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Marx Wartofsky

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Marx W. Wartofsky

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Marx W. Wartofsky (1928-1997) was born in Brooklyn and received his bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees at Columbia University. He was a professor at Boston University (where he taught for twenty-six years) and then at Baruch College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He was long-time editor of *The Philosophical Forum* which he founded in 1970. He also co-founded the Boston University Center for Philosophy and History of Science in 1960 with Ted Cohen. He wrote three books: *Conceptual Foundations of Scientific Thought* (Macmillan, 1968), *Feuerbach* (1982), and *Models: Representation and the Scientific Understanding* (1979), the last of which is the most important for his aesthetic theory. He co-edited *Woman and Philosophy* (1976) with his wife, Carol C. Gould. Wartofsky was president of the Society for Philosophy and Technology from 1987 to 1989. He was also a longtime member of the American Society for Aesthetics and participated regularly in their programs. He was best known for his “historical epistemology” which he applied to aesthetics as well as the philosophy of science. Unusual for a philosopher in the U.S., Wartofsky's overall perspective was firmly rooted in Marxism. However, he was also influenced by the work of analytic philosopher Nelson Goodman and psychologist J. J. Gibson.

Historical Epistemology. Historical epistemology is not in itself a theory of aesthetics or art but a much broader theory of knowledge which gives an important role to the evolution of pictures in the history of perception. In “Pictures, Representation and the Understanding,” (1972) Wartofsky argued that a tilted circle does not appear elliptical but rather appears circular. We represent it as elliptical to make it appear circular. Further, *how* we see the circle and how we see in general is affected by canons of representation, which, in the west, are based on geometrical optics. In a follow-up piece (1973) he argued that perception is not only biological but “a highly evolved and specific mode of human action or praxis.” It is in modes of representation that perception is related to historical changes in human social and technological practice. Human perception develops only after biological evolution of the sensory system. Later, (1978), he drew on Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art* to further develop his thesis, arguing that the theory of perceptual constancy and the standard account of representational faithfulness rest on the same mistake: that vision is based on the model of Euclidian geometrical optics. Contra that tradition, he asserted that linear perspective is not the norm of faithfulness in pictorial representation. In “Art History and Perception” (1980) he turned his attention more directly to art, saying that “human vision is a cultural artifact, created and transformed by the historical practice of representation in art.” Although Plato, Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, Peirce, and Wittgenstein, had all observed that human perception is framework-dependent, his own thesis was more radical and, admittedly,

initially implausible. We can, for instance, see the world in the way El Greco did if we just spend a lot of time looking at El Greco's, and the reason for this is that our vision has been shaped over thousands of years by representations. Most of this article is a defense of historical epistemology against three opposing arguments: that it involves a logical flaw, that it is opposed by neurophysiology, and that perceptual psychology falsifies it through the theory of constancies.

General Aesthetic Theory. Although Marxist themes are seldom mentioned in Wartofsky's work on historical epistemology, they are strongly evident in two aesthetics papers found at the end of *Models*. "Art and Technology" (1973) was an early foray into issues of aesthetics and education, in which he argued against the antithesis between art and technology promoted by a bourgeois liberal ideology in which technology was seen with elitist disdain. He rejected the myth that art is always playful and imaginative and technology imitative, mechanical and the result of rule-bound training. Contrary to the myth, the practicing artist is a technologist. He also rejected the idea that technology is valueless means to cultural ends. Separating art and technology downplays the importance of skilled craftsmanship in art. Spontaneity, although valuable, is an achievement, not something random. He further claimed that art and technology's separation plays into a passive acceptance of the unaesthetic conditions of alienated work-like. Moreover, it involves a rejection of the dignity of labor. The world needs to be made aesthetic, i.e. humanized for mankind. Yet these changes can only be made through technology.

"Art as a Humanizing Practice" (1976) was Wartofsky's most programmatic article in aesthetics. There he argued that, in the right conditions, art humanizes. As he put it, "human beings become human in coming to know themselves as human." Both the creation and practice of art is an example of this process of self-knowledge. Art, as self-understanding, does not represent nature so much as the very process of creating artworks. The appreciator, in turn, recognizes the human capacity for creativity in another, i.e. the artist. Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) saw this when he described cathedrals as public self-celebratory recognitions of human creative capacity projected onto a mythological God. He believed that we humans are beings who seek to know ourselves. It follows from this that elimination, distortion or alienation of the activity of art distorts that which is essentially human. Wartofsky agreed, and argued that this has happened in the west through commodification of art and corruption of taste, the latter exemplified in the acceptance of the lowest forms of art, including kitsch. The crisis is not just within art but within civilization itself. Sensibility no longer has the function of aesthetic self-knowledge, but has been co-opted for other ends. For example, it provides a safe outlet for social misery. Feuerbach saw that the conscious recognition of "the other" as like oneself was the basis for religious consciousness. Yet "the other," i.e. God, was seen as unlike us in being universal and self-dependent. So humans came to know themselves in God's image. However, as Feuerbach argued, this is an illusion. To awaken from this illusion is to recognize oneself in the other as a human social being and not as God. For Feuerbach, sensibility is essential to human life: human needs are bodily needs. Sensibility develops in a dialectic with "the other," which becomes not God but the natural world as world-for-us. The natural world becomes a mirror of our needs,

representing our essence as a species. Humans, in turn, become human by humanizing nature. But, as Karl Marx saw, Feuerbach limited this activity to reflective consciousness or, at best, to the feeling of sensibility, failing to capture the concrete historical nature of humanity. For Marx, meeting needs is a practical activity of transforming the world, i.e. through revolutionary praxis. Later Marxist and neo-Marxist thinkers elaborated on this insight in the realm of art. They emphasized the way that human self-knowledge comes out of the transformations of art. In sum, it is not the artwork but the process of artistic creation and appreciative re-creation that is the humanizing praxis of art.

In this essay Wartofsky also finds an analogy between the creative process in art and the process of production in a capitalist society as described by Marx. The artwork, as product, has no value in itself but has a congealed value based on the creative process and released through appreciation, which is a reproduction of the creative act. It is absurd to reduce artistic creation to the model of commodity production. Unfortunately, this is what has happened in the current art market where art only exists in alienated form. Marx demystified the value of the commodity through revealing its source in the exploitation and alienation of the worker. He also saw the labor process as that by which humans achieve their humanity, i.e. as a product of human creative praxis. So man loses his self-creating essence through the alienation of the capitalist system. Revolutionary praxis seeks to overcome this alienation by re-appropriating the creative process under socialism. It follows that the artwork has no value in itself but only in its process of creation and appreciative recreation.

For Wartofsky, the essence of humanity is not *a priori*. Rather it is constituted through self-conscious activity of humans themselves. In becoming artists, appreciators and critics we become human. However, if in this activity the object comes to be seen a mere surface appearance the human content is not realized, and the artwork becomes a mere fetish, the objectification occurring only in a mystified form detached from existential need. We also need to recognize that the philosophy of art and art criticism are not the praxis of art and do not achieve its ends, although they too may humanize us through self-consciousness. If we substitute these practices for art we fetishize consciousness about art, which is another form of idolatry.

Wartofsky is also critical of the anti-art of Duchamp and Dadaism which takes the artist as subject-matter of art, perversely returning to the process of art, painfully asserting the alienated condition of art and in the end simply accommodating the conditions of repression through institutionalized despair. It fails to elaborate sensibility in an affirmative way. He concludes by affirming that art can also recognize human suffering as expression of shared feeling. Art humanizes our capacity for tragedy and for joy: it humanizes through self-recognition of all modes of human praxis.

Response to Other Aesthetic Theories. In “Art, Artworlds, and Ideology” (1980) Wartofsky responded to the institutional theory of art offered by George Dickie and Arthur Danto. He argued that the theory does not tell us what art is, but rather relies on others for this in a circular way: “Art is what is taken to be art by those people who take things to be art.” Moreover, the artifactual condition for arthood is too loose in that it

does not insist that artifacts need to be made deliberately by an artist. Art, for Wartofsky, is a “historically changing mode of human praxis” and so he calls for a thick institutional theory rather than a “thin” formal one. The thick theory would take historical context fully into account, the “artworld” being something different at each stage in history. The “fun” is in knowing who kept the artworld going at different times. He also observes that the formal institutional theory is not just descriptive but also excludes certain works that the artworld excludes, as also certain art theories which may be excluded by what he called “the theoryworld.”

Wartofsky later in “The Liveliness of Aesthetics,” (1987) wrote on analytic aesthetics more generally. Passmore famously claimed that aesthetics is dreary, this based on the idea that aesthetic theory simply follows what is going on in the broader field of philosophy. Wartofsky criticized analytic aesthetics for doing the same. Philosophy has fragmented into competing styles or fashions, the purpose being to compete in the professional marketplace. In the end analytical aesthetics is derivative, which leads to dreariness. Art on the other hand is a natural source of insights in aesthetics, so liveliness in aesthetics depends more on attending to the arts than to philosophy: they provide it with something to say.

Legacy. Much of Wartofsky’s influence has been through his students. In aesthetics, these include Michael Kelly, Gregg Horowitz, Tom Huhn, Thomas Leddy and Barbara Savedoff. His historical epistemology has continued to be discussed after his death, for example in “Symposium: The Historicity of the Eye” (2001) which contained articles by Arthur Danto, Noel Carroll, Mark Rollins, and Whitney Davis, as well as in *Constructivism and Practice*. Unfortunately, after the fall of the Soviet Union, interest in Marxist philosophy, even the humanist version advocated by Wartofsky, declined. Yet, historical epistemology has many affinities with contemporary progressivist approaches to art and the Occupy Wall Street movement shows a continued relevance of Marxist political and social critique. Historical epistemology could even be seen as a dialectical synthesis of the antithesis between those like the postmodernists who see art as culturally constituted and those like Dennis Dutton who see it as evolutionarily determined. In the end, one could say that the legacy of Wartofsky is yet to be fully realized.

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