

# Marcuse's Vision of How Artistic Redemption Is Possible in A Repressive Civilization

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**Abstract:** Marcuse inherited Freud's view of civilization, which, according to Marcuse, contradicts man's instinctive needs, since its progress often requires restraint and delayed gratification of these instincts. However, how can art, as a product of civilization, represent man's primitive instincts and become a breakthrough point for his liberation? Marcuse points out that the desire for free love does not reject the enduring social relations of civilization, but rather rejects the organization of super-repressive social relations, and therefore there must be a non-repressive civilization. Why, then, is it possible for a non-repressive civilization to emerge from within a repressive civilization? This paper delves into Marcuse's theoretical framework, and by clarifying the logical starting point and possibility of artistic redemption, it aims to expose how a civilization that represses instincts can produce art that represents human instincts, and then explore how the road to artistic redemption is possible.

**Keywords:** Repressive civilization; instinct; artistic redemption.

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## 1. The Logical Beginning of Artistic Redemption

In *Man in One Direction*, Marcuse criticizes capitalist society, pointing out that technological progress reduces the individual to a one-way man, the working class loses its revolutionary consciousness, and the cultural industry exacerbates the difficulty of awakening consciousness. Influenced by Freud, he emphasized the importance of a revolution in consciousness and dissected the control and repression that the proliferation of technological rationality exerts on people, causing them to lose themselves.

### 1.1. The Crisis of Unidirectionality in Capitalist Society

The one-way society is the starting point of critique and the logical starting point of artistic redemption. Marcuse pointed out in *One-Direction Man* that contemporary industrial society relies on technological progress to achieve a leap in productivity, but technology has reversed itself into a dominant force controlling society and the individual, "It is not surprising that in the most developed areas of industrial civilization, social control has been submerged (imntrojectad) to such an extent that even individual protests have been radically fundamentally affected. The intellectual and emotional refusal to "go along with the crowd" can seem both insensitive and weak. In a society dominated by instrumental rationality, negativity is eliminated, the individual becomes unidirectional, and the society appears to be full of rationality and order, but in fact it hides a generalized unfreedom and repression. Marcuse states, "Similarly, 'individual,' 'class,' 'private,' 'family' " used to refer to those spheres and forces that had not yet been integrated with the established conditions of life - spheres full of tension and contradiction. With the growing integration of industrial society, these categories are losing their critical connotations and tending to become descriptive, deceptive, or operational terms." , This transformation not only reveals profound changes in social structure, but also highlights the erosion of individual

freedom and critical spirit by a one-dimensional society. In this regard, Marcuse warns that "the world is bound to become the stuff of total management that includes even the administrators. The net of domination has become the net of reason itself, and society will eventually be trapped in that net. Reason's transcendental approach looks set to overtake reason itself."

According to Marcuse, the working class revolution proposed by Marx is no longer applicable in a unidirectional society because the manipulation of ideology by instrumental rationality and the widespread dissemination of vulgar mass culture through electronic information technology have made the awakening of consciousness almost impossible. From Marcuse's point of view, the most serious drawback of a one-way society is its manipulation of human consciousness and suppression of instincts, and this effect is particularly noticeable at the social level, as manifested in the phenomenon of alienation in the cultural sphere.

### 1.2. The alienating nature of a repressive civilization

Freud constructed the theory of civilization based on the theory of instinctual structure, which is based on the lasting subjugation of human instincts, and believed that the history of man is the history of man's suppression, and that civilization suppresses not only man's social survival, but also his biological survival. Understood through personality theory, the ego pursues the pleasure principle to satisfy instinctual needs, the self harmonizes the ego-reality conflict to ensure survival, and the superego internalizes external constraints into the conscience, leading to guilt that pervades psychological life. This process, the shift from conscious condemnation to unconscious repression, has been called the "materializing tendency of the spirit," and it is an important cornerstone of the development of civilization.

Marcuse was deeply influenced by Freud's view of civilization, and in his book *One Direction Man*, he provides an in-depth analysis of how culture and ideology have replaced the primitive forces of savagery and transformed

them into a powerful mechanism for integrating the individual into the current system of industrial and consumer society. He observes that as culture and the arts become increasingly integrated into existing social structures, they lose their radical character and become increasingly conservative. Art, as it is integrated into the industrialized and commodified world, becomes an integral part of a unidirectional cultural system that is increasingly conservative and stable, aiming to preserve and reproduce the existing social order.

Moreover, Marcuse points out that popular culture not only absorbed the essence of high culture, but also transformed it, thus depriving it of its potential subversive power. Art, in such a context, can at best be considered a decorative presence or a mild form of diversion for people. He further emphasizes that one of the distinctive features of today's fiction is the elimination of the opposition between culture and social reality by eliminating those transcendental elements of refined culture. This elimination of the two-way degree of culture is not achieved through the denial or suppression of cultural values, but rather through the full incorporation of these values into the existing order and through mass reproduction and display.

A truly bourgeois cultural work, Marcuse argues, actually expresses a conscious and strategic alienation that is intimately linked to the entire commercial and industrial sphere and to the calculable and profitable order. While artists and literature such as Dutch painters, Goethe, English novels or Thomas Mann show the bourgeois order in a rich and admirable way, another dimension in opposition to it is also represented in marginalized characters such as artists, prostitutes, and renegade poets. However, while these character types still exist in the cultures of advanced industrial societies, they no longer represent an entirely new way of life, but merely "different variants or aberrant forms of the same way of life, an affirmation rather than a negation of the existing order."

### **1.3. The Rise of the Critique of Technical Rationality**

In the 19th century, the early scholars of the Frankfurt School before its birth focused mainly on criticism at the economic level. However, by the 1920s, as the advanced capitalist countries represented by Germany and Britain underwent remarkable changes in the economic sphere, the Frankfurt School began to notice that science and technology, as a powerful force increasingly out of control, was profoundly changing capitalist society. As a result, they gradually shifted the focus of their critique to technological rationality.

Drawing on Weber's and Horkheimer's theories of instrumental rationality, Marcuse analyzed in depth the close connection between the proliferation of instrumental rationality and the repression of man in developed industrial society. In this society, technical rationality and critical rationality seem to merge, and the production and distribution system is highly rationalized, making the differences between managers and subordinates based more on inheritance and vocational training than on talent and insight, a trend that exacerbates the divide between the underclass and the group that pushes for technological progress.

Marcuse further points out that while technological development has brought about the advancement of civilization, it has also reinforced the control and manipulation of people in advanced industrial societies.

Surrounded by technology, people's instinctive structure has changed and the phenomenon of "instinctive management" has emerged, making it difficult for people to express their inner negativity and criticism, and gradually reducing them to unidirectional human beings. He emphasized that science and technology, while promoting social development, had also become a means of control, hindering the realization of human freedom and independence of thought. In addition, the deepening influence of science and technology on the field of culture has caused culture to flood the market like a commodity and be manipulated by the ruling class and interest groups. People gradually lose themselves and their spirit of resistance in the materially rich capitalist society. Nowadays, the private space of the individual has been encroached upon and weakened by technological realities, and industrial psychology is no longer confined to factories, but has widely penetrated into people's daily lives, making their responses mechanical and rigid.

## **2. The Possibility of Artistic Redemption in a Repressive Civilization**

Marcuse inherited Freud's view of civilization as the methodical sacrifice of libido and its forcible transfer to socially useful activities and performances. But Marcuse emphasizes that Freud's terminology does not make a proper distinction between instinctual biological variation and socio-historical variation. Marcuse then restores its socio-historical character through conceptual extrapolation, proposes basic and additional repression, and describes the historical form of the current reality principle in terms of the "operative principle". Marcuse further reveals the inherent contradiction in the theory of civilization: the continuous conflict between civilization and instinct, which both advances civilization and sows the seeds of self-destruction. Civilization's tendency to integrate more individuals into the collective, while individual instincts prefer intimacy between the two, leads to a conflict between the goals of civilization and the goals of individual instincts. In order to maintain the order of civilization, societies developed moral and ethical norms to repress sexual instincts, to promote the triumph of loving desire over the death instinct, and to reduce aggressive tendencies. The advancement of civilization has benefited from the transformation and use of the death instinct and its derivatives to redirect the inherent destructiveness to the external world, thus promoting technological advancement. However, when the death instinct is used to shape the superego, the pleasure ego is then forced to succumb to the reality principle in order to ensure that the moral code of civilization is maintained. Nonetheless, civilization retains its potentially deadly aggressiveness. As civilization progresses, this destructive force grows. In order to balance this force, we need to look at instincts from the perspective of a non-repressive civilization, not just limited to the operating principle.

The question of how to explore and create the possibility of a non-repressive civilization in the face of a civilization dominated by the operating principle is one that Marcuse thought deeply about. He argues that even in the depths of repressive civilization, the power of self-denial lurks. As civilization moves from the free industrial stage to the organized industrial stage, the concentration of economic

power becomes increasingly pronounced, and the individual is often consumed by this force. The high degree of development of civilization has inadvertently changed the basic structure of human instincts, so that the originally dynamic tension between the ego, the self and the superego has gradually stiffened into a static mechanical reaction, and the classic forms of confrontation between them have ceased to exist. This atrophy of the instinctual structure has led to a loosening of the connection between the individual and the existing civilization, and the repressive power of the reality principle no longer seems to be able to completely bind the repressed individual. From this perspective, the progress of civilization driven by the operative principle is actually weakening the instinctual basis of repression, causing the roots of the repressive instinctual structure to gradually dry up. This provides a potential opportunity for the emergence of a non-repressive civilization.

Marcuse emphasizes that the vision of a non-repressive civilization is not a far-fetched utopia. Although utopia has an element of imagination, it is also deeply rooted in historical reality. Its real value lies in pointing us in the direction of another non-repressive possibility. In order to express this idea more vividly, Marcuse introduces images such as Orpheus and Nachas, and the image of Orpheus-Nachasus is the very image of the great refusal, the refusal to be separated from the object (or subject) of the libido. The goal of this refusal is liberation, the reunion of what was once separated. They symbolize the rejection of the world of the sustaining operating principle and the yearning for a non-repressive civilization full of love and desire.

### **3. Exploring the Road to Artistic Redemption in a Repressive Civilization**

#### **3.1. "Aesthetic restoration" to rebuild society**

"Aesthetic reduction" is a challenging and progressive idea, Marcuse notes, noting that in Hegel's conception, art par excellence reduces reality to its essence, revealing the core elements of spirituality and freedom. This process creates artistic images that contain freedom and fulfillment by removing the contingency and repression of the object. For example, when designing a house, an architect uses "aesthetic reduction" to eliminate useless elements and create a new design that enhances human happiness. New technologies can also embody this reduction, shaping objects that unleash the potential of nature and creating aesthetic forms that aim to enhance human life. Marcuse argues that artistic rationality is validated and brought into play by the ability of technology to transform the world, where art is no longer merely an appendage to the glorification of existing institutions, but becomes a technology that destroys their ills. Aesthetic restoration also means reducing violence, abuse of power, and environmental destruction, and promoting a more harmonious relationship between man and nature and others. In this process, aesthetic values and practices converge in the reconstruction of environments, housing, cities, and the construction of "art-like societies". Marcuse firmly believed that art and aesthetic values played a key role in reshaping social reality, technology, and the creation of a non-repressive civilization.

Marcuse positively evaluates beauty as a normative

criterion for true art, considering it to be a characteristic of aesthetic forms that bring harmony, satisfaction, and pleasure. But he also acknowledges that beautiful art can be illusory and become a tool for whitewashing repressive societies, especially in one-dimensional societies where art is integrated into commercialized consumption structures. Nevertheless, he proposes a utopian vision in which art and technology are constantly merging, and art can become a productive force in the production of a new kind of society, which will itself become a work of art.

#### **3.2. The New Sensibility Subverts the Reign of Technological Reason**

Within the framework of a non-repressive civilization, the principle of reality has been given a renovated look, the principle of neo-sensibility. Utilizing the inherent mechanism of imagination, this principle skillfully bridges the gap between reason and sensibility, dissolving the boundaries between higher intelligence and basic ability, poetry and science. It is not only the guiding standard of a free society, but also implies a deep desire for the essence of life, calling for the return of mankind to the real world of life, and the realization of a comprehensive enrichment and deepening of sensory experience. Marcuse advocated the integration of aesthetics and reason as a means of giving birth to a new sensibility; at the same time, he also called for art and technology to go hand in hand in shaping a new social reality - a society that is itself a work of art.

Marcuse further suggests that through an aesthetic education designed to cultivate imagination, fantasy, sensory acuity, and memory, people can gradually build this new sensibility. This new sensibility not only closely combines sensibility and reason, but also gives reason the warmth of the flesh and the power of love and desire, which is called the "new reason".

Compared with Marx, Marcuse added a crucial dimension to this new mode of existence - the aesthetic dimension. This dimension transcends not only Kant's traditional understanding of the bridge between practical and theoretical reason, between freedom and nature, but also the limits of artistic expression itself. In Marcuse's view, although art is rich in the spirit of resistance, its form tends to fetter the release of its content, making the aesthetic effect superficial and false. Therefore, the aesthetic dimension under the principle of new sensibility is no longer confined to the realm of art, but is committed to breaking through the boundaries of art and realizing the repositioning of the historical status of beauty. It does not stick to the purely rational understanding of beauty, but goes deep into the essential state of things, truly reaching a realm beyond art and returning to the true nature of things.

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