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# The Anarchist Aesthetic

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ording to them, is the economic crisis which will force workers to create a new society. At present, however, an economic collapse would bring only authoritarian alternatives because people are not accustomed to cooperating, making decisions collectively, initiating and carrying through policies. If a crisis were to happen tomorrow, people would turn on the television to find out what they were supposed to do. Far more appropriate to a relevant anarchism is Franklin Rosemont's article in the most recent *Industrial Worker*, the IWW paper, where he links the goal of worker democracy with surrealism.<sup>24</sup> During the May-June days in France, 1968, one of the famous slogans was "All power to the imagination." I cannot think of a better slogan for a contemporary anarchism which seeks counter-cultural initiatives within the aesthetic avant-garde and which makes theoretical advances starting from the problem of domination.

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<sup>24</sup> Franklin Rosemont, "Surrealism and Revolution," *Industrial Worker*, 76:1 (Jan., 1979). I do not agree that surrealism is the only revolutionary tendency in the avant-garde, but I am pleased to find myself disagreeing with someone about which kind of avant-garde is libertarian.

and presumably prefers “The Waltons,” where the family is clearly a haven (in between the commercials).<sup>23</sup>

A libertarian counter-culture has to be avant-garde to maintain its critical perspective on capitalist exploitation and modern domination. The avant-garde, however, must be challenged at all times because, like everything else in a capitalist society, it tends toward commodification. There is a sense in which the avant-garde’s innovative fervor corresponds not only to the capitalist fashion industry but to an essential feature of modern capitalism; the accumulation of capital depends on the perpetual destruction of old patterns of consumption and the creation of new needs which only the new and improved commodities can fulfill.

The avant-garde has always dramatized the desire to overcome the dichotomy of art and life, to counteract audience passivity, to demystify aesthetic creation, to insist upon a participatory art. The avant-garde, however, must go beyond the stage of merely making a gesture in this direction and start seriously implementing this aesthetic program. The next stage has to be aesthetic education, the proliferation of aesthetic skills and training so that former audiences can create their own art (or at least become more critically aware participants in aesthetic experiences). Unless people participate in experiences outside those initiated by the culture industry (whether it is PBS operas or “Charlie’s Angels,” “Superman,” or “Coming Home,” Jeannie C. Riley or the Rolling Stones), they will never learn to be self-determining, confident of their ability to create alternatives to the society controlled by government, big business, bureaucracies and the experts. If people are to free themselves from authoritarianism, then they have to begin creating their own culture. I think the libertarian socialists associated with the journal *Root and Branch* are whistling to the wind when they dismiss as irrelevant the issue of culture. What matters, ac-

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<sup>23</sup> Lasch attacks the avant-garde in the *Salmagundi* issue discussed in note 15.

“The form of government that is most suitable to the artist is no government at all.”

– Oscar Wilde

“The anarchist painter is not he who does anarchist paintings but he who without caring for money, without desire for recompense, struggles with all his individuality against bourgeois conventions.”

– Paul Signac

“Musicians can do without government.”

–John Cage

## Introduction

Although the phrase “Marxist aesthetic” is far more familiar than “anarchist aesthetic,”<sup>1</sup> the connection between anarchism and art has generated a rich diversity of both art and theory. William Godwin, the first anarchist philosopher, was an innovative novelist who influenced Percy Shelley, probably the first anarchist poet. Thoreau, Tolstoy, Octave Mirbeau (French novelist), Gustav Landauer (German novelist and anarchist revolutionary), the French symbolist poets of the 1890s, Pa Chin (Chinese novelist), B. Traven, Paul Goodman, Ursula LeGuin, Philip Levine, and Beck and Malina are some other anarchist writers—poets, novelists, dramatists. There are numerous other writers who have been influenced

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<sup>1</sup> The first author I know of to use the phrase, “anarchist aesthetic,” is Andre Reszler, *L'esthétique anarchiste* (Vendome, 1973). In addition to this and Eugenia Herbert’s *The Artist and Social Reform, France and Belgium 1885–1898* (New Haven, 1961), Donald Egbert’s *Social Radicalism and the Art* (New York, 1970) also concerns itself with anarchism and the arts. None of these books is written by an anarchist; Ebert’s is filled with errors and inexplicable omissions; Reszler’s is sketchy and Herbert’s has a narrow range. A lot of work still needs to be done in this area. Anarchist aesthetic criticism, as distinct from art history, is a much more interesting field. Important authors include: Dwight MacDonald, Kingsley Widmer, Paul Goodman, Herbert Read, Alex Comfort, and Art Efron.

by anarchism or whose aesthetic theories and practices parallel anarchist ones: William Morris, Oscar Wilde, Eugene O'Neill (who sent Emma Goldman a volume of his plays while she was in prison for anti-war activities), William Blake, Franz Kafka (who was arrested in Prague for attending anarchist meetings), D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Robert Creeley, the Dada poets, the Surrealist poets, Gary Snyder, Grace Paley, Ibsen, and many others. In painting, sculpture, and the graphic arts anarchism was the dominant influence from the 1880s to the Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia.<sup>2</sup> In music, Bakunin's friend and comrade-in-arms, Richard Wagner, exerted considerable influence on anarchist ideas concerning socially integrated art and revolutionary culture.<sup>3</sup> In the twentieth century, however, anarchists have repudiated Wagnerian authoritarianism, so that now John Cage is the representative anarchist in music. With the prevalence of avant-garde art in every field in the twentieth century, from poetry to dance, one could argue that experimental art itself is anarchistic at least in tendency, if not always self-consciously.

Along with anarchist art, there is a rich tradition of anarchist criticism of the arts. From Godwin and the romantic poets to contemporary theorists, the anarchist aesthetic has three major aspects: (1) an uncompromising insistence upon total freedom for the artist, and an avant-garde contempt for conservative art; (2) a critique of elitist, alienated art and a visionary alternative in which art becomes integrated into everyday life; (3) art as social critique—that is, since art is an experience, it is a way to define and rede-

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<sup>2</sup> See Herbert, above; also, Rennato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Fitzgerald (NY, 1968), p. 99: "the only omnipresent or recurring political ideology within the avant-garde is the least political or the most anti-political of all: libertarianism and anarchism."

<sup>3</sup> See Reszler, Chapter III, for the Wagner-Bakunin relationship.

women confront every day is totalitarian; totally organized from top to bottom, from left to right, without any free zones within which one might formulate a counter-cultural opposition.<sup>22</sup>

One of the most discouraging aspects of the 1970s left has been its resurrection of exploitation-based politics and its revival of cultural conservatism. Exploitation-based politics can and will be co-opted by liberals, social democrats, union bureaucrats, or Marxist-Leninist parties. In the West it is not economic exploitation as such but the entire culture that deprives us of creative autonomy. Since domination is the experience which defines our modernity, we should look to avant-garde art, not theories about the working class, in order to find libertarian points of departure. Although rank and file worker initiatives and autonomous working-class movements are anarchist possibilities, they are only possibilities; if they are not to be co-opted and assimilated, then the anarchists must also provide insights into authoritarianism and domination. Unless anarchism is linked with the attempt to build a counter-culture, a living alternative to the culture industry and its consumerism, then it will merely be the left-wing of a reformist effort to patch up the irrational breakdowns of the capitalist system. Along with a 1930s-style politics has come cultural conservatism, a reaction against the 1960s. The major problem, according to people like Christopher Lasch and Richard Sennett, is what they call narcissism, which they identify with the 1960s counter-culture. Although the many critiques of the counter-culture contain useful insights, their purpose is not to reconstitute a counter-culture at a higher level, but to demolish it. Lasch, for example, considers the avant-garde historically obsolete

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<sup>22</sup> Recent authors I find sensitive to domination and useful in analyzing it are Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. See especially Foucault's *Discipline and Punish, The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Sheridan (NY, 1977), and Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Hurley, Seem, and Lane (NY, 1977).

with the dynamics of exploitation; the utter collapse of the workers' movements during World War One, after the Bolshevik seizure of power, and the rise of fascism made necessary a revolutionary theory that would take domination as its point of departure.

Emma Goldman was extraordinarily sensitive to the problem of domination and the importance of individualism and avant-garde art.<sup>21</sup> The Mother Earth Press published Oscar Wilde's "Soul of Man Under Socialism," promoted the avant-garde theatre of Ibsen and Hauptmann, and sympathetically 'introduced readers to the thought of Nietzsche. Goldman was beginning to formulate a theory of domination when the Spanish revolution occurred; although she disagreed with many of the anarcho-syndicalist decisions, especially the one to participate in the Popular Front government, she continued to work for the Spanish revolution.

If the primary factor of oppression is exploitation, then it is plausible to relegate art, especially avant-garde art, to a lowly position, subordinate to the class struggle. If, however, domination is at least as important as exploitation, then art, especially avant-garde art, gives one a way' of comprehending experience. The avant-garde, always working at the limits and extremes of consciousness, makes possible libertarian ruptures with established reality. To understand experience, so much of which is shaped and determined by factors outside one's control, one must go beyond the consumerist entertainments served up by the culture industry. One must also go beyond the anarchist and Marxist theories formulated in the nineteenth century on assumptions that are no longer adequate. Every aspect of modern life has the imprint of authoritarian design inscribed on it.

One is taught from the earliest age to submit to authority, to accept bureaucratic procedures, to defer one's judgment to the experts, to limit one's desires. The social world which men and

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<sup>21</sup> See for example her superb essay, "The Individual, Society, and the State," reprinted in *Red Emma Speaks* (NY, 1972).

fine human needs, altering socio-political structures accordingly.<sup>4</sup> I want to analyze each aspect of the anarchist aesthetic with a special emphasis on the tension between artistic autonomy and the social ideal of unalienated art. I also want to suggest ways in which art and aesthetic theory are relevant to contemporary anarchist politics.

## The avant guard

For the sake of time and space I will limit myself to literature, even though the other arts are just as important, each one requiring its own avant-garde history. When the word "avant-garde" was coined in 1825 by Saint-Simon to refer to the artist-engineers he designated to govern the new socialist society, there already existed in England an avant-garde literary movement: romantic poetry. Art is avant-garde which makes radical innovations in either the art's form or content or both.<sup>5</sup> Both the artist and the audience acknowledge the deviation from the norm so that either the audience changes its expectations to accommodate the new art or the audience rejects the new art in any number of ways: censorship, repression, unpopularity, ridicule, refusing to call it art. The first literary avant-garde appeared in England during a period of extreme social uncertainty, when the political institutions were archaic in relation to the actual social relations.<sup>6</sup> It was not until the 1830s that the bourgeois institutional apparatus had been fully

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<sup>4</sup> Although not an anarchist work as such, or even consistently libertarian, John Dewey's *Art as Experience* (NY, 1934) is richly suggestive of anarchist aesthetic ideas.

<sup>5</sup> Ortega y Gasset's essay, "The Dehumanization of Art," (1925) has a brilliant theory of the avant-garde which is marred by the author's elitism. He confuses sham democracy with real democracy, the culture industry with participatory art. Ortega would not accept my calling romantic poetry avant-garde, which he dates much later and which he sees as essentially anti-romantic.

<sup>6</sup> See E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (NY, 1963).

created for controlling a society shaped by industrial and agricultural capitalism. The destruction of the peasantry by the enclosure movement, the contradiction between the middle class's growing social power and its political disenfranchisement, the emergence of democratic and secular ideas from the Enlightenment and French Revolution, all contributed to making the romantic avant-garde possible. From Blake, Godwin, the early Wordsworth, and Shelley, there came an aesthetic and political ideal of creativity. Blake described social domination and exploitation as effects of the enslaved imagination, whose mind-forged manacles had to be abolished. Blake also attacked the repression of sexuality and feeling, the liberation of which would transform every social institution. Godwin's insistence upon creativity was so stubborn that he deemed oppressive and authoritarian performances of other people's art. Wordsworth's innovation was to situate poetry closer to everyday speech and daily life. And Shelley argued that perception itself was a creative, constitutive activity; therefore, both perception and aesthetic creation involved a radical questioning of established social concepts. Furthermore, Shelley's reliance upon inspiration helped distance poetry from neoclassical technique and placed it closer to experiences accessible to everyone. The particular strain of romanticism I am briefly alluding to here based a radical politics on an aesthetic foundation. To create and perceive in new ways that transcend the established aesthetic norms is to question the legitimacy of the socio-political order which upholds those norms. This radical romanticism was stridently attacked and rejected by the cultural guardians of law and order. While Blake was too uncompromising for the cultural establishment to even bother with, Wordsworth's ideas on poetic diction were ridiculed; Godwin became so unpopular after the 1790s that he had to adopt a pseudonym to continue publishing; Shelley was not just unpopular, but his most radical works were suppressed, censored, and left unpublished in his lifetime. Even John Keats's deliberate aesthetic withdrawal from socio-political concerns did not save the

## Art as social critique

After Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman were expelled from the U.S., then from the U.S.S.R., they were bounced around Europe and Canada by government bureaucracies, while fascism gradually rose to dominance. Although Berkman and Goldman publicized the betrayal of the Russian social revolution by the Bolsheviks, the international left did not like to hear about it and waited until the 1950s to admit that there were problems with Soviet "communism." In the 1920s and 1930s, Berkman and Goldman had to reevaluate their anarchist politics because clearly historical events had gone beyond their theories. Goldman concluded that the problems were not simply economic exploitation and government power because such could not explain why so many working people were supporting fascism, why so many workers had supported World War One. In 1927 she wrote to Berkman, "The entire school, Kropotkin, Bakunin, and the rest, had a childish faith in what Peter calls 'the creative spirit of the people.' I'll be damned if I can see it. If the people could really create out of themselves, could a thousand Lenins or the rest have put the noose back on the throat of the Russian masses?"<sup>20</sup> The problem, then, was authoritarianism, the willingness to accept political authority, the inability to pursue self-determination. (This too is the topic of Rudolf Rocker's classic study, *Nationalism and Culture*, published in English in 1937, and recently republished in the U.S. by Michael Coughlin; Rocker was good friends with Goldman and Berkman.) Before both members of the Frankfurt School and Wilhelm Reich had begun their studies into the psychology of fascism, Berkman and Goldman were trying to analyze the problem of domination. Nineteenth-century socialism from the utopians to the Marxists and anarchists had constructed a movement and set of theories concerned primarily

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<sup>20</sup> Richard and Maria Drinnon, eds., *Nowhere at Home, Letters from Exile of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman* (NY, 1975), p. 82.

out an institutional state, the authoritarianism exists nevertheless inside the people. The aesthetic conservatism of Tolstoy, Proudhon, and Kropotkin suggests the possibility of a regime of authoritarianism implemented not by a state or a capitalist ruling class, but by an egalitarian society. Does society, as distinguished from a government, have the right to regulate artistic production? An anarchist must answer with an unequivocal “No” because without unrestricted artistic freedom a libertarian society will not for long remain libertarian.

The dichotomy which Kropotkin, Proudhon, and Tolstoy make between avant-garde and *engagé* art is an unfortunate one. There have not been many anarchist *engagé* works as such,<sup>19</sup> but the few that have existed were avant-garde by virtue of their content. Unless art is unacceptable to the cultural establishment for either its form or content or both, it can be of little interest to anarchists anyway, so that Kropotkin’s dichotomy is in fact a spurious one. There are kinds of avant-garde art, some of which might be called *engagé*. The problem with most *engagé* art, the kind usually produced by Marxists, is that it does not tell us anything we did not already know. Avant-garde art, on the other hand, is an aesthetic adventure, trying to discover new realms of experience, making new departures.

Although the utopian vision of unalienated art is an indispensable feature of anarchism, it should not be used as a club with which to strike down the avant-garde. I am not saying that everything which calls itself avant-garde is therefore good, but unless art breaks new ground in content or technique then it is no different from bourgeois art or totalitarian art.

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<sup>19</sup> Herbert discusses some such works which appeared in France and Belgium.

poet from reactionary attacks because his new imagery, as well as his paganism and friendship with Leigh Hunt, placed him in the “Cockney School,” as they contemptuously called it. Whether the innovation is in form or content, the avant-garde arouses the same anxiety.

The romantics, however, weakened the effectiveness of their counter-cultural attack in several ways. First, as a defense against their unpopularity and failure in the marketplace, they suggested that the romantic artist was a Genius, whose nature was different from other people’s;<sup>7</sup> this reinforced audience passivity and mystified the concept of artistic creation. Second, so troubled were the romantics over their unpopularity that some became politically conservative (like Wordsworth and Coleridge), while others posited poetry as a special form of wisdom that could be acquired only under special conditions, thus excluding almost everyone except a privileged coterie. The romantics did not understand fully the avant-garde nature of their art and often merely elevated it above what they perceived as popular art. Even though the romantics were the first avant-gardists, they also formulated ideas which would domesticate the avant-garde and integrate it into the established culture in the form of “high art.”

The cult of the Genius came to a romantic culmination with Wagner, who wanted single-handedly to create a new culture. Late-romantic sentimentality, flamboyance, and hero-worship of charismatic artists, like Liszt, carried to logical extremes audience passivity and mystified art. The cult of the Genius effectively undermined the idea of participatory art and generated instead the crucial importance of criticism to mediate between creator and audience, to separate the good from the bad, the high from the low.

The anti-romantic avant-garde, however, not only repudiated the Wagnerian artist-as-hero, it also formulated a theory and prac-

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<sup>7</sup> Raymond Williams, “The Romantic Artist,” in *Culture and Society* (NY, 1958), analyzes the social dimensions of the romantic theories.

tice of art with a different set of assumptions. The new avant-garde, as Ortega y Gasset noted, refused to play the role of religious leader, trying to guide the masses toward wisdom. The new art was playful and ironic, refusing to set itself above the audience as a moral authority.<sup>8</sup> The main problem with Ortega's theory is the Opposition he draws between realist and nonrepresentational art, calling only the latter avant-garde. In fact, the collapse of romanticism stimulated two avant-garde currents: symbolism and realism.<sup>9</sup> The avant-garde realists shocked audiences with new content (sexuality, poverty, anti-militarism, labor struggles, political corruption), while the symbolists outraged the audience with their form and technique. It is not even always useful to distinguish between form and technique because when one approaches a writer like Kafka or Celine, one needs to formulate a different vocabulary; nevertheless, there has always been a recurrent tension between realist and symbolist ideas.

When one examines the literary phenomenon known as modernism, one sees the ambiguity of the literary avant-garde in clear terms. One tradition issues from Flaubert, Henry James and Matthew Arnold, extending to T.S. Eliot, Pound, Yeats and Joyce, and more or less ending with writers like Mann, Bellow, and Stevens. Although the modernist tradition is critical of twentieth-century society, it carefully distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate kinds of criticism; it fastidiously separates high art from low art: dismissing into the hinterlands literary productions that are too obscene, too political, too incomprehensible, too simplistic, too rough and unhewn. Modernism and its critical schools, which have dominated the universities for decades, are the filter

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<sup>8</sup> Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art* (Princeton, 1968), pp. 49–50; 14.

<sup>9</sup> Herbert, for example, shows that both realist novels and symbolist poetry were the avant-garde literary expressions in France and Belgium in the 1880s and '90s. Paul Goodman makes this same point in "Advance-Guard Writing in America: 1900–1950," in *Creator Spirit Come!* (NY, 1977), pp. 144–164.

credit the avant-garde. Nietzsche, the aesthetes, the symbolists, the new anarchists in France sympathetic with the avant-garde, were all labeled by Kropotkin as bourgeois individualists, self-indulgent and irresponsible.<sup>16</sup>

Although Proudhon, earlier, had defended Gustave Courbet's realist paintings against the academic establishment in *Du principe de Part et de sa destination sociale* (1865), the later influence of Proudhon's ideas was antagonistic to the avant-garde and encouraged instead an engaged art, one closely aligned to the aspirations of the social movement. Tolstoy, as is well known, condemned almost everything ever produced by artists, including his own novels, because such art was decadent, unethical, irreligious.<sup>17</sup> Godwin; Bakunin and Stirner, I am happy to say, were aesthetic libertarians, but the fact that three of the major anarchist theorists were not deserves serious analysis.

In Ursula LeGuin's utopian novel *The Dispossessed* (1974) her protagonist, Shevek, is an innovative scientist whose uncompromising originality disturbs the egalitarian ethos of the anarcho-syndicalist society. Her novel suggests that any society, even one organized anarchistically, with the ideals of mutual aid and solidarity, will view with suspicion any expressions of avant-garde individualism.<sup>18</sup> The avant-garde seems to be anti-social even when it is not. The problem, as the novel demonstrates so well, is this: libertarianism cannot exist for long without individualism. When Shevek's society persecutes him for his scientific theories, it discloses its authoritarian features; although the society exists with-

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<sup>16</sup> See George Woodcock and Adam Avakumovic, *The Anarchist Prince* (Cleveland, 1971), pp. 280–282.

<sup>17</sup> See Tolstoy's *What Is Art?*

<sup>18</sup> Bob Newman pointed out Ursula LeGuin's novel to me and suggested an authoritarianism within anarchism that I had never considered before. He has written an essay on *The Dispossessed* which should be published soon. See also the article on LeGuin in *Cienfuegos Review*, #2 (the entire issue is relevant to art and anarchism).

ten editors. Clearly the idea of artistic freedom is still radical and needs to be defended.

## Unalienated art

Utopia as a place where art is unalienated, reconstituted along egalitarian lines, is a commonplace idea in nineteenth-century socialism, from Fourier to Marx, from Godwin to Ruskin. Morris and Kropotkin, however, gave the most complete and interesting visions of a new art in a society which had conquered alienation. Kropotkin had, in *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, praised the medieval aesthetic of an organic, participatory, collective culture. Just as Shelley and Nietzsche had idealized Hellenic culture's high degree of social integration, so Carlyle, Ruskin, Morris and Kropotkin idealized the social culture of the medieval city, run by guilds and artisans. Kropotkin refused to accept as normal art's alienation into so many specialized fragments, all of which were kept apart from politics, the economy, and social life. Kropotkin and Morris envisioned art as something that permeated social life in all its aspects. Homes, streets, gardens, rooms, villages and cities would be constructed with a sense of beauty as a primary concern. The things of everyday life—kitchen utensils, curtains, rugs, tables, furniture—should reflect the aesthetic values of the society. Not only should the environment be shaped according to the logic of beauty, but productive activity itself should be animated with aesthetic concerns. In the anarchist society, one would learn a variety of skills and participate in a variety of useful activities, concentrating on whatever is most interesting. Tedious labor, performed collectively, loses its oppressive burden; furthermore, since no one does such labor all the time, people are free to develop in different areas.

There is, however, something disturbing in Kropotkin's aesthetic ideas, because he used the ideal of unalienated future art to dis-

through which avant-garde literature passes.<sup>10</sup> If an author cannot be dismissed outright, then s/he is domesticated with a barrage of irrelevant and pedantic criticism, burying the author's rebellious art underneath a rubble of words. Modernism has also promoted a certain kind of sensibility which the avant-garde has always attacked and which came under effective attack in the 1960s by critics like Susan Sontag.<sup>11</sup> This sensibility cultivates seriousness and a certain kind of (serious) irony, values the importance of complexity, is uncomfortable with spontaneity and sincerity, discourages levity, playfulness and propaganda, stresses the importance of aesthetic unity and insists upon discrete boundaries between art and society. The modernist can tell good from bad, high from low, and will never lose control when experiencing an artwork; the modernist is one who can never be fooled—or if s/he is, s/he will never let anyone know about it.

There is a crisis in modernism today because not only does hardly anyone produce modernist literature (most of the interesting literature today is adamantly avant-garde), but modernist criticism has been subjected to several decades of devastating critiques. There is no doubt that bourgeois ideology will reconstitute itself in some form or other to substitute for the discredited modernist creed, but today it is unclear what exactly that substitution will be.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See John Fekete, *The Critical Twilight: Explorations in the Ideology of Anglo-American Literary Thought from Eliot to McLuhan* (London and Boston, 1977), for an excellent discussion of literature's cultural domestication.

<sup>11</sup> The important essay is "Against Interpretation," (1964) reprinted in one of the most important texts of 1960s cultural criticism, *Against Interpretation* (NY, 1966). Significantly, she finds in Oscar Wilde's epigrammatic wit a real alternative to the modernist spirit of seriousness.

<sup>12</sup> Witness the hysteria by liberal intellectuals who are desperately trying to undo the damage inflicted upon modernist assumptions by the 1960s. A recent issue of *Salmagundi*, 42 (Summer-Fall, 1978), is entirely devoted to attacking what it calls cultural radicalism; contemporary modernists are trying to find an

If in the bourgeois democracies the battle is between modernism and the avant-garde, in totalitarian regimes the writer who deviates from the party line is silenced, censored, jailed or exiled, sometimes even killed. One tends to forget that the avant-garde is a possibility for a minority of writers, the rest of whom, the majority, live under dictatorships of the left or right. In countries where literature is taken seriously, rebellious writers are silenced or controlled, while in states like the U.S., where writers have the freedom to write whatever they want, the audience can be truly shocked only with great difficulty. When one examines closely the nature of artistic freedom in the U.S., then one sees why dictatorial methods are not needed. In addition to the universities and the critics, who promulgate the modernist ideology, there are the extremely conservative publishing companies, who never take a risk; so it is very difficult for avant-garde writers to get published by a major press. (I personally know of three excellent novels which are unpublished and which were rejected by publishing companies.) The freedom to write does not mean the freedom to publish and have an audience. Furthermore, in the U.S. people have such unsatisfying jobs that when they get home they do not want to be challenged in an aesthetic way, so that they accept the consumerist entertainment served up to them by the culture industry.<sup>13</sup> So, although the writer has freedom to write, most working people do not have the freedom to read avant-garde literature, because they are so dehumanized at the workplace and also because avant-garde art is not readily accessible.

One might think that unrestricted freedom for a writer to write whatever s/he wanted would be uncontroversial, but one need only look at the Marxist-Leninist tradition to see otherwise. In the 1960s

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alternative not only to avant-garde literature, but also to literary criticism which refuses to play cultural policeman.

<sup>13</sup> For the concept of the culture industry, see T.W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Cumming (NY, 1973). The Frankfurt School has done a lot of valuable work in this area.

some Communist parties finally accepted as legitimate art other than “socialist realism,” not without, however, expelling two of the most vocal advocates of aesthetic open-mindedness, Ernst Fischer, the Austrian critic, and Roger Garaudy, the French critic.<sup>14</sup> Stalinism is not solely responsible for Marxist aesthetic conservatism because neither Marx, Engels, nor Lenin appreciated the avant-garde at all; their taste was completely bourgeois. Although Trotsky was more receptive than the rest to new art, he still believed the party and the state had a right—a duty—to suppress all art that was “counter-revolutionary,” that did not serve the interests of the “revolution.” Mao’s aesthetic conservatism was so extreme that an authoritarian “moderate” like Teng Shao-Ping appears to be a surrealist in comparison. Perhaps the most telling story concerning the avant-garde and Marxist-Leninism is that of Mayakovsky, the great Futurist poet who championed the Bolshevik revolution and linked it with avant-garde art. Progressively disillusioned by the Bolsheviks, cut off from a sympathetic audience, he took his own life in despair. Another interesting but much later episode was the jailing of the Cuban poet Padilla in 1971. After international protests, Castro was forced to release Padilla, whose two major crimes were homosexuality and avant-garde tendencies (“bourgeois individualism,” as they call it). In a shocking article the editors of *Jump Cut*, a leftist film journal, said that it was wrong to jail Padilla for homosexuality, but they agreed with Castro that the “revolution” had a right to tell artists and intellectuals what to do; the editors sanctioned the repression of Padilla for being an individualist and an avant-gardist.<sup>15</sup> I thought that this kind of thinking had died out long ago—but I am wrong; the article was signed by

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<sup>14</sup> For the gloomy history of the Marxist-Leninist aesthetic, see George Biztray’s uncritical but informative *Marxist Models of Literary Realism* (NY, 1978). For a tragi-comic account of the Communist encounter with Franz Kafka’s literature, see Tom Morris, “From Liblice to Kafka,” *Telos*, 24 (Summer, 1975); Morris also shows the influence of anarchism on Kafka.

<sup>15</sup> For this shameful article, see *Jump Cut*, No. 19, pp. 38–39.