

Base, Superstructure, Aesthetic Level: further notes on a theory

Gary Tedman

Today (June 2006, when I began writing this) there are 52,100 mentions on the internet if you search the term 'aesthetic level' using quote marks (if no quotes you get 16,600,000). Usually these are phrases people are using to describe a different way of apprehending something from the *rational*, such as in this question I found asked of an artist "Is it important to you that people see the concept behind the work or are you happy for them to enjoy it merely on an aesthetic level?"

So, it is already a concept that is being used, although usually in a fairly intuitive manner.

In past work I have tried to apply the term in a more concrete way by placing art within a Marxian 'aesthetic level,' in a similar sense as Althusser used the concept of levels and practices, chiefly because the traditional Marxian described relation between Base and Superstructure seemed to me to either 'jump' too quickly from the one to the other, or was 'squashed together' in theory without much mediation. In this work I proposed (see *Rethinking Marxism* 11/4; 16/1, 16/4, also Singh *RM* 16/2) that this concept allows us to approach the object of our enquiry (art) *after* having given it its proper grounds, i.e. the aesthetic level, which is defined on the basis of a materialist aesthetic. A well-founded Marxist theory of art is important, need I say, because on it hinges many aspects of technique, or 'artistry,' in revolutionary practice.

This essay is a return to this subject to reiterate it in what is hopefully a simpler and more direct way, as well as updating certain aspects of the research.

A materialist aesthetic, to put it schematically, is a sensual aesthetic, embedded in the world, and the human senses sense the world in a way that corresponds to the physics of this world and our bodies. We assume here that the senses mediate the 'external' world to the mind. This mediation is not a trifling matter and cannot be null or 'transparent' in its effects. As material systems the senses cannot be 'passive receptors' (a favourite idea of behaviourism).

An aesthetic theory must come before art theory, which is to be based on it. Most bourgeois theories of art are based on a denegated aesthetic theory, i.e. one that remains unaccountable or mystical ("...there's no accounting for taste"). Marxist art theories also often leave this aside, hence they are at best 'in lieu' of a foundational aesthetic theory.

Base and Superstructure is, in Marxist theory, a metaphor for the way society is architected, with the economic Base at the bottom, and the cultural Superstructure at the top. The Superstructure 'arises' upon the Base. One tenet of materialism (the Marxist theory of knowledge, or epistemology) is that the economic Base determines the character of any social Superstructure. The metaphor derives of course from Marx in "The German Ideology." Louis Althusser (not alone) added the concept of levels and practices to this architecture, which is perhaps implicit in the original schema. A *level* can have a *practice* associated with it, e.g. economic practice (production of goods).

The levels look like this: the economic Base at

the bottom, the foundation or infrastructure, with the ideological level and then the political level rising above it, thus the Superstructure, all in that order. The political level refers to action in time for change. (All the other levels in a sense therefore occur within the political. Although we need not concern ourselves with this further, this metaphor can become both more complex and less descriptive if we start to see it as a *topology*).

I have submitted the thesis that the concept of an aesthetic level needs to be added to the Base and Superstructure paradigm in order to take account of certain things that seem to have been left relatively untouched by Marxism so far. Perhaps not by Marx himself, but in the later history of Marxism: such as human feeling, sensibility, custom, tradition, taboo, habit, ritual, sexuality, and affection (leaving aside those Marxists who have approached this subject from a slightly different, more psychological angle, such as Marcuse).

This aesthetic level of practice is 'nearer' (so to speak) to the Base than the ideological and political levels; this is because the aesthetic is also the realm of necessity and human needs: the human body needs certain things in order to live and remain human. Our senses are attuned by evolution to the processes necessary to fulfil these needs and probably our emotions are, in part, too. This level can thus be understood as a representative of materialism in social theory. Philosophically, materialism has it that existence comes before thought: we *are*, therefore we *can* think.

Of course, the Economic Base has always been considered by most Marxists to be the 'material base,' but I think this is inaccurate if left by itself (and leads to 'Economism') because much of the Base is made up of, or structured by, purely conventional rules. While these rules have a material effectivity certainly, they are not the same kind of laws as, for instance, the physical laws of motion. The materialist element of the economic is represented by the realm of human necessity. An economic structure is needed to fulfil material human needs, which are themselves determined biologically. The Base derives its 'baseness,' however, not from this alone, but from the fact that its organisation shapes the rest of human

society. Mediation with the rest of nature (as a part of it) is always sensual and experiential (aesthetic). Human beings are social beings, and this mediation is organised socially at the economic level. We need to eat, drink, have shelter. So the economy is fundamental in the way it organizes the fulfilment of these material needs but here there is a close intertwining of the levels.

So we get this structure:

- d) Political level
- c) Ideological level
- b) Aesthetic level
- a) Economic level

a+b = infrastructure, c+d = superstructure

In everyday life the aesthetic level can be witnessed, I suggest, in the 'affective practices' of human subjects, their emotional interpersonal relationships. A great deal of this, by default, is unconscious communication (we might here refer to Freud's small number of works addressing group psychopathology), or perhaps we might say 'subliminal'. We might also note that the classic Marxist notion of class, as such, implicitly requires unconscious affective communication to account for class characteristics (like so called 'crowd behaviour'), unless we opt for the overtly Hegelian interpretation of the Marxian understanding of classes, as the 'subject/object of history.'

I have argued that 'Aesthetic State Apparatuses' are the 'official' representatives of this level of human activity by, and in, the State.

The State is generally considered, in its classic Marxist sense, an organ of the ruling class for the suppression of the exploited class. It keeps the status quo of class power intact. It has changed its form along with historical changes in the Base: from slavery, through feudal, to capitalist modes of production. It is a kind of integument, a 'shell,' keeping things in place, by persuasion, and by force in the last instance. The State can be described as a way of securing the reproduction of the existing conditions and relations of production, in time.

Thus, an Art College is an ASA (in this sense), while a School is an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA,

in Althusser's sense). The hospital and the family are also ASAs as they both deal, in slightly different but related ways, with the human body and the affections. This new schema now allows us to ask that hoary and recalcitrant question 'what is art?' again but in a more precise way, because it refers art theory back to this material *level* of human experience and not to an unaccountable and denegated domain (to an aesthetic of 'the beautiful' or 'the sublime' or some such). The question then becomes: What is the function of art *on the aesthetic level of practice*? What does it (or can it) *produce* on this level?

The function of the art ASA is simple in this understanding: it is to *mediate* the transactions, the 'traffic,' between Superstructure and Base. But by definition this mediation is not 'ideological' mediation, it is not the 'flow or exchange of ideas,' it is a different kind of traffic, it is sensual mediation, if you like: it is the *technique* of ideological mediation, or how ideology is transferred or transacted.

To clarify: Ideology, to have any effect, must be manifested. It must take a form and in that form have an effect. Ideology as a system of pure bodiless ideas does not exist and so can have no effect. The way ideology has an effect is through sensual mediation. All advertisers for commercial products in capitalism know this very well: to 'put something across' it must be packaged 'aesthetically.' Artists in the art ASAs learn how to mediate ideology aesthetically.

But in fact, and this is very important, there can be no ideology without an aesthetic (we can make the distinction in theory between theory and practice, but in practice they are united). For materialism the aesthetic in fact comes first, before ideas, and it is the ideas which, 'after the event,' seek to justify actions, to legitimize 'what is.'

Given the existence of art ASAs, we can make a similar claim as Althusser does about ideology and ISAs: art (also) takes part in *reproducing the already existing conditions of production*.

What is reproduction? We already know what production is: we must produce (food, water, shelter, and the circulation of these goods, etc.) to survive. Any society, in order to maintain its existence, must re-produce its own conditions of existence, in time (Althusser explained this very clearly). This repro-

duction entails, also, the reproduction of the human subject itself. It must 'know how to act' in society. This means the human subject must be orientated, gendered, trained, educated, and if necessary, repressed. Therefore, the aesthetic level reproduces (in contrast to other aspects of culture), through art (specially designed aesthetic referents), the *feelings* and *sensibilities* of social normality in the subject, i.e. so it *feels* that how we live is how we *ought* to live.

To properly function on the aesthetic level a work of art must, therefore, *do something*; it must act as an *agent* (this agency is often left out by Marxist theories of art, where an artwork is explained 'fully' by its context in production): it must *change* something or *reinforce* something in the subject. It is perhaps obvious that what an artwork acts upon is *human sense*. An artwork is the product of specific expertise to be affective on the human senses. But this is not just or only for the moment of the experience itself, but so that it permeates and lodges in the memory for some time in the future, perhaps for a long time. It is in this way that I suggest art takes part in the reproduction of our *feelings*.

How do our feelings change? We must accept they usually do not. Our affections, traditions, habits, rituals, dispositions, and so on, do not alter overnight. Most culture (e.g. pop culture) simply reinforces or sublimates the feelings (including alienation) that are already held by the contending classes in class conflict. Feelings might change within a limited range, but only so far. That is, except at special, unusual times, such as times of social revolution.

If, therefore, art (and all its sub-categories) can be said to mediate the Superstructure with the Base via the aesthetic level, there will be, generally, two ways that it can do this: immediately and 'mediately.'

Talking narrowly about art as such, we can assume pretty safely that graphic design and advertising deals with the more immediate aspects of art, i.e. advertising and propaganda messages. This kind of art and design at best maintains the status quo and could be said to be also often repressive in function. But 'fine art' or so called 'high art' is distinct from this. The kind of reproduction that fine art takes part in is not immediate (though certainly the practices 'bleed into' each other), because it operates in and for

the longer term, hence artworks live in the museum. The fine art product and its reproduction on the aesthetic level, is in this sense special, it is a kind of mediation designed for the future and so for a future kind of human sensibility. It is projective, and, as such, highly political (remember, politics is time); its kind of *interpellation*, to employ the Althusserian term, is projective.

But there is an important complication to this mediation, in that this aesthetic level reproduction cannot be a simple 'one-to-one' process. People do not simply reflect their actual lived conditions of existence in their subjectivity; they rather 'refract' them. Apart from the psychological subtleties of this, which we cannot remark on much here, there is the factor of social alienation from the relations of production. Alienation is a factor to do with feelings of being estranged from production due to exploitation, and separated from the social value that can be derived from creative labour, and, as is presumed, certain natural characteristics of our species. Our feelings may be, as it were, pre-shaped by alienation, which is firstly or spontaneously (in any case) *affective*, i.e. we firstly *feel* alienated from our labour.

How does the art ASA deal with this affective social phenomenon of alienation? We must place this question in the context of our contemporary knowledge of unconscious desire, the activity of the psychology of the group (or class), and possibly of a group unconscious and unconscious communication. This is a big and complex subject that I must pass by here rather too quickly, but we can note that artists are made aware of alienation all through their higher education; in fact, talented artists are rooted out precisely for their ability to 'divine' in this area (though this is rarely admitted as an exact knowledge of the practice, it is denegated).

Artists are professionally trained to produce artworks. The typical type of artwork today is a narrative or story (with perhaps some fancy high tech added). But while an artwork's narrative may be understood to be one thing, its *form*, i.e. that sensual element which is 'added' by the expertise of the ASA, (with its special knowledge of alienation), may be something quite different. For instance, the narrative may be an easy to grasp 'common sense' ideological tale which

is grasped readily by its viewer. But the aesthetic knowledge consists in understanding the *way* the artwork acts upon our feelings through its materials and techniques – sensually. The affect of such materials and techniques on the viewer may be subliminal or entirely unconscious, of course.

The State employs aesthetic expertise in the ASAs to mediate ideology: i.e. through 'the media' (e.g. broadcast media, print media, 'the Press'), which 'mediates' the social levels with its advanced technology and techniques. These technologies, and techniques, are not neutral. They are always 'sided.' For instance, forms of illusion, of myths and drugs, of kitsch, are the main staple of bourgeois State artistic interpellation.

So, it is not only a question of how any particular narrative supports or does not support a political standpoint (a theory in which art acts like mere 'clapping' at something it likes), it is also a question of *how* (and how well) it mediates its message. While Marshall McLuhan said 'the medium is the message', we realise that the medium is not necessarily a message, but this does not stop it from having an effect/affect. So abstract art has as much effectivity as any other kind, and indeed all art is abstract in this respect and must be regarded as such, since the material element is the abstract element, the technique and form, and the narrative element usually an illusion (which of course is quite useful to an aesthetic of myths and drugs).

So, what is art? *Art is the process of the reproduction of the aesthetic level of human practice.* Our sensibilities exist in a matrix of largely unconscious interpersonal communication, and this is ultimately – in the cycle of its production and consumption, its 'working up' and refinement for use – conditioned by art. The art ASAs are assigned the political task (amongst its other mandate to provide the material knowledge of its practice – the two often quietly but viciously conflict within the institutions) of refining the otherwise inchoate and spontaneous feelings of alienation, of workers or bourgeois, usually to sublimate and/or glorify that alienation (in its aesthetics), which then 'react back' on those spontaneous feelings, and so onto their origin, so to speak, as a kind of diabolical dovetailing. Such products therefore seem occasion-

ally 'so right,' so 'fitting' and 'appealing' but are also 'beyond words'.

I think it goes without saying that this is important for anyone interested in the problem of radical artistic policy and strategy, right down to the apparent minutiae of decisions about how to artfully 'market' political positions. As well as being crucial to a fuller understanding of history as such, it is a way to understand the political function of form and technique in art and culture beyond a simple notion of narrated elitism/anti-elitism. It also provides a platform for a new radical kind of art history. And of course given this it is important to understandings of class struggle, of its strategy and tactics.

Perhaps it will be better here to provide a brief and schematic example of how one could apply the above concepts to an actual significant art historical period (an interpretation that can lead to a different strategy for practice).

I submit that an aesthetic level 'eruption' (to be metaphorical) took place in the nineteen-sixties, focused in the events of Paris 1968. I suggest that this was a kind of historical re-emergence, a kind of delayed reaction, of the same effects which led to the forming of the Soviet Avant Garde around the time of the Russian Revolution of 1917 (the latter I have written on separately in more detail, which I hope to publish soon), and other forms of European modernism, in fashion, attitudes, design and manners as well as art, during the early 1920s. At this time, around 1968, the situation of the social levels (in the Base and Superstructure relations) with respect to each other was undergoing a change. The 'gap' that had grown between the levels, i.e. the 'lagging' of the aesthetic level, was closing. Participants in the 1968 revolts, particularly in France, were intent upon dragging the aesthetic level (in particular) to where it 'should' be, i.e. to a position adequate to their post-war sensibilities and (often ideologically vague) aspirations. It was a movement that, however, could no longer surface in the same way in the Soviet Union, where it had been born.

In this movement, it was not the case that artists were the primary focus of this 'forwardness,' I admit. But the period is notable for worldwide uprisings of, let's say, a non-traditional character. For instance

they involved integrations of student with workers' protests and had a definite cultural and 'artful' slant (I thank the reviewer of this text for pointing out the Hot Autumn in Italy and the Cordobazo of Argentina, 1969) but artists and art students were I think representative of its dramatic shifting into the broader domain, as in fashion, i.e. through Pop Art, Op Art and so on, the so-called sexual revolution, the strengthening of feminism, the attacks on family and religion, and the liberation from (and unfortunately into) forms of narcosis.

What I think epitomize the specific uniqueness of these events were the art college protests. The 'Hornsey affair' was a particularly poignant case. The 1968 London Hornsey art college work-ins and protests had a creativity which had reverberations on later workers' struggles in Britain (though these have been relatively neglected since). The events at Hornsey have been documented and have local and more specific origins that have to be included, but I think it is not feasible to dismiss them as a mere logistical grievance by local art students (as some sociologists do). That the relation of, say Hornsey to Paris in May 1968, and to the broader workers' struggles of the period, and then to 1920s struggles, is empirically tenuous seems obvious, but we are here being far more concrete than when we use the descriptive notion of a 'zeitgeist,' though it would still be true to say that a confluence of ideas was around at the time across many diverse parts of the world. Why?

I submit that this represented a revolt mostly *on the aesthetic level*, in that it was restricted or limited in certain ways to this level. In 1968 the 'artistic lessons' of the previous years, since 1900 and since the advent of the Soviet (in particular) and European avant garde, finally burst through the old aesthetic-sensual integument, which remained more-or-less intact in the SU (for reasons of class struggle that we cannot go into here), to become a part of a new general sensibility of everyday 'western' life, one which is still having its affects today.

For sure, the notion of 'backwardness' and 'forwardness' in history that I have used above is unsustainable; history has no essence that it must conform to, no spiritual guidance, and no pre-

ordained proper 'state of play.' Yet still we can see in this, I think, effects that are 'as if' history were delayed or rushing ahead of itself. So what is going on? I defer to Lenin/Althusser and the theory of uneven historical development. Given that we can note the uneven effectivity of the different levels, we can see that in the class struggle they either are in a condition of relative harmony or stasis, or they contradict and clash with each other. The aesthetic level might be described as a kind of 'cement' which bonds them together as a relative unity in time: it *consolidates* the levels through feelings, through sensibility, through art, fashion, custom, tradition, and ritual in the way that it 'reacts back' upon the Base. We might talk of 'backwardness' if by this we mean a level seems, to our political analysis, to be withholding an event with which it could 'catch up' with the other levels, perhaps to provide social consolidation, or we might say a level is advanced in certain respects relative to the others in the way that it is superficially sophisticated yet lacking in sustaining substance, so it is likely to 'fall back.' Any 'median' in this would also have to be considered as not static but changing.

Some caveats: I must make it plain that I am not suggesting this theory is an alternative to class struggle. Simply that it fills a gap in the determinants in this struggle. Nor (of course) do I wish to demote the economy from its foundational position in the

theory (as if I could!). Inevitably I lay the emphasis more here on aesthetics, but it is the class struggle, which is founded in economic contradiction, which is always the generator of the struggle. And of course ordinary everyday human activity involves all the levels present at once in practice. We are just making theoretical distinctions. These nevertheless have explanatory power because they refer to different effective forces within the total of experience.

The working classes, its representatives and fellow travellers *feel* differently about life than the bourgeoisie and already have a different position and way of acting that reveals this difference; it would be good if its ideology matched and could refine and extend this position – Marxist theory provides the tools for doing this. But revolutionary practice requires artistry, and it needs to be able to recognise aesthetics based in alienation for what it is to get this right. The neglect of formal technique and the overemphasis on 'message' or 'content' leads to an idealist attitude no matter how much materialism is proclaimed in theory and has, I think, some terribly disabling effects when translated into actions: such as on simple things like how to put across communist ideas. Take the attitude of repetitive browbeating didacticism that often seems to crop up: "it's not what you say, but the way you say it," may be an old motto but it's still a good one.