *societal* brush. The individual can become a bit lost in Benjamin’s notion of modern culture.

Rorty to the Rescue

Richard Rorty offers a useful view of how potentially revolutionary culture interacts with the individual citizen in modern liberal capitalist societies. Though Rorty’s theory is not perfect, it *is* an empowering and democratic philosophy of art and politics that, I believe, has a liberating effect. That being said, Rorty’s ideas about art are complex, and are rooted in his epistemology and metaphysics.²⁰ Given this complexity, his theory needs a bit of intellectual “unpacking,” which I will attempt to do.

For Rorty, “truth” is contingent on language, and hence in human interpretation. To the extent that only a sentence can be either “true” or “false,” there is no eternal truth outside of human experience. Rorty writes:

To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations. Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind – because sentences cannot exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own – unaided by the describing activities of human beings – cannot (Rorty 1989: 5).

Just as sentences are human creations, and hence dependant on human beings, whole human vocabularies (the vocabulary of, say, physics) cannot completely correspond to the world. It is “difficult to think of the world as making [one of these vocabularies] better than another” (Rorty 1989: 5). The “world” cannot decide and judge; only humans can do that. This does not mean that our judgments are without purpose. Humans judge using a variety of selected criteria

²⁰ *Anti*-metaphysics?

(usefulness, beauty, love, etc). However, this does not mean that these “judgments” embrace theories that are closer to the “truth.” In other words, “the fact that Newton’s vocabulary lets us predict the world more easily than Aristotle’s does not mean that the world speaks Newtonian. The world does not speak. Only we do” (Rorty 1989: 6).

Following this anti-foundationalist metaphysics, Rorty concludes that any notion of a “true” self is essentially useless. Adopting Davidson’s analysis, Rorty argues that the only internal “truths” that could (possibly) be agreed upon would be completely trivial and vague. These truths, in which we could find the “true self” are “so abstract and empty as to have no mediating powers” (Rorty 1989: 6). A search for a true self, which is necessary in order to find Marcusian “true” needs, can “reveal nothing about the order of things other than that there is no such order within human beings” (Casey 2002: 85). The implication of Rorty’s theory “discredits the whole idea of one ‘true self’” (Shusterman 2000, 242).

In this sense, the Rortian “self” is similar to the unencumbered self of communitarian thought (Crittenden 1992: 27) (I will explore this connection in greater detail below.) For Rorty, our notion of a “self” is the product of complete socialization—there is no “true” self outside of that socialization. “Moral consciousness’ is contingent and ‘historically conditioned,’ so much so that people can even be socialized to regard torture and humiliation of others as something noble and good”²¹ (Casey 2002: 85). In this contingency, Rorty sees the place for only the recognition of irony and chance, and an embrace of said characteristics. “[W]e should look at [life] ‘ironically,’ acknowledging the contingency of everything about ourselves and our beliefs” (Rorty 1989: 15). For Rorty, even the notion of a “mind” is merely a useful concept.

As stated above, without a notion of a “true self” any notion of “true needs” falls into the realm of fairies and angels. Rorty is willing to acknowledge that “within a language game” a certain belief could be the product of what Marxists call “false consciousness” (Rorty 1989: 48). Yet he states that it would be nearly impossible to actually make the determination of such coercion, even with the given language game. Hence, for practical discourse, the notion of a “true need” is metaphysical language. Of course, Marcuse thinks that true needs are historically contingent, but that assertion seems more like a token nod in the direction of anti-foundationalism. For throughout *One-Dimensional Man* Marcuse refers to true needs as if there were based on an ontological certainty of self (This is why, above, I referred to this argument as a sort of “contingent Platonism.” I could have also—I suppose—have referred to such a line of thinking as crypto-Cartesian or crypto-

²¹ I imagine that people *can* also be socialized to think that torture and humiliation of *themselves* is noble and good.

Kantian.) The Rortian self can have no “true” needs outside of the context of the social and its contingent culture (Ferguson 1989: 4). Rorty denies the “very idea of anything – mind or matter, self or world – having an intrinsic nature to be expressed or represented” (Rorty 1989: 4). Identities, like everything else, are “contingent, learned, and historically malleable” (Rorty 1989: 45). “[H]uman beings make truth rather than find it” (Rorty 1989: 36).

This world without metaphysics, without a “true” self, is connected to the notion of a liberal society. Rorty writes:

The difference between a search for foundations and an attempt at redescription is emblematic of the difference between the culture of liberalism and older forms of cultural life. For in its ideal form, the culture of liberalism would be one which was enlightened, secular, through and through. It would be one in which no trace of divinity remained. ... The process of de-divinization ... would, ideally, culminate in our no longer being able to see any use for the notion that finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings might derive the meanings of their lives from anything except other finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings (Rorty 1989: 45).

With the end of divinity, and the coming of the liberal age, the whole notion of a “true essence” gets tossed aside.

Given this lack of true essence, Rorty sees the “purpose” of human existence as the self-creation of meaning²² (Rorty 1989: 36). This self-creation is the great possibility of humanity, what separates us from animals. We can, as Rorty states, “will” our meaning (Rorty 1989: 37). Given this notion of self-creation without a foundational *telos*, Rorty sees the only standard, albeit a subjective one, as ultimately one of *aesthetic* self-creation—living one’s life as if the life itself was a poem. Rorty acknowledges his debt to Nietzsche in advocating the aesthetic life. The Nietzschean world, according to Rorty, is one where we viewed “human history as the history of successive metaphors,” and which would “let us see the poet, in the generic sense of the maker of new languages, as the vanguard of the species” (Rorty 1989: 20).

Though Rorty wants to move away from some of the elitism of the Nietzschean world-view, this notion of metaphor is crucial to Rorty’s theory. Rorty links human self-creation to the use of a new “vocabulary”: “[T]he human self is created by the use of a new vocabulary” (Rorty 1989: 7). By vocabulary, Rorty is speaking of ways to understand the world—the symbols we use to make meaning

²² He would deny this was universal purpose, however.

possible. Hence, metaphor—the new use of vocabulary—is key in Rorty’s world. Rorty, like the romantics, thinks that the “talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change” (Rorty 1989: 8). It is for this reason that Rorty advocates that philosophy seek new and “better” ways to describe the world (Rorty 1989: 9).

As mentioned above, this idea of human self-creation is tied to aesthetics, for aesthetics do not require a *telos* (Schoolman 2001: 224 – 225). Given this, artistic self-creation is key to human existence for Rorty. On Rorty’s account, we should create the self in accordance with our aesthetic will. Identity, hence, is linked to performance. “[I]dentities arise from the way that selves are enacted, from systems of signification that we dramatize.” (Casey 2002: 79 – 80). Rorty sees this notion in Freud’s theory of the subconscious, which shows us “how to see every human life as a poem” (Rorty 1989: 35). Given this “life as a poem,” humans can now break from the past and create our own world. On Rorty’s account, Freud, like Walt Whitman,²³ sees the human life as an incomplete poem (Rorty 1989: 40).

From Rorty’s point of view, Marcuse’s criticisms of art in liberal-capitalist societies are not criticisms at all. Such “criticisms” show the poverty of Marcuse’s philosophy more than they reveal anything useful about liberal society. For Rorty, we are all “created” by outside forces; the notion that given the lack of cultural “coercion” we could look inside and find our “true” needs is a complete non-starter. There are no “needs” *at all* outside of socialization. The goal for the Rortian being is to create as distinct life-poem as possible within such social relations. A search for the “true self” (via the realization of “true needs”) will always lead to emptiness. Looking for “truth,” like Nietzsche wrote, is a chase which will lead us nowhere. “Self-knowledge [is] self-creation” (Rorty 1989: 27).

As Whitman would suggest, the United States is the perfect society for individual self-creation. American democracy is the “best friend of aesthetic individuality” (Schoolman 2002: 237). It is the country with “wide open spaces” and its mythology is one of rugged individualism. The U.S. contains seeds of the “spirit of playfulness” that Rorty so desires, and which he sees as central to the appreciation of the value of metaphor. For Rorty, old-world, “absolute” truths are *boring*.²⁴ (Rorty 1989: 47). The worst possible fear for the Rortian individual is to be a “copy” of something or somebody else. Of course, we desire the comforts of other people, and hence there is a tug-and-pull between the “togetherness” and the

²³ Walt Whitman is the perfect poet for this notion of self-creation. His work can be seen as an ode to self-creation on the individual and national level.

²⁴ Rorty opines with great wit: “Decent people are often rather dull. Great wits are sure to madness near allied.” (1989: 35).

“unique.” Ultimately, however, self-creation is our goal—our unique ability as humans (Rorty 1989: 24 – 25).

Since our “selves” are socially constructed, and our contingent purpose is to find our unique voice in the midst of a manufactured reality, art plays a crucial role in liberal society. The experience of art, as both an artist and—to a lesser extent—an appreciator of art, is indispensable to Rortian self-creation. In fact, the Rortian utopia would be a sort of liberal artistic colony (Casey 2002: 87). In contrast to the Marcusean view, we do not look deep into ourselves (to the “uncoerced” self); we need to *create* ourselves via art, aesthetics, and culture²⁵ (Schoolman 2001: 187).

Like Nietzsche, Rorty’s “depth” resides in the “surface.” “According to Nietzsche, whenever the surface of the world is formed aesthetically, its depth is reflected on the surface as the meaning and value attached by the artist (the creator) to the new form in which the world appears” (Schoolman 2001: 187). Rorty also wants a complexity of surface, which he argues would be equated to the surface of depth. He wants to see the world *as* a poem. This Rortian view “requires nothing more than a particular kind of superficiality or “lightness,” a simple interest in the immediate possibilities of the present and a commonplace indifference about “deep” questions of meaning and purpose” (Casey 2002: 194). On Rorty’s account, the performance of our lives is our total culture. To engage in Marcuse’s argument is to accept a quasi-Platonic view of art, society, and philosophy (Casey 2002: 120). Rorty will have none of this. He essentially embraces western-capitalist society, and its implications for the future. Of course, society needs to watch for the dangers of the market—conformism, commodification, etc. That being said, Rorty generally sees a symbiotic relationship between art / aesthetics and liberal-democratic-capitalist societies.

Problems with Rorty, or “You Look Like an Idiot Dancing Alone”

As stated above, I am sympathetic to Rorty’s position. That being said, I think there are some problems with his view. First, to a certain extent Rorty himself is grounded in an old-world view. His notion of self-creation reeks of “coming to terms” with a world without a metaphysical foundation. As Casey writes, this view collapses into a form of existential “therapy”:

But to the extent self-creation has any meaning at all it means therapeutic self-creation: telling stories about ourselves, and playing with different

²⁵ As noted previously, Rorty’s view is very similar to Whitman’s secular utopia.

roles and personae, with greater or less skill, as a consolation for the inability to *truly* make ourselves anything we will. There is never self-creation as such, even for the artistic few: only the semblance of it (Casey 2002: 89).

Though Casey eventually exonerates Rorty because a “semblance” of self-creation is all we can muster at all, I am more troubled by this implication. Rorty hinges his whole argument on the notion that our meaning is contingent and self-created. If his solution to that problem – artistic self-creation – is merely a consolation prize, then it calls into question his whole “argument.” If, as Schoolman writes, “[m]ortality ... limits individuality’s creativity in time and space,” then our life-poem is sort of a “second-rate” existence (Schoolman 2001: 241). At the very least, it implies that the “less” artistic have to settle for a lesser existence. If such is the case, it questions the democratic nature of Rorty’s argument.

The democratic nature of Rorty’s view is also called into question by his insistence on the idea that we need to be strictly individualistic in our self-poems. As noted above, for Rorty the worst possible outcome is to be discovered as a fraud. Yet, it seems that one could find meaning in the *already crafted* roles of society. Richard Shusterman writes:

But why can’t our autonomy be expressed in the freedom to define ourselves through an already existing life-style or language? There is no reason why freedom to be oneself should be incompatible with being like others, unless we conflate autonomy with radical individualism. Indeed, the Rortian compulsion to create oneself in novel fashion can itself be seen as a form of non-autonomy, and bondage to the new and individualistic (Shusterman 2000: 254).

Rorty wants us to create ourselves via our own will—to “not be a copy.” Can we really—as Mama Cass suggests—have a society of people all dancing *alone* to individual music? Though some of us have hyper-individualistic strands of personality, many people find gratification in fulfilling *defined* roles. To say that such roles are not “real” self-creation is as crypto-Platonic as Marcuse’s “true needs.” Yet, Rorty’s theory is illuminating; we *are not*, in fact, the Hegelian receptors of aesthetics that Benjamin implied. In other words, “Rorty’s vision of the aesthetic life needs to be expanded to embrace more of the social” (Shusterman 2000: 257). Nevertheless, even a neo-Rortian position does not *completely* address the issues raised by Marcuse and left unanswered by Benjamin.

A Modest Proposal – A Theory of Art in Liberal-Capitalist Society

In this final section, I will offer a modest theory about the way that way that art functions vis-à-vis politics and the individual in a liberal-capitalist society. My theory seeks to avoid the pitfalls of Marcuse, Benjamin, and Rorty: Yet, as implied above, it takes as its starting-point the contention that the world is without non-contingent foundations. I take seriously Wittgenstein's famous claim, updated somewhat in an ironic fashion by Richard Rorty, that languages do not exist independently of the ability to communicate with someone else. Nevertheless, I think Rorty's view is *too* individualistic. That being said, a discussion of the thought of the so-called "communitarians" and Jacques Ranciere will help us re-constitute a viable Rortian view.

Communitarianism²⁶

Communitarianism developed in reaction to the individualism of liberalism, and it contends that man is defined by a set of roles (Crittenden 1992: 21). Those roles were once fixed and certain, but eventually they became the matter of choice. However, though the roles are chosen, the virtues associated with such roles are not. "Thus the pursuit of the good provided choices among the roles within the boundaries of the hierarchy of virtues" (Crittenden 1992: 22). In these virtues, people found meaning and value. The communitarians are deeply troubled by the collapse of such virtues in the modern world. They mourn the loss of a *telos*. "Adrift in a sea of competition and commercialism, unable to anchor their aims to anything but desires, men were lost, not free" (Crittenden 1992: 23).

The communitarians share with Rorty the notion that the "self" is fixed within social realities (Crittenden 1992: 31). There is no "true" self outside of society. In a wonderful passage from his book *After Virtue*, communitarian author Alasdair MacIntyre writes:

I am brother, cousin and grandson, member of this household, that village, this tribe. These are not characteristics that belong to human

²⁶ Though I recognize that there are differences among the various communitarian thinkers, this paper is not the place to flesh out such differences. By "communitarian" I mean thinkers such as Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Michael Sandel. The strand of communitarianism from which I borrow most heavily is based on MacIntyre.

beings accidentally, to be stripped away in order to discover ‘the real me’. They are part of my substance, defining partially at least and sometimes wholly my obligations and my duties. Individuals inherit a particular space within an interlocking set of social relationships: lacking that space, they are nobody, or at best a stranger or an outcast. To know oneself as such a social person is however not to occupy a static and fixed position. It is to find oneself placed at a certain point on a journey with set goals (MacIntyre 1984: 33 – 34).

On MacIntyre’s account, liberal societies have too many choices, and individuals have no framework by which to choose between competing claims. Without a unity of morals, life lacks meaning. MacIntyre advocates an Aristotelian hierarchy of virtues that would provide us with a teleological basis of society (Crittenden 2002).

Jacques Ranciere

French thinker Jacques Ranciere can be helpful in this discussion by addressing how art shapes the individual, as well as how that “shaping” is a political act. On Ranciere’s account, aesthetics sets the limits of politics by shaping human experience:

If the reader is fond of analogy, aesthetics can be understood in a Kantian sense – re-examined perhaps by Foucault – as a system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time (Ranciere 2004: 13).

Art *shapes* politics by defining the possibility of debate and the way that signs are interpreted. This is why “[w]hen *Madame Bovary* was published ... [it was] immediately perceived as ‘democracy in literature’” (Ranciere 2004: 14).

In fact, the way in which art informs the world is political, and always linked to politics. Like Rorty, Ranciere believes aesthetics allow us to create a state without a *telos*, “a moment when form is experienced for itself” (Ranciere 2004: 14). Of course, for Rorty this non-teleological society is the liberal-democratic state. Ranciere does not *necessarily* share Rorty’s affinity for modern western society, but

he does agree that aesthetics and politics are always linked: In fact, art always contains a sort of “meta-politics.” (Rorty 2004: 60).

A Solution

As suggested above, I am mostly on Rorty’s “team,” in that I believe he has a functioning theory of art in modern society that goes farther in understanding the core of popular culture than the Marxism of Adorno, Marcuse, or even Benjamin. That being said, I think that communitarians and Ranciere can help *tweak* Rorty’s theory so that it is *more* useful and accurate.

The “self” starts with a semi-fixed social reality, and is “defined” within that reality. However, given a social reality, humans search for identity in a narrative community. MacIntyre’s “drama” metaphor is essentially correct, in the sense that we play out our life as “characters.” Though I think MacIntyre is correct about this initial process, he neglects how we eventually *choose* some roles. MacIntyre is a bit too ready to sacrifice the individual to the community for the *sake* of continuous narrative. This surrender to the “whole” is not helpful in an individual’s search for meaning because it creates resentment (Crittenden 1992: 24 – 25). Though the forfeit of the individual completely to the *telos* of the community is troubling, endless choices without any basis for judgment do not equal freedom, and does not lead to a meaningful life. In my view, we, as individuals, are *situated* in a range of roles—born into a “cultural social.” In fact, the “very ideal of private self-creation, the desire for individual distinction and originality, is itself the product of the pressures of a given public field” (Shusterman 2000: 256).

Given this self “situated” in the context of the society, we interact with art as it is produced by others, and possibly as we create it. This art generally creates either a comforting or non-comforting reaction.²⁷ Much of mass culture is, as Marcuse suggests, designed to be familiar and comforting: yet not all of it fits his image. Hence, we react in various ways. This reaction to culture is constant, and forms part of our existence; “each individual forms its self differently through forms of small difference others take” (Schoolman 2001: 285).

Sometimes, culture is so disconcerting or powerful that it transforms us. We then “re-situate” ourselves in the social narrative. This “re-situation” can occur throughout the cultural landscape, and often is caused by popular culture. Quasi-communitarian thinker Mark Reinhardt writes that we *define* ourselves by our culture:

²⁷ I am summarizing for the sake of simplicity; there are myriad reactions.

Hip-hop, country, piercing, soap operas, tabloids, pick-up trucks, hunting rifles—though they lie outside the field of political vision for most students of political science, these genres and objects all number among the means through which contemporary selves are (re)made. Such forms of subjectivity inflect our everyday encounters with others, shaping our speech, helping us to map our social worlds, filtering and at times even producing the divisions that run through the polity (Reinhardt 2000: 112).

This “situating” in the context of the cultural social defines who we, as individuals, and we, as society, are. It “determines those who have a part in the community of citizens” (Ranciere 2004: 12).

Art can “effect” us in various ways, even to the point of alleviating pain (Bernstein 2003: 131). Thus, depending on our reaction, the power of the art, and our own judgment, we might decide to “re-situate” ourselves to our culture. Hence, our identity is formed *not only as the creator of aesthetics, but its receiver too*. Rorty himself suggests this when he writes about the “parasitic” nature of new vocabularies (Rorty 1989: 9). This is similar to the Nietzschean notion that “identity is formed through an aesthetic receptivity to the surface” (Schoolman 2001: 156). It is this interaction, this “encounter with [the] otherness” of culture, which forms our “independent” and national identities (Reinhardt 2000: 113). Rorty hints at this interpretation of culture when he complains that philosophy is not romantic or inspirational any longer (Rorty 1989: 130 – 131).

My proposed theory of art in liberal-capitalistic is in direct contrast with Marcuse. It denies the notion of a “true” need, and hence that mass culture produces “false” needs. It also rebuffs the notion that art is impotent to change people in the context of a market society. My theory can be viewed as a sort of “community-friendly Rorty,” or possibly a communitarianism without a fixed *telos*. Despite my hostility to the Marcusian position, I do not deny that the market often has “negative” effects on culture. I aesthetically reject the glut of reality shows, boring rock music, and bad literature that is produced daily in the “west.” That being said, popular culture shapes identity and has the potential to change society. In fact, by “relativizing our relations to the world, aesthetic receptivity thus chastens ... an interest in dominance and mastery” (Schoolman 2001: 177). To change society, one will likely *have* to change some aspect of its aesthetic sensibility (Ranciere 2004: 60 –61).

Considering the above analysis, it is my contention that in liberal-capitalism we emulate and imitate the togetherness of our differences. Hence, my theory consists of a “situated self” that then “reacts” to culture, and that culture *may* inspire the individual to “re-situate” himself in the context of the cultural social. As noted above, this theory can almost be seen as a synthesis of Rorty and

MacIntyre. “One can style oneself aesthetically, create one’s life as a work of art, by adopting and adapting familiar roles and life-styles, adjusting generic forms to one’s contingent circumstances” (Shusterman 2000, 253). Like the Liv Ullman character in Ingmar Bergman’s film *Persona*, one must embrace the “roles” we play even if we know those roles are contingent. In this sense, we are unmasked by putting on masks.

Finally, I believe the above-stated theory addresses the thoughts of Adorno, Marcuse and Benjamin, as well as the pitfalls of Rorty. Contrary to Marcuse’s contention, popular culture *can* change society. Rock music, for example, helped pave the way for the completion of the civil rights movement by aesthetically blending black and white culture (Cullen 1996: 14). This is echoed in my above-described story concerning the two professors reaction to “Dancing in the Street.” In other words, the promise of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech was forecasted by the shaking of Elvis’ hips as well as the beat-poetry / hyper-blues of Chuck Berry’s classic songs. As suggested, change *can* occur via popular culture; it contains the real possibility of social reform, even if only by first liberating us from the “pain of cultural oppression” (Shusterman 2000: 170). Though it is often of limited aesthetic value (as with all art), “popular culture was given voice to the oppressed and generated dialogues that have been heard all around the world” (Cullen 196: 14).

Though it has the potential for changing society, popular culture mostly helps define us as individuals. That is, I believe, what the dancers at the above-mentioned Christmas party were trying to do. They were attempting to re-situate themselves in the context of a new sonic vocabulary. That “re-situation” has real effects—on individual, social, and political levels. Without this cultural map to help us decide where we want to go, we would be continuously lost.

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