

PERSPECTIVE, IDEOLOGY, AND SOCIAL REALITY IN THE AESTHETIC THEORY OF GEORG LUKACS

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Introduction

What is the function of a writer?¹ What is the function of art? To the first question, the response shall be direct: the function of a writer is to reveal reality. It is his task to inform human consciousness of the reality of the world and to put forward a perspective of the human condition. The second question needs an indirect route, for we need to ask what is presupposed when any aesthetic formulation is conceived. To this, we say that art must reveal the truth. Truth must be in art; art must be in truth.

The philosopher, writer, and literary critic who glorified the paradigm above and rebelled against the prevailing systems of his time was none other than Georg Lukacs² (1885-1971), author of the Marxist cultural revolution in Europe whose thought finds alliance in the critical theories of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse. According to Lukacs (1963, 19), "in any true art, there is no content of which man is not the focal point." He adds, "literature must be able to portray the contradictions, struggles, and conflicts of social life in the same way as these appear in the mind and life of actual human beings" (Lukacs 1981, 143). Furthermore, he notes that the task of the writer is "to portray the connections between these collisions in the same way as they focus themselves within the human being" (Ibid, 143). Liberation from human alienation³ is only possible if man frees his consciousness of the images painted by capitalism, and this comes about by way of the realist aesthetic tradition, which is "not contented simply with the appearances of truth, but builds its edifices on truth itself" (Lukacs 1978, 31).

Georg Lukacs' Critique of Modernism

Lukacs' critique of modernism is elucidated in his two works, namely, *The meaning of contemporary realism* and *Essays on realism*. In order to understand Lukacs' aesthetic theory, we must begin with his putting into question the aesthetic paradigm of modernism. Modernism, for Lukacs, is a capitalist

instrument.⁴ It is, by and large, an artistic medium that thrives in the character of form and style but fails in showing the substance of social reality. Modernism considers substance as secondary to formal coherence. Lukacs suggests, imploring of course his Marxist leanings,⁵ that what is to be understood in any work of art is not merely the subjective and formal criterion of the artist, but more importantly the clear understanding of the totality of his historical consciousness. For Lukacs, the artist's subjectivity no longer matters, because the means in achieving the fullest possible reflection of a totality does not coincide with subjective meaning. The writer must intend to bring forth the objective reality and not the subjective contents of his mind.⁶ This objective reality refers to man's roots in a historical totality.

The modernist tradition advocates that "there is no outer reality; there is only human consciousness, constantly building, modifying, rebuilding new worlds out of its own creativity" (Faulkner 1977, 25). This criterion emphasizes the criterion of formality in modernism. Modernity is devoid of any substance since it does not portray the real conditions of man. It dwells on an illusion of form and style, appealing to the imagination of an audience who are taken out from the perspective of real life. But according to Lukacs, the goal for all great art is to provide a picture of reality in which the contradiction between appearances and reality, the particular and the general, the immediate and the conceptual are made clear (Lukacs 1978, 34). Modernism does not show this contradiction. It only shows the ideal and neglects the real. It paints an illusory world of beauty and color.⁷ Any true work of art must depict the pain and struggles of human existence because "the effect of art results from the fact that the work by its very nature offers a truer, more vivid, more complete, and more dynamic reflection of reality (Ibid., 36).

Important to the understanding of the task of art is an elaboration of the meaning of reification.⁸ What is reification? Reification is "the process by which capitalism permeates the whole of reality" (Ibid., 5). Objective reality has been deeply embedded or reified in the consciousness of the masses. The truth of the human world is objectified. Reification reduces the truth of human activity to an object. The same thing happens in art where the modernist leanings for the glory of form and self-gratification replace the truth of the human world.

It is in the sense above that modernism must be rejected, since for the bourgeois mind, "a correct theory of objectivity is an impossibility" (Lukacs 1978, 25), and we must thereby appeal to the realist tradition, which is "the art of copying from nature as she really exists in the common walks of life,

and presenting to the reader, instead of the splendid scenes of an imaginary world, a correct and striking presentation of that which is daily taking place around him" (Faulkner 1977, 1). The task of art, Lukacs says, is to de-reify reality. By showing the objectivity of man's world, the writer must free it from the illusions imprinted in it by capitalism. A real work of art stands on its own as a real presentation of that objective world, where man lives and experiences the miseries of life.⁹ It manifests all that is significant in the area of life it tries to depict: real people, real suffering, and real struggles.

In a capitalist society, modernism defines "persons in terms of abstract quantities" (Ibid., 34). Mass media, for instance, sometimes undermine its poor audience by putting emphasis on the latter's weight, education, upbringing, social status, and worst, their face.¹⁰ In architecture and design, the interplay of colors inside a mall or a modern fast food chain, and in cinema, the sex and violence menu of a Hollywood flick take away from man his objective consciousness of reality. The beautiful images of modernism render mute the human mind. In the end, man himself loses the authentic meaning of his humanity.

Ideology and Perspective in Literary Texts

According to Lukacs, "the basis for any correct cognition of reality, whether nature or society, is the recognition of the objectivity of the external world, that is, its existence independent of human consciousness" (Lukacs 1978, 25). Applied to literature, ideology speaks of the objectivity of the external world as the substance of every work. The truth that matters, for Lukacs, is the truth that concerns man. It is a work that understands man. This understanding results from the conception of a perspective, which refers to the truth of man's world.

Modernism is insufficient as an art form because it deprives literature of a sense of perspective (Harrison 1998, 678).¹¹ Perspective determines the course and content of any realist writing. It allows the delineation of what is significant and insignificant. Content determines form, and there is no content which man himself is not the focal point (Ibid., 676).

Of course, Lukacs names realism as the primary aesthetic mode of the new socialist literature (Kadarkay 1991, 343). Realism puts forward an aesthetic presentation of man's historical totality, which is lost in modernist art forms because of its "exaggerated concern with formal criteria and the questions of style and technique" (Lukacs 1963, 17). In contrast, what matters, for Lukacs, is "the view of the world, the ideology, the *Weltanschauung* underlying a writer's work that counts" (Ibid., 19). Realist

literature simply aims at a truthful reflection of reality, and it tries to bring about the concreteness of man's life. Realism is not only a style among others, but "the basis of literature" (Ibid., 48).

Writing, as an ideology, presents the writer's conscious views about life and the problems of his time (Ibid., 71). Realism makes human life the subject of all its aesthetic constructions. Lukacs adds,

In the portrayal of a story, a real plot leads inevitably to testing human feelings and experiences against the external world, weighing the living interaction with social reality and finding this light or heavy, genuine or false, whereas the psychological or surrealist introspection of the decadents simply offers the superficial internal life a completely restricted field, entirely free of any criticism (Ibid., 145).

According to Lukacs, it is the question of ideology that the realist writer takes into account when he writes. The modernist writer, on the other hand, glorifies form and style at the expense of the substantial content of the character's life. For Lukacs, taking the ideological question means that the writer who portrays real human beings need in no way be completely aware that a portrayal of such is already the beginning of a rebellion against the prevailing system (Lukacs 1980, 149). For Lukacs, only a realist aesthetic theory provides man with a reply to the question of ideology. "It is important to show the distortions evident in modern society," and he praises Thomas Mann, for instance, for "showing distortion for what it is, tracing its roots and its concrete origins in society" (Ibid.).

Art and Social Reality

A literary work of art should not only arouse our imaginations but should also reflect the ideological decay of contemporary capitalist society. The only way to free man from his alienation is to bring him to an awareness of his social totality. Lukacs has shown the connections between history with all the material struggles of man, and literature, which is no more than a reflection of human reality. The reality of man is the totality of his material struggles which forever define his way of life and survival, and therefore, the very meaning that he creates for himself, including his conceptions of the aesthetic. Writing must be true to man's material conditions, so that writing as an art does not become a mere reproduction of gibberish media. Writing must enable man to retrace his roots in a totality, a totality that reveals his authentic state of being.

For Lukacs, "the concept of totality is a dynamic reality that enjoys an ontological status" (Kadarkay 1991, 272). This totality manifests man as a

being who is situated in social, political, economic, and historical conditions where he experiences the struggle for liberation. This totality defines the reality of human existence. Literature must therefore be grounded on this truth.

The work of art must therefore reflect correctly and proportionately all the important factors objectively determining the area of life it represents (Lukacs 1978, 38). All literary works of art of this kind are thus already rich and developed because a genuine love of life and human beings arises in it as the result of its own contact with life (Lukacs 1981, 147). For Lukacs, the great novels of our time reveal the driving forces of history that are invisible to actual consciousness.

Lukacs explains that the essence of discourse is the category of concrete totality that governs the notion of reality. Truth emerges out of this discourse. But modernism's theoretical and practical conception of the world is not faithful to the real conditions of man. Its basis for action is not the essential nature of man's real problematic. The man in modernist art forms is not the man who suffers from the political and economic tragedies of his time.

It is the function of art to make us see, however painful they might be, the sufferings of men, of real men, and not the artificiality of modern life. Art must uncover the undercurrents in the real world of man. Real human life can be found in the slums, in the lives of street children, in the *palengke*, in sugarcane plantations, and in the *bodegas* of real people. Real people do not exist inside the mall. Every color, every shape, and every smile inside the mall is nothing but imaginary and artificial.

Present day spectacles such as cultural and social gatherings, elections among elitist clubs, intellectual conferences and meetings are but ways of pretending to see the truth about man because they are no more than a hypocritical way of showing concern for man's socio-economic and political conditions. These events are mere illusions. The plush venues stacked with delightful meals, themes, participants, and topics misrepresent social reality. Real people, many of them victims of injustice and inequality, dwell outside.

As writers, our task is to lay claim to our real, objective life. Philosophical ideas must not only be a symbolic expression of the world but must also be a presentation of the real world, the real objective world with all its conflicts and anguish. Human thought must reflect clearly the important factors objectively determining the meaning of life. Thinking in this sense must be an objective portrayal of the individual's social and economic conditions. Lukacs (1971, 52) asserts,

The more artless a work of art, the more it gives the effect of life and nature, the more dearly it exemplifies an actual concentrated reflection of its times and the more clearly it demonstrates that the only function of its form is the expression of this objectivity.

Any literary piece or artwork must express reality and truth to those who involve themselves in its evolution through time. Thus, art must go beyond the mere expression of beauty, for art is also about real life. Art must express the human problematic. The writer as an artist must reveal the truth of the human condition. His ultimate obligation is to tell his readers the truth of human life. After all, man writes for his fellow human beings.

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Endnotes

¹ This paper attempts to put into words my view of the human world. I have always thought that life is difficult and that however beautiful others may want to paint it there exist in this world the many faces of injustice, hatred, inequality, discrimination, domination, and many other evils. A writer must be honest to the truth of human life. To my mind, the writer's task is to tell people what our world



is really like. This I believe is the function of writing as an art. To quote Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, "art saves man, and through art, life" (Nietzsche 1954, 59).

² According to Rodney Livingston, "Georg Lukacs is one of the most controversial figures of his own age and of ours. As a Marxist philosopher, he has been credited with the most profound development of Marxist theory since Marx. He has been widely regarded as a major influence on writers as diverse as Heidegger, Benjamin, and Sartre. He played a big role in the Hungarian revolution after the First World War... From inside party lines he has been accused of deviations from the current party line as well as revisions of Marxist doctrines. From outside Marxism he has often been identified as one of the chief spokesmen for the dominant communist cultural ideology" (Lukacs 1978, 7).

³ Alienation is also the alienation of human consciousness. Human consciousness, according to Lukacs, is imprisoned in a false consciousness. Political economy hides the slavery in the modern work place. The colors, lighting, and overall ambiance of beautiful workplaces hide the reality that the poor worker earns a pittance compared to the huge profit of the corporation. As Marx says in the *Economic and philosophic manuscripts*, "the more the worker exerts himself, the more powerful becomes the alien objective world which he fashions against himself" (Marx 1988, 44). To change this system, Lukacs advocates for the elevation of the consciousness of the proletariat, saying that because of the nature of a capitalist economy, objective consciousness is lost and must be recovered.

⁴ Lukacs asserts that "modernism suggests that the form of an object is always determined by the self, through the self's inner activity. Aesthetic pleasure is always objectivized self-gratification" (Lukacs 1978, 33). Such notion is in congruence to the function of capitalist technology where emphasis is on the fulfillment of human desires.

⁵ Lukacs is known for his brand of Marxism as Western Marxism. Lukacs says that orthodox Marxism, the wing to which he belongs, is not about a blind obedience to the thesis of Marx. Orthodoxy, he says, refers to method, a method that leads to the truth. Method for Lukacs is something that can be developed if only to satisfy the demands of the present.

⁶ Lukacs' literary criticism is best elucidated in *The theory of the novel* (1920) and *The historical novel* (1936). Both trace the history of the novel as a genre.

⁷ This illusion is made manifest by malls, glossy magazines, American Idol, Hollywood, Harry Potter and others, alienating man from his real conditions. On the other hand, some films which vividly illustrate the human condition are "Tinimbang ka ngunit kulang" (social critique), "Himala" (popular religion), "Ora Pro Nobis" (political persecution), "El Crimen de Padre Amaro" (church ethics), and "Romero" (religion and politics) as prime examples.

⁸ The theory of reification is one of the major contributions of Lukacs to Marxist thought, along with his ideas of ideology, false consciousness, and class-consciousness.

⁹ Think, for instance of "Presumed innocent" (crime) by Scott Turow, "The Brothers Karamazov" (guilt) by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, "The old man and the sea" (the human will) by Ernest Hemingway, "Death of a salesman" (meaning of work) by Arthur Miller. These works represent the objective human world.

¹⁰ It is important to explain the phenomenon of modern television. Modern TV, the toolbox of hyper-nonsensicality, brings us to a cultural bankruptcy. Talents are hidden beneath an array of foolish and gibberish re-reproduction of Western literary inventions, shown for the sake of entertainment and not truth. Our children know nothing about us, for the tools of modernity alienate them from their roots. Their consciousness is forever embedded in an identity that does not know itself. Kris Aquino exemplifies the non-sense of modern television.

¹¹ The lack of perspective in modernist writings is in view of its reduction of objective reality to the subjective conditions of the writer. This leads to the alienation of human nature. For Lukacs, modernism alienates us from our true historical conditions by freezing objective reality in the reified ideas immanent in modern literature.