

10.

Art as Ethics: The Aesthetic Self

Ian Fraser

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 and the Territory*³. 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.⁴ 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".⁵ 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.⁶ He

argues that non-human animals remain tied to their instincts and produce only for what they materially need. Humans, on the other hand, produce beyond basic needs, in the form of intellectual and spiritual endeavours. Indeed, Marx contends that individuals could become creatively multifaceted in communist society where we can “hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner...without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic”. The examples are somewhat dated now but the sentiment remains the same. As Marx contends in his subsequent writings, achieving this depends on a reduction in necessary labour time to a minimum to allow the “artistic, scientific, etc. development of the individuals in the time set free”.⁷ The “true realm of freedom” is where “the development of human powers” is an end in itself and lies beyond the realm of natural necessity.⁸ As aesthetic selves this is a future that awaits us, a hope for the “Not-Yet”, as Ernst Bloch states, but moments of which exist in the present.⁹ These aesthetic moments carry with them a tremendous ethical import by saying that ourselves and the world can and should be other than what it is.

Against this affirmation of our aesthetic selves, Marx asserts that a society based on the division of labour severely limits spontaneous and diverse creative activity, and instead forces people into a single task that they must perfect in order to maintain their livelihood.¹⁰ Such activity “becomes an alien power” from which they cannot escape. So all art is shaped by the productive practices prevailing at the time, but as active subjects humans relate in a complex and vibrant manner to these often alienating situations, which arise in particular from the division of labour in society. The negative effects of the division of labour even extend to artistic talent itself, which becomes concentrated in particular individuals while being generally suppressed in the masses. Even within these artistic individuals, the division of labour forces their creative activity into one aspect of artistic endeavour, as a painter or a

sculptor for example. Similarly, the demand for their work and the conditions of human culture of the society they are in, also determines the extent to which they will successfully develop their talents. Again, though, the hope here is that aesthetic selves try to resist these restrictions and in doing so develop an art as ethics that is in, against and potentially beyond capital.

In a critique of Max Stirner, Marx considers Stirner's suggestion that human work can only be done by others whereas other work is egoistical because it is part of the work of a "unique individual".¹¹ Stirner offers the example of the painter Raphael, arguing that only he can do his work. Marx rejects this and mentions that Raphael only finished "an insignificant part of his own frescoes", adding that even the majority of Mozart's *Requiem* was composed and completed by someone else.¹² Moreover, Marx maintains that it is impossible to dislocate this work from the division of labour prevalent at any particular historical period. He suggests that if Stirner was to "compare Raphael with Leonardo da Vinci and Titian, he would see how greatly Raphael's works of art depended on the flourishing of Rome at that time, which occurred under Florentine influence". Similarly, "the works of Leonardo depended on the state of things in Florence, and the works of Titian, at a later period, depended on the totally different development of Venice". For Marx, Raphael, like all artists, "was determined by the technical advances in art made before him, by the organisation of society and the division of labour in his locality, and, finally, by the division of labour in all the countries with which his locality had intercourse". For a Raphael to develop his talent, "depends wholly on demand, which in turn depends on the division of labour and the conditions of human culture resulting from it".

Marx also notes how Stirner is in an inferior position compared to the bourgeoisie in his claim for the uniqueness of art.¹³ Marx cites how the supposedly unique activity of the French painter of battle scenes, Horace Vernet, would not have been able to produce a fraction of his pictures if he thought only he, as a unique person, could produce them. Additionally, Marx mentions that in Paris even novels and vaudevilles needed the organisation of work for their production in contrast with their unique competitors in Germany. Marx observes that it is obvious that any organisation based on the division of labour will produce “extremely limited results, and they represent a step forward only compared with the previous narrow isolation”. For Marx, the “exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals, and its suppression in the broad mass which is bound up with this, is a consequence of the division of labour”. He proposes that even where everyone could be an excellent painter that would not rule out the possibility of each of them being original, rendering Stirner’s distinction between human and unique labour as “sheer nonsense”. Marx then prophesies that in a communist society the restrictions imposed by the division of labour that subordinate the artist to “local and national narrowness” is overcome. Moreover, the subjection of individuals to a definite art that makes them exclusively a painter or sculptor, for example, is a reflection of the narrowness of their professional development and their dependence on the division of labour. This is transcended in communist society because there will be “no painters but only people who engage in painting among other activities”. Stirner does not realise that the “division of labour, material production and material intercourse” all “make individuals subordinate to definite relations and modes of activity”.¹⁴ There is therefore a democratisation of the aesthetic that Marx is arguing for here and an emphasis on understanding the work of the artist as part of the society he or she is in to grasp properly the determinants that govern the creation of the artwork.

For Marx, while recognising that some degree of specialisation is needed for individual development; within capitalism this occurs in a dehumanising process for the worker by rapidly producing more commodities to increase the accumulation of capital for a capitalist.¹⁵ This “appears historically as an advance and a necessary aspect of the economic process of the formation of society”, but it also “appears as a more refined and civilised means of exploitation”. Marx contrasts this emphasis on “quantity and exchange-value” with the “writers of classical antiquity, who are exclusively concerned with quality and use-value”. Consequently, the division of labour in ancient society means that “commodities are better made” and people’s “various inclinations and talents select suitable fields of action”.¹⁶ So “without some restriction no important results can be obtained anywhere”. In a footnote, Marx quotes Homer’s *Odyssey* to illustrate his points with the statement that ““for different men take joy in different works””¹⁷ and ““he could do many works, but all of them badly””.¹⁸ The outcome is that “both product and producer are improved by the division of labour” when it is conducted in this manner. Marx also observes that the “growth of the quantity produced” is barely mentioned and when it is it is only “with reference to the greater abundance of use-values” rather than “exchange-value, or...the cheapening of commodities”.¹⁹ In a world of quality over quantity, of use-value over exchange-value there is little surprise that great advances were made in artistic production but this of course was on the back of a slave society and the enjoyment of it by a ruling minority.²⁰ Aesthetic selves, then, must resist this tendency for capital to reduce everything to exchange-value and assert the aesthetic use-value inherent in an art as ethics in the affirmation of their identities.

The role of the division of labour also forces Marx to consider how art is related to the technology pertaining to past and future societies. He contemplates how the technologically advanced society that emerged from the industrial revolution could still be charmed by Greek

art, given the social conditions that created it, had dissipated.²¹ He asks how, for example, Greek mythology and the Greek imagination can still be pertinent in a world with “self-acting mule spindles and railways and locomotives and electrical telegraph?” He evocatively continues, “what chance has Vulcan”, the Greek god of metalwork and craftsmanship, “against Roberts & Co”, Jupiter, the god responsible for lightning and rain, “against the lightening-rod and Hermes”, deity of thieves and merchants, “against the Crédit Mobilier” or “Fama”, goddess of rumour and gossip, “alongside Printing House Square?” Similarly, is the great fighter “Achilles possible with powder and lead? Or the *Iliad* with the printing press” and “printing machine?”²² Marx’s response is that Greek art as in all art, from whatever epoch, teaches us about the material production and development of our societies and also shows us how artistic and economic production develops, albeit unevenly rather than in parallel. Greek art itself was, for Marx, an expression of the highest of human values and still gives us “artistic pleasure”. “The charm of their art for us” is the “result” of the “undeveloped stage of society on which it grew” and is “inextricably bound up” with the “fact that the unripe social conditions under which it arose, and could alone arise, can never return”. As aesthetic selves, then, we should be aware of the history of art as a history of human existence that gives us an insight into how the world was and could be while also satiating our desire for beauty on the path to transcendence. .

In relation to the consumption of art, Marx makes a comparison between consuming champagne and listening to music in relation to productive and unproductive labour.²³ He notes how if the music is good and comprehended by the listener then its consumption can be “more sublime than the consumption of champagne” even though the production of champagne is a “productive labour” and the production of music is not. Marx contends that designating labour as productive labour is irrelevant for the content of the labour, utility or

use-value” and even the “same kind of labour may be *productive* or “*unproductive*”.²⁴ He gives the example of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* as a form of unproductive labour because the reason he produced it was the “same reason that a silk worm produces silk. It was an activity of *his* nature”. Even though he sold the book later for £5, it is still not productive labour because to be so it has to be “subsumed under capital” from the beginning and only exists “for the purpose of increasing capital”. Consequently, a writer who churns out books for a “publisher in factory style, is a *productive labourer*” just as a singer who is commissioned to sing is, as she is making money for her sponsor. The singer engages in unproductive labour when she “sells her song for her own account” as she is not producing capital. Similarly, “an actor’s relation to the public is that of an artist, but in relation to his employer he is a *productive labourer*”.²⁵ For aesthetic selves, the practice and creation of art is an activity of nature which only becomes subordinate to capital as productive labour if from the beginning the aim was to accumulate capital. The aesthetic moment of art as ethics is in resisting this imposition and affirming our species-being. With the main ideas on Marx’s understanding of art and my construction of an art as ethics from with the aesthetic self, I now want to explore these themes by considering Houellebecq’s novel and the artist Jed Martin.

Humans as Artists

Jed’s affirmation of his species-being began as a child drawing flowers with coloured pencils (17). By the time of his adolescence he was using watercolours and painted a picture entitled “*Haymaking in Germany*”, despite knowing nothing of either Germany or haymaking (18-19). The painting “was as beautiful as a Cézanne or indeed anything” and depicted peasants pitchforking the hay onto their carts that had donkeys harnessed to them (19). Summer was intimated by the use of light but “snow-clad mountains closed the scene”. The narrator then proclaims that beauty is of secondary importance in a painting. Painters in the past were only

revered as great by painting similarly, using comparable methods and procedures to render objects pictorially that was specific to their style and unprecedented in the history of art. The great painters advanced a “world view that was both coherent and innovative” and this “classical vision of painting”, based on “*figuration*”, was what Jed took up initially while at high-school. He would return to it at the end of his career, bringing him much fame and fortune, but it is solely quality that he is interested in rather than any notion of market value and quantity, as he affirms his aesthetic self.

His “seriousness” impressed his teachers who had to examine his application, entitled “Three Hundred Photos of Hardware”, to enter the Beaux-Arts and they realised they had a candidate that was “original”, “cultivated” and “hard-working” (27). He eschewed any focus on the shininess of the metals in favour of photographing them in neutral light against a backdrop of mild-grey velvet, allowing the nuts and bolts to appear “like so many jewels, gleaming discreetly”. Writing about his work, however, did not come easy to him then or for the rest of his life. Instead, he just talked factually about the objects and the metals that constituted them. He concludes that the “history of mankind could in large part be linked to the history of the use of metals”, with “polymers and plastics” not really producing “any real transformation” as of yet. When art historians commented later on this, Jed’s first real creation, they designated it the same as all his others: “a *homage to human labour*”. The “sole project” of Jed’s artistic career “was to give an objective description of the real world – a goal whose illusory nature he rarely sensed” (28). The art historians have interpreted Jed’s work as being a detached assessment of the state of the world and see him as a successor to the great conceptual artists of the last century (35). Just as Marx said that we look at art of the past, in his example Greek art, to give us an insight into the nature of production in societies, so too is Jed’s mission here to capture aesthetically the development of human labour in

capitalism. For Jed, though, there seems no ethical import for why he doing this but constructing a Marxist art as ethics approach we can identify a flourishing, albeit unconsciously, of his aesthetic self, which moves between moments of alienation and disalienation and an increasing class conscious understanding of society.

Jed devotes the whole of his life to art and the “production of representations of the world, in which people were never meant to live” (20). In doing so, he offered “critical representations” to a “certain extent” because in his youth he was enthusiastic and accepting about the world but it was still “nuanced with irony”, and it is this irony that will grow into a sceptical understanding of capitalism.

Jed moves away from painting and into photography when he enters the “Beaux-Art de Paris”. The impetus was the discovery of his grandfather’s “ancient and prehistoric” camera, a “Linhof Master Technika Classic” that still had “exceptional production quality” that Jed mastered for his next artistic phase which was to systematically photograph the “world’s manufactured objects”. His main aim was to “constitute an exhaustive catalogue of the objects of human manufacturing in the industrial age”. So even though he changes his artistic practice from painting to photography, his link with the humanist nature of his project is clear. Marx noted how capitalism and the division of labour process tends to force individuals to specialise in one artistic endeavour, but Jed seems to undermine that by his move into photographic art opening up a new moment to assert his aesthetic self in a different form, at this stage in his life at least but which he will later reject.

The project’s “grandiose”, “maniacal” and “demented...character” gained his teachers’ respect but kept him apart from groups that had a “common aesthetic ambition” or any

possibility of “collectively entering the art market”. He lives relatively alone and realises that his life was to be a solitary one (20-1). He moves back to live with his father but even this proved “both easy and empty”. His father’s extensive working hours meant Jed saw little of him which intensified his isolation (21). This sense of an alienated aesthetic self will be present throughout his life but it is important to notice at this stage that his art is not marketable and it is use-value over exchange-value that seems to be governing his work.

One evening, his father asks Jed if he plans to “pursue an artistic career” to which Jed concurs (23). His father assumes that Jed is earning little money but he has been employed by two photographic agencies, taking pictures of commodities such as a mountain bike or food. Jed’s pictures retained a “certain style of pure photography” that the agencies modified due to their own “commercial or advertising imperatives” much to his disdain. It is the aesthetic aspect rather than the commercial that is the driving force for Jed and by implication his aesthetic self. He is developing a critical stance to capitalism’s commodification of artistic products.

His father is pleased that Jed is autonomous and not reliant on him as artists who normally depend on their parents never really break onto the art scene. According to his father, the “need to express yourself, to leave a trace in the world, is a powerful one, yet in general that’s not enough”. What fires people instead, he proclaims, is the “pure and simple need for money”. His father is therefore suggesting to Jed to negate his aesthetic self and the affirmation of his species-being in the pursuit of exchange-value just, as we find out later, that the father sold out on his architectural dreams, much to his regret. Jed realises he cannot do this and his aesthetic self suddenly has an epiphany reinforcing that fact.

He moves into a new flat and spends most of his time responding to orders for his photographs of objects but now rejects this type of work for artistic reasons (28). He reflects that photographing “these objects for a purely professional and commercial aim invalidated any possibility of using them in a creative project”. This rupturing of his consciousness was “as brutal as it was unexpected” and he descends into depression and the viewing of daytime television. Jed’s realisation of the instrumentalism of capitalism and how it commodifies art has the negative effect initially of plunging him into a moment of deep alienation but it is out of this crisis that he moves into a moment of disalienation.

Jed’s “second great aesthetic revelation” occurs when he is being driven by his father to his grandmother’s funeral and they stop at a service station (29). Jed buys a Michelin road map of the Creuse and Haute-Vienne region and he has an epiphany while unfolding it. He is “overcome” and begins to “tremble” as he realises that the map is “sublime” and that he had never “contemplated an object as magnificent, as rich in emotion and meaning as this”. He sees the map as the “essence of modernity, of scientific and technical apprehension of the world...combined with the essence of animal life”. He appreciates its complexity, beauty and clarity, utilising only a limited number of colours. He detects in each of the villages and hamlets the “thrill, the appeal, of human lives, of dozens and hundreds of souls – some destined for damnation, others for eternal life” (29-30).

Jed’s aesthetic epiphany creates a moment of transcendence in his identity so he buys over a hundred and fifty Michelin maps: Michelin Regions that covered most of Europe and Michelin Departments that were specific to France (35). He was now “turning away from purely moneymaking photography” and for six months goes out only to visit the hypermarket, while seeing students from the Beaux-Arts only intermittently. However, his

reclusiveness had aroused curiosity in them and they invite him to participate in an exhibition entitled “*Let’s Remain Courteous*”, which he accepts.

He exhibits part of the Michelin map of Creuse that contained part of his dead grandmother’s village (36-7). While there, he meets a glamorous Russian woman, Olga, who says she finds it very beautiful and tells him that she is a public relations officer for Michelin France (37). They arrange to dine together and eventually become lovers (41). At dinner, she discusses her work and states, “I’m sorry, I only talk about business, while you’re an artist”, implying that art and business should be separate which causes the development of Jed’s aesthetic self in alienating him from capitalism (39). This happens early in Jed’s artistic career when he was hardly known (42). He had never exhibited on his own; no one had written about his work and explained its importance to the world (42). Nevertheless, he gets invited to more and more *vernissages*, premieres and literary cocktail parties (42-3). His reluctance to talk about his own work is interpreted as him being a real hardworking artist.

Jed obtains his first exhibition due to Olga as she asks her director at Michelin to sponsor it (45). It occurs on the firm’s premises in a “vast but quite sad” space whose barrenness Jed liked. He modifies the space by having an extra panel at the entrance and by giving precise instructions about the lighting, which he ensured they followed meticulously. The exhibition is entitled “*THE MAP IS MORE INTERESTING THAN THE TERRITORY*” and is attended by many people (48). As Marx observed, artists such as Leonardo, Titian and Raphael are dependent on demand, the division of labour in society, technical advances that preceded them and the flourishing of the societies they are in. Jed’s situation is similar but this showing of his work will undermine the ethics informing his aesthetic self because of the commodification of art and its subordination to exchange-value that awaits him.

Jed becomes “a very young mini-celeb” and adopts a detached attitude that suited his new status (50). He receives unanimous praise from the critics (53). The French countryside seemed to have become fashionable again and this is conveyed in the major daily papers and magazine after Jed’s *vernissage* (54). The Michelin map which was a previously “unnoticed utilitarian object” was now the “privileged vehicle for initiation into what *Libération* was to shamelessly call the “magic of the *terroir*”. Jed has turned a use-value into an aesthetic value with an emphasis on quality over quantity but this will soon be subverted as he has unwittingly promotes the Michelin map in its normal guise as a commodity. Consequently, Jed meets Patrick Forestier, the director of communications for Michelin France, who explains that the maps have increased in their sales since Jed has turned them into artworks (54). He informs Jed that other firms would raise their prices but not Michelin and leaves Jed to “appreciate the lofty considerations behind this commercial decision”. Yet Forestier adds that even the old maps have been auctioned on the internet and are selling well but laments that previously they had been pulping them and so squandering a “heritage whose value no one in-house suspected”, until Jed’s photos appeared that is (54-5). Forestier mentions heritage but he sinks momentarily into a depression because of the lost money and the “destruction of value” (55). Again it is the exchange-value that is the concern here rather than the use-value of the object as a map to help us find our way or its artistic representation that Jed has created in affirming his aesthetic self.

Forestier discusses how Jed’s “works”, he struggles for the right word, can be distributed. After consulting Olga, he suggests that it cannot be done through Michelin directly as this may undermine Jed’s “artistic independence”. Forestier realises that galleries normally do this but as Jed does not have one, he proposes an internet site instead. Here they can be sold directly with no mention of Michelin and under Jed’s jurisdiction. Jed agrees and Forestier

declares this to be a “win-win situation”, while Jed realises that he has just “reached a new turning point in his life” (55-6). Marx’s discussion of productive and unproductive labour is of importance here. Just as Milton produced *Paradise Lost* as part of his artistic nature, Jed has photographed the Michelin maps as part of the affirmation of his aesthetic self and his human essence. He is engaged in unproductive labour because he is producing and selling his artworks himself. He realises that the new turning point was not just the development of his art but also that he had never before had to “meditate on the capitalist mystery par excellence: that of price formation” (57). As Marx indicates, if the origin of the artwork was not from the beginning subsumed under capital nor about increasing it, the labour is still unproductive and related to the affirmation of our human essence and development of our aesthetic selves. Jed initially charges two hundred euros because the prints cost him thirty euros but his first series sells out in three hours. So he ups the price to two thousand euros for one print and finds his “market price”. Unsurprisingly, selling his work himself, he quickly becomes wealthy but his love for Olga sets off another bout of his alienated self.

Olga decides to return to Russia to strengthen Michelin’s presence which ends their relationship (64-5). He considers begging her to stay but his lack of faith in human relations stops him, a decision he will regret (65). He only really knew his father but even that was limited. As far as Jed could see, people’s lives were “organised around *work*, which occupied most of life, and took place in organisations of variable dimension”. So Jed recognises, as Marx emphasises, the delimiting nature of the division of labour on people’s lives. Additionally, his lack of faith in humanity is undermined by his love for Olga and it is only by losing her that he comes to realise this and affirm his aesthetic self.

Once Olga leaves, he returns home and senses a new chapter in his life beginning because everything that mattered to him previously now seems empty (66). All his road maps are spread on the floor and suddenly mean nothing to him, despite representing years of work, so he buys waste bags and packs them up ready for disposal. Years later when he was very famous, he was often asked what it meant to be an “*artist*”. His answer was to be someone who was “*submissive*” as you need to submit yourself to “mysterious, unpredictable messages” that could best be referred to as “*intuitions*”. Obeying these messages was essential to retain one’s integrity or self-respect if it involved destroying your work to go in a new direction or no direction at all. Consequently, the artist’s condition was “*difficult*” which demarcates itself from other professions and trades that Jed would paint in the second part of his career (66-7).

Jed’s aesthetic self falls into a further bout of disalienation due to his love for Olga and makes him reflect further on his life and work as an artist. His musings on what it means to be an artist in relation to submitting to your intuitions is part of the affirmation of our creative and productive powers, our species-being, in the development of our aesthetic selves. Jed sees this as peculiar to the artist and not present in the other professions or trades that he will paint but as Marx points out in his discussion of Stirner, this is because the division of labour restricts all individuals in developing their intuitions in this way. Artistic talent becomes concentrated in particular individuals and suppressed in the broad mass of people and it is only in communist society that this narrowness can be overcome. Then we can have a world, as Marx explains, where we have no painters but only people who engage in painting among other activities as they affirm their aesthetic selves.

The destruction of his own work might be the realisation that this is a shallow art form and subject matter compared to what he will soon take up with painting and his professions project. As Marx indicates, the division of labour and demand for an artist's work determines the extent of how successful they will be in developing their talents. Jed's was determined via the Michelin organisation which was parasitic on them and thereby increased demand. It could be, as Marx also rebukes Stirner for, that Jed perceived that his art was not unique due to this dependency on the division of labour in society. This reliance, however, is inevitable in capitalism and will also be present after another epiphany that encourages Jed to return to painting.

Once he disposes of the photos, Jed rings Forestier and notifies him of his decision, which he receives phlegmatically but asks him for a meeting the following morning (67). Once there, Forestier informs Jed that Michelin will put a message on the internet site saying this phase of his work is over but some prints are still for sale, despite Jed's intervention that there were not many left (68). Forestier then adds, on an optimistic note, that they will always publicise the Michelin maps have been critically acclaimed as part of an artwork, to which Jed concurs. Forestier repeats his early refrain that it was always a "win-win" between them in terms of Jed pursuing aesthetic value and accruing exchange-value indirectly, while the Michelin brand was re-invented and prospered by these means. Such are the contradictions of affirming your aesthetic self in capitalism.

A Series of Simple Professions

After a few weeks of inactivity, Jed meets Franz Teller, a gallery owner who has been following Jed's work almost from the beginning (69). Franz is educated and resembles a "Belgian situationist, or a proletarian intellectual" and his "strong worn hands" reveal a

background in manual labour. Returning to Franz's gallery, they visit a cafe that that they will frequent repeatedly in the future and from where that Jed got the idea for his "'Series of Simple Professions'" paintings. The place serves cheap wine and food for the final "'working class'" pensioners of the 13th arrondissement who were dying off and not being replaced by a new clientele.

Franz compliments Jed on how differently he sees things and how interesting he found his work on the Michelin maps but confesses that he would not have taken him in his gallery then because he seemed over confident. When he read that Jed had stopped doing the maps, he decided to meet and represent him. Jed is unsure he wants to continue with art but Franz is resolved. He informs Jed that he is interested in "personality, a view of the artistic gesture, of its situation in society" rather than a "particular art form or *manner*". For Franz, even if Jed wrote on a piece of paper that he refused to do art again, he would exhibit it in his gallery because he interests him. Franz confesses that he is not an intellectual but tries to appear to be one because it is useful in his milieu. He has had luck in picking his artists but always does so from his intuition and this links to Jed's definition of an artist. Jed suggests that only artists have this capacity but Franz, from an apparently proletarian background, also has it and has used it to develop his aesthetic self in terms of the appreciation of art.

Jed's alienated state continues after a visit to Franz's gallery (71). He wanders around Paris, getting lost twice before finally reaching home. This pattern continues weekly and he often needs to consult a map to return home. Ironically, the map is now in the form of a use-value as a guide for a journey rather than Jed's aestheticisation of it in his photography. His walks were "robotic" with no intuitions formulating in his brain and no new artistic project occupying him; fatigue was the result (73).

One day, he finds himself outside Olga's old flat, an inevitable occurrence due to the automatic nature of his ramblings but it still shocks him (73). He reaches the Jardin de Luxembourg and slumps on a bench next to the "red-brick pavilion, adorned with mosaics, which occupies one of the corners of the garden". The sun is setting in the distance and its glow is enveloping the chestnut trees creating "an extraordinary orangey warm shade" like "an Indian yellow", which causes Jed to remember the words of the song "'Jardin de Luxembourg'" that describes a life without love. He recalls how Olga worshipped the melancholic songs of Joe Dassin. Jed shivers at the thought and feels an "irrepressible crisis coming on" and another song, "'Hello Lovers'" comes to his mind and makes him weep. The words convey the love of his relationship with Olga and its demise: "Of farewells that come a little too easy" (74). An epiphany is working through his consciousness that will offer a transcendence of his alienated self.

Jed enters a cafe and orders a bourbon. The alcohol comforts him but his melancholy returns and he starts crying again. The place is full with law students but they ignore him so he weeps in peace. When he leaves, he takes a wrong turning and in a "state of numb semi-consciousness" arrives by accident at the Sennelier Frère art shop. The display in the window has brushes, canvases and tubes of colour. Jed enters and "without thinking" buys a basic oil painting kit in a wooden box. It was these circumstances that led Jed to "'return to painting'" and caused such a stir in the art world (74). He has had another epiphany in the transcendence and reconstitution of his aesthetic self, which seems to have been triggered by Olga, his lost love.

In his resumption of painting the first canvases were *Ferdinand Desroches, Horse Butcher* and then *Claude Vorilhon, Bar-Tabac Manager*, both professions in decline (75). Art

historians later indicated that Jed's choice here could seem to be nostalgic for a previous age in French history but this was not his intention. Rather, he realises that these occupations were "going to disappear soon" so "it was important to fix their images on canvas while there was still time". Indeed, his third painting, *Maya Dubois, Remote Maintenance Assistant*, was related to "*just-in-time production*" that dominated economic production in the West. So Jed is developing an aesthetic archive of the relations of production in his depictions of the division of labour in its various forms in the history of capitalism.

The first monograph devoted to Jed's work by Wong Fu Xin, interpreted his painting by an "analogy based on colorimetry" where the colours of the objects in the world are presented by a minimum number of primary colours (75-6). A realistic representation can be achieved by using three colours but more could be used to make the representation "more extensive and subtle" (76). Xin also relates this to a certain number of typical professions, between ten and twenty, who recreate the productive conditions of a society. In Jed's work, the part devoted to the "Simple Professions" as art historians have called it, numbers forty-two and offers a "spectrum of analysis that is particularly extensive and rich" of the productive conditions of his society. His next output, twenty-two paintings as part of the "Series of Business Compositions", attempts to "give a relational and dialectical image of the functioning of the economy as a whole". Jed's affirmation of his aesthetic self was to aesthetically preserve the history of capitalism with the depiction of labour and capital. Just as Marx said we look back on previous art to understand the nature of the world they originate in and appreciate their beauty, Jed is doing a similar task in his homage to human labour.

Jed isolates himself and takes seven years to complete the “Simple Professions” series, culminating in his masterpiece, “*Bill Gates and Steve Jobs Discussing the Future of Information Technology*, subtitled *The Conversation at Palo Alto*” (76-7). Jed made the twenty-two paintings of the “Series of Business Compositions” in just eighteen months, a remarkable accomplishment given their complexity and wide format. Surprisingly, Jed could not complete the painting *Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons Dividing Up the Art Market*, which would have corresponded to his portrait of Gates and Jobs. Xin sees Jed’s failure here as the reason for his return to his “Series of Simple Professions” for his sixty-fifth and final painting as Jed decided he wanted to give an “exhaustive view of the productive sector of society of his time”. He resolves to paint an artist, which will be Houellebecq, who he goes to visit in Shannon to ask him to write the catalogue for his new exhibition and where they begin to discuss the nature of Jed’s art.

Jed considers his move from photography to painting (90). He contends that photography is just portraying objects but once you decide to have human beings as your subject then they must be painted although he cannot say exactly why (92). Jed continues this theme by considering the landscape outside Houellebecq’s house which he would photograph despite realising how beautiful the Impressionists would capture this scene with their watercolours. Nevertheless, Jed suggests that if there was a human being in the scene, however seemingly inconsequential such as a peasant working in the distance, then he would choose to paint it. He knows that this sounds preposterous because some people say the subject is not important and it is ludicrous to make the “treatment depend on the subject being treated”. Yet that is Jed’s conclusion and Houellebecq sympathises by proclaiming that this rejection of the subject is the “formalist point of view” that is “present in writers too” but is “even more widespread in the visual arts”. Jed argues that “from one painting to another” he has tried to

“construct an artificial, symbolic space” to “depict situations that have a meaning for the group” and why his work is “situated entirely in the social”. Whereas others may be returning to painting for commercial reasons, he clearly is not and despite slipping into moments of disalienation his aesthetic self is embedded in the social and what it means for the group, adding an ethical dimension to his artistic endeavours. This becomes even clearer once we consider his portrait of Hirst and Koons. Hence, there is a deep humanist ethics operating in Jed’s aesthetic self despite his continued disenchantment with people and the world in general.

Dividing Up the Art Market

The “dividing up the art market” in the title of the painting indicates the contempt that Jed has for their art, which becomes clear as they pose for him. Both are wearing black suits, Koons’ is pin-striped, and symbolic of businessmen rather than artists (1). Jed reflects on depicting them and concludes that Hirst was easy to portray because you could make him “brutal, cynical in an ‘I shit on you from the top of my pile of dosh’ kind of way”. Jed also regards Hirst as a “*rebel artist* (but rich all the same) pursuing an *anguished work on death*”. His face was “ruddy and heavy, typically English, which made him resemble a rank-and-file Arsenal supporter” and a “British artist typical of his generation”. Jed, of course, has attained richness himself, first in his photography which he now denigrates, but then in his more authentic aesthetic self with his painting. It seems that for Jed, Hirst’s work or that of the generation of British artists was not really art.

Jed also ridicules Koons who he sees as having a dual character: “an insurmountable contradiction between the basic cunning of the technical sales rep and the exaltation of the ascetic”. Jed muses that depicting Koons “was as difficult as painting a Mormon

pornographer”, so contradictory is his character (2). Additionally, Koons has the “appearance of a Chevrolet convertible salesman” that “he had decided to display to the world”. The implication is that both Koons and Hirst are interested in art more for its exchange-value than anything else.

He takes the painting back to his studio, awakes in the middle of the night and, “a little despite himself”, examines it and is filled with deep dissatisfaction (12). He looks “morosely at his failed painting” and deduces that Koons with his “pinstriped suit and salesman’s smile” resembles Silvio Berlusconi (12-13). Jed then reflects that Koons was number 2 on the ArtPrice ranking of the richest artists consistently whereas Jed was 593 ten years ago but 17 in France (13). Scrutinising the picture again, he concludes that he has used the wrong colours and “was making a truly shit painting”. He seizes a palette knife and cuts open Hirst’s eye, forcing the gash as wide as possible. Stamping on the canvas, he falls back and bangs his head, realising in the process that this cycle of his work was over. As Xin deduced earlier, Jed’s failure to complete this painting was incredible because it would have complimented perfectly the Gates and Jobs one, but that is precisely why Jed cannot do it. He sees Hirst and Koons as two artistic capitalists and a mirror image of the real capitalists Gates and Jobs. Hirst and Koons are a negation of their aesthetic selves because they have allowed themselves to be ruled by exchange-value rather than aesthetic use-value, despite the rebelliousness of Hirst and the asceticism of Koons. With Gates and Jobs, however, Jed wants to aesthetically preserve them as representations of capitalism and we can see why with Houellebecq’s analysis of that picture for the catalogue.

A Brief History of Capitalism

Houellebecq's catalogue is considered an "historical curiosity" but it still has "some interesting intuitions" about Jed's work (122). Houellebecq detects a "unity" to Jed's art deriving from the first phase of his life that identified the "essence of the world's manufactured products", whereas the second period focused on the producers of these products. For Houellebecq, Jed is not a committed political artist but rather an ethnologist of the society of his time. He depicts people with a form of detachment in a "simple and direct way". Even his rendering of the traders in his painting of *The Stock Exchange Flotation of Shares in Beate Uhse* is not overtly derogatory. He shows them just as they are in their trainers and hooded sweatshirts, as "direct descendants of the suited bourgeois who meet endlessly in the receptions directed by Fritz Lang in the Mabuse films". Houellebecq notes how Jed rarely allows himself "a poetic notation or a subtitle serving as commentary" except in one of his "most successful works, *Bill Gates and Steve Jobs Discussing the Future of Information Technology*, which he subtitled *The Conversation at Palo Alto*" (122-3). Jed is offering a work of autonomous art because it is political without being political and lacks tendentiousness leaving the viewer to make their own mind up on the meaning of the paintings.²⁶ Jed is certainly expressing his aesthetic self but as in all great artworks in a subliminal, probing fashion that impacts on the consciousness of the viewer.

Houellebecq analyses this painting focusing first on Gates who is sitting relaxed and happy in a wicker chair clothed in canvas trousers, khaki short-sleeved shirt and wearing flip-flops as though he is on holiday (123). "Only his metal-framed glasses, with their strongly magnifying lenses, recalled his past as a nerd". Houellebecq designates this image of him as the "intermediary Bill Gates" between his initial success as Microsoft began to dominate the globe and he became the world's richest man resplendent in a "sea-blue suit", and his second as a philanthropist and defender of the poor in Sri Lanka or West Africa. Jed captures

aesthetically in his image of Gates, this intense technological phase of capitalism and the riches that he has accrued to allow him to be a philanthropist. Such a trait is common to capitalists in a neoliberal age to show that they are a force for good and disguise the exploitative nature of their enterprises. Jed's affirmation of his creative powers and assertion of his species-being is as an aesthetic self that is in opposition to capitalism as depicted in the subliminal messages of the painting.

Houellebecq then surveys Jed's image of Jobs, cross-legged on the white leather sofa "paradoxically an embodiment of austerity, of the Sorge traditionally associated with Protestant capitalism". In contrast to Gates, there is nothing Californian about Jobs with his uncertain look and holding his jaw as if he was pondering on some difficulty. Jed had made Jobs wear an Hawaiian shirt but this could not disguise the "general sadness produced by his slightly slumped position, and by the expressing of disarray" on his face. The meeting occurred in Steve Jobs' home which is bedecked in "coolly designed white furniture and brightly coloured ethnic draperies" that constituted the "aesthetic universe of the founder of Apple", contrasting starkly with the home of Bill Gates in the Seattle suburbs with its "high-tech gadgets, at the limit of science fiction". Focusing back on the painting, there is a chess board with "hand-crafted wooden pieces sat on a coffee table". The game was interrupted at a stage that was unfavourable to Jobs who was playing the blacks (124). Jed's depiction of the chess set is important here as part of affirming his aesthetic self as a critique of capitalism, which to them is nothing more than a game of chess between their competing corporations of Microsoft and Apple. The chess pieces are symbolic of the workers that create their products and who they exploit. Moreover, these are "hand-crafted" chess pieces and symbolically represent the expression of human labour in their creation which Jed's art gives homage to.

Houellebecq refers to Bill Gates' autobiography, *The Road Ahead*, where occasionally the façade of his work is exposed by "total cynicism", especially when he maintains that offering an innovative product is not necessarily of benefit to a business. Instead, the advice is to watch your competitors, by which implicitly he means Apple, let them produce their products, see how they deal with any innovative problems, copy them and flood the market with cheaper versions. Such cynicism is not part of Gates' nature, rather it is present in the "almost touching passages" where he reaffirms "his faith in capitalism, in the mysterious 'invisible hand'" and his "absolute unshakeable conviction", irrespective of the problems that may occur, that "the market is always right" and "identical to the general good". Here the "fundamental truth about Bill Gates appears" because he is a "creature of faith, and it is this faith, this candour of the sincere capitalist" that Jed portrayed in him, with his "arms open wide, warm and friendly, his glasses gleaming in the last rays of the sun setting on the Pacific Ocean". In contrast, the other face of capitalism, Steve Jobs riddled with illness, with a dishevelled and stubble-haired face, leaning on his right hand as if in sorrow, resembled one of those travelling evangelists who has preached persistently to a tiny and "indifferent" audience and is now endowed with doubt.

Ironically, Houellebecq deduces that it was Jobs, "motionless, weakened, in losing position, who gave impression of being master of the game", which was the "profound paradox" of the painting. Jobs' eyes still contained the passion indicative of "preachers and prophets" but also of those inventors created by Jules Verne. Houellebecq's close analysis of the chess pieces that Jed has depicted indicate that Jobs could win if he played certain moves (124-5). Additionally, it could be inferred that Jobs could "impose new norms on the market" with his "brilliant intuition" of developing a new product (125).

Houellebecq notes that beyond the initial scene, in the distance is the Pacific Ocean with its endless golden-brown waves and on the lawn there were young girls playing Frisbee. The sun was setting and Jed had tried to capture it in its “improbable...orangey magnificence”. The evening “was falling on the most advanced part of the world” as was the “indefinite sadness of farewells, which could be read in Jobs” eyes”. The mention “orangey” relates back to Jed’s epiphany in the Jardin de Luxembourg that made him return to painting. It is here now as symbol for the end of capitalism.

Houellebecq concludes that these two “convinced supporters of the market economy” and “resolute supporters of the Democratic Party” were ultimately “two opposing facets of capitalism”. They were as “different as a banker in Balzac could be from Verne’s engineer”. Houellebecq’s summation is that the subtitle of the painting was far too modest because instead of being called *The Conversation at Palo Alto*, it should have been named *A Brief History of Capitalism*. Jed has covered the different stages of capitalism aesthetically with his professions’ paintings from industrial labour to post-Fordist production, and with his portrayals of the high priests of an incessant technological capitalism. He has asserted his aesthetic self in his homage to human labour and portrayed a critical stance against those who attempt to control and exploit it. His art as ethics has been part of his own life and reproduced in his work.

Ironically, the Gates and Jobs picture is offered for purchase at around one and a half million euros by an American broker who works for Jobs (133). Franz explains to Jed that the art market has been dominated by the richest businessmen in the world but for the first time they not only buy “what is the most avant-garde in the aesthetic domain” but can also “buy a painting that portrays themselves”. Franz tells him that he has been inundated from

businessmen and industrialists who all want Jed to paint a picture of them, concluding that we have “returned to the time of Ancien Régime court painting”. Yet in Jed’s case he is, in the Gates and Jobs painting, undermining their grandiose images of themselves symbolically as Houellebecq’s and my analysis has shown. His initial impulse for asserting his aesthetic self was not a concern for exchange-value but the aesthetic use-value of the artwork as an ethical affirmation of the importance of human labour and as a critical stance against those who throughout history have attempted to exploit it.

The narrator concludes that one interpretation of the work that constituted the last thirty years of Jed’s life was a “nostalgic meditation on the end of the industrial age in Europe and, more generally, on the perishable and transitory nature of any human history” (291). Yet this was now an “ideologically strange period” because people in Western Europe now realised that capitalism was “doomed” and was “living through its very last years”, albeit without any of the “ultra-left parties” being able to attract anyone to their cause except “their usual clientele of spiteful masochists” (270). It was as though a “veil of ashes” was now “spread over people’s minds”, Jed among them. Even the portraits of the human beings he had painted now fragment under the impact of bad weather and then “decompose and disappear”, which in his last work on videos seems to symbolise ‘the generalised annihilation of the human species’. Against humanity all that is left is the total victory of vegetation.

Conclusion

Starting with Marx’s views on art, I have attempted to construct an art as ethics that shows humans to be creative beings that try to affirm their human essence under the constraints of the division of labour and the subordination of all our relationships and activities to the rule of exchange value that capitalism imposes on us. The movement between alienation and

-
- ¹² Marx & Engels, *The German Ideology*, 393
- ¹³ Marx & Engels, *The German Ideology*, 394.
- ¹⁴ Marx & Engels, *The German Ideology*, 395.
- ¹⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 486. Cf. Mikhail Lifshitz, *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx*. (London: Pluto), 88.
- ¹⁶ Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, 487.
- ¹⁷ Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, 487 n.55.
- ¹⁸ Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, 487 n.56.
- ¹⁹ Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, 487.
- ²⁰ Lifshitz, *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx*, 88-9.
- ²¹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 110.
- ²² Marx, *Grundrisse*, 111
- ²³ Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, Part One. (London: Lawrence and Wishart), 298.
- ²⁴ Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, Part One, 401.
- ²⁵ Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, Part One, 411.
- ²⁶ Theodor Adorno, 'Commitment', in Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, Volume Two. (Columbia University Press: New York, 1992), 93.