Art, in the Marxist conception, is a social product that has evolved in tandem with humanity. The unconscious self-formation of humanity was the most decisive qualitative change in nature — the first great ‘natural’ revolution. With this ‘original sin’ the human species became alienated from nature; a natural product, humans transcended nature. As it is naturally for all animals, the major and most fundamental activity is the reproduction of life. Human self-reproduction, however, takes the form of labour. Labouring is not merely an adaptation to nature; it is a conscious and purposeful transformation of natural conditions.¹

This qualitative differentiation, the beginning of alienation, is the beginning of the history of humanity. According to Marcuse’s interpretation of the Hegelian dialectic, a social animal carrying the potentialities of a new species inherent in its nature burst through the initial Limit (that between human and animal) and at the same time began the ever—widening gap between humanity’s existence and essence. For both Marx and Hegel, this dialectical process is essentially the development of Reason. The history of humanity is fundamentally the expansion of Reason. Reason is the condition by which humanity can comprehend the basic contradiction between existence and the Notion of human essence.²

Consequent to the growth of Reason was the evolution of art. As Fischer argues, originally emphasizing humanity’s oneness with nature, art was (and is) “the voice of the collective”.³ Art emerged as the realm of ideology in which expression of the Notion could occur. The history of art is the history of human consciousness.

According to Hegelian dialectics, being is becoming; every existent carries within itself possibilities which the given state of affairs precludes from becoming real. The potentialities inherent within the reality become ‘ripe’ through a series of quantitative changes, finally transcend the Limit, and become actualized. This process, the negation of the negation, is the qualitative becoming of the contradictory potentialities transcending the negative (and untrue) reality. Nothing is true in its given form but contradicts itself.

Marx applied this dialectical conception to society. Following a qualitative

change in the social relations a new social order is established. This new ‘is’ is burdened with contradictions. A new Limit is evolved and reality becomes negative since it denies the possibilities within itself.

An important element in the making of a decisive qualitative break is human consciousness, which is expressed in ideology in the form of art. In Fischer’s view, art is the custodian of the collective Notion, the medium of reflection whereby the contradictions within reality are documented and the inherent possibilities conceptually presented. The artist, first to become aware of the totalitarian standards of reality, is also aware of the great gulf between man’s essence and existence.

Ideology is the first to test the Limit of the given. Within the Limit the artist (an individual who is the agent of history) creates a revolutionary content, which is the conscious expression of the Negation. For Marcuse, “The needs and interests of individuals are the levers of all historical action.” A universal principle is latent in the particular aims of the individuals. Their consciousness is conditioned by their personal interest. Art is the conscious reflection of an individual’s particular awareness and hence precedes, reflects and adds a causal element to the qualitative change. It is during the bursting of the Limit that the revolutionary ideology reaches its climax. As the new reality becomes stabilized and hence becomes negative and untrue the ‘revolutionary’ art forms become academic and an integral part of the ‘is’. A new Limit is established and a new logic and common sense operating within the Limit and serving to rationalize reality adopts the revolutionary ideology transforming it to non-revolutionary ends.

The new ‘is’ is a fetter on further qualitative growth. As the contradictions become extreme they are reflected in the state of human consciousness. A new artistic form, revolutionary in content, negates the academic traditional form. The external conditions in which humanity lives do not agree with what the human being “properly is”. The human state of existence is demonstrated to be non-reasonable. It is humanity’s task to overcome this discrepancy and it is the revolutionary artist, whether philosopher, writer or painter, who first conceptualizes the revolt. In Marcuse’s words,

The presence of the contradiction makes man restive, he struggles to overcome his given external state. The contradiction thus has the form of an ‘Ought’ that compels him to realize that which does not as yet exist.

For Marx, social being determines consciousness. In a heterogeneous age the consciousness of humanity is heterogeneous. Art is an ideological social product. As Marx pointed out, the ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas. They

---

4 Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution.*
5 Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution.*
6 Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution.*
are not, however, the only ideas. The content of society is in a continual flux, is constantly changing and developing. However social forms tend to be retained as the ruling class “clings to the traditional form investing it with the character of immutability.” Art must express this dichotomy. The ruling class is opposed to the possibilities inherent within the ‘real’ social structure and seeks to strengthen its hold on the dissolving reality.

In the period preceding the French Revolution the chief Academic tradition was neo-Classicism. As contradictions sharpened an ‘art of negation’ — Romanticism — grew as an expression of the negated possibilities. Romanticism reached its climax in the French Revolution. In the bourgeois era the ideologies of Romanticism were adopted by the victorious class. As this new betrayal of the essence of humanity became more openly contradictory; when it became obvious that Romanticism had outlived its usefulness for revolt, a new social Realism emerged from the revolutionary void. Thus more than one art-form co-existed. At that historical stage Romanticism defined the Limit and Realism revolutionized form and content transcending these boundaries.

In the present decade the ‘voice’ of the existing reality is the mass media. The conditioning of mass consciousness, universal education to totalitarian standards of common sense, the belief of the propagators that the present corresponds closest to the ideal, plus the repression of the consciousness of revolt by mass dissemination of its contrary relationship to reality, makes the development of a revolutionary consciousness much more difficult. Hence the bizarre form of much of contemporary art. The dialectical nature of mass dissemination of revolutionary material can only be hypothesized today.

Pop Art is basically an illegitimate child of Magic Realism itself derived from Dada, the most nihilistic art form to date. Ordinary reality, such as Campbell Soup tins, electric chairs, and so on, are taken out of their natural surroundings, out of the environment of reality and presented in bizarre forms, such as enlargements, or multiplied or faceted. By association the everyday object creates an environment in the viewer’s mind, such as a polluting factory or a greasy restaurant. The gigantic proportions of the hamburger or other object similarly enlarge the horror of the associated environment. Pop Art was born in revolt yet it is being subverted to the cause of the ‘Establishment’, of the ‘is’, as a celebration of reality. The implications of present-day manifestations will only become completely clear in the future.

The logic of the Hegelian dialectic is that contradictions never cease to develop in any existing reality. In his philosophy of history, however, Hegel declared the history of humankind to be the realization of Freedom, eventually culminating in bourgeois private property and the Prussian State. Similarly, Hegel also maintained a link between social progress and the obsolescence of art. According to Marcuse, Marx

---

was to retain this link. Marx considered the antagonisms between existence and essence to be an historical fact. Hence the antagonism would be resolved in a society which reunited humanity’s essence and existence. In his introduction to The Communist Manifesto, A. J. P. Taylor declares that Marx “assumed that the dialectic would achieve its goal” in a conflict-free socialism: the ultimate synthesis. A communistic society, providing all the material conditions for the development of human faculties, is the prerequisite for such reconciliation. “When this is achieved, the traditional base of art is undermined with the realization of the content of art.”

This question is central to an understanding of art and the dialectical process. Paul Sweezy’s answer is to declare that, on the contrary, Hegel’s thesis-antithesis-synthesis triad, rather than being central, is a minor aspect of Marxian philosophy. For our purposes, Lichtheim’s argument is more consistent with the dialectical heart of Marxism. In Lichtheim’s view, Communism was “not for Marx an end, but a means to man’s greater freedom and humanity. It is the movement which will transform the state of things, it is not a stable state which is to be established; an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself.” Hajek makes the same point: “Communism is no static utopia toward which men should strive but a critical and revolutionary movement.”

From these arguments it follows that art will not disappear under Marx’s future socialism or even under communism. The function of art as the conscious expression of the Notion will remain. In a critical and revolutionary movement no less in a relatively more stable future society, art will serve to present reality in its true process of becoming, to demonstrate the inconsistencies and contradictions with the potentialities which art foretells and which the ‘is’ denies. Under capitalism art must transform consciousness in a revolutionary direction; under socialism art must expand consciousness and advance reason.

---

8 Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*.
10 Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*.
14 Jiri Hajek, “Literature Between Myth and Politics”.