

## NOTES TOWARD A MATERIALIST AESTHETICS

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1. Dialectical materialism conceives of art as the aesthetic practice of man.
2. At the same time, it takes into consideration the different forms that art has adopted over the course of history and interprets its movement as the product of contradictions that arise in the process of social practice.
3. The history of the evolution of modern art, from the Impressionists to so-called abstract art, presents a situation in which those inner contradictions, derived from practice itself, lead to partial resolutions. Antagonism arises when the different partial resolutions—which in aesthetic practice emerge as yet another concrete factor—come into contradiction with the old forms of art.
4. Dialectical materialism, applied to the interpretation of artistic practice, begins by establishing a distinction between the process and its product—the material object with aesthetic properties. It therefore differs, essentially, from the various idealist interpretations that do not take into account such a distinction, because they fail to conceive of both art and sensory activity as practice.

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In fact, those interpretations depart from unconditioned premises, such as the supposed “representative faculty of the inner sense”: pre-established forms of sensibility that, once accepted, determine the characteristics of judgment, etc. The idealist mistake thus consists in regarding both aesthetic judgments and feelings as something already given in the form of intuitions or formal categories.<sup>1</sup>

5. Metaphysical systems have been characterized, among other things, by failing to realize the difference between the physical and historical world and the world of representations.<sup>2</sup> In the realm of aesthetics, this has amounted to ignoring the historical and practical nature of art and, consequently, to conflating (in the speculation about the beautiful or about the elements of judgment) the properties of the natural object with those of the aesthetic object.
6. For materialism, as we have said, the aesthetic process is a conditioned practice. But this materialist conception of art as practice has not been, by any means, the result of a formal critique; it has come about when the internal contradictions of the work of art required the verification of the procedure that gave rise to it.
7. The old idealist aesthetics did not care about the reality of the object; it was content with its intuitive representation. For materialist aesthetics, by contrast, it is indispensable that the object really exists. In other words: whereas idealist aesthetics included the object in the process of artistic practice merely as “sensuous intuition,” the materialist conception maintains that the object is defined and becomes real in the process. This amounts to saying that, in the former view, the process consisted of a representation that, of course, was not dialectically resolved in the object; in the latter, however, the process is one of invention and the object is its result.
8. For the classic formalist approach, it was spirit that imparted order and form, whereas the sensible world provided matter, “the content.” In this manner, the qualities of a thing were metaphysically segregated from the thing itself.

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1 Here Hlito is taking issue with Kant’s doctrine that the objective reality of a possible experience must lie in strictly a priori conditions. The notion of the “inner sense” denotes a receptive faculty that allows for the representation of succession and multiplicity; as stated in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, this faculty provides the basis for the intellect’s “transcendental unit of apperception.”

2 Following a Marxist convention established by Engels, Hlito opposes “dialectics” to “metaphysics.”

Hegel defined this “classical” attitude as a moment in which “the free subject, by determining himself, finds in his own essence the external form that suits him.” But it soon becomes evident that the said form represents a limitation: it is finite and therefore tends to integrate itself into pure spirit. Thus, romantic form comes along, and aesthetics begins to struggle fruitlessly in the theory of “contents.” The artistic process finds its resolution in pure intuition and contemplation; the subject imparts not only form but also the very “content” of reality.

Within this system of representations, in which both subject and object act as “implicit contents,” becoming one in the embrace of “sentimental projection,” everything is susceptible to becoming an aesthetic phenomenon so long as it allows for an expressive need of human nature.<sup>3</sup>

9. For materialist aesthetics, the object is exhausted in its properties. The starting point of materialist aesthetics is invention as the only possible means of constructing an art in accordance with the materialist conception of knowledge.

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3 This thesis combines different critical idioms and theoretical perspectives in a rather confusing manner. While the first paragraph reiterates Hlito’s critique of Kantian idealism, the subsequent two paragraphs seemingly expand this critique by adopting some views and terms developed by Hegel in his lectures on fine art. Loosely quoting from the introduction to Part II of Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, Hlito appears to suggest that what he calls the “classic formalist approach” falls under Hegel’s definition of the “classical form of art.” For Hegel, the classical mode, which supersedes the symbolic mode of Eastern peoples and finds its highest realization in Greek art, is based on the vision of an entirely harmonious unity of content and form: “Here art has reached its own essential nature by bringing the Idea, as spiritual individuality, directly into harmony with its bodily reality in such a perfect way that external existence now for the first time no longer preserves any independence in contrast with the meaning which it is to express, while conversely the inner [meaning], in its shape worked out for our vision, shows there only itself and in it is related to itself affirmatively.” Romantic art, however, “dissolves that classical unification of inwardness and external manifestation and takes flight out of externality back into itself.” G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Clarendon Press, 1975), 301. Thus, Hlito relies on Hegel’s account both to refute Kant and to present materialist aesthetics as signaling the end of all earlier forms of art (as classified by Hegel). It is not clear, however, whether the “classic formalist approach” falls under the rubric of “classical” or “romantic.” In fact, Hlito seems to imply that *all* previous forms of art suffered from the idealism that, in his view, Kant comes to epitomize. But with regard to this point, it should be noted that Hegel, while critical of Kant’s “formalist” analysis of aesthetic judgments, does not link Kant to any of the rubrics in his classification. Moreover, Hegel’s account, while arguably evolutionistic, is ostensibly less normative than Hlito holds it to be. Hegel, in other words, does not imply that romantic art is “superior” to classical art; he is simply describing the conditions that, according to him, allowed for the transition from one to the other.

Insofar as it does not segregate the object from its properties, this conception determines that the aesthetic property resides in the concrete materiality of the artwork.

10. Art, like every activity that in its process “is constantly changing from the form of action to the form of being,” is concretely verified in the object. In the process of artistic invention, practice manifests itself as the producer of a new thing with new properties.

“What is new is the organization and the new properties must relate to it” (Sellars, quoted by J. Lewis).<sup>4</sup>

11. The new property determines the new content, the new “being.” “Labor has become bound up in its object. . . . What on the side of the worker appeared in the form of unrest now appears, on the side of the product, in the form of being, as a fixed, immobile characteristic” (K. Marx).<sup>5</sup>

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4 The reference is to British Marxist philosopher John Lewis and Canadian philosopher Roy Wood Sellars, the proponent of a kind of naturalistic epistemology that Lewis found congenial to dialectical materialism. Source unknown.

5 This quote is taken from Marx’s well-known discussion of the labor process in volume I of *Capital*. I am citing from Ben Fowkes’s translation (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1976), 287. None of the Spanish translations available at the time match Hlito’s transcription.