



Technology and Creativity: A Study of Herbert Marcuse Theory of Aesthetic Liberation

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The following essay discusses the changing role of technology in various art forms, focusing on its impact on the artist's autonomy. As digital tools and platforms become increasingly essential to artistic creation, they present new opportunities and challenges for creative expression. The paper examines how technology has transformed traditional mediums such as painting and sculpture, giving rise to entirely new digital art, virtual reality, and AI-generated works. While technology has democratized artmaking, enabling broader participation and innovation, it also raises questions about an artist's autonomy and originality in an age of algorithmic assistance. By analyzing the theoretical perspectives of prominent thinkers – especially Herbert Marcuse – this essay aims to understand how artists navigate the balance between creative control and external specialized influence, ultimately questioning whether technology enhances or reduces an artist's autonomy. This discussion contributes to broader debates on the future of art in a rapidly changing and highly digitized world.

When we examine the value of an art form in the human cognitive process, it is relevant to compare it with the scientific cognitive process. An art form involves a cognitive elaboration of facts, where an artist expresses their innermost feelings: the creative process can serve as a tool for both art and propaganda. Although propaganda potentiates social realities, its power in this aspect often depends on the artistry. If art is to enhance understanding genuinely, it must do more than assert itself as propaganda does: instead, it must secure belief through reflective understanding.

In contrast to the process of scientific inquiry, a work of art is a creative expression that can enhance and illuminate day-to-day experiences. Thus, artistic cognition is a powerful medium that makes an art form more valuable than any materialistic objects of pleasure and provides a better understanding of the human experience. If a reality depicted by an art form is deeply rooted in human experience, there is a danger of a technology-driven art form which may completely alter the uniqueness of this experience. Thus, this study examines the factors that significantly contribute to the inherent part of the human creative process and those that are detrimental to it.

Keywords: aesthetic liberation, creativity, herbert marcuse, digital technology, creative autonomy

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1. Introduction

In the words of the great American philosopher Suzanne K. Langer, "A work of art is the creation of forms symbolic of human feelings." This unique capacity of human beings sets them apart from all other biological beings. A work of art is also valued for its specific functions in different cultures and can bring about social changes through the perspective of various artists. This dual nature of a work of art – both ideological and imaginative – enables it to mirror the social structure in many ways. Thus, the emotion and sensitivity of an artist forms the basis of their creative pursuit.

The relationship between technology and creativity is complex and multifaceted. Technology provides artists with advanced tools and software that enhance their ability to create and manipulate digital art, music, film, and more. This accessibility democratizes creativity and allows for a new form of expression. Artists have access to a global audience due to technology, and this exposure fosters cultural exchange and creates/amplifies diverse voices. However, easy access to digital tools can lead to a proliferation of generic or formulaic content, potentially diluting the originality and artistic diversity. Technological intervention therefore enhances but also manipulates and compromises the creative process.

Herbert Marcuse, the philosopher known for his critique of modern society, argues that authority control hinders creative freedom, as it can stifle unconventional ideas and limit expression. He believed that true creativity flourishes when individuals are liberated from societal constraints. Regarding AI and OTT platforms, he might have argued that while they offer new avenues for expression, they can also be co-opted by powerful interests, potentially influencing creativity in ways that serve their agendas, rather than fostering genuine artistic innovations.

The present paper aims to understand the challenges artists face from external sources, which can affect their relationship with their work and potentially lead to alienation. We also aim to understand whether Marcuse's philosophy offers either utopian or dystopian visions of the future relationship between technology and creativity and whether his ideas might induce discussions about the potential trajectory of creative practices in an

Increasingly technologically mediated world like the one we face today. We want to deliberate on the ongoing relevance of Marcuse's ideas in the current digital age. The following paper limits its study to the following three books by Herbert Marcuse:

1. "One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society"
2. "An Essay on Liberation"
3. "The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics"

In the works of Herbert Marcuse, we come across an analysis of the role of society and other external factors in man's creative pursuits. Marcuse begins his study by distinguishing between a novel and an epic. Whereas an epic expresses the collective life of an entire people, a novel expresses the alienation of the individual artist from social life. The book articulates individual longing and striving for a higher, more authentic mode of existence. The conflict arises when he does not find fulfillment in the life forms of his environment with all its limitations. His essence and longing cannot be contained, and he stands alone against everyday reality. He thus seeks a solution by being a creative being, which also underlies his humanity.

2. Main Body

Marcuse discusses the transitions from Greek society to a society subjected to 30 years of war. Here, a historical epoch of division and conflict emerges in which the individual confronts an utterly devalued, impoverished, brutal, and hostile world that offers no fulfillment to a man as a social whole. The artistic call creates a self-conscious subjectivity and a yearning to overcome Alienation. Artists objectify their emotions and aspirations and seek approval from society. In this way, the artist attempts to mold reality to fit his vision. He finds safety in a realm of exquisite illusion after fleeing creative alienation.

In his book, *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse used "One-Dimensional" to describe trends in advanced industrial societies. These trends are marked by capitalists and communists increasing social control and domination modes. This results in an increasingly homogenized society and culture, suppressing higher critique and alternative dimensions. He further describes how culture and ideology have replaced brute force to integrate individuals into the existing industrial and consumer society.

Marcuse argues that culture and art have progressively lost their radical potential, and are becoming more conservative as they are integrated into the structure of existing society.

In this book, Marcuse also offers a comprehensive critique of contemporary capitalist societies and the prevailing Marxist theories of his time. The essay explores the key themes and arguments in *One-Dimensional Man* and discusses Marcuse's views on technology, culture, and politics. At the heart of Marcuse's critique is "technological rationality", which has dominated social life and individual thought in advanced industrial societies. This rationality ensures that all aspects of life conform to the logic of efficiency and utility, thus integrating individuals into a system where dissent and deviation become difficult.

Marcuse argues that technology, which has the potential to liberate people from labor, instead serves as a tool for social control and conformity, which reinforces the current exploitative system. He suggests that technological rationality extends beyond mere workplace efficiency and influences all dimensions of human life—from politics and education to culture and leisure, which flattens differences and oppositions, rendering society "one-dimensional" in its thoughts and behavior. The role of culture and media in *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse also delves into the role of mass culture and media as instruments of social control. He argues that they promote a passive acceptance of the status quo by providing illusions of choice and freedom. He describes the culture industry churning products perpetuating conformity and immediate gratification, stifling critical thought and genuine creative expression. Mass media and consumer culture thereby contribute to what Marcuse describes as "repressive desublimation", where social controls are exerted not by denying pleasure but by dictating its forms. This results in a populace that is ostensibly satisfied and uninterested in challenging the underlying causes of their discontent.

Marcuse expresses profound concern for the decline of critical thought, which he sees as essential for challenging and changing unjust power structures. He points to the overwhelming acceptance of the "performance principle"—a societal norm that equates individual worth with productivity and success within the capitalist framework.

This acceptance suppresses alternatives to the capitalist system and discourages revolutionary thinking. Marcuse also criticizes contemporary Marxist thought for being overly deterministic and focused on economic factors without adequately considering the role of culture and psychology in social change. He calls for a radical re-envisioning of Marxism that recognizes the transformative potential of consciousness and culture.

Marcuse clings to the hope that liberation is possible and that it can come from within the systems of dominance. He suggests that marginalized groups outside the established system of advanced industrial society, such as racial minorities and radical intelligentsia, might spearhead a revolutionary change. However, he acknowledges that the entrenched strength of one-dimensional thinking makes such possibilities increasingly tricky. Marcuse's call to action is to develop critical, two-dimensional thinking to challenge a one-dimensional society, which involves reimagining the potentialities of technology and culture to enhance human freedom and happiness.

Thus, *One-Dimensional Man* remains critical for understanding the complex interactions between technology, culture, and capitalism. Marcuse's analysis provides insight into the pervasive power of consumer culture and technological rationality, which continue to resonate in contemporary society. His work encourages reevaluating our engagement with technology and culture, advocating for a society prioritizing genuine human needs over economic and technological imperatives. Marcuse's call for a new sensibility and radical thought continues to inspire those who seek to envision and achieve a more emancipated society.

Herbert Marcuse introduced the term "repressive desublimation" to further his critique of authority in creativity. According to Marcuse, repressive desublimation refers to the process through which societal mechanisms control individuals by seemingly liberating their desires and pleasures. Instead of allowing for genuine liberation, these desires are manipulated to maintain existing power structures, reinforcing the status quo and intensifying social control.

Herbert Marcuse coined the term "Repressive desublimation" to further his criticism of authority in creative endeavors.

Marcuse defines repressive desublimation as the process by which people are subjugated by societal mechanisms that appear to liberate their pleasures and desires. These desires are not allowed for true liberation but are used to uphold the status quo and escalate social control.

Marcuse contends that the culture industry contributes significantly to repressive desublimation in contemporary societies, especially capitalist ones. Mass-produced media, including music, movies, and television, modifies people's desires and presents consumption as a means to achieve fulfillment and freedom. As a result, people become less critical of themselves and less unique, focusing more on instant gratification than on true freedom or creativity.

Technological advancements have further facilitated this process, making cultural goods more accessible and ensuring that individuals remain engaged with and within capitalist modes of consumption and entertainment. This accessibility to commodified pleasures pacifies the populace, reducing the likelihood of dissent or demands for more profound societal changes.

The implications of repressive desublimation for autonomy and freedom are profound. Marcuse suggests that increased freedom and individuality are a deeper form of control, integrating individuals fully into the system of production and consumption, and reducing their ability to think critically about their conditions or imagine alternative ways of living.

Thus, Herbert Marcuse's concept of repressive desublimation sheds light on the relationship between individual desires and societal control mechanisms. It illustrates how liberatory practices within capitalist societies can function as tools of control, disguising their repressive nature under the guise of fulfillment and pleasure. This concept remains relevant for analyzing contemporary social and cultural phenomena, raising questions about the true nature of freedom and autonomy in a world dominated by consumer culture and advanced technologies. Marcuse's critique prompts an ongoing reflection on how true liberation might be achieved in a society where desires are not simply managed but genuinely fulfilled in a way that promotes individual and collective flourishing.

Another essential concept Marcuse discussed is technological rationality, which refers to applying instrumental reason to improve efficiency, control, and predictability in all aspects of life. It prioritizes technical efficiency and utility over human values such as freedom, happiness, and creative self-expression. This type of rationality is deeply rooted in modern technological societies and influences the development and use of technology within capitalist economic structures.

Marcuse argued that technological rationality reshapes the economy and society. It fosters a one-dimensional view of human existence, where individuals are increasingly valued based on their roles as consumers and producers. Technology is primarily used to support and expand capitalist enterprises, resulting in what Marcuse termed as "technological domination". The widespread standardization, control, and monitoring of social life, which stifles opposition and critical thought, are clear signs of this dominance.

One of Marcuse's main concerns is losing human freedom and autonomy under technological rationality. With the advancement of technology, people become more integrated into the existing order, which subdues dissent and deviation by tacit coercion. Marcuse defined "comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom" as the conformity imposed by society's technical organization, which stifles true originality and creativity.

Marcuse also addressed the relationship between technological rationality and the natural world, critiquing capitalist technology's exploitative and destructive tendencies toward the environment. He advocated for a more harmonious and less harmful approach to technology that respects ecological balance and promotes sustainability.

Marcuse acknowledged that technology may aid in the emancipation of people. He advocated for a different technological advancement that puts ecological sustainability and human fulfillment ahead of efficiency and profit. This would require fundamental rethinking of the values driving technological innovation and restructuring the socio-economic systems determining technology use. A comprehensive critique of technology's place in contemporary society can be found in Herbert Marcuse's concept of technological rationality.

His analysis challenges us to consider how technological advancements can sometimes reinforce existing inequalities and suppress human potential. In his critical theory, *Art as Liberation*, Herbert Marcuse delves into the intricate relationship between art, society, and liberation. He emphasizes the revolutionary potential of art as both a form of resistance against oppressive societal structures and a means to envision and actualize a liberated future. Through his theories regarding the role of art in fostering social change, he offers incisive insights on how cultural expressions can go beyond simple amusement or aesthetic enjoyment to question and alter the status quo.

Marcuse viewed art as inherently subversive, with the potential to challenge the prevailing order by presenting alternative realities and values. In his various writings, particularly in "One-Dimensional Man," he argues that authentic art can negate the established norms of reality imposed by a one-dimensional society, where technological rationality and consumerism suppress critical thought and creativity. According to Marcuse, faithful art disrupts the comfortable patterns of everyday life and the prevailing consciousness, providing a glimpse into what could be, rather than what is. It transcends the immediate, presenting visions that critique current conditions and propose new possibilities. For Marcuse, this subversive characteristic of art makes it a potent tool for liberation, which can awaken a critical consciousness in individuals, encouraging them to question and resist the conditions of their existence.

Marcuse extensively discusses the aesthetic form of art, which he believes embodies the essence of contradiction: it is at once a part of the material world and a transcendence of it. In his view, artistic aesthetics forge a connection between sensory experience and a deeper, more critical understanding of society. This connection is vital for any social transformation, as it engages individuals emotionally and intellectually, fostering a radical empathy that compels action. For Marcuse, the aesthetic form in art carries revolutionary potential because it can produce a liberating effect on consciousness. By engaging with Art, individuals are exposed to new ways of seeing and being and invited to reimagine and reshape their lives and societies. In his vision of a non-repressive society, Marcuse emphasizes the need to integrate the liberating aspects of art into everyday life.

This integration involves breaking the barriers between art and life, thus allowing creative impulses and aesthetic enjoyment to permeate individuals' daily existence. Marcuse proposes that in a truly liberated society, the creation and appreciation of art would not be confined to specialized institutions or elite circles; instead, it would be a common and shared experience, contributing to the ongoing development of individual and collective freedom. Therefore, Herbert Marcuse's philosophy presents art as a crucial element in the struggle for human liberation. Art challenges societal norms and opens possibilities for radical changes by embodying alternative realities and fostering critical consciousness. Marcuse's perspective on art as resistance and a means of liberation encourages a deeper engagement with cultural practices vital to any comprehensive effort to overcome oppression and achieve a truly free society. His ideas remain relevant today, inspiring artists and cultural theorists to consider how art can continue to catalyze social transformation and human emancipation.

Thus, his notion of liberation is deeply embedded in his critique of one-dimensional society. Advanced industrial societies neutralize the potential for critical thought and opposition through mass media, technology, and controlled consumption. In his various writings, particularly in *One-Dimensional Man*, he argues that authentic art can negate the established norms of reality imposed by a one-dimensional society, where technological rationality and consumerism suppress critical thought and creativity. According to Marcuse, faithful art disrupts the comfortable patterns of everyday life and the prevailing consciousness, providing a glimpse into what could be rather than what is. It transcends the immediate, presenting visions that critique current conditions and propose new possibilities. For Marcuse, this subversive characteristic of art makes it a potent tool for liberation—it can awaken a critical consciousness in individuals, encouraging them to question and resist the conditions of their existence.

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As discussed in earlier sections, Marcuse also warns of the risks associated with what he calls "repressive desublimation", where the release of suppressed desires is manipulated to reinforce social control (such as in the commodification of art and culture). In this context, Art must resist being reduced to merely another consumer good; it should aim to elevate consciousness and promote genuine human fulfillment. In response, Marcuse advocates for a form of art that resists commercialization and remains true to its critical and transformative objectives. This form of art challenges the status quo by depicting alternatives to the repressive reality, thereby nurturing a sensibility attuned to liberation and radical change. Herbert Marcuse's philosophy presents art as a crucial element in the struggle for human freedom. Art should challenge societal norms and open up possibilities for radical change by embodying alternative realities and fostering critical consciousness. Marcuse's perspective on art as resistance and a means of liberation encourages a deeper engagement with cultural practices vital to any comprehensive effort to overcome oppression, and achieve a truly free society. His ideas remain relevant today, inspiring artists and cultural theorists to realize how art can continue to catalyze social transformation and human emancipation.

Herbert Marcuse's examination of cultural hegemony revolves around the concept that the ruling classes use culture to maintain control over society. This analysis becomes particularly relevant in the age of digital media platforms, where significant shifts in the production, distribution, and consumption of culture have occurred. It aims to explore how these digital media platforms align with and challenge Marcuse's critique of cultural hegemony, shedding light on the intricate relationship between technology, culture, and power in today's society.

According to Marcuse's argument, culture is a tool for perpetuating social order and quelling revolutionary potential within capitalist societies. The concept of "repressive desublimation", as discussed in an earlier section, denotes the redirection of libidinal energies to reinforce the existing social order rather than challenging it. This process dampens the public's critical thinking and undermines their capacity for genuine creativity and dissent.

The following section will focus on how technology impacts the creative process:

1. Commodification of Culture: Digital media platforms—such as social media, streaming services, and online marketplaces—have heightened the commodification of culture. These platforms capitalize on user engagement, often prioritizing content that is sensational and addictive, or adhering to mainstream norms. This commercial drive aligns with Marcuse's idea of culture as a tool for social control, prioritizing the perpetuation of consumerist behavior over the encouragement of critical thought or meaningful change.

2. Normalization of Surveillance: Marcuse expressed concerns about the technological enablement of control and surveillance. Digital media platforms have brought these concerns to the forefront by accumulating extensive data on user behavior, preferences, and social interactions. This data is utilized to tailor content that reinforces existing preferences and biases, creating a feedback loop that further strengthens established cultural norms.

Digital media platforms often promote popular or trending content through algorithms that reflect prevailing ideologies and cultural norms.

This algorithmic curation can limit exposure to diverse perspectives and reinforce the existing social order, aligning closely with Marcuse's views on how mass media serves to maintain cultural hegemony. These platforms have lowered content production and distribution barriers, allowing individuals and groups traditionally marginalized in mainstream media to express themselves and reach global audiences. This democratization can challenge cultural hegemony by diversifying the various types of content available and introducing new narratives that contest mainstream ideologies.

Furthermore, social media and other digital platforms have become crucial tools for organizing social movements and spreading activist messages. These platforms can amplify voices of dissent and facilitate mobilization on a scale that was not possible in Marcuse's time, potentially leading to significant social and political changes.

While digital media can reinforce the status quo, it also holds potential for subversive uses. Users can manipulate these platforms to spread counter-cultural messages, create satirical and critical content, and creatively subvert dominant cultural messages. This subversive potential aligns with Marcuse's vision of art and culture as inherently revolutionary forces. Art and culture has the potentiality to carry out social changes, it's a human inherent expression which voices out its opinion for or against social conditions and practices.

Therefore, digital media platforms present a paradox in the context of Herbert Marcuse's critique of cultural hegemony. They both reinforce cultural hegemony through commodification, surveillance and algorithmic curation, and challenge it by democratizing content production, thereby facilitating activism, and providing a space for subversive practices. The dual nature of digital media suggests that the extent to which they align with or challenge cultural hegemony depends significantly on how they are used and regulated. Marcuse's critique remains a valuable framework for analyzing these dynamics, urging continual critical reflection on the relationship between technology, culture, and power in the digital age.

Herbert Marcuse's critical theory offers a profound perspective on analyzing the dynamics of creative industries and technologies. Marcuse's ideas about technology, art, and society, along with his concepts of technological rationality, repressive desublimation,

And the potential for true liberation through aesthetic dimensions. These provide a framework for exploring how modern creative industries either strengthen or challenge existing social orders.

The rise of streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime has transformed the film and television landscape. These platforms have democratized access to a wide array of content, but they also exemplify Marcuse's concerns about the commodification of culture and repressive desublimation. Streaming platforms use sophisticated algorithms to recommend content to viewers, optimizing user engagement by reinforcing viewers' preferences and reducing exposure to diverse perspectives. While these platforms offer a veneer of choice and freedom, they often promote content that adheres to the mainstream, commercial tastes, potentially stifling truly innovative or radical ideas that could challenge societal norms. Thus, streaming platforms can be seen as tools of cultural hegemony. They provide an illusion of choice while carefully curating and controlling the viewer's experience to maintain the status quo.

Furthermore, platforms like Instagram and TikTok have become major venues for artistic expression, allowing individuals to share their artworks with global audiences. These platforms can serve as spaces for creative liberation, and sites of intense commercial and normative pressures. Though these platforms democratize artistic expression, they also subject it to the pressures of market forces, where popularity and commercial viability often overshadow artistic merit.

3. Conclusion and Final Analysis

Artistic expression is man's primary instinct. Any control from external sources can neither complement nor support individual freedom or autonomy to represent the ideas and thoughts unique to an individual. Technology may support individual conceptualization to begin with, but it slowly takes complete control over the human creative process and may destroy human creativity totally.

The distinctive nature of a work of art that separates it from any scientific deliberation is its capacity for imaginative creation. This process involves ordering and subsequently illuminating it. A process of objectification and exteriorization of the innermost self marks this.

In its process of self-objectification, a being is alienated or estranged from its immediate character. Here, man goes through a process of exteriorization or detachment. Thus, the process of creativity is marked by alienation, where a being is alienated or detached from its social surroundings. This process also emancipates a being from his/her static immediate environment. Thus, the creative process has a dual role: emancipatory and alienation. The creative process is marked by estrangement, where a being surrenders or relinquishes what he truly is. When technology overtly controls creation, a being goes through double alienation, distancing the being from its unique self. At stage one, double alienation occurs when human beings remain separated and discarded as social beings from their true innermost selves. The second stage of alienation happens when a creative process becomes a catalyst for overcoming the first stage of alienation. Alienation works at a third level with external technological aid, alienating the artist from the creative process. The true inner self is now molded and has its creativity; the creativity that should stay connected with its innermost being is now distanced from its true self. All art forms contain a possibility of the unity of affirmation and negation, where happiness is mixed with sorrow, joy, transitoriness, and peace with memories of the anguish of a world that refuses peace. The hope for Utopia and Liberation remains the cherished goal of any creative process.

Thus, creativity and technical intervention may annihilate the cherished goal of creativity.

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