CHAPTER 4

Art as Ethics

The Aesthetic Self

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Marx did not leave behind a coherent theory of aesthetics but art in its many forms appear throughout his writings serving two main purposes: to affirm his understanding of the creative powers of human beings and to make us think more critically about society. Marx’s interest in all art is not simply aesthetic, art is not just for art’s sake, but is a resource for the development of human beings that allows them to take a critical stance against an oppressive society. My concern is to construct an ethics that develops from Marx’s understanding of humans as artists with my notion of the aesthetic self that I first developed in the final chapter of my book, *Dialectics of the Self: Transcending Charles Taylor*¹ and which I used as a basis for examining contemporary fiction in *Identity, Politics and the Novel: The Aesthetic Moment*.²

The aesthetic self emanates from understanding identity dialectically as abstract and concrete, universal and particular, in an alternating movement through which the world is constituted. This understanding of identity implies that the self is a social self, engaging in self-interpretation, language, dialogue and affirming life in our social relations and responsibilities with each other, contradictory though that may be. Out of these contradictions, the aesthetic self refers to the many ways in which those of us who want to challenge the status quo of capitalism do so politically, economically and culturally. Nevertheless, the aesthetic self can also be negated when attempting to affirm the human spirit due to the alienating effects of capitalism. Indeed, the aesthetic self moves dialectically between moments of alienation and disalienation in the search for epiphanic moments of insight on the path to a transcendence of the self and the forging of an enhanced or different identity. I do this by first outlining Marx’s views on art and then exploring them in relation to a novel, an artwork itself, which has the role of art and the artist as one of its main themes: Michel Houellebecq’s critically acclaimed *The Map*

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Art As Ethics

The book was awarded the Prix Goncourt in 2010, France’s highest literary accolade, and so established Houellebecq as one of the foremost writers of contemporary fiction in the world today. It centres on an artist, Jed Martin, who attains international success with his exhibition of photographs of Michelin roadmaps that allows him to join the elite of the art world. He is embarking on another exhibition but this time the focus is on painting people in various forms of work. He asks Michel Houellebecq, the author starring in his own novel, to write the exhibition catalogue. In return, Jed will paint Houellebecq’s portrait while also paying him a considerable sum of money. A murder takes place and the novel becomes a crime thriller but the “key themes are the great ones: art, death, cultural decline.” Jed is an aesthetic self who moves between alienation and disalienation mediated by epiphanic moments that allows him to transcend his identity and forge a new one albeit within the constraints of capitalism. The ethical dimension that emerges from Jed’s journey is that art as ethics becomes undermined when it is done for exchange-value rather than use-value, the need for artistic expression and the appreciation of beauty for a transcendence of the self and an increased critical awareness of society. The novel ends in despair both for him and humanity but the dialectical development of Jed, both positively and negatively, displays the antagonism that besets aesthetic selves as they attempt to affirm their creative powers and think more critically about the world they are in. I begin by outlining Marx’s views on art.

Marx on Art

Marx sees human beings as artists when they engage in an affirmation of their creative and productive powers. In his early writings, he relates how humans assert their species-being in the form of intellectual and spiritual endeavours that manifest themselves in culture. He argues that non-human animals

4 For my own work on Houellebecq analysing two of his previous novels, Atomised and Platform, see my Identity, Politics and the Novel, Chapters 5 and 6.
6 Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, in Karl Marx, Early Writings (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 327–328.