

Black Music and Desublimation: Contravening Expectations in Marcusean Aesthetics*

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Abstract: In 1968, Herbert Marcuse spoke to a packed audience of students at the New England Conservatory. The author of *One-Dimensional Man* urged young composers and performers to fight against the sublimating, harmonizing, and consoling forms of tradition. In other words, he encouraged them to create music that responded to the needs of the historical moment they were living in. Marcuse realized that both serious and popular music could not divorce themselves from their political dimension, and thus, they could contribute to the task of emancipation. In this speech, the philosopher declared that the musical counterculture of the 60s and 70s was *the outcry of men and women who had lost patience, who had felt the lie, the hypocrisy, and the indifference of late capitalism, and who wanted music from other planets, very real and very close planets*. This later reference to a speech by Arnold Schönberg serves as the motivation for this investigation, which has a dual purpose. On the one hand, this article aims to examine Marcuse's comments and notes on musical counterculture from the late 60s until his passing. Certainly, the German philosopher was primarily interested in the Black music of his time because he believed it revealed the fissures of one-dimensional society and participated in the desublimation of the real. For this reason, the goal is to delve into the forms and musical strategies that led Marcuse to consider that Black music contributed to the task of denouncing the brutality of one-dimensional society. Secondly, this article seeks to evaluate the ongoing relevance of Marcuse's radical aesthetics in the context of contemporary popular music.

Keywords: Radical aesthetics; Marcuse; popular music studies; black music; counterculture.

Resumo: Em 1968, Herbert Marcuse falou para uma plateia repleta de estudantes no New England Conservatory. O autor de *O homem unidimensional* incentivou os jovens compositores e intérpretes a lutar contra as formas sublimadoras, harmonizadoras e consoladoras da tradição. Em outras palavras, ele os incentivou a criar músicas que atendessem às necessidades do momento histórico em que viviam. Marcuse percebeu que tanto a música séria quanto a popular não podiam se divorciar de sua dimensão política e, portanto, podiam contribuir para a tarefa de emancipação. Nesse discurso, o filósofo declarou que a contracultura musical dos anos 60 e 70 foi *o clamor de homens e mulheres que haviam perdido a paciência, que haviam sentido a mentira, a hipocrisia e a indiferença do capitalismo tardio, e que queriam música de outros planetas, planetas muito reais e muito próximos*. Essa posterior referência a um discurso de Arnold Schönberg serve de motivação para esta pesquisa, que tem um duplo objetivo. Por um lado, este artigo tem como objetivo examinar os comentários e as anotações de Marcuse sobre a contracultura musical desde o final dos anos 60 até seu falecimento. Certamente, o filósofo alemão estava interessado principalmente na música negra de sua época, porque acreditava que ela revelava as fissuras da sociedade unidimensional e participava da dessublimação do real. Por esse motivo, o objetivo é de se aprofundar nas formas e estratégias musicais que levaram Marcuse a considerar que a música negra contribuía para a tarefa de denunciar a brutalidade da sociedade unidimensional. Em segundo lugar, este artigo procura avaliar a atual relevância da estética radical de Marcuse no contexto da música popular contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: Estética radical; Marcuse; estudos sobre música popular; música negra; contracultura.

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In the 1950s and 1960s, Theodor W. Adorno persisted in his critique of the commodified nature of popular music, which strips it of any emancipatory potential. He questioned, “if music has come into harmony with the world (*stabilisiert sich mit der Welt*), should anyone be surprised that the music has gotten worse?” (ADORNO, 2002, p. 200). It is not surprising that the author of *Minima Moralia* gradually moved away from his immanent critique of popular music, focusing on other issues such as his opposition to positivism or the composition of *Negative Dialectics* and *Authoritarian Personality*. Indeed, his last essay on jazz, titled *Zeitlose Mode. Zum Jazz*, dates back to 1953. After this date, he rarely mentioned popular music, except on two occasions. On one hand, the philosopher referred anecdotally to The Beatles during an interview with Peter von Haselberg¹. Regarding the music of the English group, Adorno considered it the result of the degradation of traditional forms. On the other hand, Adorno briefly mentioned the music of Joan Baez during a television interview in 1968². In this, he explained that attempting to link political revolt with popular music is a failure because the ontology of *leichte Musik* itself does not allow going beyond consumption or entertainment, making it impossible to attribute a critical function to it. In short, the category of protest song is a sort of *contradictio in adjecto*.

In contrast to his friend, Marcuse was more receptive to the popular music emerging parallel to student protests and revolutionary movements in the United States. The author of *One-Dimensional Man* ascribed aesthetic value to the new musical phenomena of the counterculture. Indeed, Marcuse reflected on the Dionysian character, the political dimension, the physiological manifestation, and the truth content of blues, jazz, protest songs, and rock and roll. In the late 1960s and 1970s, he believed that musical counterculture could contribute to the birth of a new sensibility, a *conditio sine qua non* for the struggle against the rationality of capitalism. Marcuse sympathized with black music, rock and roll, and Bob Dylan's protest music during this period of cultural subversion. In this context, music was “the freest, the most self-legislating of the arts, in

¹ See *Über die geschichtliche Angemessenheit des Bewusstseins, Gespräch mit Peter von Haselberg, Akzente*, n^o. 12, Juni 1964.

² See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xd7Fhaji8ow>.

transcending that which is, the present, and in invoking the future: a possible, a necessary future, for which we must work”³.

Marcuse seems to continue Adorno's task of reflecting on popular music within late capitalism, but unlike Adorno, he attributes an emancipatory potential to these genres, elevating them to the status of radical art. Thus, this paper aims to answer three questions: Why did musical counterculture acquire importance in Marcuse's aesthetics? Why does he particularly praise black music? Is Marcuse's radical aesthetics still relevant for thinking about today's popular music? To answer these questions, I will briefly analyze Childish Gambino's *This is America* (2018).

1 – MUSICAL COUNTERCULTURE AND RADICAL ART: AN EXPRESSION OF THE GREAT REFUSAL

What we refuse is not without value or importance. Precisely because of that, the refusal is necessary. There is a reason which we no longer accept, there is an appearance of wisdom which horrifies us, there is a plea for agreement and conciliation which we will no longer heed. A break has occurred. We have been reduced to that frankness which no longer tolerates complicity (*Le Refus*, in: **Le 14 Juillet**, n°. 2, Paris, October 1958).

In the preface to *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1977), Marcuse confesses that he does not feel qualified to talk about music. With the same combination of humility and insight, the philosopher approaches his speech at the New England Conservatory (1968) which begins with the following clarification: “in music field I am a stranger, a layman”⁴. The German philosopher does not conduct precise analyses or immanent critiques of popular music, as Adorno did. He also does not dedicate essays to the study of musical counterculture. However, upon careful examination of some of the texts and public

³ This citation, like others that will appear in the text, belongs to the commencement address that Marcuse delivered at the New England Conservatory in 1968. Certainly, the full manuscript of this speech has not been published, but a sketch or sort of outline of the speech in Kellner's *Art and Liberation*. The full speech is in the New England Conservatory Archives. Consequently, I quote just the manuscript. I would like to extend my gratitude to Maryalice Perrin-Mohr from the New England Conservatory Archives for her invaluable assistance. Without the documents she provided, this article would not have been possible.

⁴ It should also be noted that in practically all his interventions he is grateful to Adorno, so much so that in the acknowledgements of *The Aesthetic Dimension* he recognizes that “his debt to the aesthetic theory of Theodor W. Adorno does not require any specific acknowledgment”. Furthermore, his references to Schoenberg or Stockhausen, among others, prove that he was an “educated consumer” of music, as he says in his commencement speech at the New England Conservatory.

interventions he made between the late 1960s and 1970s, it becomes evident that his references to popular music become increasingly frequent. In later publications such as *An Essay on Liberation* (1969), *Art and Revolution* (1972), *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1972), *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1977), and his public interventions, such as the speech at the New England Conservatory or his interviews with Richard Kearney, Marcuse enthusiastically reflects on the emancipatory dimension of musical counterculture.

Despite his “musical ignorance”, he was the only thinker from the Frankfurt School who not only took the time to genuinely contemplate musical counterculture but also to appreciate its subversive elements. From his references to rock and roll, jazz, blues, and protest songs, it can be inferred that Marcuse finds interest in the unconventional sonorities, pulsating lyrics, and inhospitable form-content dialectic of these musical genres because they “are characteristic of a state of disintegration within the system, which as a mere phenomenon has no revolutionary force whatsoever but which perhaps at some time will be able to play its role in connection with other, much stronger objective forces” (MARCUSE, 1970, p. 71). So, the aesthetic form of certain popular musics presents a new horizon of sensibility, a structure of feeling distinct from that imposed by capitalism. In other words, although the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s was not revolutionary praxis per se, it constituted a significant force of negation. In a different vein, the exploration of new musical textures, such as Hendrix's fuzztone, the critique of consumer society through the hybrid sonority (or the fusion of noise and music) in Pink Floyd's *Money*, or Janis Joplin's screams and moans at the 1967 Monterey Festival, suggests a novel horizon of emotional experience. In these aesthetic forms, a new sensibility becomes apparent.

The strength of musical counterculture lies, therefore, in this exploration of feeling and listening. Hence, its power of negation operates through the fragmentation of the unidimensionality of feeling, listening, and thinking. In other words, these popular musics unlock the doors of perception to the antechamber of a new Reason. In Marcuse's terms, music can be “a negation which in turn prepares the ground for the new affirmation”⁵. Following this logic, The Doors, whose name is inspired by Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*, destabilizes the harmonic structure of classic blues by disrupting the *tempo*, creating a sense of rhythmic instability, and reconfiguring chords with new sonic textures

⁵ Speech of commencement at the Conservatory of New England (1968) manuscript.

in *Moonlight Drive*. This multidimensional sound envelops the images evoked by the song's lyrics, suggesting a freedom and a dialectic of limitless imagination. Indeed, this musical exploration of feeling and listening recalls the doors and windows opened by Dalí, Magritte, or Breton. Therefore, I suggest that this fragmentation of common, institutional, and unidimensional feeling by The Doors, as with many other groups in musical counterculture, is radical music. According to Marcuse:

the radical, qualities of art, that is to say, its indictment of the established reality and its invocation of the beautiful image (*schöner Schein*) of liberation are grounded precisely in the dimensions where art *transcends* its social determination and emancipates itself from the given universe of discourse and behavior while preserving its overwhelming presence. Thereby art creates the realm in which the subversion of experience proper to art becomes possible: the world formed by art is recognized as a reality which is suppressed and distorted in the given reality. This experience culminates in extreme situations (of love and death, guilt and failure, but also joy, happiness, and fulfillment) which explode the given reality in the name of a truth normally denied or even unheard. The inner logic of the work of art terminates in the emergence of another reason, another sensibility, which defy the rationality and sensibility incorporated in the dominant social institutions (MARCUSE, 1978, p. 6-7).

Many of the musical counterculture groups share these characteristics of radical art because they behave as a destabilizing force that disavows the given reality and projects the architecture of a free society, or they indict the established reality and invoke the beautiful image of liberation. Certainly, Marcuse does not go into details, nor does he analyze specific musical works. Therefore, my thesis aims to extend his intuitions about popular music, proposing some musical examples and adding that the critical/emancipatory potential of the musical counterculture of the 60s and 70s lies in these extremes of feeling and in exaggerated representations of the real to accuse the one-dimensionality of late capitalism and open up another possible horizon.

For instance, by employing an abundance of vocoders and synthesizers, the quasi-metallic sound evident in *The Man Machine* or *Autobahn* by Kraftwerk serves as a musical expression of the systematic, repetitive, and standardized nature of the overindustrialization of an era – a characteristic that Adorno and Horkheimer associated with the instrumentalization of reason. In *Who are the Brain Police?* Zappa and the Mothers of Invention denounce the tyranny, force, and oppression exerted by the reality principle on American citizens who have become police and guardians among themselves. The false appearance of order and harmony in American society is

desublimated through accusatory lyrics, accompanied by occasionally dissonant melodies, voices seeking dissonance, and screams intertwined with the use of unexpected instruments in popular music, such as the kazoo. On the other hand, King Crimson musically re-presents the deranged subject of late capitalism in *Schizoid Man* in various ways, revealing or laying bare its inequalities, precariousness, and brutality. To begin with, the song starts with a passage of contamination or noise. Then, the heavy riff unexpectedly doubles up an octave, and the distorted voice of David Gilmour sings, “Nothing he's got he really needs. Twenty-first-century schizoid man”. This statement is accompanied by sharp guitar chords, followed by a delirious saxophone and guitar solo at a *prestissimo tempo*. All of this simulates the delusional psyche, distortion, and alienation of the schizoid subject within late capitalism.

In summary, what certain popular music encapsulates is its negative dialectics. In Marcusean terms, the aesthetic form of King Crimson, Frank Zappa, Kraftwerk, Janis Joplin, Hendrix, and Pink Floyd music “indicts established reality and invokes the beautiful image (*schöner Schein*) of liberation. Their music transcends its social determination, emancipating itself from the given universe of discourse and behavior, all the while maintaining its powerful presence” (MARCUSE, 1978, p. 6-7). This occurs because musical counterculture transforms the images, forms, and sounds that are created and repetitively reproduced in one-dimensional society. This transfiguration is made possible through the “aesthetic form” of art, which is understood as the outcome of the stylization process applied to immediate content. As a result, these musical expressions subvert and contort language to the extent of disarming institutional feeling and thinking.

Paradoxically, the extensive machinery of the culture industry also disseminates explicitly oppositional music, such as that of Bob Dylan. Marcuse demonstrates particular interest in Dylan's protest songs. He is the only artist he mentions and dedicates such positive lines as the following:

Beauty returns, the soul returns: not the one in food and “on ice”, but the old and repressed one, the one that was in the *Lied* in the melody: *cantabile*. (...) It becomes the form of the subversive content, not as artificial revival, but as a “return of the repressed” (MARCUSE, 1972, p. 118).

From this, it follows that according to Marcuse, Dylan's folk is authentic because it resists the industrialization and homogenization of popular music, bringing to the

surface both the repressed and the voice of the oppressed. Marcuse thus attributes aesthetic truth and historicity to Dylan's music, perhaps because, in most of the songs he listened to, Dylan maintains the harmonic and instrumental simplicity of folk, rejecting artifices and prefabricated structures to highlight the inequality, violence, and racism in American society. For example, in *Only a Pawn in Their Game*, Dylan denounces the assassination of civil rights leader Medgar Evers; in *Masters of War*, he criticizes the brutality and destruction of nuclear war, and in *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll*, the singer condemns the murder of African-American barmaid Hattie Carroll by a wealthy white man who, in a drunken state, insulted and beat her to death.

In summary, in the aforementioned texts and interventions by Marcuse, he suggests that musical counterculture “engenders a new experience of a world violated by the requirements of the established society” (MARCUSE, 1972, p. 129). He extols the rebellious and irreverent character of rock and roll, the authenticity of Dylan's protest songs, and above all, he praises black music, towards which he never loses hope⁶. Why does he praise black music in particular? Is black music the musical expression of the Great Refusal par excellence?

2 – BLACK MUSIC: DESUBLIMATING THE ONE-DIMENSIONAL SOCIETY

According to Rashied Ali, a free jazz drummer and bandmate of John Coltrane, the black music of the 1960s was a manifestation of the need to break free from rigidity, that is, the desire to reveal the sublimation⁷ of the real. This music also possessed a truth

⁶ Marcuse consistently extols the subversive power of the blues in contrast to the degradation of rock and roll, that is, in music that becomes integrated into the logic of the administered world. I discuss this in *Herbert Marcuse and the Aesthetic Dimension of Popular Music*, which will be published in **Marcusean Mind** (Routledge).

⁷ In Marcuse's aesthetics, the notions of sublimation and desublimation are dialectically related and operate in a particular manner in the realm of art. Certainly, the philosopher also employs these concepts outside the field of aesthetics, but this issue is beyond the scope of this article. In Marcuse's aesthetics, at least two moments are distinguished in his reflection on sublimation and desublimation in art. I consider that there is a moment of gestation and a moment of development of these aesthetics notions. In *Eros and Civilization* (1955) Marcuse outlines these ideas and says that “the works of art and literature that still express without compromise the fears and hopes of humanity stand against the prevailing reality principle: they are its absolute denunciation” (see chapter 4) or “the roots of the aesthetic experience re-emerge — not merely in an artistic culture but in the struggle for existence itself” (see chapter 11). In *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) he goes further. Marcuse maintains that artistic sublimation “creates the images of conditions which are irreconcilable with the established Reality Principle but which, as cultural images, become tolerable, even edifying and useful” (p. 75). However, this Freudian-inspired appreciation proves insufficient in one-

content because in its aesthetic form, the social fury of some of the emancipatory movements of the time were crystallized. In Ali's terms:

Those was trying times in the 1960s. We had the civil rights thing going on, we had King, we had Malcolm, we had the Panthers. There was so much diversity happening. People were screaming for their rights and wanting to be equal, to be free. Naturally, our music reflected that whole period (...) that whole time definitely influenced the way we played. I think that's where that free form came into it. Everyone wanting to get from the rigid thing, away from what was happening before; they wanted to relate to what was happening now, and I'm sure the music came of that whole thing (SMITH, 2003, p. 96).

The dialectic between the society of the time and the musical material is revealed in the impulses of artistic experimentation and the formal freedom of jazz that communicate and come into tension with the struggle for civil rights and the need to overcome the inflexibility of tradition. However, the black music of the time is not a mere mirror reflecting the fervor of American society. It is more subtle than that. In the musical material, these struggles and desires crystallize through different compositional and interpretative strategies, as we will see below.

Marcuse's defense of the emancipatory potential of black music appears to be structured around three axes: the expression of collectivity, the effectiveness of desublimation, and the subversion of language. Regarding the expression of collectivity,

dimensional society. This means that these images and forms that created a certain critical distance from reality have been neutralized by the system. Marcuse explains this as follows: "Now this imagery is invalidated. Its incorporation into the kitchen, the office, the shop; its commercial release for business and fun is, in a sense, desublimation-replacing mediated by immediate gratification" (*idem*). Indeed, this process of desublimation is also not liberating because it is controlled and institutionalized, meaning, "it is desublimation practiced from a 'position of strength' on the part of society, which can afford to grant more than before because its interests have become the innermost drives of its citizens, and because the joys which it grants promote social cohesion and contentment" (*idem*). This (repressive) desublimation is articulated through enjoyment and in the affirmation of the existing, contributing to conformity and the persistence of the status quo. In *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1977), Marcuse revisits these ideas of sublimation and desublimation to develop them based on the concept of aesthetic form (this notion had already been mentioned in other texts, but it becomes crucial in *The Aesthetic Dimension*). In this book, the philosopher explains that "under the law of the aesthetic form, the given reality is necessarily sublimated: the immediate content is stylized, the 'data' are reshaped and reordered in accordance with the demands of the art form, which requires that even the representation of death and destruction invoke the need for hope – a need rooted in the new consciousness embodied in the work of art" (p. 7). In other words, the aesthetic form of radical art (for Marcuse, authentic art) affirms and negates in an emancipatory way. It re-presents the real and negates it to criticize it. At the same time, it affirms the need of another possible world. On one hand, "aesthetic sublimation makes for the affirmative, reconciling component of art, though it is at the same time a vehicle for the critical, negating function of art" (*idem*). On the other hand, desublimation reveals the annulled, the marginalized, the invalidated by the dominant reason or, in Marcuse's terms, "explode the given reality in the name of a truth normally denied or even unheard" (*idem*). In the article, I will analyze how this desublimation operates in the aesthetic form of black music.

black music of the late 60s and 70s is a cry, an outcry, a scream. It is the cry of an oppressed collectivity. In Marcuse's terms, "life music has indeed an authentic basis: *black music* as the cry and song of the slaves and the ghettos. In this music, the very life and death of black men and women are lived again: the music *is* body; the aesthetic form is the 'gesture' of pain, sorrow, indictment" (MARCUSE,1972, p. 114).

Secondly, black music serves as a force of desublimation. The aesthetic form of black music distorts and challenges the beautiful, the harmonious, and the pleasant aspects of one-dimensional society. It distorts the given. The aesthetic form of black music assaults correctness, order, and conventional images. It desublimates the sublimated. This is why Marcuse states, "today's rebels against the established culture also rebel against the beautiful in this culture, against its all too sublimated, segregated, orderly, harmonizing forms". However, this desublimation of black music should also be understood as the liberation of bodies from the bodily rigidity imposed by bourgeois puritanism. In this regard, Marcuse adds that black music is "desublimated music (because) it directly translates the motion of sounds into the motion of bodies".

Finally, black music subverts our language. According to Marcuse, black music "is a systematic linguistic rebellion, which smashes the ideological context in which the words are employed and defined, and places them into the opposite context – negation of the established one" (MARCUSE, 1969, p. 29). In this way, black music is an expression of the Great Refusal because it subverts the semantic-conceptual apparatus of the Establishment; it directly challenges it through humor, wordplay, slang, and irony, for example. In short, black music breaks with the vocabulary of domination, and this is the ultimate expression of rupture and disorder in perception.

A paradigmatic example is *Need a Little Sugar in my Bowl* by Bessie Smith, which exposes the taboos of bourgeois society regarding female sexual desire. The singer states:

"Come on and save your mama's soul
'Cause I need a little sugar, in my bowl, doggone it
I need some sugar in my bowl I need a little sugar in my bowl
I need a little hot dog between my rolls".

In this song, certain words acquire a double meaning for two reasons. On one hand, Smith plays with the metaphorical, visual, and erotic dimensions of terms like "bowl", "sugar", or "roll". On the other hand, the aesthetic form of the blues subverts everyday language,

and the mentioned terms are distorted by Smith's vibrato, the sinuous and slow tempo, the light piano accompaniment, and the final cadence (**G C F Bbm F**). All of this contributes to the seductive and carefree tone of the lyrics that desublimates the real. Thus, *Need a Little Sugar in my Bowl* materializes the observation that Marcuse had already evoked in his speech at the New England Conservatory, namely, that it is “black” music not only because it is played and sung by Negroes, but also because, like the black novel or black humor, it rejects and subverts the time-honored taboos of civilization⁸. It is not surprising that Nina Simone “covered” *Need a Little Sugar in my Bowl* and considered Bessie Smith as a first-person representation of empowered female sexuality.

As previously noted, Marcuse provides few concrete musical examples in his texts and does not specifically delineate the various genres of black music – namely, he mentions blues, jazz, and soul interchangeably. However, he does provide a very specific example to illustrate the subversion of language in black music:

the blacks “take over” some of the most sublime and sublimated concepts of Western civilization, desublimates them, and redefine them. For example, the “soul” (in its essence lily-white ever since Plato), the traditional seat of everything that is truly human in man, tender, deep, immortal – the word which has become embarrassing, corny, false in the established universe of discourse, has been desublimated and in this transubstantiation, migrated to the Negro culture: they are soul brothers; the soul is black, violent, orgiastic; it is no longer in Beethoven, Schubert, but in the blues, in jazz, in rock ‘n’ roll, in – soul food (MARCUSE, 1969, p. 29).

The transubstantiation of the term “soul” becomes evident in *Believe to My Soul* by B. B. King, also popularized by Ray Charles. In King's interpretation, the notion of “soul” is reconsidered through the sensual transition between the **B** major to **A** sharp minor chords of the song, accompanied by a slow *tempo*, moans, and a warm saxophone sound that emphasize the Dionysian character of the piece. Moreover, the inclusion of the “blue note” disrupts the Apollonian rigidity of the term “soul” and demonstrates that black culture reverses “its symbolic value and associates it with the anti-color of darkness, tabooed magic, the uncanny”⁹. In other words, these musical strategies redefine and desublimates the pristine idea of soul, “perverting” the vocabulary of domination.

⁸ Speech of commencement at the Conservatory of New England (1968) manuscript.

⁹ *Ibid.*

In essence, the aesthetic form of black music constitutes the groan of a community as well as a revolt against the rigidity of language, feeling, and thinking. It contradicts the unidimensionality of reality, exposes the fissures of monolithic society, and rejects traditional culture through various musical strategies of desublimation. Certainly, Marcuse envisions and explains the emancipatory potential of black music from the late 60s until the end of his days, especially in his speech at the New England Conservatory in 1968. In this, he adds something more to the three axes of black music analyzed thus far, namely, that black music is

desublimated music, which directly translates the motion of sounds into the motion of bodies – a non-contemplative music, which bridges the gap between creation and reception by directly (almost automatically) moving the body to spontaneous action, repelling, twisting, distorting the “normal” pattern of motion: disrupting it by a subversive pattern, motion on the spot, refusal to move along — rebellion in joy but also the exuberance of repression thrown off and the consciousness of oppression and degradation, exploding immediately and without the artistic restraints imposed by the traditional form of beauty and order¹⁰.

However, Marcuse's reflections on musical counterculture encounter a challenge due to their indeterminacy and the lack of specificity in his intuitions. In essence, it becomes difficult to pinpoint which instances of black music Marcuse is alluding to, including the artists involved, the musical forms that subvert one-dimensional perception and feeling, and so forth. Angela Davis, on the other hand, takes Marcuse's reflections on black music to their logical conclusion. She actualizes the rebellion inherent in the aesthetic form of black music through the analysis of blues songs composed and/or performed by three blueswomen (Gertrude Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday). In doing so, she not only underscores the emancipatory nature of the blues but also integrates black feminism into this struggle for emancipation.

In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1998), the American philosopher draws inspiration from Marcusean aesthetics but proceeds to invert Marcuse's notion of the aesthetic dimension. In other words, Davis employs the Marcusean concept of the aesthetic dimension to contemplate Holiday's blues, explaining it as follows:

My use of Marcuse's notion of the aesthetic dimension rejects its association with “transhistorical”, “universal truths”. I propose instead a conceptualization of “aesthetic dimension” that fundamentally historicizes and collectivizes it.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Rather than a unique product of the solitary artist creating an “individual” aesthetic subversion (DAVIS, 1998, p. 164).

And she continues:

the “aesthetic dimension” of Billie Holiday's work represents a symbiosis, drawing from and contributing to an African-American social and musical history in which women's political agency is nurtured by, and in turn nurtures, aesthetic agency. It is this “aesthetic dimension” of Lady Day's songs which accounts for their undiminished appeal, for their simultaneous ability to confirm and subvert racist and sexist representations of women in love (*idem*).

This implies that Davis reexamines Marcuse's concepts of the aesthetic dimension and aesthetic form to reformulate the emancipatory potential of the blues, which fractures the monolithic character of reality and challenges male domination. Her main points of departure and advancement from her mentor lie in the integration of different struggles within the aesthetic dimension of the blues, such as black feminism, and her concrete analyses of the aesthetic form of the blues, a departure from Marcuse's indeterminacy. In other words, her musical analyses explicitly elucidate that the aesthetic form of the blues is subversive because it unveils a tension, a friction between two dimensions: the denial of reality and the affirmation of another possible reality based on the aesthetic form of the blues by Smith, Holiday, and Rainey.

Allow me to retrieve an example from *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, specifically *You Let Me Down* by Billie Holiday. In the aesthetic form of Holiday's blues, a kind of mismatch, distortion, or deformation of one-dimensional society is created through various musical strategies. Certainly, Davis recalls that Holiday had to embrace the love songs provided by Tin Pan Alley (which Davis deems flat). Indeed, Tin Pan Alley was the most significant music publisher in the 1940s, 1950s, etc. For this reason, Holiday had to accept the rigid songs of Tin Pan Alley, songs conceived for mass consumption and white audiences. However, Holiday twists the ideology, language, and musical material that shape these songs. She challenges this classist, racist reality characterized by male domination in unconventional ways. Holiday sings:

“You told me that I was like an angel
Told me I was fit to wear a crown
So that you could get a thrill
You put me on a pedestal
And then you let me down, let me down”.

This song invokes certain clichés of a woman suffering for love, who is additionally portrayed as waiting for decisions made by a man. Consequently, her well-being or distress is contingent upon whether the man rescues her or not, reinforcing the notion of a passive and vulnerable woman. However, Holiday subverts this feminine archetype. She does not sing in an angelic manner, nor does she succumb to despair, and suffering does not incapacitate her. Her voice is not crystalline, clean, or overly sweetened. In fact, the listener perceives a voice that occasionally becomes clear and, at other times, settles into a lower tessitura, which may be perceived as “not very feminine”. Holiday sometimes disregards the saxophone accompanying her, refraining from utilizing excessive vocal ornaments such as vibrato or passing notes. She deviates from the feminine archetype, distorts the lyrics, questions their meaning, and satirizes the ideological purpose of these conformist songs through her vocal technique, which contradicts the intended message of the songs. Holiday even seduces the listener instead of dwelling solely in pain. In other words, as Davis suggests, without Holiday's voice, these lyrics would be a form of lament, but her interpretation transforms *You Let Me Down* into an indictment. The aesthetic form of Holiday's blues demystifies the image of women because the singer

boldly entered the domain of white love as it filtered through the commodified images and market strategies of Tin Pan Alley. She revealed to her black audiences what the world of white popular culture was about and invited them to discover how white people acquired a consciousness of love and sexuality that was overdetermined by ideologies of male dominance and heterosexism (DAVIS, 1998, p. 171).

In summary, the aesthetic form of Holiday's blues exposes the tension between the feminine images of one-dimensional thinking and the voices of oppressed black women. In other words, the aesthetic form of *You Let Me Down* unveils the friction between the actual world and an alternative possible world. Consequently, the subversive aspect of the aesthetic form of this song lies in the distance and apparent contradiction created between the reality conveyed by the lyrics and how it is sung, offering a glimpse of what could be. In this manner, Holiday creates a mismatch, a shock, a collision between the lyrical content (expressing lament) and the manner in which she delivers them (conveying accusation). Within this utilization of the power of the black woman lies the political and emancipatory potential of the Marcusean aesthetic form that Davis revives. For all these

reasons, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* demonstrates that certain notions from Marcuse's aesthetics are enduring concepts that provide a pertinent method for analyzing the emancipatory potential of popular music in contemporary contexts.

3 – IL FAUT CONTINUER: MARCUSEAN AESTHETICS IN LATE CAPITALISM

Twenty-five years after Davis' publication, I propose adopting a similar strategy to reflect on the subversive character and the emancipatory potential of contemporary black music within the *Kulturindustrie*. By way of conclusion, my aim is to demonstrate that the aesthetic form of certain current black music pieces unveils the contradictions of late capitalism, creating a kind of tension between reality and another possible world, like the radical art described by Marcuse¹¹. In other words, my intention is to show that current black music songs such as *This is America* by Childish Gambino constitute a form of radical art or radical popular music because they induce an experience “which explode the given reality in the name of a truth normally denied or even unheard” (MARCUSE, 1978, p. 6-7). How does Gambino employ strategies to achieve this?

Released in 2018, *This is America* coincides with the peak of the Black Lives Matter movement. Gambino condemns the systemic racism embedded in American institutions and highlights the experiences of African-Americans during the height of the movement. The aesthetic structure of *This is America* rebels against the established cultural norms and the ideals of beauty within this culture. It challenges the overly sublimated, segregated and harmonized forms. With the aim of accomplishing this, Gambino assumes the persona of a schizoid subject, immersing himself in this extreme and exaggerated representation of reality to underscore the one-dimensionality and brutality of late capitalism.

¹¹ See page 5 of this article.



Figure 1: Frames acquired from the music video for *This is America*.

He assumes the role of a fragmented subject, a product of the pleasures offered by capitalism and the oppressive circumstances experienced as an African-American. *This is America* (both the performance and the music) is constructed upon extremes – oscillating between euphoria and sorrow, navigating the freedom afforded by American affluent society and the daily injustices plaguing the black community. Gambino, amidst smiles and dance in a car graveyard, abruptly transitions to embrace violence and death. This schizoid subject serves as a representation of the inherent contradictions of reality.

Furthermore, the schizoid subject moves in tandem with two distinct rhythms, melodies, and forms found in black music: hip hop and spiritual songs. *This is America* is a form of “*desublimated* music, which directly *translates* the motion of *sounds into* the motion of *bodies* (...)”¹². The rawness of these black music moments, coupled with the intense bass of the sampler, intertwines with sounds of gunshots and screams. This abrupt juxtaposition with cheerful pop moments (slightly more melodic) is notable.

Indeed, the return of the oppressed, as Marcuse would posit, emanates not only from the musical material itself but also from the subversion of everyday language. Gambino employs certain onomatopoeias, gimmicks, or African-American rapper slang, such as “skrrt” (the sound of a tire screeching). In this manner, the American artist navigates between language subversion, the desublimation of reality, the collective

¹² *Ibid.*

moans, and the interplay of seemingly opposing and even delirious rhythms, melodies, attitudes, and gestures.

Finally, the song concludes with a brief passage wherein Gambino is pursued by the police and sings:

“You just a black man in this world
You just a barcode
You just a black man in this world
You just a big dog”.

The aesthetic form of this song serves as a gesture of desublimation, indicting the unequal position of Afro-American men and women in affluent society. Certainly, allusions to affluent society are perceptible in the banal and ironic references to money, parties, or luxury brands, epitomizing the beauty, fun, and pleasure that capitalism provides. Hence, Gambino sings: “Look how I'm geekin' out/I'm so fitted/I'm on Gucci/I'm so pretty”. However, this exaggerated, theatrical moment of narcissism and individualism is immediately overshadowed by a brutal scene: a series of cells where African Americans are incarcerated, people are escaping, cars are on fire, and there is even a horseman of the apocalypse.

These radical, brutal, and constant oppositions that shape *This is America* reveal (once again) the inherent contradictions of late capitalism. This piece of popular music is radical because it “explodes the given reality in the name of a truth normally denied or even unheard” (MARCUSE, 1978, p. 6-7). In summary, *This is America* is constructed upon a delirious dichotomy that becomes apparent both in the musical composition and in Gambino's performance.

In conclusion, Gambino's strategic approach involves juxtaposing the ostensible happiness of consumer society and America (as the purported land of the free) with the concurrent chaos, injustice, mass incarceration of African-Americans, and instances of police violence. *This is America* gives voice to the oppressed and, above all, surfaces the contradictions inherent in late capitalism, that is, within the realm of reality, and a contradiction in reality signifies a contradiction against reality. Thus, this song illustrates, as articulated by Adorno (and reiterated by Marcuse in *A Note on Dialectic*), that “the whole is the truth”, and the whole is false.

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LIST OF FIGURES:

FIGURE 1: Frames acquired from the music video for *This is America*. Childish Gambino, *This is America*. Directed by Hiro Murai. Doomsday Entertainment, Wolf + Rothstein. Distributed: RCA Records, 2018.