

Exploring Ecological Art on the Basis of Marcuse's Ecological Aesthetic Thought

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Abstract

Regarding the practical study of Marcuse's aesthetic thought, current scholars have neglected the phenomenon to a certain extent, failing to fully incorporate his ecocritical thought and comprehensively recognize the practical value of his aesthetic dimension. Marcuse points out that consumer society and technological abuse have led to aesthetic deprivation, indirectly exacerbating the ecological crisis, and emphasizes the functions of artistic emancipation, such as negativity and prediction, which constitute the prerequisites for the ecological revolution. On this basis, he further elaborates the specific path for the organic integration of ecology and aesthetics, i.e., reconstructing the concept of ecological rationality, promoting the philosophy of life, emphasizing the aesthetics of nature, cultivating aesthetic sensibilities, exploring new forms of aesthetics, and establishing new aesthetic values.

Keywords: Marcuse, ecological aesthetics, ecological revolution, artistic emancipation

1. Introduction

Existing studies have shown that the theoretical origin, scope, and connotation of Marcuse's aesthetic thought have been clearly studied, but there are differences in the evaluation of his aesthetic redemption thought, especially whether it is practical. Although the academic community has rich results on Marcuse's social-critical theory and aesthetic thought, the ecological aesthetic thought has not yet been explored in depth. The importance of the current study of Marcuse's ecological aesthetic thought is reflected in two aspects: First, some scholars regard his aesthetic thought as utopian and neglect its practical value, such as the idea of ecological aesthetics and technological aestheticization; second, the academic community has not fully combined Marcuse's aesthetic thought with his ecological critical theory, critique of technological rationality, and political philosophy, which leads to the neglect of the importance of its aesthetic dimension. Therefore, combining aesthetics and ecology to re-explore the aesthetic dimension of Marcuse's ecological thought is of great significance in correcting the misinterpretation of the academy and providing practical guidance.

2. The Ecological Crisis of the Aesthetic

The natural environment and ecological problems are re-examined through rigorous examination and rational thought and through aesthetic experience and expression, thus stimulating a deep concern for the ecological crisis. In fact, Marcuse believed that works of art could reveal the alienation and contradictions of society and, through critical and satirical methods, restore external phenomena to reveal their inner spirit and freedom. (Lv Mingyang & Geng Fangbing, 2018) He emphasizes that the value of art lies in its uncompromising critical distance from social norms and institutions.

Furthermore, Marcuse suggests that aesthetics enables people to realize individual liberation and freedom through the aesthetic experience of nature. (Yanping Xu, 2022) He points out that in modern industrial society, people's lives are dominated by technology and utilitarianism, and individual freedom and subjectivity are

suppressed. (He Bailue, 2023) However, through the lens of aesthetics, people can reconnect with nature and experience its beauty and mystery, thus regaining their freedom and liberation. (Mo Xiaohong & Wu Chenyi, 2023) This liberating experience and feeling is of great significance in promoting ecological conservation and sustainable development.

Based on the above, Marcuse's eco-critical thought makes ecological problems "present" through the perspective of aesthetics, which is mainly embodied in the reflective function of aesthetics, the critical power of works of art, and the emancipatory potential of aesthetics. Through aesthetic experience and expression, we can re-examine the natural environment and ecological problems, expose the destruction of ecology by technology and the alienation of nature by man, and thus realize the liberation of the individual and reconnect with nature. But what are the reasons that lead to the distortion of aesthetics and ultimately to the ecological crisis? Marcuse argues that there are two main aspects involved: The domination of aesthetic experience by commercialization and the misuse of technology that triggers aesthetic deprivation. First, the consumer society and technological waste lead to bad aesthetics. Aesthetic experience in modern society has been influenced by commercialization, leading people to ignore the value of nature and to rely too much on buying goods to satisfy their aesthetic needs. (Cong Bin & Zheng Xiaoying, 2022) This consumerist aesthetic experience exacerbates the excessive consumption and waste of natural resources. At the same time, the propaganda of the media and advertising further reinforces the aesthetic value of commodification, thus ignoring the nature and value of nature.

The lack of technological aesthetics is also an important cause of ecological problems. In the age of technology, human freedom is limited. Marcuse argues that we need to replace technological modes of perception with new aesthetic modes of perception in order to reconceptualize and reapproach nature and the world in which we live. (Herbert Marcuse, 2001) At the same time, the lack of aestheticization of technology has led to an ecological crisis, exacerbated by the ability to exploit and consume natural resources more rapidly without regard for the long-term effects on the environment (Herbert Marcuse, 2001).

In conclusion, Marcuse's question about the ecological crisis from an aesthetic perspective is a complex issue that needs to be thought about and resolved in many ways. We need to get rid of the realistic dilemma of consumerism and technological abuse and focus on the value of nature in order to realize the effective protection of the environment and ecology. In response to these problems, Marcuse points out that art has the potential for ecological liberation and can alleviate the ecological crisis.

3. The Ecological Emancipatory Potential of Art

As the concept of aesthetics developed, people began to view issues from an aesthetic ontological perspective. Schiller firmly believed that aesthetics was the path to a fully developed individual and regarded it as a key means of perfecting human nature. In the twentieth century, Nietzsche gave art a metaphysical ontological meaning, emphasizing that art is not only a means of perfecting human nature, but also the self-help of life and the pursuit of truth. This human-centered conception of aesthetics began with Kant's "Copernican Revolution," which asserted that beauty is a combination of purposelessness and purposiveness, in which purposiveness embodies the aesthetic needs of the subject.

In modern Western philosophy (aesthetics), this tendency, which emphasizes anti-rationality and irrationality, is closely related to the existence of human life and focuses on aesthetics, especially the human value of art and aesthetics. Among them, the negative function of art is particularly important in this regard. From the realist point of view, the negative function of art is manifested in the ecological revolution as a revolt and revolution against the ecological crisis, which raises people's environmental consciousness. (Wang Yuechuan, 2012) On the one hand, art plays an important role of resistance and revolution in the ecological crisis. Through their works, artists reflect and criticize environmental problems, arouse public concern and reflection, and promote the transformation of social cognition. (Hu Min, 2024) On the other hand, artworks make it easier for the audience to understand and feel the seriousness and urgency of environmental problems through emotional resonance, symbols and metaphors. Artists are able to depict the beauty and fragility of nature, show the destruction of environmental diversity, and lead audiences to reflection and action. Works of art can be catalysts for social reform, raising people's awareness and enthusiasm to participate in ecological movements, and promoting social change and progress.

Art also has a predictive function. In the field of ecology, this function is mainly manifested in predicting the consequences of ecological crises in order to avoid natural retaliation. According to Marcuse, the predictive function of art mainly refers to the ability of works of art to reveal certain essence and tendency of social reality, thus having a certain ability to predict the future. (Han Xiaoxiao, 2017) He emphasized that an artist's creation is not only a reflection and criticism of reality, but more importantly, a prediction of future trends through the form and content presented in the work. Artists have a unique point of view and sensitivity, and are able to keenly observe the contradictions and crises in society and express them through art. The emotions, attitudes and ideas expressed in art works can arouse people's response and concern, and then promote social change and progress.

For example, Marcuse believed that the quest for human freedom and the criticism of modern industrialized production methods in literary works reflect the contradictions and crises between man and nature, man and technology in modern society, and reveal predictions for the future. Similarly, works of art can reveal the injustices and inequalities that exist in society and provide useful insights and predictions for the future development of society.

Art also has the function of criticizing alienation. Art can criticize destructive and alienating tendencies, liberate man from the distorted forms imposed by the material conditions of life, and restore man's creativity and aesthetic personality, thus indirectly contributing to the ecological revolution. "Marcuse took a firm critical stance against alienation phenomena such as perpetual war, famine, and periodic ecological disasters." (Huang Feiyu, 2023) He believes that art can criticize the existing society, that is, its "one-sidedness" in economics, science, philosophy, everyday thinking, etc., in order to restore the possibility, negativity, transcendence, creativity, etc., latent in art. At the same time, artistic liberation can stimulate people's creativity and promote the development of ecological revolution. Art not only restores the beauty, freedom and sensitivity of human nature, but also reveals the limited and suppressed content of reality, that is, the emancipatory dimension, and thus fulfills the task of criticizing destructiveness and alienation. Art is capable of presenting images of creativity and "non-alienating tendencies". Marcuse believed that the true realization of beauty could not be achieved through the illusion of beauty, but through the elimination of the unfreedom of reality in order to achieve new forms of life, work, and recreation. (Li Jiansheng, 2000) He suggests that the abolition of affirmative culture is the means by which beauty is no longer presented as an illusion, but is expressed as a real pleasure. In this way, the artist methodically separates himself from alienated society in order to create that unrealistic world of fantasy in which only art possesses and communicates authenticity.

It should be noted that the negative, predictive and critical character of art determines its unique revolutionary qualities. Art and revolution are closely intertwined in the aesthetic dimension. Although art does not have a direct effect on ecology, it can be transformed into the subject's denial and struggle against the irrationality of the existing order by reshaping the "new man and woman," mainly by reshaping the individual's spiritual world and transforming the "inner nature," and by promoting the subject's instincts and restoring the human desire for love. On this basis, through the medium of art, the "inner nature" is transformed so that the "inner nature" can be soothed and comforted, thus resisting the oppression and violence against the "outer nature" and restoring the natural part of the subject and its intrinsic value part of the subject and its intrinsic value. In this process, "external nature" is "restored to beauty" through art.

To sum up, Marcuse always speaks of the ecology of the human world, and therefore he sees the liberation of man as the most important aspect of the liberation of nature. He regarded the "aesthetic dimension" as the most important aspect of the liberation of man. Thus, the aesthetic redemption of ecological aesthetics is an important dimension of Marcuse's ecocritical thought.

4. The Analysis of the Path of Marcuse's Ecological Aestheticization

The path of ecological aestheticization can be summarized in the following aspects. First, to reconstruct the concept of ecological rationality and promote the philosophy of life. Ecological rationality is a new mode of cognitive and cultural production that emphasizes the harmonious coexistence of man and nature, opposes the exploitation and destruction of nature, and abandons the traditional subject-object dichotomy. Under the guidance of Marcuse's aesthetics, ecological rationality presents the ecological rationality of art, i.e., the creation and appreciation of artworks should follow ecological principles and values. As a cultural practice independent of the fields of production and consumption, art has the ability to criticize and reflect reality, and therefore should pay attention to ecological issues and advocate sustainable production and consumption methods. The fusion of Marcuse's aesthetic thought, and the ecological revolution has given birth to the ecological rationality of art, emphasized the connection between art and nature, promoted sustainable development and environmental protection, and made a positive contribution to the construction of ecological civilization.

Second, it emphasizes natural aesthetics and cultivates aesthetic sensitivity. Marcuse believes that by cultivating aesthetic sensitivity, people can better understand and appreciate the beauty of nature, and thus promote social progress. On the one hand, the appreciation of natural beauty and natural artifacts can increase people's concern for the natural environment and ecological problems and raise their awareness of environmental protection. Aesthetics can inspire people's understanding of themselves and the world, enhance emotions, and reshape values. On the other hand, the cultivation of aesthetic sensitivity makes people more sensitive to the beauty and ugliness of the environment and whether it is harmonious or not, so that they can pay more attention to the environment and ecological problems and protect and preserve the natural environment.

Again, explore new aesthetic forms and establish new aesthetic values. This is mainly manifested in: the intrinsic value of natural beauty contributes to human freedom and liberation, Marcuse believes that freedom should be sought in sensual liberation; the establishment of new aesthetic concepts, Marcuse emphasized that the doctrine

of revolution should go beyond the violent revolution of the material conditions of society and focus on changing the social subject and the concept of human consciousness. The fixed standards in traditional aesthetic concepts are broken, and the combination of nature and aesthetic forms emphasizes pluralism and openness, stimulates people's imagination and creativity, establishes new aesthetic concepts and value systems, and achieves a sense of freedom and liberation. Art expresses the potential and new dimensions of human nature, establishes new aesthetic values that emphasize the social responsibility and moral obligation of beauty, frees people from the traditional values of individualism and utilitarianism, and pays more attention to the relationship between man and nature. According to Marcuse, the establishment of new aesthetic values must return to the essence of aesthetics and human nature, re-examine the meaning and value of art, and focus on human freedom and autonomy so that everyone can freely develop and express their own aesthetic concepts and values.

In summary, Marcuse's aesthetic thought runs through his life, taking aesthetics as the starting point of his research and returning to aesthetics in his later years. Marcuse's thought is incomplete without aesthetics, and his eco-socialist construction is obviously deviated from the original intention when he talks about it without the aesthetic dimension. According to Marcuse, the greatest difficulty in transcending the developed industrial society lies in the cyclical relationship between the psycho-social mechanism of instrumental rationality and the technological system, which makes human beings become "unidirectional human beings" and leads to the situation of "general alienation" in society and makes the domination system of the industrial society more solid. The ruling system of the industrial society has been strengthened. As a new revolutionary force, the aesthetic form can reshape the social subject through the socio-psychological mechanism, break the cyclical relationship between instrumental rationality and the technical system, realize the transformation of the real world through aesthetic practice, establish the real world with new forms of harmony, ideal order and self-discipline, and give full play to the emancipatory potential of the aesthetic form.

It should be emphasized that Marcuse's idea of ecological aesthetics is deeply influenced by Leopold. Leopold pointed out that things are appropriate when they tend to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of biomes; conversely, they are inappropriate. By combining the ecological movement with aesthetic forms, the further development of the aesthetic emancipation movement can be promoted, so that people can be liberated from the culture and ideology of capitalism, pay more attention to environmental issues, and realize the harmony and unity between man and nature. Although the academic community has paid more attention to Marcuse's aesthetic thought, the research on integrating his aesthetic thought from an ecological perspective is still insufficient. Moreover, the academic community generally believes that Marcuse's aesthetics is caught in a utopian dilemma, but in fact his ecological aesthetics has great practical potential. In studying Marcuse's aesthetic thought, scholars often neglect its practicality and fail to fully recognize the important value of its aesthetic dimension. Marcuse's ecological aesthetic thought aims to reveal the close connection between art and the ecological revolution, and to provide useful insights for the construction of an ecological civilization.

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