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BOOK REVIEW

The Specificity of the Aesthetic, Volume 1. By Georg Lukács. Translated and edited by Erik M. Bachman with assistance from Tyrus Miller. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2024), 822 pp., \$39 Paperback

Georg Lukács (Lukács György, 1885-1971), one of the greatest twentieth-century Marxist philosophers, published *Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen*, Band 1, in 1963. Fifty years later, in 2023, the English translation of this work, *The Specificity of the Aesthetic*, was finally published by Brill Academic. Now available in paperback, this book is included in Haymarket's Historical Materialism Book Series.

The Specificity of the Aesthetic, with its formidable length, was not only an intervention into the moment of post-Stalinism in the Eastern bloc but also the summation of Lukács' lifelong engagement with the aesthetic problem. According to Ágnes Heller (1929-2019), his most renowned disciple, "Lukács planned that the *Aesthetics* would consist of three parts. The first part (actually published under the title of *The Specificity of the Aesthetic*) would be the application of 'dialectical materialism', the sound application of 'historical materialism' to the realm of aesthetics, and the third part a synthesis of the first two, a theory of artistic genres." But after finishing the first part of his *Aesthetics*, the text we now have in English, he found it necessary to turn to ethics and then to seek the ontological foundations of social being; the fact that "he intended to write an ethic but actually wrote an ontology, was far from accidental and cannot be ascribed to his advanced age." His attempts at an Ethics remained a set of notes and was published posthumously as *Versuche zu einer Ethik*; by the end of the 1960s, he finished the Prolegomena and Part One of *Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins* in the form of a manuscript of more than 1,500 pages. Lukács was racing against time after his wife's passing and his diagnosis of lung cancer. On top of his unfinished *Aesthetics*, *Ethics* and *Ontology*, he embarked on his final work, a *Politics*, with a particular urgency amidst the sense of crisis in actually existing socialism in Eastern Europe due to the failure of the Prague Spring in 1968. His *Politics* was to be titled *The Process of Democratization*.

The Specificity of the Aesthetic marked a renewed beginning of what became known as "Lukács' later philosophy." This can be seen most clearly and pointedly in this book's epigraph ("They do not know it, but they are doing it," Marx's now famous line), the 1962 "Preface," and the first chapter, "Issues of Reflection in Everyday Life." In the "Preface," Lukács sets in motion an "imperative task" of understanding "the place of aesthetic behavior in the totality of human activities and human responses to the external world." He then states that "the primary thing is the behavior of man in everyday life." Here, the metaphor of the great river helps define the keynote of this study of the specificity of aesthetic behavior as a human activity: "The everyday behavior of man is at once the start and end point of all human activity" (5). Science and art branch off from this great river of the everyday and develop into higher forms of reality's reflection and reproduction. They rise to their specificity in order, then, to "flow back" into the river of the everyday. The enriched everyday life thus raises further questions and gives rise to even higher forms of science and art. The primacy of everyday life is the true starting point of Lukács' later philosophy, driving his ethics, ontology, and politics (his final proposal on socialist politics was also the democratization of everyday life). The thesis is not only a phenomenological reduction but also an ontological foundation, as is shown in this book's first chapter. This opening chapter explores the general characteristics of everyday thinking, restoring the genesis of cognition into an ontological view that every reflection (everyday, scientific, or aesthetic) is "the reflection of this single and unitary reality" (24). Starting from this discussion of the dialectical-materialist nature of everyday activity and thinking, the issue of labour then shows its central prominence in the later Lukács: "the fundamental factor of everyday life, everyday thinking, and the reflection of objective reality in the everyday" comes from "the essential characteristic of specifically human labour and its teleological principle" (27, 28). The human creates herself through labour as humanization. This perspective results in his eventual characterization of human labour as teleological positing in the *Ontology*. It is on the basis of labour as the ontological foundation of social existence that Lukács elucidates the difference between science and art as two specific modes of reflection of the objective world.

Lukács then defines the scientific mode of reflection as "disanthropomorphisation." In contrast, the aesthetic mode of reflection represents an "anthropomorphising tendency." By "disanthropomorphising", Lukács means "taking as its starting point objective reality – the contents (existing in themselves), categories, etc. of which are lifted into

consciousness," whereas "anthropomorphising" is defined as entailing "a projection from the inside to the outside (from man into nature)" (182). To demonstrate this, Lukács takes pains to go through a number of "preliminary issues" concerning the "slow contradictory, and uneven" (174) disentanglement of science and art as both rooted in everyday human praxis. A result of social development, art has "a very important difference from scientific reflection," as Lukács underscores that "not only receptivity, but also its objects themselves are products of social development" (192). He repeatedly emphasizes that, through complex social formation, art is also qualitatively detached from magic and religion, which are also both characterized by anthropomorphisation. Emphasizing "society in its 'metabolism with nature' (Marx)" as "the material substrate of human existence and activity," he eventually argues that "the reflection of the metabolism of society with nature is the conclusive, truly ultimate object of aesthetic reflection" (199).

Seeing "the genesis of art," "the unity of the aesthetic" and the "commonalities of [art's] multiplicity" as the "result of socio-historical development" (197), Lukács denounces all the *a priori* principles and criticizes all kinds of idealism, subjectivism and irrationalism in art history, anthropology and philosophy. This fight for dialectical materialism is further carried out as he considers such "abstract forms of the aesthetic reflection" as rhythm, symmetry, proportionality, and ornamentation. He aims to show that each of these abstract forms is rooted in "the tendency to be an organizing principle of the reflection of reality" (266). The discussion of ornamentation, in particular, can serve as a miniature model of Lukács' philosophical force turning into a critique of modernist aesthetic ideologies. After a detailed refutation of Wilhelm Worringer's theory of abstraction and the anti-human in ornamentation, Lukács' role as the arch-critic of modernism comes to the fore. He claims that "various twentieth-century art movements expressionism, cubism, *neue Sachlichkeit*, abstract art, etc.) are extremely closely related to these anti-humanist art theories" (298), and repudiates the abuse of the seeming "worldlessness" of ornamentation in *Jugendstil* and the so-called abstract art movement, whose "pseudo-ornamental" work distorts reality "without discovering something actually new at all in real ornamentation" (300, 301).

Having demonstrated that "even the so-called abstract forms are modes of reflecting objective reality" (302), Lukács moves to a comprehensive exploration of imitation or mimesis in the last six chapters of this volume that are all devoted to "issues of mimesis." As mimesis means "nothing else than translating the reflection of a phenomenon

of reality into one's own praxis" (302), its central significance in the aesthetic mode of reflection needs no further explanation. These chapters constitute, in my opinion, the most comprehensive dialectical-materialist analysis of mimesis, using examples of both anthropological materials and classical writers (Lessing, Diderot, Schiller, and, of course, Goethe) and bringing together the theoretical discourses ranging from Aristotle through the Enlightenment authors to Marx and Lenin.

Lukács then turns to magic and mimesis and emphasizes the tendency towards universality, in which the whole man responds to "the whole of the world that is accessible to him" (351). "It is in this sense that the gradual process of the detachment of the mimetico-aesthetic ... from the general ground of everyday life" (351) can be understood, whereas the arising of aesthetic categories out of magical mimesis proceeds from "the social contents that by their nature are intended for mimetic evocation and therefore draw on the aesthetic forms developed in the magical period" (380). Next, the path to the worldedness of art is demarcated from the Paleolithic Age to modern times. This discussion ends with John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn": "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" (461). Lukács then focuses on aesthetic subjectivity, attempting to defining its position in "the system of relationships between man and the outside world" (462). In the sense of fidelity to reality, "only in this way can the supposition of the self-consciousness of mankind ... philosophically justify the specificity of aesthetic reflection" (537). This contradictoriness of "utmost objectivity within the utmost subject-relatedness" leads to a radical thesis that there is "nothing utopian" about the artistic creation of a world (537). Consequently, the author delves into the world and world-creation of artistic works and the aesthetic sphere. He develops a dialectical-materialist theory of the contradictory autonomy of art, ending with a lamentation over the modernist loss of the specificity of "aesthetic reflection for the sake of the phantom of contemporary scientificity" (607). As a result, Lukács promotes the defetishising mission of art in contrast to the vicious cycle of formalism. Even the most formal genre of art, such as music, is a mimesis of the inner and outer world that has the potential of defetishisation through a heightened experience of the man made whole throughout human history. "Defetishisation occurs *uno acto* with the artistic salvaging of the enduring essence of the human species that is worth holding in trust" (651). Lukács concludes this volume by highlighting the universal features of the subject-object relationship in aesthetics. The coming-into-being of artwork "contains its social fulfilment in the lived aesthetic experience." "The

conquest of objective reality ... the intensive endlessness of meaningful content; the critique of life; the universality of the aesthetic that manifests in the pluralism of the arts and works: all of these aspects are paths to such a self-consciousness of people" (746). The book has its coda in a quote from Goethe's "Marienbad Elegy".

Lukács' book flows slowly, with a lot of repetition and back-and-forth moves. But an attentive reader will find this argumentative style necessary to the effort of dialectical systematization. Every moment of social formation is part of a movement of correlated contradictions. With every concept that tries to capture such a moment, more problems and contradictions arise. Therefore, every sentence of Lukács' demands a revisiting of preconditions and a preview of further developments, in order to resist its own reification into dogmas.

Then how should we confront such an immense Marxist enterprise of the aesthetic system that is an incomplete totality? The translator-editor's "Introduction" suggests a set of renewed approaches to the late Lukács' aesthetics, which I would summarize as five correlated methods of reading this magnum opus five decades later. The first way is to consider this work in Lukács' intellectual trajectory as a cultural giant's search for true Marxism. As Bachman has shown by referring to Heller's interpretation, *The Specificity of the Aesthetic* contains a partial return to his much earlier *Heidelberg Aesthetics*: "Thus, the identical subject-object of history in *The Specificity of the Aesthetic* is not the collectivity formed by the proletariat, as it was in *History and Class Consciousness*, but rather the collectivity of individual creators and receivers who comport themselves in the ways called for by works of art" (XXXV). The second is to situate this volume in a European and, especially, Central European tradition of the aesthetic as a modern philosophical debate (starting with Kant). Apart from pre-historical examples and evidence, almost all sources of Lukács' elaboration are drawn from European traditions (the Greek-Roman heritage, Enlightenment literature, German Classicism, Continental Philosophy, Realism, Central European social science, and more). At its own moment of composition, Lukács' systematic Marxist aesthetic forms a radical contrast to Theodor Adorno's post-Holocaust, anti-systematic *Aesthetic Theory*. This contrast leads to the third way of reading, in which one needs to heed Lukács' continuing critique of modernism. His role as the most important Marxist critic of the twentieth century is hidden in his sometimes-cumbersome sentences, as his critical insights into specific art genres (such as music as mimesis, even though he was not an expert on music) are scattered throughout the book, furthering a polemical thread of "mimesis vs modernism."

The fourth method is to return to philosophy itself. Despite all kinds of conceivable disagreements with the particular parts and the systemic whole of Lukács' aesthetic attempt, we must come to a reckoning that his dialectical materialism of everyday praxis as the starting point and endpoint of human history remains unsurpassed. That brings us to the fifth and final approach, and perhaps the most important according to Bachman's "Introduction." Bachman concludes with "a more praxis-oriented claim for the timeliness of *The Specificity of the Aesthetic*". He refers to the contemporary condition of "precarity," in which, in my view, everyday life is so digitally fetishized that the defetishising mission of art is more relevant – and problematic – than ever: "According to Lukács, art educates us to be political subjects, to lead a *vita activa*, but only so long as we resist the omnipresent sociocultural forces that act to destroy art or to reduce it to an object of consumption or to translate it into a rarefied realm cut off from everyday life" (XLI). To our contemporary minds, clouded by such pseudo-concepts as Post-humanism, New Materialism, and the Anthropocene, the late Lukács' defense of the whole human and the aesthetic experience as a deepening of self-consciousness of the whole of human history is not outdated but a powerful reminder of our current philosophical poverty. The late Lukács called for a renaissance of Marxism. More than 50 years having gone by, Bachman's twenty-first century translation of a twentieth-century Marxist aesthetic is truly timely in contributing to a renaissance of dialectical materialism of art and the everyday.

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