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***The Artistic and the Real:
Schiller's Aesthetic Theory in Lukács' Perspective***

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ABSTRACT. This contribution explores Friedrich Schiller's aesthetic theory through the lens of György Lukács' Marxist critique. Specifically, it emphasizes Schiller's role in bridging between German Idealism and the dialectical-materialistic aesthetics proposed by Lukács. For Schiller, an aesthetic education represents the solution for the fragmentation of human nature in bourgeois society. Although in Lukács view Schiller's approach is criticizable because of its idealistic limits, at the same time he acknowledges that Schiller's contributions to the reflection on aesthetics as a form of human praxis offer a solid base for the development of a materialistic and dialectical aesthetics, which sees art not only as an idealistic product, but as a reflection of social reality that engages both the subjective and objective side of the real. From this perspective, art can be equally seen as an essential means to reveal human essence and transforming the socio-historical world.

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1. Introduction

The reason for this contribution was initially related to the 100th anniversary of *History and Class Consciousness*' publication in 1923. My former intention was to underline some themes and ideas advanced and discussed in this text and, subsequently, to challenge them through a comparison with the most recent developments and reflections in Marxist social theories. Afterwards, the focus changed. Throughout the reading of the chapter "The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought",² I was surprised by the thoughts Lukács dedicates to Schiller's aesthetic conceptions. In those pages, I think some interesting insights arise which motivate a reassessment of Lukács' Marxist-based aesthetics.

Perhaps it is not inappropriate to state that reading *History and Class Consciousness* inevitably leads to discussion with a genuine attempt to deconstruct modern philosophy (German Idealism in particular), whose aporias, according to Lukács, needed to be highlighted and questioned in order to move towards an historical-dialectical materialist perspective. During the same years, interestingly, Lukács paved the way for a further development of his interests in a systematic aesthetic theory, which did not appear in a full form until the 1963 with the publication of *The Specificity of the Aesthetics*.³

As is known, Schiller is an author of great interest in the history of aesthetics. His most important text in this realm is *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, first published in 1795. Hence, Lukács' interest can be undoubtedly explained if we place his reflection in the framework of a critique of German Idealism. Furthermore, it can also be explained from the perspective of an elaboration of a scientifically, materialistically, and dialectically grounded aesthetics, that in the *History and Class Consciousness* years had not yet been declared, but that certainly was already present in Lukács' thinking.

Therefore, I will try to briefly reconstruct Lukács' reflections on Schiller's aesthetics since I believe that such an attempt could be a propaedeutic for an understanding of Lukács' aesthetics

² This section is notably included in the essay *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat* (see Lukács, 1971, pp. 83-222).

³ This book has been translated into English for the first time in 2023 (see Lukács 2023).

itself. Thus, I assume that Schiller's aesthetic thought represents a means for Lukács to touch upon some themes that subsequently will contribute to the development of his own aesthetic theory.

2. Lukács' critical assessment of modern philosophy

In *History and Class Consciousness*, Schiller is presented amongst those thinkers who bear what Lukács calls the "antinomies of bourgeois thought". Namely, the philosophers (above all, Kant) whose reflections, in accordance with the urge felt by Lukács in those years, would prevent classical German philosophy from providing a "transformative understanding" of historical and social reality. The Kantian theoretical separation between forms and contents, freedom and necessity, reason and sensibility and, again, the "problem of the thing-in-itself", represents for Lukács the most critical issue of modern philosophy. We shouldn't be surprised by such an account if we take into consideration at least the following aspects: a) the historical and biographical moment which gave birth to a text like *History and Class Consciousness* – a time when Lukács engages personally in a critical confrontation with the first phase of his philosophizing (characterized by a deepening investigation of neo-Kantian thought); b) his need to elaborate a transformative role for the philosophy, in order to decline it as an instrument of social change through its practical application (namely, the praxis).

Western philosophy posed to itself the problem of the "philosophical realization of society" from the very beginning. Yet, from Lukács' perspective, in this process it encounters several problems – for example, the issues expressed by the categories of thought in the act of philosophizing objects merely as "lifeless nature". This is a crucial point that concerns modern philosophy that, according to Lukács, has been carrying on since the development of Descartes' rationalism and the Scientific Revolution. According to such an approach, modern philosophy can exist only as a reifying thought, since its logical processuality is based on a mechanism in which nature is represented as a lifeless, de-spiritualized, objectified element. In this sense, nature is something that can merely be interpreted, broken down, analyzed, and deciphered at will. This also applies to man considered as a part of this impartial happening.

Nevertheless, according to Lukács this is not the unique conception of nature experienced by philosophical modernity. There is another one, in fact, that allows one to identify nature and being in terms of “true essence”. Understanding nature’s true essence or, again, “authentic humanity” as a specific part of nature, could enable us to overturn the problems of modern philosophy’s antinomies. Of course, this perspective would risk carrying an old metaphysical conceptions if Lukács didn’t move into the realm of a Hegelian immanent metaphysics. From this standpoint, being man equals being conceived as a part of a totality, a unity of parts that cannot be decomposed. According to Lukács, understanding nature itself as a human-based totality permits us (alongside the overcoming of ancient metaphysics) to understand all its manifestations in the domain of human praxis. As far as we’re concerned, art is one of the forms that expresses this domain. Lukács asserts that the birth of aesthetics temporally coincides with a phase in which modern philosophy (or ‘bourgeois thought’ in his terms) becomes aware of its own crisis. Reflecting on art as a form of human praxis thus means to “demolish the contingent relation of the parts to the whole and to resolve the merely apparent opposition between chance and necessity” (Lukács, 1971, p. 137). Yet, it also means reflecting upon what man realises from himself and through the world.

As Lukács writes, “it is in Schiller’s aesthetic and theoretical works that we can see, even more clearly than in the system of the philosophers [...] the need which has provided the impetus for these analyses” (Lukács, 1971, p. 138). In describing the play-instinct [*Spieltrieb*] as an essential feature of human beings, Schiller explicitly encloses man’s authenticity into an aesthetic principle whose consequences go far beyond aesthetics itself. By theorizing man as a playful animal, Schiller pushes the antinomies of modern philosophy to their extreme consequences, allowing us (in Lukács’ view) to recover the specificity, the proper nature, and the typicality of man through and into the aesthetic. In Schiller (in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* in particular), man’s natural disposition toward play and thus toward aestheticization (namely, toward the search for a particular union of form and content) represents the rescue of the human essence from a social context that tears it apart, dismembers it, parcels it, and reifies it. As Lukács writes:

In the aesthetic mode, conceived as broadly as possible, they may be salvaged from the deadening effects of the mechanism of reification. But only *in so far* as these contents become aesthetic. That is to say, either the

world must be aestheticized, [...] Or else, the aesthetic principle must be elevated into the principle by which objective reality is shaped (Lukács, 1971, pp. 139-40).

3. The systematic development of a dialectic-materialistic aesthetics

Lukács proceeds more systematically in his analysis of Schiller's aesthetic thought in an essay composed in 1935 (during the so-called "Moscow period", 1933-1945) entitled "On Schiller's Aesthetics", collected in the 1954 book *Contributions to a History of Aesthetics*.⁴ At that time, as a researcher at the Marx-Lenin Institute, Lukács begins to outline his project of founding a Marxist aesthetics, explicitly invoked in the very introduction to the *Contributions*. To give it substance, he proceeds again in a dismantling of modern/idealist philosophy. In order to accomplish this purpose, Lukács returns again to Schiller, since in his view he represents the thinker who (Hegel excluded) rooted his reflections mostly in: a) a real, historical conception of man; b) a partial overcoming of the issues posed by modern philosophy; c) the search for a way to take man's being away from the reification process (the result of bourgeois social structure); d) the repossession of man's true essence through art. For all these reasons, Schiller's thought can be circumscribed to a very specific goal of a socio-historical nature: the realization of a society where beauty, morality and truth mutually match through and in artistic activity. It is precisely for achieving this purpose that Schiller finds it necessary to arrange for an aesthetic education of men. In Lukács' view, in Schiller's aesthetics art making becomes a project aimed at the foundation of a new humanity. Nevertheless, it is precisely in the rollout of this project that Schiller shows both his merits and his demerits.

On one hand, Schiller in fact ends up reproducing the same aporetic problems of modern philosophy. On the other hand, he embodies the forerunner of an anti-subjective Idealism that finds its crowning in Hegel. Although Schiller has made a considerable leap forward from Kant's subjective Idealism, he fails to distance himself completely from it at the same time. This is a noticeable contrast for Lukács, given the fact that reason and sensibility, ethics and aesthetics, form

⁴ Since the text is still untranslated in English, we referred to the Italian translation (see Lukács, 1957). Moreover, the original version in German has been mentioned in the references (see Lukács, 1954).

and content appear to merge into the totality that is man in Schiller's theory of aesthetic education, but essentially as separated elements outside of it. By enclosing moral and social renewal in the fulfillment of aesthetic civilization, Schiller reveals himself as a careful and sensitive observer of his time, when the social consequences of the division of labor overtake the development of man's true essence: the creation of forms, namely the basic definition for art making and aesthetic education.

But still, this is a rather short-sighted view according to Lukács, because it simply proposes both an idealistic and proto-romantic expedient as a solution for adjusting society's material forces. Therefore, it's almost as if Schiller correctly formulates the diagnosis but misguides the therapy. In order to regain a lost totality, he opposes an inverted perspective which claims to produce a specific configuration of social being from the consciousness of the original and authentic aesthetic character of man. As much as he grasps the precise characteristics of the historical movement of bourgeois society, Schiller falls back on a vacuous and ineffective idealistic appeal, even though he tries to resolve these same characteristics via a theorization of a practical principle (the play).

Paradoxically, in the very proposition of an aesthetic solution, Schiller reproduces the same antinomies of bourgeois thought that he wants to criticize. Although he successfully analyzes the state of laceration of the human, he remedies this latter through an idealistic transformation that has a vain effect in Lukács' perspective. As he writes:

Schiller undertakes the impossible attempt to construct an objectivistic theory of aesthetic creation on the basis of a theory of subjective idealistic knowledge [...] he fails to see that the problems of the sensitive objectivity of art can achieve a coherent solution only on the basis of philosophical materialism, that is, on the basis of the recognition of the independence of the objects of human consciousness (Lukács, 1957, p. 58).

This brings us to the following issue posed by Lukács: in order to develop a "objectivistic theory of aesthetic creation" whereby men can freely deploy the totality of their faculties in a conscious praxis, it is essential to adopt a dialectical viewpoint. Only this can overcome Kant, Schiller, and, generally, modern philosophy's gap between reason and sensibility so as to look at human-historical reality not as a "lifeless thing" but, on the contrary, to understand it as the product of a dialectical synthesis given by the mutual encounter between a creative subject (the man/the artist)

and an objective reality. In aesthetic terms, this means man must develop the ability to perceive the historical world as a dynamic dimension whose structure and appearance lay entirely on men's creative, practical and productive capacities to shape it, but to also perceive that, at the same time, these very capacities are objectively founded in historical praxis. This implies that the same social and historical structures and men's ability to perceive them (as well as the capacity to influence them through the creation of forms and the making of art) are in a dialectical, mutual relationship.

This is the reason why Lukács will choose to draft a theory of reflection (partially based on Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*) that he will discuss systematically in 1963's *The Specificity of the Aesthetics*. From Lukács' perspective, the answer to the theoretical problems posed by modern philosophy cannot be concealed in either vulgar materialism or fatuous Idealism. Therefore, to decline the relationship between the subject and the shapeable, sensitive world in the terms of mirroring (or reflection) represents a need that cannot be conceived as a copying mechanism, but rather as an experience of the translation of reality. From an aesthetic perspective, the philosophical foundation of this dialectical synthesis constitutes, as Lukács argues, the ultimate goal of his aesthetic foundation project.

To grasp art's place in the totality of human activities (i.e. the multiple and differentiated attempts to respond to the external, human-based reality), we ought to analyze the specific characteristics of aesthetic reflection. According to Lukács, art represents a particular form of the reproduction of reality which is formally (even if not substantially) different from other forms of reproduction, such as science, ethics or religion. Therefore, if we wish to understand why humans are inclined to make art and why their ways of making art materially changes over time and space, then we are called to consider the general law of reflection of our social reality. That is to say, if we intend to think of art as a product of a dialectical relation, then we have to argue with pre-Hegelian idealistic approaches and their hierarchical reasoning which places subject consciousness above a reality that is conceived as the direct product of subject itself. In Lukács' opinion "there is being without consciousness, but there is no consciousness without being" (Lukács, 2023, p. 12). In that sense, getting rid of Idealism's problems concerning the objectivity of social being cannot involve starting from the knowing subject. For Lukács, as well as for Hegel, the real (social and

aesthetic at once) and its knowability constitutes the product of a reciprocal relation between a subjectively produced objectivity and an objectively produced subjectivity.

Obviously, going beyond Idealism and the problems of subjectivistic modern philosophy cannot mean completely getting rid of the subject. But that's the whole point: through art the essence of the real is shown as the result of a mediated reproduction. As Lukács writes:

For any genuinely consistent Idealism, a form of consciousness that is meaningful for everyone in human existence – thus, in our case, the aesthetic form of consciousness – must be of a 'supratemporal' and 'eternal' nature, since its origin is hierarchically founded in the context of a world of ideas. [...] For it necessarily follows from this that the aesthetic, both on the side of production and reception, belongs to the 'essence' of man, [...] Our materialist way of looking at things must yield a completely opposite image [...] The scientific reflection of reality attempts to disengage itself from all anthropological, sensuous, and mental determinations, that it strives to render objects and their relations as they are in themselves, independent of consciousness. In contrast, aesthetic reflection proceeds from and is directed at the human world. As shall be expounded later, this does not amount to simple subjectivism. On the contrary, the objectivity of objects is preserved, albeit such that all of the typical relatedness to human life is included in it such that it appears in keeping with the current state of mankind's inner and outer development, which is a social development. This means that any aesthetic formation intrinsically includes and itself arranges the historical *hic et nunc* of its genesis as an essential aspect of its decisive objectivity. (Lukács 2023, pp. 14-16)

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, Schiller is the first thinker associated with German Idealism to grasp these insights. In the framework of his aesthetic theory, the knowability of the world becomes guaranteed by the existence of artistic praxis that reflects the real without leaving it in the obscurity of the thing-in-itself. Unfortunately, Schiller does not carry out all the consequences arising from this perspective. Thus art, unable to be a mere imitation of reality, is forced to make itself an imitation of the ideas of reason, ultimately revealing his ambivalence in this regard. Hence, the work of art in Schiller's aesthetics shows itself bound to the real insofar as it detaches itself to stand as a transformative idea. But not, as Lukács hopes, as conscious praxis. In his view, all this faithfully expresses the

vacuous Romantic attitude of critique of bourgeois society which, in the end, is ineffective for producing a plan for the real transformation of human environment and existence.

Nevertheless, the aspiration for objectivity in Schiller's objectivism represents an important attempt towards an overcoming of Idealism and the formulation of a dialectical engagement between man and the world. Schiller rightly finds objectivity in the aesthetic products themselves, clots of humanity whose beauty derives precisely from their human nature. Indeed, beauty is, according to him, in man insofar as it is in nature and insofar as man takes part of this nature. In a sense, his aesthetics represents both a theory of self-creation and self-understanding of nature. Subjective mediation takes place inasmuch it represents a moment of objective nature which, through man, aesthetically thinks, creates, and reproduces itself. The aesthetic, therefore, loses its detached character about the ontological structure of the real to become a theory and practice of social transformation.

Unfortunately, this transformation remains in Schiller merely ideal; he reveals himself as a proto-dialectical and a proto-romantic thinker at once. Nonetheless, from the point of view of the evolution of philosophical thought, he represents for Lukács the 'Pillars of Hercules' of modern philosophy's subjectivistic formalism and a bridge between the bourgeois consciousness of the Enlightenment and the crisis of this conscience. From Lukács' perspective, Schiller prepared the ground for the development of dialectical materialism in the field of aesthetics, representing the first thinker to give to the artwork the character of a dialectical movement whose effectiveness is revealed, rather than in the real's disruption, in its implementation mediated by art.

I think this excerpt from Schiller's *The Bride of Messina*, mentioned by Lukács in his 1947 work *Goethe and His Age*, could bring this contribution to a good conclusion:

Art can be truer than any reality and more real than any phenomenon. Hence, it automatically follows that the artist cannot use a single element of reality as he finds it, that its work must be ideal in *all* its parts just as it must, as a whole, possess reality and accord with nature (Lukács, 1968, p. 89).

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