Songs of Eros: The Blues of Bessie Smith

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Abstract
The aim of this article is to demonstrate how Bessie Smith's Classic Blues exemplifies the potential for change through the aesthetic dimension. We will reference the works Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud, An Essay on Liberation, and The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics by Herbert Marcuse to illustrate how music possesses a persuasive power over the minds, souls, and bodies of listeners. Additionally, we will utilize Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday by Angela Davis, which presents the Blues as a means for expressing and transmitting the ideas and thoughts of Black women, capable of provoking changes in African American consciousness. Bessie Smith, one of the best-known singers of Classic Blues, is featured in this article. The singer preserved an African heritage in her songs that was presented to African Americans, serving as an incentive for alternative models of behavior and attitudes towards the established norms.
Key words: Angela Davis, Herbert Marcuse, Eros and Civilization, Blues, Aesthetics.

Canciones de Eros: El blues de Bessie Smith

Resumen
El objetivo de este artículo es demostrar cómo el blues clásico de Bessie Smith ejemplifica el potencial de cambio a través de la dimensión estética. Haremos referencia a las obras Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud, An Essay on Liberation y The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics de Herbert Marcuse para ilustrar cómo la música posee un poder persuasivo sobre las mentes, almas y cuerpos de los oyentes. Además, utilizaremos Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday de Angela Davis, que presenta el blues como un medio para expresar y transmitir las ideas y pensamientos de las mujeres negras, capaz de provocar cambios en la conciencia afroamericana. Bessie Smith, una de las cantantes más conocidas de blues clásico, aparece en este artículo. La cantante preservó una herencia africana en sus canciones que fue presentada a los afroamericanos, sirviendo como incentivo para modelos alternativos de comportamiento y actitudes hacia las normas establecidas.
Palabras clave: Angela Davis, Herbert Marcuse, Eros y Civilización, blues, estética.

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Songs of Eros: The Blues of Bessie Smith

Listen to my story and everything'll come out true
(Blue, blue -Bessie Smith)

Classic Female Blues can be seen as an example of how changes are possible through the aesthetic dimension. The music sung by Black women fostered a sense of community among them, of communion and unity in a common condition that was expressed through the lyrics of the songs. Blues was a form of cultural expression for Black women in the early 20th century, capable of uniting diverse listeners by speaking of the indescribable, that which would otherwise be banished from the realm of language (Davis, 1998).

Angela Davis, in her work *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle* (2018), states that "when Black women move, the entire political and social structure moves in society" (Davis, 2018; p.9). The Blues songs pointed to the signs and traces of this movement, as well as enabling the emergence of modifications in African American consciousness. Music serves as a vehicle for the expression of ideas produced by women and presents itself as a means of transmitting thoughts that can reach not only Black women. The songs were able to translate the laments and desires of Black people and express them collectively, creating a communal discourse about the racial experience in the United States during the early decades of the 20th century.

Music can have a revolutionary and subversive character by breaking away from the current reality and protesting against social relations as they exist in contemporary times. Through the songs of Classic Female Blues, it is possible for the given reality to be transcended and for a horizon of change to become visible. Herbert Marcuse, in his work *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (1978), presents the possibility for art to "extrapolate the given reality in the name of a truth that is normally denied or even unprecedented" (MARCUSE, 1979, p.7). Art has the capacity to destroy the established reality that defines what is real. The philosopher emphasizes music as having persuasive power over the minds

and bodies of listeners, arguing that musical experiences have the potential to awaken a new sensitivity, a new consciousness, and a new rationality.

The work *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freud's Thought* (1955) presents the recovery of Eros by Marcuse to think about an aesthetic dimension of human existence. The author finds in Freud the perception of humans' ability to internalize and reproduce, even if unconsciously, the repression of impulses. Drawing from concepts developed by the psychoanalyst, such as the pleasure principle and the reality principle, Marcuse contextualizes his aesthetic theory by highlighting the emergence of a technological rationality derived from the increasing development of technology. This technological rationality leads individuals to conformism, provides a false sense of well-being, and weakens the possibilities for revolt. Art is then presented as possessing the ability to reconcile reason and sensitivity, thereby guiding individuals toward another principle of reality in which freedom, beauty, and happiness would prevail, and the world would be predominantly erotic.

By embodying a political potential, art can transcend established social relations. This transcendence "breaks with the dominant consciousness and thus revolutionizes experience" (Marcuse, 1979, p.11). Marcuse argues that art is revolutionary in several ways and highlights the possibility of art not only facilitating a change in style and/or technique but also exposing the absence of freedom, breaking with the given reality, and presenting the possibility of transformation and liberation. Therefore, all art should be revolutionary by corrupting the dominant forms of perception of the world and thereby revealing the possibility of liberation. It is important to emphasize that for the author, art should not be political, as the orthodox Marxists argued; for the philosopher, a work of art can be potentially political only in its aesthetic dimension, and "the more immediately political the artwork is, the more it reduces the power of detachment and the radical, transcendent objectives of change" (Marcuse, 1979, p.14).

Upon reaching subjectivity and facilitating a change in consciousness, or even the appropriation of it, art enables individuals to free themselves from the constraints established by material relations of production and to enter another dimension—one of their own subjectivities. Marcuse argues for the possibility of art transcending its social determination, thus introducing "another reason, another sensitivity, which challenge the rationality and sensitivity incorporated in dominant institutions" (Marcuse, 1979, p. 19). The Marcusean aesthetic, from a socio-historical perspective, posits the necessity of an aesthetic transformation that would only be feasible in a free society. Art is attributed the capacity to engender such a society, and, for the philosopher, it possesses revolutionary potential as it is related to Eros, the life drive that stimulates creativity and pleasure, opposing the principle of reality.

Although Marcuse's thought is rooted in Freudian theories, he differentiates himself from Freud by not limiting the pleasure principle to libido and sexual desire. In "Eros and Civilization," he defends the life drive as something distinct from genital impulses. The pursuit of happiness and human sensitivity are related to the life drive just as much as pleasure and libido are.

Regarding the reality principle, Freud characterized it as manifesting in institutions as a repressive impulse of civilization. For Marcuse, the reality principle generates an alienated subject within the depths of rationality. The consumer society we inhabit is built on the technological growth of civilization combined with the domination of nature; this required the subjugation of human impulses and the establishment of a lack of freedom under the guise of false liberty.

The reality principle leads to the sublimation of our life drive, of the pleasure principle, of Eros. However, Marcuse argues that it is possible to transcend the reality principle through art. The pleasure principle can be satisfied through art, as it is grounded in fantasy, which in turn exists in a region of consciousness untouched by the reality principle, thus remaining free from the repression it imposes. It is important to note that while art inherently embodies the possibility of happiness

and freedom, this essence is obstructed by the historical development of the reality principle and the associated repression.

In *An Essay on Liberation* (1969), Marcuse advocates for the necessity of new political, moral, and aesthetic categories to conduct a critical analysis of society. Initially guided by the paradox of one-dimensional society, which produces excessive commodities for consumption while simultaneously generating hunger and misery for those who do not fit as consumers, the philosopher emphasizes the need for a radical change in consciousness. Only after such a radical shift can one consider transforming social existence.

Marcuse proposes establishing a new sensitivity that will act as a political force "expressing the affirmation of life instincts over aggression and guilt, fostering, on a social scale, the vital urgency of abolishing injustice and misery, and shaping the evolution of the 'standard of living'" (Marcuse, 1969, p. 43). Art has the capacity to reveal the new sensitivity proposed by Marcuse, as it exists within the context of social relations while also being able to transcend them. The author argues that the artwork, as a whole, defines its revolutionary potential; thus, the aesthetic dimension of the work embodies its revolution, independent of the artist's social class or the "presence or absence of the oppressed class in their works" (Marcuse, 1979, p. 28).

"Art has its own language and illuminates reality through this alternative mode of expression. Furthermore, art possesses its own dimension of affirmation and negation, a dimension that cannot be ordered in relation to the social process of production" (Marcuse, 1979, p. 31). This capacity allows art to critique and transcend existing social norms, revealing deeper truths and potentialities beyond the constraints of conventional discourse.

Marcuse emphasized the revolutionary potential of art but clarified that he did not advocate for engaged art. For him, art must be autonomous, as it is in this autonomy that its power to effect societal change resides. Artworks are expressions of a collective consciousness rather than representations of a specific class. While art

can highlight the need for liberation and reveal the necessity for change, it must adhere to its own laws rather than the prevailing laws of reality. "Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and impulses of men and women, who could then change the world" (Marcuse, 1979, p. 39). Art encapsulates aesthetic sublimation, allowing the norms of the reality principle to be transformed, thereby enabling an experience of a demystified world, in Marcuse's words,

> The intensification of perception can reach a point where the unspeakable is articulated, the invisible becomes visible, and the unbearable erupts. Thus, aesthetic transformation becomes both a denunciation and a celebration of what resists injustice and terror, as well as what can still be salvaged (Marcuse, 1979, p. 49).

This duality reflects art's capacity to challenge oppressive realities while simultaneously affirming hope and resilience in the face of adversity. Although the world of a work of art is fictitious, it is not independent of the given reality, the feelings, dreams, and actions of human beings; thus, the world of the artwork is always linked to reality. Because art is rooted in fantasy, its world is often more truthful than that of the given reality. In the illusion provided by the aesthetic experience, the reification of everyday life becomes apparent. It is through the illusion afforded by art that truth emerges, as the prevailing reality is false. Since the world governed by the reality principle is one of unhappiness and repression of Eros, truth is found only in the realm of art. Art allows access to other possibilities of existence, and for this reason, Marcuse considers it an instrument for social revolution.

Blues, as both a form and aesthetic phenomenon, can be understood as how Black individuals articulated and documented the lack of real and attainable possibilities for social transformation within the established reality. This style solidified not only in Black communities but also reached and resonated with white

audiences, even in a racially segregated country. In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (1998), Angela Davis illustrates how the queens of classic female blues led the struggle for the rights of Black women, and through their music, facilitated profound changes in the consciousness of these women. Most of these singers hailed from the southern United States, bringing with them religious and folkloric traditions expressed in some of their songs. These artists encouraged alternative models of behavior and attitude for Black women, promoted a shift in perceptions about them, and changed how these women were viewed. They preserved and disseminated the cultural and ancestral heritage of African Americans throughout the country.

In her analysis of the singers, Davis captures and presents the political aesthetics of blues by examining the key messages conveyed in the songs and the prevalent themes in the lyrics of "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday: the social ills affecting Black individuals, particularly those related to social relationships and the sadness caused by certain romantic entanglements. Sexual freedom and travel were also recurring themes in the classic female blues songs, challenging the notion of the place women were expected to occupy in society, as they had previously been relegated solely to the domestic sphere.

> It is important to note that the dominant notions and ideas about women and their roles in society were not based on the realities of Black, poor, and immigrant women. Middle-class white women often took their own experiences as universal and applicable to all women. While the realities of Black and poor women were entirely different, many sought to attain the ideal imposed by white women (Davis, 1998).

Davis analyzed how "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday expressed social protest, same-sex relationships, romantic relationships, and a revolutionary ideology in their music. By emphasizing the political aesthetics of blues, the author noted that the themes presented in the songs were profoundly significant, revealing

a multitude of issues common to Black, poor, immigrant, and working-class women in America. The lyrics of classic female blues articulate the deepest memories of cultural experiences shared among Black individuals.

In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Davis highlights incarceration as a recurring theme in the lives of a disproportionate number of Black individuals, emphasizing this issue through songs like "Chain Gang Blues" by "Ma" Rainey and "Jail House Blues" by Bessie Smith. Although Bessie Smith was never imprisoned, she wrote several songs addressing the theme of incarceration. Her lyrics recount experiences of physical imprisonment for non-violent or petty crimes, alongside confessions of her own minor offenses, such as her love for gin, despite its prohibition during Prohibition.

Davis presents some of Smith's lyrics as pedagogical, establishing a connection between addiction, petty crimes, and the physical imprisonment of Black individuals from the perspective of a Black woman. These songs tell the story of African Americans and the social restrictions imposed upon them, primarily depicting Black alienation, citizenship, and deferred dreams. Through their laments, blues songs effectively denounce the racism of the era.

The song *Jail House Blues* (1923) speaks to the experience of loneliness faced by a Black woman in prison, beginning with Smith's line, "Lord, this house is gonna get raided, yes, sir!" This foreshadows her potential imprisonment, reflecting a common reality for Black individuals. The song then recounts the incarceration, expressing the inmate's isolation and indignation over the loss of friends. Davis highlights the powerful analogy between prison and slavery, marked by solitude and the inability to form lasting relationships with other Black individuals. Smith's lyrics convey the feeling of being forgotten, as incarcerated Black women often feel abandoned by their families and friends.

"Blues songs serve as reminders to Black individuals about the prison-industrial complex as a new form of slavery, warning them about their reality" (Davis, 1998, p. 71). Bessie Smith, one of the most renowned classic blues singers,

primarily sang about love, creating a shared experience that resonated with Black women. She became a musical icon not only for her unique vocal expressiveness but also for preserving an African heritage that encouraged alternative models of behavior and attitude toward Black women.

In "Poor Man's Blues" (1928), Smith denounces poverty and its ethical dilemmas, illustrating the paradox of American wars fought for freedom while enslaving the Black soldiers who served in them. The despair, sadness, and pain left as legacies of these wars and Jim Crow laws are poignantly revealed in her music.

> Mister rich-man, rich-man, open up your heart and mind
> Mister rich-man, rich-man, open up your heart and mind
> Give the poor man a chance, help stop these hard, hard times
> While you're livin' in your mansion you don't know what hard times mean
> While you're livin' in your mansion you don't know what hard times means
> Poor working man's wife is starvin', your wife is livin' like a queen
> Please, listen to my pleading, 'cause I can't stand these hard times long
> Oh, listen to my pleading, can't stand these hard times long
> They'll make a honest man do things that you know is wrong
> Poor man fought all the battles, poor man would fight again today
> Poor man fought all the battles, poor man would fight again today
> He would do anything you ask him in the name of the U.S.A.
> Now the war is over, poor man must live the same as you
> Now the war is over, poor man must live the same as you
> If it wasn't for the poor man, mister rich-man what would you do?
> (Davis, 1998, p.327. Canção de Bessie Smith).

Smith portrays poverty as a catalyst for criminal activity, suggesting that the resulting effects of poverty often lead to imprisonment: "Please, listen to my pleading, 'cause I can't stand these hard times long (...) They'll make an honest man do things that you know is wrong." While laden with irony, these lyrics address a

dilemma faced by Black individuals, particularly war veterans, expressing a shared sentiment about the social restrictions repeatedly imposed on African Americans throughout the twentieth century. This expression of feeling allows for a collective response from the audience that could shape future actions against oppressive conditions.

The classic female blues singers communicated typically feminine responses to the impositions and restrictions placed on women. Bessie Smith's lyrics describe the perspective of being a Black woman, a viewpoint often rendered invisible by both white women and men. According to Patricia Hill-Collins, "African American women experience the pain of never being able to measure up to extremely defined beauty standards—standards imposed on us by white men, white women, Black men, and, more painfully, each other" (Collins, 2019, p. 80).

Smith also has songs that depict the loneliness of women while simultaneously encouraging them, as in "Long Old Road" (1931), where she sings: "[Y]ou can't trust nobody, you might as well be alone" (Davis, 1998, p. 308). In "Wasted Life Blues" (1929), she captures the experience of a woman who feels utterly alone, further reflecting the struggles faced by many Black women in their pursuit of identity and community amidst societal neglect.

> No father to guide me, no mother to care
> Must bear my trobles all alone
> Not even a brother to help me share
> This burden I must bear alone. (Davis, 1998, p. 349).

Davis emphasizes the significance of female blues singers portraying the sexuality of Black women as a form of affirmation of their confidence. In the early 1900s, Black women asserting their sexual freedom were directly challenging the societal norms of the time. Sexual freedom was one of the few liberties available to Black women post-abolition, as they gained the ability to choose their partners (Davis, 1998, p. 4).

Classic blues singers provided their listeners with the impetus to embrace self-confidence, allowing the female community to engage aesthetically with ideas and experiences that were often inaccessible in the so-called real world. This artistic expression enabled women to explore their identities and desires, fostering a sense of empowerment and agency that resonated deeply within their lives.

> Blues as a genre marked a significant point in African American historical development, emerging at a time when Black communities seemed receptive to various new possibilities. This musical form, with its implicit celebration of exploration and transformation, held special meaning for African American women. It provided them with the opportunity to challenge the social norms that dictated women's roles within their communities and society at large (Davis, 1998, p. 74).

Through blues, women could assert their identities, express their desires, and carve out spaces for themselves outside traditional constraints, ultimately contributing to broader movements for social change. Classic female blues expresses a collective will and the spiritual and physical needs of Black people, particularly Black women. As an aesthetic form and phenomenon, the genre can be understood as a means of articulating the lack of real and attainable possibilities for social transformation within the established reality. The songs serve as an encouragement for critical attitudes to emerge, inciting listeners to challenge imposed social conditions.

The lyrics exhibit a socializing character that acknowledges the shared nature of individual emotional experiences. Thus, classic female blues has a collective quality that enhances opportunities for self-affirmation, recognition, and individual resistance. In *Counter-Revolution and Revolt* (1973), Marcuse describes Black music as embodying the life and death of Black individuals: "the music is body; the aesthetic form is the 'gesture' of pain, suffering, grief, and protest" (Marcuse, 1973, p. 113).

The songs of Bessie Smith in classic blues give voice to the desires and dreams of Black women—desires that are often suppressed by the status quo. Music can

provoke an aesthetic experience that inspires and compels listeners toward action, fostering a movement for change.

Marcuse argues that aesthetic experience can evoke a sense of freedom within individuals. Art possesses its own language, articulating truths that are inaccessible to everyday language and perception, thus presenting a new way to organize reality. "Art alters experience, reconstructing the objects of experience" (Marcuse, 1969, p. 40).

The classic female blues of Bessie Smith exemplifies how Black women can experience freedom through music. The lyrics offer a new affirmation of femininity, independence, and Black strength that challenge established norms. As a type of experience distinct from those encountered in daily life, aesthetic experience is inherently transformative, allowing listeners to explore new identities and resist societal constraints.

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