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Marxist Aesthetics: A Minimal Research Programme

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To Joshua Clover, Frederic Jameson, and Marina Vishmidt in memoriam.

This special issue reconsiders the notion of a "Marxist aesthetics," seeking to test and reassess its contemporary claims, relevance, and pitfalls. Such a task is, of course, fraught from the start. The problem of identifying what might be contained under the rubric of a Marxist aesthetics—what might belong to its historical canon, seen to be its offshoots and experiments, or counted among its rising and ebbing waves—is as awkward as any attempt to define the overarching category. At best, the term Marxist aesthetics names a contradictory and diffuse field of study, a research programme haunted by a century of problematic ideological investments in the "correct" tendencies in art and cultural production. At worst, it names an aporetic idea, one that both betrays its Marxism and misunderstands its aesthetics—an idea best jettisoned, best relegated to a minor episode in the annals of history.

This special issue, however, is not an attempt to straightforwardly recover the idea of Marxist aesthetics as if it were or could ever be some grand resolution to a set of historical and contemporary questions. Indeed, critical theories of art and aesthetics are likely better off without a unified notion of Marxist aesthetics. And yet, we venture that there are lessons to be gleaned from revisiting more than a century of Marxist thought on art, culture, and aesthetics.

Rather than designating a discrete historical object, such as "Western Marxism," we here view Marxist aesthetics as necessarily pointing to a heterodox intellectual tradition that could include tendencies, strands, and impulses as diverse as Dadaism, constructivism, surrealism, the anthropophagic movement, Négritude, Proletkult, LEF, New LEF, the early Frankfurt School, Acéphale, as well as postwar practices such as the Black Arts Movement, the cultural practices of Operaismo and Autonomia, the Situationist International, Black

Mask, Art & Language, Third Cinema, Dziga Vertov Group, Wages Against Housework, Womanhouse, and and and.

Such lists are necessarily incomplete, idiosyncratic, biased, and, without an organising concept, more or less meaningless. Polemically stated at a level of sweeping generality, art history provides one such deeply inadequate organising concept, one that risks uncritically assuming the integrity of its object(s), the work of art, and the unbroken continuity of its relatively autonomous history.[1] A Marxist aesthetics, by contrast, does not provide a set of positive criteria with which to chart and taxonomise works strictly, but enquires into the extended historical conditions of production through which works emerge. Further, this can only be a materialist project if its grasp of aesthetics does not detach a regime of "the sensible" or an "anthropology" from capital and its related power dynamics (whether this is called "aesthetics" or "art" is here less important), for this can easily lead to various forms of mystifications and ideological legitimisations.[2]

This does not mean that any Marxist or materialist aesthetics, in the sense of a historical designation and minimal methodology, can escape the question of what precisely constitutes its object (of critique).[3] Rather, in the words of Peter Bürger's comment on Marx's *Grundrisse*, "the unfolding of objects and the elaboration of categories are connected."[4] Marxist aesthetics must therefore self-reflexively include itself as a historically contested space of intellectual enquiry and practice, which involves critically assessing its own limits and (missed) encounters, which would need to include, as Fred Moten phrased it, the "encounter between Marxist theory and the theoretical resources and political-economic aspirations held within (the work of) the black aesthetic."[5] The continuing debates and critiques of Marxist orthodoxy and dogmatism, its sometimes latent, sometimes overt racialised and gendered programme, testify to this. None of these debates, however, provides any safe anchor point regarding the required morphology of objects. Hence, without relegating the centrality of thinking through the concrete, and without abandoning the political importance that directs our attention to particular objects of study—whether the critical object is the avant-garde (Bürger), a set of minor aesthetic categories (Sianne Ngai), or the black expression of jazz (Fumi Okiji)—the direction of critical attention is of somewhat diminished importance when contrasted to how the studied object is historically constituted as an object of "interest" in the first place.

If the ongoing task of Marxist aesthetics, then, is to return its objects to the "totality" of capitalist societies and their gendered and racial underpinnings, this tells us little about what, precisely, is to be gained from such a return, or what this requires of us when further pursuing contradictory and critical frictions.

This might not only have to do with the Benjaminian idea of method as *detour*, but also the more general porosity or homelessness of Marxist aesthetics. In contrast to, say, a Marxist art history, Marxist aesthetics appears to lack a disciplinary and institutional anchor and to be separated from any natural environment. At its worst, it seems to aim at a meta-disciplinary doctrine, at its best, a field of extra- and even anti-disciplinary *study*.

The prompt for contributions to this special issue was that of Marxist aesthetics considered as a minimal "research programme," one in which the historical content and form remain contested—a continuous and problematic object of critique. Starting from the basic presupposition that Marxism is a critical *method* rather than a positive doctrine, this introduction briefly outlines the general contours of Marxist aesthetic thought as it unfolds, in our reading, through three partly overlapping historical cycles that bleed into and inform the present moment of prolonged economic stagnation, deferred crisis, spectacularised decline, livestreamed genocide, latent civil war, and new revolutionary horizons.

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In many respects, the notion of a "Marxist aesthetics" is an invention of the 1920s and 1930s, an idea co-constituted by the concentration of debates within Marxist circles and associations around the role of art, theatre, and literature in revolutionary praxis, problems of thinking and drafting cultural policy within socialist and communist political parties, the torturous publication of many of Marx's and Engels's manuscripts and minor works, and the extensive efforts of writers, artists, theorists, and critics to think through the political and philosophical importance of art in a historical materialist framework.

Early ventures into this burgeoning line of thought—what we are here designating the "first wave" of Marxist aesthetics—predominantly emerged in the German and extended Soviet spheres, as well as in the significant and often porous exchanges between them, nearly embodied in the figure of Georg Lukács. Perhaps the first to formally constitute the idea was Karl August Wittfogel in his article "Zur Frage der marxistischen Ästhetik" (On the question of Marxist aesthetics),[6] published in several parts in 1930 in *Die Linkskurve*, the organ of the Association of Proletarian-Revolutionary Authors (fig. 1). The article begins: "Economic crisis, millions out of work, hunger marches, fascisisation, [Karl] Zörgiebel and the feuds in industry have not brought the cultural work of the revolutionary proletariat to a standstill. The class struggle, which on all other fronts rages with increasing obstinacy, cannot on the cultural front remain silent."[7] Wittfogel's impassioned opening broadly betrays his otherwise

rather sober intentions, which, in the main, were to try to establish the basic philosophical coordinates for a Marxist aesthetics—understood as the Marxist framework within which art was to be analysed and produced—relative to the competing German Idealist traditions it had inherited. Sketched most extensively in the first and fifth instalments, such traditions were divided into two: on the one side, prompted by the recent reception of the literary criticism of Franz Mehring,[8] Wittfogel posits a Kantian–Schillerian formalist-idealist position;[9] on the other, prompted by the work of Lenin, a Hegelian dialectical-materialist position.[10] The central issue upon which Wittfogel separates these two traditions is that of the form–content division, which he deployed to demonstrate the limitations of the Kantian–Schillerian contribution to the theory of both bourgeois and proletarian art respective to that of the critical Hegelian one. But rather than recount Wittfogel's claims in any depth here,[11] we want instead to stress that several of the fundamental tensions that the project of thinking or producing a Marxist aesthetics—which repeat throughout its fragmented history and which haunt the present publication—are bound up in this early, symptomatic exercise and the criticism that it garnered. Wittfogel's essay, that is, remains important to us here not because of its distinctive philosophical position or claims but because it inhabits a problematic that is illustrative of the broader Marxist aesthetic research programme.

Given that, as Helga Gallas claimed in her canonical study of *Die Linkskurve*, Wittfogel's serialised article was "really the first in Germany to present more precisely the tendencies and principles of a Marxist *aesthetic*,"[12] it was also the first to be rebuked, notably from the Marxist feminist art critic and theorist Lu Märten, whose major prior contribution to the area had been her 1924 *Wesen und Veränderung der Formen / Künste: Resultate historisch-materialistischer Untersuchungen* (Essence and transformation of forms/arts: Results of historical-material analyses). As Jenny Nachtigall and Kerstin Stakemeier recently summarised,

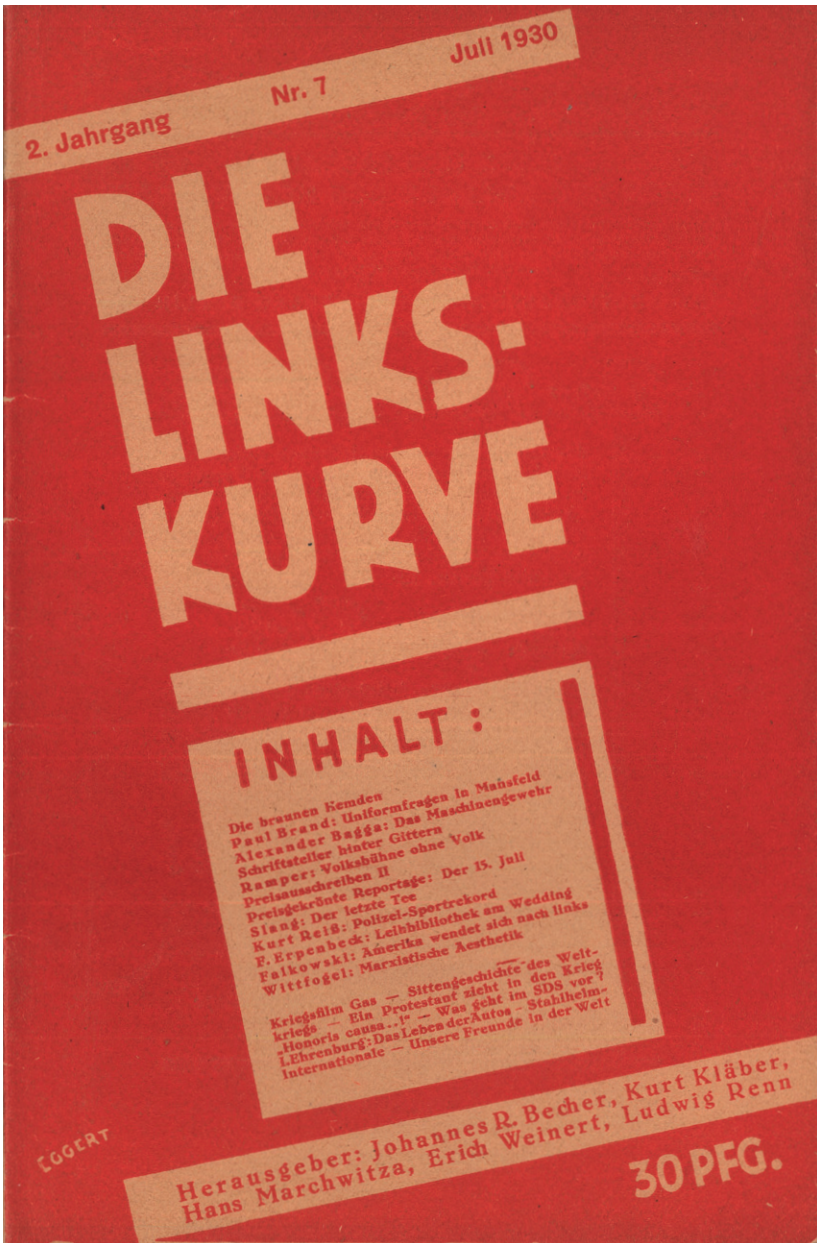
> *Essence and Transformation* aimed to rewrite the history of art as a monist history of form with a scope much broader than art's institutionalised Western field. The book calls on cave painting, ancient tools, bowls and masks, folk music and dance, fairy tales, furniture, Gothic cathedrals, radio, film, and many other artefacts in an effort to pluralise the monolithic notion of 'art' that was taught in the European academies.[13]

Märten's quasi-anthropological emphasis on questions of form and her critical attempts to undermine the bourgeois concept of art were, of course, fundamentally intolerable to Wittfogel. Thus, Märten's claims that "the problem of art is a problem of form, not content," and that "the art of every age, the form of every age, remains not as content, revered and peculiar, but as form," are

dismissively attacked by Wittfogel as "formalist barbarism," remaining content with "the heritage of German classic philosophy, its idealism, that proletarian culture will not accept."[14] In her published response to his attacks in 1931, Märten took to task several of Wittfogel's basic methodological blind spots: his failure to ask what presumptions we, as Marxists, must adopt in order to think the production of art under capitalism; his exclusive extrapolation from studies of literature; his exclusive development of philosophical, not concrete, enquiry; his reticence to cite Marx's writings; and so on.[15] In essence, Wittfogel assumes that the essential question was that of how to conceptualise aesthetics from a Marxist standpoint, rather than how Marxism might best instruct us in thinking about the production and circulation of the arts and other form-bestowing activities.[16] Given that, for Märten, a Marxist "critique of the arts necessarily transforms into a critique of labour,"[17] it could hardly have been appropriate to pose the problem as one of what philosophical lineage Marxists should be drawing on. Indeed, to even posit it as a question of Marxist aesthetics would be to set out on fundamentally non-Marxist terms.

Although these early German debates could justifiably be separated from Soviet spheres of thought—insofar as for the former the questions were refracted through the analytical lens of art *in* capitalist society, whereas the latter aimed at theorising art *after* capital's abolition—it is more fitting and useful to consider them mutually imbricated, biographically and structurally. In the case of Wittfogel, for example, we need only note that his early essays on the reception of Mehring, on a Marxist aesthetics, and his distributed "Stalinist-inspired" denunciation of the "vulgar Marxism" of August Thalheimer were written within the context of a contestation over the involvement of the Soviets in the "German October."[18] Or in the instance of Märten, we would have to recognise that her *Essence and Transformation* is entirely unthinkable without the historical experiences of the Russian Revolution and its cultural and intellectual impact in the aftermath of the failed revolution in Germany as well as the discussions on proletarian culture in the early 1920s in communist and avant-gardist milieus.[19] Such charged, conflictual experiences imbue the work of Wittfogel, Märten, and many other German and Central European intellectuals with a historically specific tension between a communist sensibility and the "ruthless critique" of art's social function under capitalism.

Within the Soviet context, one of the earliest, most significant, and most formal attempts to elaborate on this tension within a supposedly communist context was offered by Mikhail Lifshitz. Among other, otherwise more catastrophic events, the year 1933 marked the publication of Lifshitz's *Marks i Engels ob Iskusstve* (translated into English as *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx*)—a text that delved in some depth into the aesthetic thought of Marx's early work in particular—as well as an anthology of Marx's writings on art



1. Cover of *Die Linkskurve* 2, no. 7 (July 1930), in which a part of Wittfogel's article appeared.

that he co-edited with Anatoly Lunacharsky and Franz P. Schiller—the first of its kind anywhere in the field. As has already been pointed out and as is important to reiterate, such efforts were not built by isolated individuals, but often drew on earlier attempts to think what Marxism had to say about art and literature—with contributions in the Soviet context from figures such as Boris Arvatov, Alexander Bogdanov, Vladimir Fritsche, Georgi Plekhanov, and Liia Zivel'chinskaia—as well as to think about the place of art in its separation from its bourgeois social position—the division between an "old" capitalist and a "new" communist culture that we find, for instance, in Lukács's earlier essay on the subject.[20] In the immediate aftermath of the first Five-Year Plan and with the Stalinist sanctioning of Social Realism on the near horizon, the following lines appear as closing remarks in Lifshitz's text:

> According to Marx's doctrine, therefore, communism creates conditions for the growth of culture and art compared to which the limited opportunities that the slaves' democracy offers to a privileged few must necessarily seem meagre. *Art is dead! LONG LIVE ART!* this is the slogan of Marx's aesthetics.[21]

If we are here figuring these early German and Soviet theoretical interventions as a "first wave," we do so insofar as they collectively denote an extended body of self-reflexive attempts to think and produce a Marxist aesthetics, as mediated by a given set of historical coordinates. As would not be true of the "second" and what we suggest might be a current "third wave," first wave interventions are conditioned by broader questions of party cultural policy,[22] the value to be attributed to proletarian culture above, alongside, or against a "radical" bourgeois tradition, the contribution of the arts, usually in advancing class consciousness, to the revolutionary workers' movements, the immanent reconfiguration of art and art's autonomy in post-capitalist society, and so on.

For the most part, and for obvious historical reasons, attempts to theorise a Marxist aesthetics in what is now generally termed the Global North subsequently remained somewhat dormant until the mid-to-late 1960s and early 1970s, when a new generation of theorists rekindled an interest in recovering, reframing, and expanding the early debates in the wake of then-recent political movements.[23] Such a rediscovery obviously varied greatly from context to context. Hence, according to Paolo D'Angelo, a Marxist aesthetic did not exist in Italy before 1945, even if well-known Italian aestheticians from the first half of the twentieth century, such as Benedetto Croce, were highly interested in Marxism but not its aesthetics, and prominent Italian Marxists, like Antonio Labriola and Antonio Gramsci, showed no sustained interest in the bourgeois discipline.[24] In the German context, on the contrary, the emerging "second wave" was more in keeping with the contributions of the 1930s, as seen, for instance, in Peter Gorsen and Heiner Boehncke's republication in 1970 of

the Wittfogel–Märten debate in the pages of *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* and the re-introduction of Märten's writing by the journal *alternative*. In the Anglophone world, then somewhat out of joint, we would have to recognise the work conducted by Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski to re-anthologise Marx's and Engels' writings on literature and art as part of Baxandall's broader, unfortunately ultimately aborted, Documents on Marxist Aesthetics series.[25] But this emerging second wave would also begin to take a more generalised and pluralistic approach to the problem, trying to move beyond exegesis towards claims about what a heterodox Marxism can think about aesthetic concerns.[26]

Part of this was spurred by vast translation efforts that saw, for instance, Arvatov's seminal *Art and Production* from 1926 translated into German in 1972, then Spanish and Italian the year after.[27] Such translations not only transformed the legacy of Marxist aesthetics into new works and disputes—as conveyed in the original title of Herbert Marcuse's 1977 book *Die Permanenz der Kunst: Wider eine bestimmte Marxistische Ästhetik* (translated into English as *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*)—and produced new conceptual resources for this line of thought—such as in the writings of Raymond Williams—they also renegotiated and contested the very legacy of what a Marxist or materialist aesthetics should imply.[28] Good examples thereof are Heinz Paetzold's two-volume monograph *Neomarxistische Ästhetik* (1974) and, in the Anglophone sphere, the still largely authoritative compilation of essays published under the title *Aesthetics and Politics*, a book compiled and presented by Rodney Livingstone, Perry Anderson, and Francis Mulhern with an afterword by Frederic Jameson. Partly echoing the first volume of Paetzold's work, which itself concentrated on the thought of Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin, *Aesthetics and Politics* presented texts by Bertolt Brecht, Lukács, and Bloch that revolved around the 1930s debates on expressionism and realism, as well as the now-iconic exchanges between Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno in the wake of the former's "Work of Art" essay. Whereas Paetzold's second volume focused on the postwar revival of these debates in the work of the late Adorno and Marcuse, *Aesthetics and Politics* insisted on the debt and aporias of the earlier debates, arguing, for instance, that the "Adorno–Benjamin exchanges have yet to be truly surpassed by any general progress of Marxist aesthetic theory since that time."[29] This volume has been crucial in introducing an Anglophone audience to these important resources and is worth revisiting and rereading regularly. However, it also simultaneously limited what was originally an essentially transnational discussion to a specific geopolitical space (Germany), a particular intellectual tradition (Western Marxism), and even a single art form (literature).[30] That is to say, as important as it remains, this small 1970s anthology functionally overdetermines much of the English-language discussions of the project of constructing a Marxist aesthetics—and, in many ways, also conditions some of the myopia of this introduction.

Given these limitations, it becomes all the more important to mention various second-wave attempts to subvert "the classical land of aesthetic thought."[31] An interesting example of this, admittedly also emerging from within German territory, is the 1972 compilation of texts entitled *Parteilichkeit der Literatur oder Parteiliteratur? Materialien zu einer undogmatischen marxistischen Ästhetik* (Partisanship of literature or partisan literature? Materials for an undogmatic Marxist aesthetics), edited by Hans Christoph Buch.[32] Though the hegemony of literature is largely maintained here, it stands out as a far more direct and expansive engagement with the methodological and historiographical problems of an "undogmatic" Marxist aesthetic. Whereas the editors of *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* sought fit to republish, in only their second issue, Wittfogel's "Zur Frage" with the suggestion that it constituted the "earliest attempt at a blueprint and an extrapolation of aesthetics from the theoretical oeuvre of historical materialism," Buch's compilation indeed appears rather more promiscuous in its selection criteria. Despite its still largely Germanophone focus, which couldn't resist including classic texts from Marx, Mehring, and Lenin, Marxist aesthetics was therein expanded into a highly heterogeneous canonical field, encompassing texts such as Clara Zetkin's 1910 to 1911 "Art and Proletariat," various post-revolutionary and interwar manifestos and texts that ranged from LEF, Bogdanov, and Wieland Herzfelde through to André Breton, Diego Rivera, and Leon Trotsky's "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art," Jean-Paul Sartre's "The Situation of the Writer in 1947," and several texts from "Third World" writers such as Lu Hsün, Mao Zedong, Frantz Fanon, and Fidel Castro. Curiously, however, Buch did not choose to include more contemporary and explicit "Third World" elaborations of Marxist aesthetics, such as Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez's 1965 *Las ideas estéticas de Marx: Ensayos de estética Marxista* (translated into English as *Art and Society: Essays in Marxist Aesthetics*). This contestation of the geographical and epistemic boundaries of aesthetics has, since the 1970s, not only haunted but also increasingly defined materialist scholarship, as is evident in the influence of writers such as Sylvia Wynter, Roberto Schwarz, and Françoise Vergés. As recently argued by Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, such contestation should be mobilised retrospectively; modern art and the aesthetic habitus of the museum visitor is simply unthinkable without reference to a colonial and imperial regime of plunder and violence.[33]

As the many anthologisation and translation efforts from the 1960s and 1970s as well as new Marxist scholarship into heterodox forms of materialism evince,[34] Buch was obviously not alone in the endeavour to reconsider materialist strands in the history of aesthetics and the arts. In retrospect, his theoretically underdetermined though referentially expanded compilation might best be understood as a symptom of a more general discontent with the otherwise latent elective affinities between Marxist perspectives on art and aesthetics, waning working-class (cultural) politics, and a dogmatic Stalinist aestheticism. In the early 1970s,

such discontent often served as the more or less explicit starting point, as was the case with the early theorisation of "commodity aesthetics" by Wolfgang Fritz Haug and the 1974 anthology *Das Unvermögen der Realität. Beiträge zu einer anderen materialistischen Ästhetik* (*The incapacity of reality: Contributions to an alternative materialist aesthetics*), which was tellingly published the same year as Karl Heinz Roth und Elisabeth Behrens's *Die 'andere' Arbeiterbewegung und die Entwicklung der kapitalistischen Repression von 1880 bis zur Gegenwart* (The 'other' workers' movement and the development of capitalist repression from 1880 to the present day). As one of the editors, Gisela Dischner, wrote in the opening passages of *Das Unvermögen der Realität*: "The authors of this volume assume that a materialist aesthetics is not a 'superstructural phenomenon,' but that the base–superstructure schema needs to be newly rethought and problematised."[35] Such an assumption was, of course, a little more than that, extending a long and broad line of argumentation that had been partly prefigured in the undogmatic Marxism of the critical theoretical tradition—in Max Horkheimer and Adorno's chapter on the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in Alfred Sohn-Rethel's epistemological extrapolation of Marx's mature thought, or in Benjamin's attempts to undermine theories of "a causal relation between superstructure and infrastructure" in favour of an *expressive* one.[36] In the intellectual environment of the post-war period, one marked by an expanded set of Marxisms, this *Ur*-problem of Marxist cultural methodology—a problem that revolves around the extent to which art and culture are mechanically determined by economic forces, the extent to which art and culture are merely illustrative of particular historical conditions[37]—remains, but only as the impossible condition on which a Marxist aesthetics cannot build, as we see theorised by figures such as Guy Debord, Marcuse, and Adorno, as well as the other contributors to *Das Unvermögen der Realität* such as Gorsen.

Whilst this turn towards aesthetics was often seen as a part of a broader attempt at reinventing a critical and anti-authoritarian vocabulary of late capitalism and its multiple and contradictory crises, one increasingly engaged with feminist movements and critical theories of race, there were of course voices that glimpsed in this turn a departure from a commitment to a critique of political economy and class relations. In the Anglophone sphere, Anderson's 1976 Trotskyist analysis in *Considerations on Western Marxism* has long figured as a cornerstone for such a (sometimes lampooned, sometimes celebrated) narrative. Or, as the German literary scholar Gerhard Kaiser put it in a book on Adorno and Benjamin: "After all, in an era of the increasing public insignificance of art, aesthetics has been moved to a prominent place of theoretical thought in the orbit of neo-Marxism. It is not one subject among others, but the cutting edge of theory [*Spitze der Theorie*]."[38] Rather than a historical fate, Kaiser argued that the contradictory continuum between Marxist aesthetics and an "aesthetic Marxism" should be considered as a historical and theoretical

tendency that could already be glimpsed in Lukács's "pre-Marxist" 1910 essay collection *A lékek és a formák (Soul and Form)* and had since reappeared in new forms.[39] This tendency arguably reached one of its more experimental and parodic forms in Asger Jorn's 1962 *Værdi og Økonomi* (*Value and Economy*), in which he presented a counter-value form theory of art, featuring a photograph of himself as a Marx-like caricature on the front cover (fig. 2).

Broadly summarised, what we are here calling the first and second waves, then, is the periodic, efflorescent, self-reflexive reassessment of "aesthetic" questions from a broadly Marxian standpoint, typically involving a discovery or rediscovery of prior attempts as mediated through events of the intervening years and within a given historical conjuncture. Characterised in this way, the first wave of the 1920s and 1930s turned to Marx's and Engels's own writings, some of which had recently been recovered and published, mediated by the workers' movements, the reception and discussion of various modernist and avant-gardist practices, as well as art institutions such as the Vitebsk art school, VKhUTEMAS, and the Bauhaus. The second wave, by contrast, appears as a series of "first" attempts to anthologise a Marxist aesthetics—in distinction to Lifshitz's early anthology of Marx's and Engels's aesthetics or Wittfogel's more dogmatic theorisation—mediated by the students' movements, the so-called "cultural revolution," and the scholarly and disciplinary legitimisation of materialist and Marxist approaches to art, culture, and aesthetics.[40] While the first wave could thus be seen as a critical elaboration on the industrial, "productivist," and workerist base of capitalism—epitomised in textbook examples such as Arvatov's *Art and Production* and Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay—the second wave appeared at a time in which such a "base" was cast fundamentally into crisis, materially as well as theoretically. Articulated at the threshold of the postwar *Wirtschaftswunder*—a period that not only came to form a historical phase of "counterrevolution" (Marcuse) and secular stagnation more broadly in the "Global North,"[41] but also a period characterised by an increasing aestheticisation (Gorsen) and spectacularisation (Debord) of the capitalist life form on the backdrop of decolonisation, struggles of racial justice, the feminist critique of "the capitalist function of the uterus" (Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James) and an accelerated capitalogenic climate crisis—second-wave theorists were confronted with the problematisation of social totality itself.[42] In a way, such a problematisation was embodied in the very concept of aesthetics as an analytic pertaining to both (the work of) art and what is *more* than art—namely, the aesthetic experience that supposedly "anticipates the successful abolition of the aesthetic semblance [*Scheins*]"—an abolition that could only be realised in the "right life."[43]

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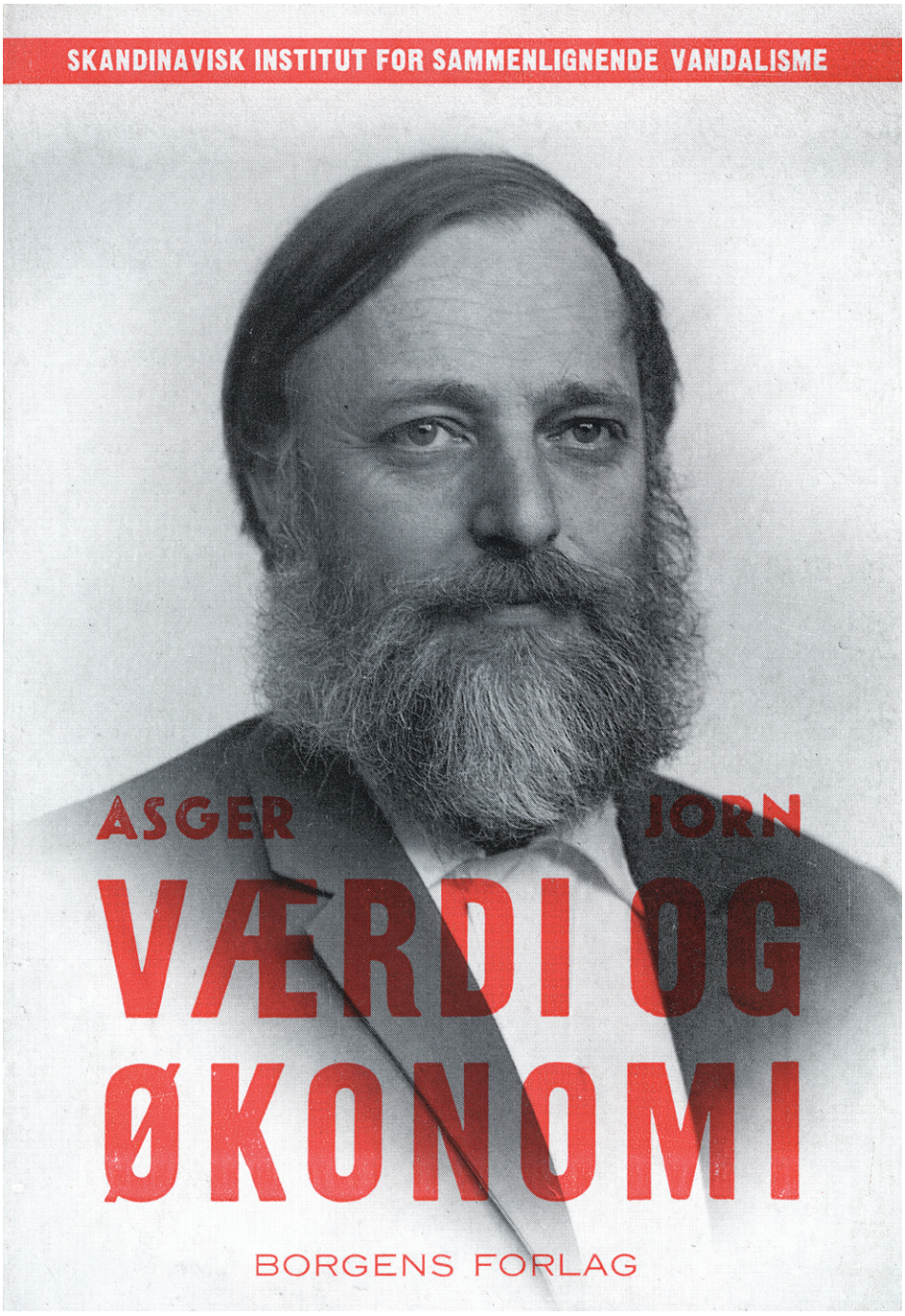

2. Asger Jorn on the cover of his *Værdi og Økonomi*, 1962. Published under the auspices of the Scandinavian Institute for Comparative Vandalism.

Without diminishing some of the important contributions to the general Marxist study of art and culture that were published in the 1980s and 1990s,[44] the general theoretical and intellectual dominance of anti-Marxism throughout the period stymied a broad efflorescence of efforts within these decades. It would not be until the spread of popular uprisings from Greece to Turkey, Tunisia to Egypt, and further yet to Chile, Hong Kong, South Korea, the US, and elsewhere in the "long 2010s" that an emergent body of heterodox Marxist work would give rise to what we might call a "third wave" of Marxist aesthetics.[45] The historical backdrop of the financial crisis of 2008 and its protracted aftermath explains, in part, that we find in this wave the impetus to ground aesthetic enquiry more firmly in the critique of political economy and to analyse cultural production in relation to the crisis-ridden tendencies of the capitalist mode of production in its totality.[46]

In some of the best and most compelling Marxist approaches to questions of aesthetics in this third wave, the notion of crisis functions as a periodising category, a prompt to rethink "once-hegemonic categories" such as postmodernism, neoliberalism, or post-Fordism within a broader historical view of "a protracted crisis of capital accumulation stretching back to the early 1970s."[47] When some form of recognisable Marxist aesthetics thus reappeared post-2008—the relatively broad appeal of Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012), even outside Marxist literary studies, perhaps best exemplifies this shift—it was less concerned with rehearsing questions of class consciousness, party politics, and the workers' movements (as in the first wave of the 1920s and 1930s) or with tackling the problem of ideology through an abandonment of base–superstructure determinism (as in the second wave of the 1960s and 1970s). Rather, what we might take to be common among contemporary Marxist approaches to aesthetics is perhaps the attention to how the historical experience of crisis mediates not only style, meaning, content, or artistic intention but, more fundamentally, the changing social dynamics of *form*. Indeed—though he would no doubt object to having his work described as a philosophical aesthetics as opposed to a critical philosophy of art—such a concern is encapsulated in an essay by Peter Osborne, wherein he claims: "what was crisis has become a new general form of the social. It is expressed by that extended crisis of art that takes the form of a crisis of form. Crisis of form is the primary form-determination of contemporary art."[48]

Drawing on previous Marxist theorisations of art, most notably the "new social history of art" in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as on the value-theory framework developed over the course of the 1960s and 1970s in Germany, Italy, France, Denmark, Norway, and elsewhere,[49] many contemporary Marxist thinkers have come to fundamentally contest the use-value of the notion of "work of art" and even "art" itself. At the same time, the idea of "aesthetics" has again come under

critical scrutiny, not only for its contradictory philosophical presuppositions, but also for its unexamined humanist assumptions and latent or practical white supremacism.[50] In light of this critique, Marxists have sought to redefine seemingly intra-aesthetic philosophical problems as social problems and to prioritise the analysis of decidedly "non-aesthetic" features of late capitalist society, such as finance and other forms of real abstraction.[51] Thus, in recognising the notion of art as an inherently problematic category of analysis, Sarah Brouillette and Joshua Clover recently proposed that we shift the analytic focus away from the work of art and towards its cultural conditions of crisis, stagnation, and decline; thus, further positioning the category of art as integral to the unstable and dynamic social ontology of capital rather than fetishising what appears to be its "autonomy."[52]

In short, if in some ways the first wave, particularly with the intervention of Märten and related constructivist and productivist theorisations, began to foreground the instability and constitutive problematics of aesthetics and art, and the second wave sought an expansion of Marxism and its intellectual resources, we here take to be one of the defining shifts in the current wave the theorisation of crises and contradictions of that classical object of Marxist aesthetics, the category of art itself, as the central methodological leitmotif and point of disciplinary and theoretical justification. This focus heavily relies upon theorisations from the previous waves—how could it not?—and to some extent it even explicitly draws its theoretical resources from them. Yet, it is possible to identify at least two relatively distinctive characteristics of the current third wave.

The first of these is centred on an increasing recognition of the category of art as historically conditioned and problematic, a relic broadly inherited, within the Marxian sphere, from a bygone social imaginary that was itself tied to the era of "programmatism."[53] Uneven and combined global processes of deindustrialisation, outsourcing, automation, and uprising—in sum, the effects of a protracted crisis of capitalist profitability—have made traditional Marxist beliefs in a resurrection of the organised labour movement seem as antiquatedly utopian as the idea of the avant-garde itself (to which it was intimately connected). Whereas neo-reactionary commentators have confronted this disintegration by (once again) positioning it as one of the last harbingers of freedom and supposedly bourgeois existential necessity, it might be the task of materialists to pursue this disintegration to its completion. And yet, art is not reducible to a liberal fantasy, a mere superstructural realm of contingency in capital's realm of mute necessity and compulsion.

As a central second characteristic of the third wave, we consequently find a general justification for maintaining a critical, dialectical commitment to art

and aesthetics ever more thematised. This is less because art serves as a *promesse du bonheur* than because it is instrumental to the social fabric of (too-)late capitalism and therefore also a potential ally in thinking and acting against it. Such a recognition requires a continuous materialist engagement with art's "economic exceptionality" and seeming "post-art" character, its critical sedimentation of the "wage-form" in an age of stagnation and new ways of expanding or inverting art historical and critical aesthetic methodologies.[54]

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The various "third wave" contributions to this special issue remain squarely within Marxism's as-of-yet inescapable orbit, doing so through the turn to heterodox figures, currents, ideas, and readings, rather than, say, the reinterpretation of works by Marx and Engels. Alongside parallel recent or forthcoming publications,[55] we hope that the contributions, both separately and jointly, aid us in discerning the general contours of what a Marxist approach to aesthetics might comprise in the present, highly reactionary political moment.

The "reconstruction" of a Marxist aesthetics today inevitably confronts the problem of the revolutionary subject. Two contributions to this issue, by Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen and Josefine Wikström, address the problem of revolutionary subjectivity in Marxist thought. Bolt Rasmussen's article asks whether "Marxist aesthetics [can] exist without the notion of a historical subject?" to which he replies, "Not really." Bolt Rasmussen builds his argument on a broad historical survey encompassing Vladimir Lenin's reflections on dream and revolution in *What Is to Be Done?*; the Russian Nihilists, Nikolay Chernyshevsky and Dmitry Pisarev; and the post-Marxist strands of critical thought that emerged in the wake of '68 and to some extent still marked the early noughties through to the post-2008 revival of Marxism. What has been lost during this long historical process is not only the idea of a revolutionary subject but also the contradictory relation between theory and practice that historically underpinned it. Considered against the backdrop of the demise of the workers' movement and the disappearance of the avant-garde project, the historical grammar and conditions on which Marxist aesthetics depended now seem irretrievably lost.

Whereas Bolt Rasmussen somewhat hesitantly suggests that we might be better off abandoning the notion of Marxist aesthetics, rather than reviving its phantom-like forms of revolutionary subjectivity, Wikström takes a step back to philosophically reexamine the conditions of modern subjectivity as such. The theoretical anchor for Wikström is Étienne Balibar's 1988 essay "The Citizen Subject," which provides an occasion to reconsider the post-Kantian notion

of subjectivity and its relation to Marxist aesthetics. Rather than attempting to "reconstruct a Marxist aesthetics from positive criteria," Wikström enquires in her article how Balibar's concept of the "citizen subject," an attempt to theorise the paradoxical but potential freedom and "intense universality" that emerged with the French Revolution, might help us critically reflect on the limits and potentials of contemporary forms of aesthetic reflexivity, agency, and subjectivity.

Another line of enquiry interrogates the intricate connection between Marxist aesthetics and non-Marxist approaches to aesthetics, including the notion of aesthetics within the discipline of art history. A series of articles in this special issue grapples with what Angela Harutyunyan aptly describes as "the discipline's turn away from class struggle, social contradictions, and totality as central analytical categories and methodological standpoints since the 1970s." In her article, Harutyunyan not only criticises this depoliticisation of art history, which in the late 1980s and 1990s was viewed by various liberal theorists as ushering in an "end of art history," but also asks "whether another, non-liberal, end of art history is possible." To pose this question, Harutyunyan returns to a key early figure in the history of Marxist aesthetics, namely Lifshitz, and his elaboration of the "uneven" development and relationship between art and material conditions, "one entangled with the communist project of emancipation," as Harutyunyan suggests.

Though not directly engaged in a disciplinary critique of art history, a similar ambition of both "rescuing" elements from the interwar period and pursuing new territory for art historical writing is to be found in Tobias Ertl's contribution. Against the grain of predominant critiques and pejorative accounts of artistic affirmations of logical positivism, administration, and statistics—perhaps most famously epitomised in Benjamin Buchloch's seminal critique of the "Aesthetic of Administration" among certain conceptual art practices—Ertl returns to a series of supposedly "vulgar" manifestations of such artistic attractions in the communist avant-gardes of the interwar period. With Otto Neurath as his main protagonist, Ertl traces various engagements with statistics, administration, and planning as both a "medium of collective *Bildung*" and a social aesthetic subverting bourgeois traditions. What Ertl here unearths is "a short-lived convergence between an aesthetic of administration and a collectively administered aesthetic practice."

Advancing through subsequent developments in artistic and poetic practice, Rose-Anne Gush takes as her point of departure the recent trend of "global" art history and its neglect of the notion of "form" and its ability to sediment and critique global capitalist modernity and its various colonial, racial, and gendered conditions. For this, Gush combines a reading of Adorno's notion

of *Verfransung* with the Warwick Research Collective's work on combined and uneven development, not to reinstate a formalist methodology, but with the aim of attuning us to art's deformation, a-formation, or anti-formation—that is, the very *instability* of form—across geopolitical and colonial terrains. This necessitates, Gush suggests, not entirely unlike Harutyunyan and Ertl, a *return* to alternative genealogies of "formal" and anti-colonial corrosions, and thus also alternative genealogical traces of Marxist aesthetics, in Suzanne Césaire's poetic work of the 1940s and the 1953 surrealist film *Statues Also Die* (*Les statues meurent aussi*) by Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, and Ghislain Cloquet.

In his article, Daniel Spaulding is in general agreement that a materialist theory of art is critically attuned to questions of form. The question of form, Spaulding argues, necessitates a rethinking of methods devoted to an analysis of "content" or visual figurations of concepts—so-called "symbolic forms"—as in the tradition of iconology. Through a series of case studies, Spaulding calls for a more dialectic notion of form and content, sensuousness and concept, to grasp how artistic symbolisation and figuration are immanent to capitalist socialist relations and the rule of "the equivalency of the non-equivalent." Thus, subverting the method of iconology and the ideology critique of Marxist art history, Spaulding speculatively asks what a Marxist art theory might do with the observation that not only are commodities to be considered as "aesthetic forms," but that "figural processes migrate out of art and into the economy—a reified abstraction in its own right—and that this movement accounts at least in part for the crisis of figuration in modernism."

An attention to capital's aesthetic forms is also at the centre of Seb B. Grossman's review of Beverley Best's *The Automatic Fetish: The Law of Value in Marx's Capital*. As he argues therein, the "aesthetics of cognitive mapping," as initially proposed by Jameson, can not only help us discern the power of abstractions and value, but even more importantly, "grasps capital from the standpoint of its overcoming." For Best, as Grossmann contends, this is due to the "figurative" potentials intrinsic to the capitalist value-form, or what Best also calls the "the perceptual physics of capital." Studying such "physics," Best shows us, in the words of Grossmann, "how we are able to discern what remains formless, invisible, and impossible in our current situation." Marxism could here ultimately be conceived, as an "aesthetic science of the commune," as the review's title suggests.

A key figure across several articles in this special issue is the art historian, theorist, and self-defined *Mentalitätshistoriker*, Peter Gorsen, who is little known to an Anglo audience. Gorsen's perhaps surprising prominence in this issue stems from his importance to the 1960s and 1970s revival and reconsideration of Marxist and materialist aesthetics. During the second wave of Marxist

aesthetics, Gorsen's diverse work included the Proletkult movement, the republication of the Wittfogel–Märten debate, the founding of the journal *Ästhetik und Kommunikation*, and the promotion of other formats of undogmatic materialist research, such as the later introduction of feminist art history. It also encompassed his long-standing interest in "sexual aesthetics," alongside research interests in pathology and perversity, obscenity and criminology, consumerist sexual freedom, and "illegal" antisocial sentiments and practices. Kerstin Stakemeier, who, besides having written on and thought with Gorsen for some time, is also currently translating some of his work into English, here aims to rededicate Gorsen's sexual aesthetic challenge to "(art's) modern *Sittlichkeit* (ethical life), to initiate an aesthetic political practice of self-illegalization." She conceptualises such "materialist dedication to a non-reproductive love" as a practice of "disalienation," "dissociation," and "love," bringing in allies such as Fanon and Kay Gabriel, which leads her to a critique and reconsideration of what is known as romantic anticapitalism.

In Louis Hartnoll's article, it is Gorsen's thesis on art's historical *Entästhetisierung* (de-aestheticisation), here theorised through the "non-aesthetic," that Hartnoll argues should be inscribed at the centre of Marxist reflections on aesthetics. Beginning with an elaboration of Adorno's (Gorsen's *Doktorvater*) attempts to account for the non-art and non-aesthetic dimensions and conditions of artworks—epitomised in Adorno's struggles with theorising "the double character" of art—Hartnoll goes on to pursue his preliminary theory of a "Marxist non-aesthetics" by registering the "double crisis" of aesthetics and art's autonomy, already imprinted in *Aesthetic Theory* but intensified in Gorsen's writings on the post-avant-garde. Rather than bid a farewell to the subdiscipline of aesthetics and the contradiction of art's autonomy, Harnoll argues that a "Marxist non-aesthetics" might be what we need in order "to advance an understanding of the insufficiency of aesthetic apprehension to grasp the form and content of a work, to delineate the historically unstable boundary between art and non-art as a socially determined dialectic, and to recognise in the appearance of historical crises a permeation by the 'external' logic of capital."

The third text in this special issue that unfolds latent ideas in Gorsen turns on what Tobias Dias theorises as the "aporia of praxis." Such an aporia (which in recent years has resurfaced under the notions of socially engaged art, art activism, etc.) is discussed by Gorsen under the notion of "operative aesthetics," and lies at the centre of the better-known writings of Peter Bürger. As Dias argues, Gorsen's operative aesthetics and Bürger's theory of the avant-garde—both published in 1974—could be considered as conflictual and complementary attempts to pursue the grounds of a post-Adornian "materialist aesthetics" on the basis of the historical experiences and practices of the interwar avant-gardes. While Bürger famously considered these experiences and practices doomed, Gorsen

continued to grapple with the conundrum of what he termed the "aesthetic appropriation of praxis" in *post*-avant-garde operative practices. On this basis, Dias turns his attention to the recent revival of radical claims on behalf of art, arguing that it must be the task of a materialist aesthetics to reject any unmediated "appropriations" of praxis, so prevalent in recent critical writings, and as such "continue to engage with art's *aporetic* relationship to praxis under capitalism"—less with the aim or hope of resurrecting some new avant-gardes than with a desire to actualise the (self-)negation that the concept entails.

The fourth and last strand in the special issue can be registered in the contributions of E. C. Feiss, Eunsong Kim, Hannah Black, and Jackqueline Frost, who all, in distinct ways, engage with how Marxist and materialist perspectives can elucidate the contradictions of art's and the artist-subject's embodiment of revolutionary, reformist, and counter-revolutionary forces. Engaging with recent discussions and mobilisations of social reproduction theory in the field of art, the seeming clarity of these concepts is called into question by Feiss's suggestion of an "art theory of reform." Beginning from Stakemeier and Marina Vishmidt's work on art's imbrication in both autonomy and social reproduction, Feiss elaborates an art theory of reform through a reading of the painter and social organiser Betty Blayton. Blayton's practice, Feiss argues, constitutes a "split artist-subject" simultaneously engaging in critical autonomy and a labour of devalorised social reproduction and "maintenance," autonomy's invisible conditions. In a contribution gesturing towards both theoretical intervention and methodological pondering, Feiss thus surveys the often-overlooked tensions and contradictions inherent to artistic and reproductive labour, suggesting that a theory of reform might help us better grasp practices that encompass both revolutionary and counter-revolutionary tendencies, an "incomplete negation" of a split artist-subject.

The notion of counter-revolution is not only to be found in the title of Kim's contribution to the special issue, it also serves as the focal point of the unpublished and undated novel draft "Assassination," by Pat Parker. At stake in this novel draft—centred on an imagined former member of the Black Panther Party who, after being appointed the first director of "Race Relations," chose to assassinate the president of the USA, and a black liberal journalist and writer who makes a career out of writing about the event—we find the intricate tensions between sacrifice and innocence, violence and art, and, not least, of course, revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries. Through a discussion of these tensions, Kim unpacks a series of "antidotes to counter-revolutions" and their "imperial grammar" in an essayistic reflection that ultimately evokes Parker's demand (which reappears as the epigraph of Kim's essay): "Don't let the fascists speak."

In her essay, Black shares with Feiss and Kim an interest in the porosity of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary tendencies and racialised artists' attempts to navigate and practice in the storm of racial capitalism's colonial and gendered violence and the propensities to ideological co-option and reaction. Writing from the perspective of the "post-woke" situation that currently defines the field of contemporary art and beyond, Black registers the mutations, constraints, and potentials of the "woke art era." At its best, art and its alliances here evoked and practised what Vishmidt influentially dubbed "infrastructural critique," something that Black characterises as a "general social negativity that transcended the limits of institutional critique and moved toward the infrastructural." Since the infrastructural, as Black reiterates, is "that which repeats," it has to be considered as foregrounding the racial and colonial matrix that "makes possible only insofar as it also makes impossible." Critical interlocutors can register and concretise the contradictory modalities and forms of such possible impossibilities (and vice versa), not because they have some self-evident strategy ready at hand, but because, as Black argues, our current moment is, for better or worse, the moment of a "despairing openness to doomed methods and forms as a means of temporalizing, rather than repressing, the sad passions of the false eternity of the unconscious of struggle."

From a different historical context (the interwar years), albeit one whose analogical parallelism has constantly been evoked over the last ten years or so, Frost examines the openness to new politico-aesthetic methods and strategies now known as Freudo-Marxism and its surrealist underpinnings, as manifested in the work of the queer antifascist writer and activist Claude Cahun. In her article, Frost contextualises and examines Cahun's claims for "the place of avant-garde poetics in the context of communist literary culture," as articulated in the pamphlet *Les Paris sont ouverts*, "conceived as a report to the literary section of the PCF-led Association des écrivains et artistes révolutionnaires." At stake here, Frost argues, is a consideration of poetry as a medium of political action, and with this also the contours of an "affinity between the humanist program of the young Marx and the surrealist project of revolutionary morality" in times of fascist and communist politics.

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As the far-right stages its fascistic, genocidal, and ethonationalist spectacle in an unapologetic, unbroken stream of images and other aestheticised political forms, it seems pertinent to close with a brief and provisional reflection on the historical limits and possibilities that Marxist aesthetic enquiry presently faces. What happens to Marxist aesthetics when it is confronted both with the

groundswell of reactionary politics and with its own impossibility due to the disappearance of once-stable forms of social and political modes of organisation? Does it still make sense to insist on the terms "Marxism" and "aesthetics," let alone their forced unity-in-contradiction, in view not only of the shortcomings of traditional Marxist imaginings of revolution and its deep historical failure to accommodate feminist, anti-colonial, and anti-carceral perspectives, but also at a time in which a left-wing theoretical and political programme seems in such jeopardy? From a Marxist standpoint, that is, aren't there more important things to be worried about than art and aesthetics? Whilst each of the contributions to this special issue articulates an assessment of the history, missed encounters, and present state of "Marxist aesthetics," taken together, they cannot be untethered from attempts to think the reactionary political conjuncture that we face. Such assessments thus each operate with a level of discomfort in affirming the term as anything more than a shared set of materialist commitments to a minimal research programme for thinking art and culture through notions of history, crisis, and periodisation at what might be the start of a long and deep conservative turn. To here heuristically construct and apply a notion of "waves" to an expansive, disjunctive, patchwork intellectual history in which we find clusters of semi-systemic attempts to think Marxist aesthetics under a given set of conditions, the collected contributions to this special issue demarcate our own attempt to think, intervene into, and perhaps even produce a third wave within our politically claustrophobic conjuncture. Whether such a wave is just breaking or beginning to recede, has yet to be determined.

NOTES

1 Of course, such a distinction does not entirely hold, and, indeed, many of the contributions to this issue advance an intervention into Marxist aesthetics through and within a Marxist history of art. Hence, whilst we want here to foreground the question of a Marxist aesthetics, we foresee this special issue as building on, not contradicting, parallel efforts to advance a Marxist history of art; see Andrew Hemingway, ed., *Marxism and the History of Art: From William Morris to the New Left* (Pluto Press, 2006); Warren Carter, Barnaby Haran, and Frederic Schwartz, eds., *ReNew Marxist Art History* (Art / Books, 2014); Larne Abse Gogarty and Andrew Hemingway, eds., "Keywords for Marxist Art History Today," special issue, *Kunst und Politik: Jahrbuch der Guernica-Gesellschaft* (2020); and the recent Tijen Tunalı and Brian Winkenweder, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Marxisms in Art History* (Routledge, 2025).

2 As we go on to argue below, and as readers will find underpinning many of the contributions to the issue, our claim is that any Marxist aesthetics that is of worth must immediately and constitutively recognise the high bourgeois tradition to which it is inseparably attached. On this view, aesthetics is itself an idea conditioned by historical and social forces, both as a discipline and as pseudo-independent realm of perceptual or sensuous apprehension. That Jacques Rancière's writings have received a warm reception in both academia and the art world is likely a result of his positive, seemingly non-problematic notion of aesthetics, one which is entirely palatable, perhaps even self-affirming, to conservative structures of the broad art field. For another attempt to resurrect such a positive, unproblematised notion of aesthetics on the basis of an evacuation of nearly any materialist commitment, see Juliane Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst: Zur Einführung* (Junius, 2013). In the end, the writings of both Rancière and Rebentisch appear to lend a much-needed legitimacy to liberal art institutions' progressive "politics" and elaborations of "freedom," ideas that we take Marxism to critically interrogate. Regarding the attempt to extract from recent "socially engaged art" an anti-capitalist anthropology detached from the "abstractions" of capitalism, an attempt, issuing from the first pages, that opens a Pandora's box of "metaphysical subtleties," see Massimiliano Mollona, *Art/Commons* (Zed Books, 2021).

3 Heinz Paetzold, *Neomarxistische Ästhetik 1: Bloch-Benjamin* (Pädagogischer Verlag Schwann Düsseldorf, 1974), 15; unless otherwise noted, all translations are our own. Certain *receptions* of Sianne Ngai's work on contemporary minor aesthetic categories could be considered symptomatic in this regard insofar as the discussion or analytical application of categories such as the cute or the zany there often tends to evacuate a commitment to critique for the sake of a supposedly "affirmative" empiricism. The "object" is here detached from its social totality and reduced to a sociological or culturalist fact.

4 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 16.

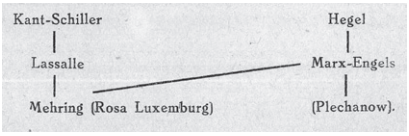
5 Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 217.

6 Though this essay is variously republished and discussed under the titles of both "Zur Frage *der* marxistischen Ästhetik" and "Zur Frage *einer* marxistischen Ästhetik," we have chosen to use and translate *der*, as this is the title of the first part and better represents Wittfogel's attempt to pose a definitive claim.

7 Karl August Wittfogel, "Zur Frage einer marxistischen Ästhetik (I bis V)," in *"Zur Frage einer marxistischen Ästhetik": Abhandlung, mit einem Anhang Märten/Wittfogel* (Frank Rainer Scheck, 1973), 8.

8 Franz Mehring, *Zur Literaturgeschichte*, volume one: *von Calderon bis Heine*, volume two: *von Hebbel bis Gorki*, ed. August Thalheimer (Soziologische Verlagsanstalt, 1929).

9 The two lineages are sketched using the following diagram, showing the formalist-idealist tradition on the left and the dialectical-materialist on the right, as reproduced in Wittfogel, "Zur Frage," 30:



10 Wittfogel adds after the schema: "We have placed the names R. Luxemburg and Plechanov in parentheses as R. Luxemburg had not produced a great work on the problem, whilst Plechanov's work can only be included, insofar as it has been brought into German." Wittfogel, "Zur Frage," 30.

11 For an extended English-language recapitulation of this text, alongside other important contextual contributions to the German debates in the pre- and interwar period (including Lukács, Märten, Mehring, etc.), see Martin I. Gaughan, *The German Left and Aesthetic Politics: Cultural Politics between the Second and Third Internationals* (Haymarket, 2021).

12 Helga Gallas cited in Gaughan, *German Left*, 169.

13 Jenny Nachtigall and Kerstin Stakemeier, "Lu Märten: An Introduction to Four Texts," *October* 178 (Autumn 2021): 4.

14 Wittfogel, "Zur Frage," 34.

15 Lu Märten, "Replik," in Wittfogel, *Zur Frage*, 41–46.

16 As Herbert Marcuse would later briefly summarise of this "great debate," Märten's contribution was to suggest "that Marxist theory possesses a theoretical form of its own which militates against any attempt to give it an aesthetic form" that it would require its own distinct and separable discourse through which to think its concerns. Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, trans. Herbert Marcuse and Erica Sherover (Beacon Press, 1978), 12.

17 Märten, “Replik,” 43.

18 Gaughan, *German Left*, 8.

19 Indeed, as Nachtigall and Stakemeier note: “Märten’s radically heterodox monograph *Essence and Transformation* was initially commissioned by the Russian State Publishing House around 1921, when Proletkult endeavors were not yet curbed in the Soviet Union. This situation changed in the course of the 1920s, and along with funding cuts, unfortunate miscommunications, and missed encounters, it meant that Märten’s book was never published by a Soviet press.” Nachtigall and Stakemeier, “Lu Märten,” 7.

20 Georg Lukács, “The Old and the New Culture,” trans. Paul Breines, *Telos* 5 (Spring 1970): 21–30.

21 Mikhail Lifshitz, *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx*, trans. Ralph B. Winn (Pluto Press, 1973), 116.

22 Or, in the case of Märten, inversely characterised by her ostracisation from party politics. See Nachtigall and Stakemeier, “Lu Märten.”

23 Since we mostly focus on the 1970s in the following, it seems necessary to name at least one contribution from the mid-1960s authored by a writer not unknown to an Anglo audience—thanks to the English translation of the 1959 book *The Necessity of Art*—namely Ernst Fischer’s compilation of essays *Kunst und Koexistenz: Beitrag zu einer modernen marxistischen Ästhetik* [*Art Against Ideology*] (Rowohlt, 1966).

24 Paolo D’Angelo, *L’estetica italiana del Novecento: Dal neoidealismo a oggi* (Laterza, 1997), 199. Regarding Gramsci, as D’Angelo also underlines, it should here be noted that his *Prison Notebooks*, though it would be misleading to characterise this as a Marxist aesthetics, was first prepared for publication after the Second World War.

25 The reintroduction of Märten’s work, which both included re-publications as well as commentaries on Märten’s philosophy of history, aesthetic theory, and writings on film, appeared in *alternative* 3, vol. 16 (1973). Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski, eds., *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels on Literature and Art* (International General, 1973).

26 For a comparative account of this second wave as it burgeoned in China, reflected through a different set of traditions and debates, see Liu Kang, *Aesthetics and Marxism: Chinese Aesthetic Marxists and their Western Contemporaries* (Duke University Press, 2000).

27 Of course, this does not mean that translations were not already taking place in the interwar years. This was particularly true with writings from the Soviet Union that were widely distributed across the European continent and beyond. For instance, Märten’s book was translated into Russian, Czech, and Japanese during the 1920s.

28 The list of various forms of “aesthetics” that Marxist or materialist aesthetics could entail is long. To name a few: political aesthetics, operative aesthetics, aesthetics of production, and organisational aesthetics. On the notion of “political aesthetics,” see the relatively influential work by Friedrich Tomberg, *Politische Ästhetik* (Luchterhand, 1973). An important precursor to this compilation of essays was Tomberg’s 1968 publication *Mimesis der Praxis und Abstrakte Kunst* (Luchterhand, 1968) in which he revitalised the Aristotelian theory of mimesis through a Marxological lens. The notions of “operative aesthetics” and “aesthetics of production” was theorised by Peter Gorsen in “Transformierte Alltäglichkeit oder Transzendenz der Kunst?” [Transformed everyday or transcendence of art?], in *Das Unvermögen der Realität* (Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 1974), 129–54. The notion of “organizational aesthetics” came up, for instance, in a text by Hans Günther (one of the German translators of Arvatov’s *Art and Production*) on Bogdanov and his influence on LEF; see “Proletarische und avantgardistische Kunst: Die Organisationsästhetik Bogdanovs und das LEF-Konzept der ‘lebenbauenden’ Kunst” [Proletarian and avant-gardist art: Bogdanov’s organisational aesthetics and the LEF concept of “life-building” art], *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* 4, no. 12 (1973): 62–75.

29 Fredric Jameson, “Presentation III,” in *Aesthetics and Politics* (NLB, 1977), 109.

30 Especially when paired with Jameson’s earlier study, *Marxism and Form* (1971), though it admittedly also takes something of a glance at the French scene.

31 As the editors and/or publisher framed *Aesthetics and Politics* in the book’s blurb (p. i): “Ever since Baumgarten and Winckelmann, Germany has been the classical land of aesthetic thought in Europe. In the 20th century, Marxism itself has repeated the rule. No other country has produced a tradition of major aesthetic debate to compare with that which unfolded in German culture from the thirties to the fifties.”

32 Once a member of the Gruppe 47 circle, since the publication of this anthology, Buch has steadily transformed himself into an ever-more devout, publicly prominent reactionary critic of postcolonial critique, “wokeness,” and cancel culture.

33 See Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso, 2019).

34 Here we are thinking, for example, of Elisabeth Lenk’s 1971 *Der springende Narziss: André Bretons poetischer Materialismus* (The leaping Narcissus: André Breton’s poetical materialism).

35 Gisela Dischner, “Einleitung,” in *Das Unvermögen der Realität: Beiträge zu einer anderen materialistischen Ästhetik* (Verlag Klaus Wagenbach), 7.

36 Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 392. In prose that perhaps only Benjamin could pen, he continues: “The superstructure is the expression of the infrastructure. The economic conditions under which society exists are expressed in the superstructure—precisely as, with the sleeper, an overfull stomach finds not its reflection but its expression in the contents of dreams, which, from a causal point of view, it may be said to ‘condition.’ The collective, from the first, expresses the conditions of its life. These find their expression in the dream and their interpretation in the awakening.”

37 For more on the interwar debates, see, for instance, Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno* (University of California Press, 1982).

38 Gerhard Kaiser, *Benjamin. Adorno. Zwei Studien* (Athenäum Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1974), 79.

39 Kaiser, *Benjamin. Adorno. Zwei Studien*, 81.

40 For a historical theorisation of the notion of cultural revolution, see Sven Lütticken, *Cultural Revolution: Aesthetic Practice after Autonomy* (Sternberg Press, 2017). An exemplary text, also discussed by Lütticken, in this context is Peter Schneider's "Die Phantasie im Spätkapitalismus und die Kulturrevolution." As Schneider remarked: "The domain of capital—that is reality. The domain of imagination—that is fantasy. And what can a thousand desires do against a thousand police officers, what can the dream of the free development of individuals do against the real exploitation and crippling of the oppressed classes, what can the cloud formations of imagination do against the poison clouds of the CRS, against tear gas, chlorine and phosphorus grenades? Let us fill the streets with the facts of capitalism, and the barricades that imagination has erected in the streets will disappear and transform back into the invisible barriers between the unconscious and capitalist reason." Peter Schneider, "Die Phantasie im Spätkapitalismus und die Kulturrevolution," *Kursbuch* 16 (1969): 1.

41 "Global North" is in scare quotes given that the geopolitical imaginary out of which this arises is properly of the post-1989 period.

42 For attempts to consider the so-called "neoliberal" period as one long counterrevolution, see François Cusset, *How the World Swung to the Right: Fifty Years of Counterrevolutions*, trans. Noura Wedell (Semiotext(e), 2018); Melinda Cooper, *Counterrevolution: Extravagance and Austerity in Public Finance* (Zone Books, 2024).

43 Paetzold, *Neomarxistische Ästhetik II*, 137.

44 The obvious candidates to reference here would be Terry Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Blackwell, 1990) and Fredric Jameson's various books and essays of the period—to mention nothing of their structural impact in inducting new generations of theorists and critics within the university—but we should also note the contributions collected in John Roberts, ed., *Art Has No History! The Making and Unmaking of Modern Art* (Verso, 1994).

45 For an overview of the 2010s uprisings, see Vincent Bevins, *If We Burn: The Mass Protest Decade and the Missing Revolution* (PublicAffairs, 2023). For a critical review, see Jasper Bernes, "What Was to Be Done? Protest and Revolution in the 2010s," *Brooklyn Rail: Field Notes*, June 2024, https://brooklynrail.org/2024/06/field-notes/What-Was-To-Be-Done-Protest-and-Revolution-in-the-2010s/. For an attempt to mine the resources of Marxist aesthetic thought and apply them to an analysis of these protests, see Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, *The Refusalist International: A Theory of the New Protest Cycle* (Polity, 2025). For a somewhat more "classical" attempt to revive Marxist aesthetic thought on the basis of novel readings of Marx, see Samir Gandesha and Johan F. Hartle, eds., *Aesthetic Marx* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

46 Post-2008 attempts to think about cultural production and art from the point of view of the critique of political economy include Sarah Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy* (Stanford University Press, 2014); Jaleh Mansoor, *Marshall Plan Modernism: Italian Postwar Abstraction and the Beginnings of Autonomia* (Duke University Press, 2016); Annie McClanahan, *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis and Twenty-First Century Culture* (Stanford University Press, 2016); Jasper Bernes, *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization* (Stanford University Press, 2017); Marina Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production: Forms of Value Subjectivity in Art and Capital* (Haymarket, 2018); Sianne Ngai, *The Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Harvard University Press, 2020); Peter Osborne, *Crisis as Form* (Verso, 2022); Anna Kornbluh, *Immediacy, or the Style of Too Late Capitalism* (Verso, 2024).

47 Benjamin Crais, Veronica Davis, and Carson Welch, "Introduction," in "Narrative & Crisis," ed. Benjamin Crais, Veronica Davis, and Carson Welch, special issue *Polygraph* 29 (Summer 2024): 1.

48 Peter Osborne, "Crisis as Form", in *Crisis as Form*, 38.

49 A useful historical sketch of the various value-form tendencies can be found in Endnotes, "Communisation and Value-Form Theory," *Endnotes 2: Misery and the Value Form* (2010): 68–105.

50 See, for instance, David Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (Fordham University Press, 2019); Eunsong Kim, *The Politics of Collecting: Race and the Aestheticization of Property* (Duke University Press, 2024).

51 We find something of this tendency, among other places, in: Beverley Best, *Marx and the Dynamic of the Capital Formation: An Aesthetics of Political Economy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Gean Moreno, ed., *In the Mind but Not from There: Real Abstraction and Contemporary Art* (Verso, 2019); Torsten Andreasen, Emma Sofie Brogaard, Mikkel Krause Frantzen, Nicholas Alan Huber, and Frederik Tygstrup, eds., *Finance Aesthetics: A Critical Glossary* (Goldsmiths Press, 2024); Andreas Petrossiants and Jose Rosales, eds., *Diversity of Aesthetics* (Common Notions, 2025).

52 Sarah Brouillette and Joshua Clover, "On Artistic Autonomy as a Bourgeois Fetish," in *Totality Inside Out: Rethinking Crisis and Conflict under Capital*, ed. Kevin Floyd, Jen Hedler Phillis, and Sarika Chandra (Fordham University Press, 2022).

53 The notion of programmatism comes from Théorie Communiste's analysis of the transformation of the revolutionary perspective, see Roland Simon, *Fondements critiques d'une théorie de la revolution: Au-delà de la l'affirmation du prolétariat. Théorie du communisme. Volume I* (Senonevero, 2001). For an attempt to think the decline of programmatism alongside the artistic logic of modernism and the avant-garde, see Daniel Spaulding, "Value-Form and Avant-Garde," *Mute*, March 2014; Daniel Spaulding, "Speculative Negation, or: A Dialectic of Modernism," in *Speculation* (Whitechapel Documents of Contemporary Art), 2023; Dominique Routhier, *With and Against: The Situationist International in the Age of Automation* (Verso, 2023).

54 The claim for thinking the historic case of art's "economic exceptionality" in relation to the capitalist mode of production has been elaborated by Dave Beech, *Art and Value: Art's Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics* (Brill, 2015). The notion of "post-art" is, for instance, discussed by John Roberts in *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (Verso, 2015). For a discussion of recent socially engaged art's sedimentation of a stagnant wage-form, see Leigh Claire La Berge, *Wages Against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art* (Duke University Press, 2019).

55 For some recent publications that supplement this special issue, see, for instance: Crais, Davis, and Welch, "Narrative & Crisis"; Pietro Bianchi and Joshua Harold Wiebe, eds., "Filming Capital," special issue, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 124, no. 4 (October 2025); and Thomas Waller and Sean O'Brien (eds.), "Keywords for Value and Culture," special issue, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, forthcoming.