

***Moral TechEducation:
The Role of Imagination to Humanize Technological Societies***

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The Barcelona Conference on Education 2020
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The age of advanced technologies (industry 4.0, robots, sophisticated machines able to replace human workers) has already arrived. We cannot stop to debate on the ethical demands for a human sustainability of this technological progress, and for sure we must ask ourselves if education is already providing tools to manage this epochal transition. Education seems having been too contents-oriented over the last fifty years. Contents is what really matters and what we must achieve: form is considered a sort of plus, related to people's freedom. This slow and inexorable passage to contents centered institutional education, has had a visible consequence: the aesthetical question of the form has turned into the main requisite of a culture based only on consuming. So the argument is still relevant: will education be able to give an aesthetic perception of the self and of the world around? When we talk of aesthetic awareness we mean that particular consciousness linked to imagination. This proposal aims to use contemporary philosophical issues on aesthetic (theories by Herbert Marcuse, Arnold Gehlen, Peter Sloterdijk) to affirm the role of imagination as a necessary framework for any technological education.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Marcuse, Education, Ethics, Advanced Technologies

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The International Academic Forum
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Introduction

Aesthetics is still important in education today, in a changing world where technocracy and capitalistic beauty dominate. The philosophy of Aesthetics (perception, representation, art) keeps imagination alive helping people not be dominated by reality: would it be able to play a central humanistic role in the age of advanced technologies as well? And if yes, how could it be? We start reading some pages from Marcuse, which will be the basis for further analysis and debate.

Reshaping *obscenity*: a conceptual category in challenging scenarios

A small simple word has been used by Herbert Marcuse to introduce his *Essay on Liberation*: obscenity. What does this mean? In the Latin language, *obscenum* meant something that is beyond the stage. Theatre has been conducted for centuries. It includes a main stage for acting, in front of spectators, spaces behind the scenes and off stage assigned to actors, writers, directors, screenplay writers, staff and technicians and life around rehearsals. Therefore, what is called *obscenum*, born in an aesthetic context of drama and performance, could actually be meant as something hidden, unofficial, secretive, not public. However, only the modern meaning of the word *obscenum* is known in its present-day usage. It currently means indecent, awful, vile, also unfortunate and sad. Therefore, an investigation into Marcuse's use of the word is, is necessary, because obscenity plays a central role in the development of Marcuse critical theory, and in its unique aesthetic theory in particular.

«The category of *obscenity* will serve as an introduction. This society is *obscene* in producing and indecently exposing a stifling abundance of wares while depriving its victims abroad of the necessities of life; *obscene* in stuffing itself and its garbage cans while poisoning and burning the scarce foodstuffs in the field of its aggression; *obscene* in the words and smiles of its politicians and entertainers; in its prayers, in its ignorance, and in the wisdom of its kept intellectuals. *Obscenity* is a moral concept in the verbal arsenal of the Establishment, which abuses the term by applying it, not to expressions of its own morality but to those of another»¹.

«This society» of consumerism, we understand, is obscene: the way it produces and imposes goods, the way it is represented by its politicians, intellectuals and entertainers.

It seems we are facing an oxymoron. Society is a common representation of community, *societas* is the word used in Latin, indicating a particular kind of association, an inclusive, settled, harmonious being recognized and by all as a part of it. What we would like to assume is that claiming a society can be obscene, in some way, is like defining a symphony off key. In so much as it is quite impossible that a musical score is off key by itself, so it is difficult to think of a society in terms of obscenity, and this is what Marcuse has in mind. For this reason the inquiry on this concept follows.

«*Obscene* is not the picture of a naked woman who exposes her public hair but that of a fully clad general who exposes his medals rewarded in a war of aggression; *obscene* is not the ritual of the Hippies but the declaration of a high dignitary of the Church that

¹ Marcuse, H.(1969), *A Biological Foundation for Socialism?*, in *An Essay on Liberation*, Beacon Press, Boston; e-book ISBN 978-08070-05958. It is my choice to highlight the word «obscene» in cursive.

war is necessary for peace. Linguistic therapy – that is, the effort to free words (and thereby concepts) from the all but total distortion of their meanings by the Establishment – demands the transfer of moral standards (and of their validation) from the Establishment to the revolt against it. Similarly the sociological and political vocabulary must be radically re-shaped: it must be stripped of its false neutrality; it must be methodically and provocatively “moralized” in terms of the Refusal»².

Marcuse links the idea of obscenity to his sexual theories in *Eros and Civilization*, writing that it belongs to the sexual sphere, “shame and the sense of guilt arise in the Oedipal situation”, so that obscenity is not a materialistic concern, but a psychoanalytic concern. But the main point here is that obscenity is the Establishment’s concept assimilated by a specific moral framework: *obscenum* is something that is behind or off stage, in a play where the dominant role has been played by the Establishment since the beginning. What if this category removed from the established framework? In opposition to the Establishment, we find *the great refusal*, as Marcuse writes. So what is the meaning of obscenity in the framework of refusal?

The surprising answer is that the same significance indicates the overturning of scenarios. If the Establishment is on stage, obviously obscene is what stands on the ground behind and off, but if we move the Establishment from the stage, it immediately takes up the space of obscenity.

«The so called consumer economy and the politics of corporate capitalism have created a second nature of man which ties him libidinally and aggressively to the *commodity form*. The need for possessing, consuming, handling, and constantly renewing the gadgets, devices, instruments, engines, offered to and imposed upon the people, for using these wares even at the danger of one’s own destruction, as become a «biological» need in the sense just defined. The second nature of man thus militates against any change that would disrupt and perhaps even abolish this dependence of man on a market even more densely filled with merchandise – abolish his existence as a consumer consuming himself in buying and selling. The needs generated by this system are thus eminently stabilizing, conservative needs: the counterrevolution anchored in the instinctual structure»³.

Form and Reification: *The Aesthetic Dimension*

A more subtle idea can be read when looked at more closely: Capitalism has generated a second nature in human beings, a second instinctual life that expresses itself in a specific biological need for goods. That is *obscene*, because this second nature has been artificially created to dominate the primary one and to reduce primary impulses to silence, and it is able to do all so due to *commodity form*. This expression should be underlined because the real *counterrevolution and revolt* will be revealed only in a conflict between *forms* of reality and needs: commodity form and the aesthetic form.

First of all, it is quite understandable that Marcuse is suggesting a deep connection between form and needs, in the sense that needs are produced by shapes of contents which force our capabilities of reasoning.

² Marcuse, H., *Ibidem*.

³ *Ibid*. It is my choice to highlight the words «commodity form» in cursive.

Returning to *One Dimensional Man*, and remembering what he wrote about «introjected» values and «false» needs. The distance between his analysis of consumer society and the traditional Marxist theory can be superficially explained by this speculative passage pertinent to the relation between workers and the system. Marcuse, contrary to Marx, understood that the workers are entirely integrated within modern society, in a way that makes current Capitalism absolutely unique. Workers could be victims of introjected values and false needs, however they work for and to an extent to achieve those needs. Even if a revolution happens under these conditions, and it is quite uncertain it will, because workers are too busy acquiring goods, the people, having assimilated artificial consumption-based values, would only reproduce the repressive structure that had conditioned and subjected them. Marcuse is truly assertive when he stresses this serious, alarming difference, that only if and when people have freed their minds, can they be affected by any material change; only if they are able to change their consciousness (meaning their form of reality, their imagination) will they be capable of a change in relations. While Marx maintained that only by changing men's economic relations could their consciousness be changed⁴.

This emphasis on consciousness and its power of introjecting values linked to false needs, is precisely what allows Marcuse to go forward and overcome the Marxist conceptual acquisitions of *reification* and objectification. Reification is the objectification of social relations or of those involved in relations, and implies that objects are transformed into subjects and subjects are turned into objects, with the result that subjects are rendered passive, while objects are rendered as the active, determining factor. If alienation is the general condition of human estrangement in production processes, reification is a specific *form* of alienation.

The importance of the form is again reaffirmed, just as in George Lukacs' work, where he treats reification as a problem of capitalist society related to the prevalence of the commodity form, through a close reading of Marx's chapter on commodity fetishism in *Capital*. In more recent times philosopher Martha Nussbaum, in her analysis of objectification in *Sex and Social Justice*, interprets reification as an absence of autonomy, a deprivation of subjectivity awareness:

«Absence of true autonomy is absolute crucial to the analysis, as is also instrumentality and absence of concern for experiences and feelings (although Marx seems to grant that workers are still treated with some lingering awareness of their humanity and are not regarded altogether as tools or even animals). Workers are also treated as quite thoroughly fungible, both with other able-bodied workers at times with machines. They are not, however, treated as inert: their value to the capitalist producer consists precisely in their activity»⁵.

On the other hand, the German philosopher Axel Honneth reformulates this key western Marxist concept in terms of intersubjective relations of recognition and power in his recent work *Reification*. Instead of having an effect of the structural character of

⁴ Marcuse, H.(1964), *One Dimensional Man: studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* , Beacon Press, Boston; see Woods, R. (1989-1990), *A critical evaluation of Herbert Marcuse's An Essay of Liberation*, UC Davis University of California, <http://prizedwriting.ucdavis.edu/past/1989-1990>.

⁵ Nussbaum, M. C.(1999), *Objectification*, in *Sex and Social Justice*, Oxford University Press, NY.

social systems such as capitalism, Honneth contends that all forms of reification are due to pathologies of intersubjectivity based on struggles for recognition⁶.

In *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Marcuse's purpose is to determine the revolutionary essence of art by writing about a «dimension» in which everything is possible, the retreat «into a world of fiction where existing conditions are changed and overcome only in the realm of imagination».

When we talk about reality, its social and political standards, we refer to something that stands in such ways of individuation, “this is how things are” we can easily say, involuntary approving of the state of things. Following our thread of analysis, reality has contents which must be managed, but which is the *form* that instills our actions? Form is what aims to guide our perceptions and our frame of mind. Well, the aesthetic dimension is exactly where form nourishes itself: «literature can be called revolutionary in a meaningful sense only with reference to itself, as content having become form».

We can tentatively define *aesthetic form* as the result of the transformation of a given content (actual or historical, personal or social fact) into a self-contained whole: a poem, play, novel etc. The work is thus “taken out” of the constant process of reality and assumes significance and truth of its own. The aesthetic transformation is achieved through a reshaping of language, perception, and understanding so that they reveal the essence of reality in its appearance: the repressed potentialities of man and nature.

The work of art thus represents reality while accusing it. The critical form of art, its contribution to the struggle for liberation, resides in the aesthetic form. A work of art is authentic or true not by virtue of its content (the “correct” representation of social conditions), nor by its pure form, but by the *content having become form*⁷.

What we call “form” in these pages is actually the representation of contents. And talking about representation we come across two important iconic representations of contents, that is the “symbol” and the “utopia”. Symbol as an hermeneutical representation, utopia as an ideological representation.

Utopia must identify political leanings objectively produced in the social course to achieve itself, but must be capable to remake forms, that is the reason why it is so important to stress the role of creativity and imagination in critical theory. Imagination is inevitably needed to keep focused on firm goals for the future and to be critical about contingency, because of its unique ability to grasp objects even if they do not exist *hic at nunc*. Imagination, as Aristotle and Kant understood and described, has the ability to create new things with material offered by knowledge, and make its own autonomy from facts. Transcending present conditions, imagination is always a disclosing of the future. This power of transcending reality is what makes imagination such a precious instrument to call into question any state of things, to animate a sort of permanent revolution.

⁶ Honneth, A. (2012), *Reification. A new Look at an Old Idea*, Oxford University Press, NY.

⁷ Marcuse, H. (1978), *The Aesthetic dimension : toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, Beacon Press, Boston; e-book ISBN 978-08070-15193; see also Marcuse, H. (1999), *Kultur und Gesellschaft I*, SuhrKamp, Berlin. It is my choice to highlight words in cursive.

It is convincing that this is the feature able to show better than anything else how critical theory is loaded with utopia: critical theory is not so much interested in reforms or interventions of social engineering but rather it is occupied with an extreme denial of things in existence. And that is probably why critical theory has not so much interest in social sciences, exactly because being sciences they must deal with facts, and only facts.

In this context, the hermeneutical position of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur about imagination, ideology and utopia should be drawn to mind. He distinctly understood and explained that the critique of ideologies in the Frankfurt School was connected to a project of liberation. That connection between a project of liberation and a scientific approach was directed against the treatment of social reality offered by any positivistic sociology; the concept of an ideology-critique presupposes a stand taken against sociology as an empirical science. The empirical science of sociology is itself treated as «a kind of ideology of the liberal, capitalistic system, as developing a purely descriptive sociology so as not to put into question its own presuppositions. It seems that step by step everything becomes ideological».

«We must integrate the concept of ideology as distortion into a framework that recognizes the symbolic structure of social life. Unless social life has a symbolic structure, there is no way to understand how we live, do things, and project these activities in ideas, no way to understand how reality can become an idea or how real life can produce illusion; these would all be simply mystical and incomprehensible events. This symbolic structure can be perverted, precisely by class interests and so on as Marx has shown, but if there were not a symbolic function already at work in the most primitive kind of action, I could not understand, for my part, how reality can produce shadows of this kind (...). The distorting function covers only a small surface of the social imagination, in just the same way that hallucinations or illusions constitute only a part of our imaginative activity in general»⁸.

Ricoeur's viewpoint is that social imagination is absolutely constitutive of social reality, and the presupposition is that of a social imagination, of a cultural imagination operating in both constructive and destructive ways, as both confirmation and contestation of the present situation. The power of imagination acknowledged by Ricoeur is the power that Marcuse entrusts to imagination.

And reasoning on utopia, the French philosopher invites us to stop and think upon the Greek origin of the word and the description offered by Thomas More: a place which exists in no real place. The field of the possible is open beyond the actual, a field for alternative ways of living.

«May we not say that imagination itself – through its Utopian function – has a constitutive role in helping us rethink the nature of our social life? Is not Utopia the way in which we radically rethink what is family, what is consumption, what is authority, what is religion, and so on? Does not the fantasy of an alternative society and its exteriorization “nowhere” work as one of the most formidable contestations of what is? If I were to compare this structure of Utopia with a theme in the philosophy of imagination, I would say it is like Husserl's imaginative variations concerning an

⁸ Ricoeur, P. (1986), *Introduction*, in *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, Columbia University Press, NY; e-book ISBN 0-231-06048-3.

essence. Utopia introduces imaginative variations on the topics of society, power, government, family, religion. The kind of neutralization that constitutes imagination as fiction is at work in Utopia»⁹.

Imagination has a preeminent role in allowing us to rethink possibilities and ways for our actions, and this is what really represents the core of any utopia. A place which exists in no real place, but a place that can be imagined everywhere.

Turning back to Marcuse, we can easily understand that the political potential of art lies only in its own aesthetic dimension; its relation to praxis is relentlessly indirect and mediated. Furthermore, the more immediately political the work of art is, the more it reduces the «power of estrangement and the radical, transcendental goals of change».

Politics has a strong instrument to numb societies into making them lose their familiarity with imagination of differences: when the imperative only focus on contents, immediately contents generate needs. But when the public reasoning aims to collect contents together with forms, politics takes a step forward (into a new democracy, or into a revolution. This is the same for Marcuse). Aesthetic formation is a process that allows the transvaluation of the norms of the established reality principle, and this dissociation from actuality does not produce false consciousness or mere illusion, but rather a *counter-consciousness*, as Marcuse writes, a negation of the realistic-conformist mind, in the name of precious binomial aesthetic form/autonomy. The aesthetic transformation becomes a vehicle for recognition.

«The world intended in art is never and nowhere merely the given world of everyday reality, but neither is it a world of mere fantasy, illusion, and so on. It contains nothing that does not also exist in the given reality, the actions, thoughts, feelings, and dreams of men and women, their potentialities and those of nature. Nevertheless the world of a work of art in “unreal” in the ordinary sense of this word: it is a fictitious reality. But it is “unreal” not because it is less, but because it is more as well as qualitative “other” than the established reality. As fictitious world, as illusion (Schein), it contains more truth than does everyday reality. For the latter is mystified in its institutions and relationships, which make necessity into choice, and alienation into self-realization. Only in the “illusory” world do things appear as what they are and what they can be. By virtue of this truth (which art alone can express in sensuous representation) the world is inverted – it is the given reality, the ordinary world which now appears as untrue, as false, as deceptive reality: The world of art as the *appearance* of truth, the everyday reality as untrue, delusion».

The great contribution of art to revolt and struggle for liberation cannot be based and evaluated by the artist's origins or the ideological horizon of his/her class, neither by the presence of the oppressed class in his/her work. If art is capable of forward thinking, it is only in accordance with the work itself as a whole, with what it says, with the way it says it, with cohesion between form and content. Literature is not revolutionary because it is written for the revolution, or for the working class; it is revolutionary for its social function determined by imagination and universality, the real essential aspects of liberation.

⁹ Ricoeur, P., *Ibidem*.

In Marcuse's idea, art creates another reality principle which can, in a psychodynamic sense, allow the subjects to experiment with transgressions that they would not be able to explore in the given reality they inhabit. It is not a rejection of the reality principle, but of how the reality principle operates in civil society today.

Education, *everyday aesthetics* and advanced technologies

Now. Let's stop and take a step forward. Is education still able to manage aesthetic forms at their origin? On the contrary, education seems to have been too contents-oriented over the last fifty years. Contents is what we should achieve, contents is what really matters: form is something in addition linked to people's freedom. This slow and inexorable passage to contents centered institutional education, has had a visible consequence: the aesthetical question of the form has become the main requisite of consumer culture. So the argument is still relevant: has education been capable to create an aesthetic awareness so far?

When we talk of aesthetic awareness we mean that particular consciousness linked to imagination, recognition and refusal. And, above all, is education still calling for an aesthetic perception of the self and of the world around?

The solution can be difficult, but the nature of philosophy is to ask questions. Above all two grey areas should be illuminated. The first one is represented by the so called capitalistic "everyday aesthetics", the second is represented by technocracy and anthropotechniques.

Let's take a close look at the first grey area, in relation to Gilles Lipovetsky: «Aesthetics has become an item of mass consumption as well as a democratic way of life». In his writings he focuses on the artistic aspect of capitalism, explaining that capitalism needs to make goods attractive, beautiful, fancied. It's like a new mythology is being sold to us, a new *grand narrative* (using a word so precious to Lyotard): the narrative of goods. A new mythology that corresponds to a real transformation taking place in consumerism. It's quite known that up until now, the taste for luxury was reserved to rich. «It was anathema because it was seen as an immoral act of wasting resources for anyone who was struggling to meet their basic needs. That was the thinking. There was this idea that people had to know their place and stay there. Our world is no longer like that by any means – Lipovetsky says. Today, the working classes know all about brand names, fashion and luxury thanks to advertising and magazines»¹⁰.

Which is the role of education in this multitude of brands? Here is the point for us. Talking about literary imagination, or aesthetical imagination, we learnt from Marcuse that reality can be forced and overcome into a kind of universality. Well, we don't think that the "flattening" of the capitalistic world can be associated to that kind of universality. Commodity form remains completely opposite to aesthetic form. Education should be used to teach us the difference between those two concepts of form.

¹⁰ Lipovetsky, G., Serroy, J. (2013), *L'Esthétisation du Monde. Vivre à l'âge du capitalisme artiste*, Gallimard, Paris; *On Artistic Capitalism*, Interview on Crash Magazine 65, <http://www.crash.fr/on-artistic-capitalism-by-gilles-lipovetsky-crash-65/>

Let's move to the second grey area: the age of advanced technologies, Industry 4.0, robots, sophisticated machines able to replace human workers. We cannot stop to debate on the ethical demands for a human sustainability of this technological progress, but for sure we must ask ourselves if education is already equipping people to manage this epochal transition.

Newspapers, magazines, scientific journals are full of articles and theories explaining how producing things in the new era of work robots will be simple, fast and advanced. On the other side, many sociologists warn us about how hard looking for a job in the new age of technology will be.

But, what about the question: are you ready for this big change in reality? We will be introduced to a new aesthetics of work, exactly as it happened centuries ago with the industrial revolution. Are we ready to think of ourselves as part of this change? A new perception of beauty, a new perception of order and proportion, a new representation of objects and state of play: the new age 4.0 seems to request new aesthetics before and within new ethics. Is our education ready to teach good advice or does it want to arrive after robots and after the real transition?

Conclusions

The German philosophical anthropologist Arnold Gehlen believed our real primary nature is hidden by our «second nature» that requires us to create a cultural world. It is culture that, as a second nature, enables us to construct and mediate norms and values¹¹. This activity originates in the nature of human beings, in their ontological deficiencies. Animals have a natural head start on human beings, have inherent instincts enabling them to react with absolute certainty to various situations and have been equipped with a natural protection, while human beings are imperfect and in order to survive they are compelled to create conditions for their own existence. In this way culture comes into being.

In more recent times, Peter Sloterdijk, for example, suggests us to work intensively on looking for an original interconnection between aesthetics of life, medical art and politics: if we want to survive keeping our human condition in the next age, we should learn a new art called *the art of living*.

If we believe in an affirmative answer, then we should consequently talk in terms of a reaffirmed human flourishing: will education be ready to still play a big part in between humanism and technocracy? We are convinced that Marcuse's idea of the aesthetic dimension is still a valuable tool for rethinking education not in support of repressive obscene societies, but in support of human deliberation.

¹¹ Gehlen, A. (1988), *Man, His Nature and Place in the World*, Columbia University Press, NY.

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