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NEW ELEMENTS OF A THEORY OF
COMMODITY AESTHETICS

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COMMODITY AESTHETICS REVISITED

EXCHANGE RELATIONS AS THE SOURCE OF ANTAGONISTIC AESTHETIZATION¹

„Thus much of this, will make black white; foul, fair...“

This line from Shakespeare figures in a longer quotation in Marx' *Capital*, in the chapter on hoarding. The sentence to which the footnote with the Shakespeare quotation is attached, reads: „Just as in money every qualitative difference between commodities is extinguished, so too, for its part, as a radical leveller, it extinguishes all distinctions.“ (C I, 229) However, this is no complete description of what we find in the Shakespeare quote, which is taken from *Timon from Athens* and reads in full:

„Thus much of this, will make black white; foul, fair;
 Wrong right; base, noble; old, young; coward, valiant.
 What this, you gods? Why, this
 Will lug your priests and servants from your sides;
 Pluck stout men's pillows from below their heads;
 This yellow slave
 Will knit and break religions; bless the accurs'd;
 Make the hoar leprosy ador'd; place thieves,
 And give them title, knee and approbation,
 With senators on the bench; this is it,
 That makes the wappen'd widow wed again:
 Come damned earth,

¹ Written for the Radical Philosophy Conference „Shiny, Faster, Future -- Capitalism and Form“, London, Birkbeck College, 19.3.2005, first published in *Radical Philosophy*, January/February 2006.

"Thou common whore of mankind."

(Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*)

Gold, in Shakespeare's accusation, not only extinguishes determinations, but replaces them with their opposite. Some old order, in which everything finds its place according to inherent merits, is repressed by a new order in which money commands. But now Shakespeare, as before Marx, seems to be besides the point, because money may command but not in the binary perverting logic of changing all things into their opposites. We understand why Marx stresses the extinction of difference or the indifference effect.

The perverting power „to make black white“ recurs in *Capital*, where Marx speaks about adulteration of bread, referring to the origin, in the history of philosophy, of the term „sophistication“ in the Platonic critique of the Greek Enlighteners, the Sophists:

„In fact, this kind of ‘sophistry’ understands better than Protagoras to make white black, and black white, and better than the Eleatics how to demonstrate before your very eyes that everything real is merely apparent“ (*Capital*, I, 358).

Speaking about commodity aesthetics means to shed light into some of this sorcery.

I. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

My point of departure is the Marxian analysis of the exchange relation. Marx discovers an apparently circular structure of this everyday practice: a commodity is destined for sale, that is, the value that it represents must be realized -- the realization problem. What moves the buyer to exchange money

for the commodity is the use value. But the use values must be realized too and they are, as Marx says, „only realized in use or consumption“ (C I, 126). However, purchase and use are normally separated in both space and time. As a rule, use takes place after sale (if one excludes commodity samples). This leads to the following circle: the realization of use value is the presupposition of the act of purchase, and the act of purchase is the presupposition of the realization of use value - as in the story of the shoemaker from Berlin-Koepenick, who couldn't get a work permit without a residence permit, and no residence permit without a work permit. The shoemaker forced his exit from this circle by imaginary violence: he went to the costumier's and rented the uniform of a Prussian colonel, came back into the city hall of Koepenick and *ordered* them to give the permits. But where is the exit from the mutual presupposition/circle of buying and selling?

The astonishing thing is that this chicken-and-egg-aporia is 'forgotten' by Marx and left unsolved. He displaces the question to a further apparent problem, which lies in the fact that every owner of a commodity only acts for himself while producing for others. „But the same process cannot be simultaneously for all owners of commodities both exclusively individual and exclusively social and general“ (C I, 180). To show how this second circle is overcome, Marx introduces the concept of „general equivalent commodity“ as a genetic pre-stage of money. The „equivalent commodity“ - gold, for instance - is, on the one hand, a specific use value; on the other, it is always in the form of immediate exchangeability, and thus represents the social nature of private products.

But where is the exit from the first circle? „Ordinary language offers an answer [...]: The buyer buys a specific commodity, since he promises himself [to obtain] from it the use value he desires“ (Haug, 1980, 44). What sets the purchase in motion is the *use value promise*. But on which ground should I

promise myself that others will meet my needs? The answer seems obvious: what makes me *expect* use value are the *aspects* offered by the commodity.

This leads us to scrutinize two poles of the use value promise: one of subjective activity and the other of objective data of appearance, which motivate the former. In our perception of such ‘appearances’ we may be additionally influenced by their intersubjective interpretation (for instance, through ‘sales talk’). The relation of exchange, however, is an antagonistic one. In the literal sense of the Greek *antagonizomai*, exchange action is always opposed action, insofar as those who exchange represent opposite interests. The use value promise functions, in this antagonism, as a means of power. The ‘forcing effects’ of this power operate within myself. In this sense, Werner Sombart spoke of „inner compulsory means.“ How do they work?

To understand this, we have to take into account the ‘normal’ role of the ‘imaginary’ in our motivational structure. In this structure drives and needs are articulated with (and condensed within) images: ‘imagining’ ourselves we assume the glance of what George Herbert Mead has analyzed as the generalized (anonymous) other. Whenever we act we ‘fill out’ these imaginary spaces. Here, ‘imaginary’ does not mean ‘unreal’. As psychoanalysis and phenomenology have shown, we entertain an imaginary relation to reality.

The use value promise can deploy its real-imaginary power by affecting our self-image. Like the shoemaker from Koepenick, the commodity goes to the costumier's, though the uniform into which it changes in most cases is no military but a civil one; more often it is the uniform of intimacy. Never is it more in disguise than when it is naked. Deploying its imaginary powers, the commodity borders on illusion or even deception. In deception, the appearance of a use value becomes a deceptive appearance, detaches itself from its reference to reality as a mendacious illusion. The other person is

meant to take *appearance* for *being* and to fall for the ruse. Deception realizes itself as self-deception on the part of the other.²

To the extent that the relation of exchange is antagonistic, the boundaries of property have the effect of a filter of appropriation, which, like a window pane, only lets through specific information and sense data (the visual). The experience that not 'being' but 'appearance' sets off the act of purchase must sooner or later lead to the fixing of the „appearance of use value through abstraction of its reality“ as a special object of work, and its intentional processing by „purposeful activity“ (C I, 284; cf. Haug 1980, 48ff). „The aesthetic in its broadest sense - sensuous appearance and the sense of the use-value - here detaches itself from the thing. Domination and separate production of this aesthetic aspect turn into means for the end of money“ (Haug 1987, 106). That Marx forgot this first aporia may be due to the fact that commodity aesthetics under early industrial capitalism did not yet have the significance that it acquired almost immediately after his death, since the 1880s. In 1968, Theodor W Adorno concluded: „Beyond anything foreseeable in Marx' time, needs have finally become functions of the production apparatus“ (157).

In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, however, Marx says: „production precedes consumption, supply compels [erzwingt] demand“ (CW 6, 137; cf. MEW 4, 97). Nonetheless, Marx wastes no time on the thought of how this compelling of demand by supply is effected. In the *Grundrisse*, he touches on this question, where he reflects on the relation of the entrepreneurs to the

² Myths and fairy tales are full of figures which represent such relationships. The 'changeling' preserves something of the constant potentially deceptive character of exchange. In Latin, this is expressed by the split semantics of *alienatio* („exchanging away“ and „alienation“); in German, by the proximity of *tauschen* (to exchange) and *taeuschen* (to deceive). Greco-Roman antiquity represents this proximity in the union of interpretation, exchange and deception personified by the same god Hermes (see Platon, *Kratylos*, 407e-408a) - hence even the ambiguity of *hermeneutics*; and in Latin, Mercury (from *merx*, commodity), who is both god of the professional actors of exchange, the merchants, and of thieves. Socrates is basing this ambiguity on the same „faculty of speech“ (ibid.), from which, two thousand years later, Adam Smith derives exchange (*Wealth of Nations*, Book I, Ch. 2).

workers' world as one of consumers: The capitalist seeks here „all means to encourage them to consumption, seeking to give the commodity new charms, to persuade them of new needs“ (ibid., 189). Marx holds „this side of the relation of capital and labor“ to be „an essential moment of civilization [...] on which the historical justification, but also the present power of capital depends“ (ibid.).

But why doesn't Marx analyze *how* this ‘civilizational’ effect is reached by capital? The reason for this seems obvious: the forms in which commodity aesthetics had detached itself from the ‘body’ of the commodity were, in the second third of the 19th century, still marginal. At any rate, they interested Marx und Engels primarily as an everyday matter, to which they pointed in order to make their project of ideology-critique plausible to common sense: „Whilst in ordinary life every shopkeeper is very well able to distinguish between what somebody professes to be and what he really is, our historiography has not yet won this trivial insight“ (*The German Ideology*, CW 5, 62). While historians tend to fall for the deceptive features of their sources, in philosophy the deception tends to become self-organizing. „The label of a [philosophical] system distinguishes itself from that of other articles in that it, among other things, not only fools the buyer, but often also the salesman“ (*Capital*, II, MEW 24, 160). Also „factory-made and deceptive production [*Scheinproduktion*], deterioration in quality, adulteration of raw materials, falsification of labels, fictitious purchases“ are related metaphorically to „philosophical charlatany“ and „the tragicomic contrast between the illusions of these heroes about their achievements and the actual achievements themselves“ (*The German Ideology*, CW 5, 28; transl. corrected). „Adulteration“ means the blurred transition from commodity to commodity falsification.

How to understand such deceptiveness? Hannah Arendt argues against Marx's assumption that the development of productive forces and the creation of

new needs and disposable time leads, under adequate social relationships, to the development of personality: „A hundred years after Marx we know about the fallacy of this reasoning; the spare time of the *animal laborans* is never spent in anything but consumption, and the more time left to him, the greedier and more craving his appetites“ (1958, 133; cf. 1960, 120). Whoever speaks thus exempts his or her own hermeneutic community from the rule, without remarking thereby that the statement is weakened. Consumerism, which Adorno locates entirely in the process of late capitalism, where he sees needs as being „totally controlled“ (2003, 117; cf. 1968, 157), seems for Arendt to lie in human nature, since the necessary detour via the analysis of mediations is sacrificed to an anthropological short-circuit. The analytics of commodity aesthetics has to discover these mediations.

II. MODES OF EFFECTIVITY

Deception is fraud, as such widely disseminated, but always as „abuse“ or „excess“. The normal form is more important. The deception which is no deceit happens in the imaginary. An aesthetic mirror is held up to the senses by commodities or in connection with them. The Archimedean point of commodity aesthetics lies not in the commodities themselves, and not at all in their use value, but in the needs or desires of the prospective buyers. Those images to which these appetites are fixed, ‘stick’. Instead of an Archimedean point, one may therefore speak of an Archimedean ellipse of commodity aesthetics, which runs around the body of the commodity. Its two focal points lie outside it: the *organizing focus* forms the interest of valorization (*Verwertung*), the *material one* condenses the ensemble of desires which burn inside the human material. In the manifest aesthetic message, therefore, everything revolves around the addressed human subject. But this subject is only the

environment of a system which revolves around itself. Thus, the centrality of the subject is imaginary, or the imaginary aspects of the subject become central.

Normally, a commodity owner who wants to sell his commodity uses the appearance of use value in the fashion of Werner Sombart's inner mode of compulsion, in order to put other's desire under his spell and to push the wish to appropriate to become overwhelming in the other person. All conceivable forms of promise and enticement are directed towards the needs of the potential exchange partner. The latter is supposed to get what (s)he wants, but no longer able to will what (s)he wills.

This „supposed to“ refers firstly to the conscious intention and strategy of „market interests“ (Max Weber). This intentional character is taken to be real by manipulation theories without testing it. As all strategy, the strategic imaginary of the commodity aesthetics may miss its goal. This restriction is overcome by the periodic recycling of commodity aesthetic patterns which is driven by the feedback of success or failure. In this sense, Brecht compared the cinema box office with the film critic: the financial hit stays in the repertory and finds imitators, the flop disappears and any similarity to it is avoided. „That counts as correct which has already been photographed once and ‘made it’, and that counts as good, which raised a fee“ (*Journals*, 2.XII.1941). It is sufficient that the market actors hold onto their program of profit maximizing to give this permanent effect of selection the weight of a subjectless process.

As the bearer of use-value promise, aesthetic abstraction lies at the base of many techniques relevant to sales. Among them are: the shaping of the body of the commodity, the particular elaboration of its ‘skin’, its representation on the package, its decoration in display, its *mise-en-scène* in the TV spot. The

aesthetic abstraction of the commodity thus becomes the precondition of an aesthetic specification that is apt to the claim of property rights. One of the classic examples is the idea which a producer of mouthwash hit on a hundred years ago of twisting the neck of the bottle in which his product was sold into a (technically senseless) form which was clearly distinguishable from that of other bottles. The automobile, a serially mass-produced item, became almost from the start normalized as that sort of brand-name item of which the physical appearance represents both the use value and the brand name. Such an aesthetically specified use item in the possession of a corporation can be conceived of as an *aesthetic monopoly of use value* (Haug 1986, 24ff).

Copyright laws for such combinations of aesthetic form and linguistic signs were created in the late 19th and early 20th century. These laws founded the property rights of words and shapes. Apart from the „self-promoting“ (Wernick) attires of the particular material configuration of the body of the commodity (which can also be submitted to property rights), the specification is easier to grasp in the combination of figurative appearances (here: of the packaging) and semiotic designation, which distinguishes the aesthetic as an appeal to meaning and sensuousness. The aesthetic monopoly of use-value grants its possessors two new possibilities for maximizing profit: (1) that of monopoly price, (2) that of regeneration of demand. This latter, which has been described as „planned obsolescence“ (Packard), may be more accurately described as *aesthetic innovation* of a commodity. Its effect is the *aesthetic aging* (obsolescence) of still functioning products of earlier shape (Haug 1986, 39ff; 1987, IIIff).

What explains the drive for aesthetic innovation and obsolescence is the leisure of the new and the demand for conspicuousness (Veblen) or distinction (Bourdieu), regularly followed by a paradoxical mass conformism of distinction. From the standpoint of the producer, the production of

distinction is by intent the production of conformism. For those consumers who want distinction, every such conformism motivates anew the desire for a distinctive escape. This craving sets the following cycle in motion and follows it itself: Every attractive symbolic or aesthetic distinction is followed - or pursued - by a mass conformism to this distinction, which is then extinguished by this conformism, named general fashion. Craving for aesthetic difference then seeks again to escape this mass conformity. This process constantly remodels the needs addressed by commodity aesthetics. The offers are not simple answers to needs, but rather reformulate the latter's demand. Every demand is 'understood' as a market demand and related to something purchasable. The excessive desire, whose satisfaction is not purchasable, did not get its due, but its 'view' - to vary Walter Benjamin's famous dictum from his essay „The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.“ Since wishes are related to commodities, the expression of wishes is drawn into the aesthetics of these goods, thus these wishes are forced through all conceivable filters and amplifiers by specialists and sent back to the realm of need.

Starting with the body of the commodity, concentrating on its surface, transfigured on the packaging and situated in display and decoration, commodity aesthetics turns into dream movies. The TV spots feed into the imaginary spaces of the addressee, functioning like recognized identity moulds to be filled out by commodity consumption. Commodity aesthetics thus overdetermine what G. H. Mead analyzed as the role of the „generalized other“, by delivering the image or model to be reproduced by consumers. The basic pattern can be seen in an advertisement in a women's magazine, in which Jean-Paul Sartre read the „extraordinary sentence:“ “BOLD OR DISCREET, BUT EVER MORE YOURSELF.” Sartre translated this as follows: „Purchase like everyone, in order to be like none.“ He adds: „Herein lies the manipulation.“

The thesis of manipulation is not false but one-sided. It remains fixed in an actor who is represented as quasi-omnipotent instead of being represented in the process in which, because of the never quite foreseeable reactions of the addressees amidst competing appearances, the manipulator is also included. In the self-organizational form of this process, the tendency which had its beginning in the chicken-and-egg aporia of the exchange developed into a powerful catalyst which brings everything cultural to react with the commodity world. This then combines with the subjects which shape their identities in the endless loop of a perpetual commodity aesthetic recycling, from which, to be sure, the cultural forever again reemerges. It does so in the double sense of *escaping again* and *proceeding anew from*. On the one hand, the boundary between advertisement and entertainment is blurred; on the other, the aesthetics of entertainment is penetrated by commodity aesthetics.

Again, the border between cultural industry and everyday life is transcended in both directions. The resulting real-imaginary merger has been described as a „promotional culture“ (Wernick), though it may be more contradictory. Brecht described this tendency in his American exile as an overall expansion of the pragmatic expressivity of selling (*Journals 1934-1955*, cf. 27.12.1941). In the ambience of consumptive passivization, the activity returns in the form of „thrilling consumption“, as the English director Paul Anderson represented it in his 1993 film *Shopping*: consumption as destruction and devouring of oneself.

III. COMMODITY AESTHETICS AND ART

If one considers commodity aesthetics with the criteria of classical aesthetics, nearness and distance are strangely foregrounded. If morality and aesthetics explain our „tastes and sentiments“, as David Hume claimed (*Treatise of*

Human Nature, I, 43), then commodity aesthetics with its 'technology of the beautiful' does this even more. And if Hume describes the effect of every kind of beauty that it causes „a peculiar delight and satisfaction, as *deformity* produces pain“, no matter „upon whatever subject it may be plac'd“, then it becomes clear that commodity aesthetics does just this, namely, it both depicts „delight and satisfaction“ via the emanation of commodity beauty, and also it serves to excite them. Above all, it ties the anticipatory appearance and promise of „delight and satisfaction“ to the commodity.

Hegel destroys this false harmony: „But Kant has already made an end of this reduction of beauty's effect to feeling, to the agreeable, and the pleasant, by going beyond the sensation (*Empfindung*) of the beautiful“ (*Aesthetics*, trans. slightly changed; cf. W 13, 147). In fact, Kant defines the beautiful as „the symbol of moral good“, which thus lays „claim to everyone's consent“, building on general consensus, „whereby one's temper is aware of a certain [...] raising above the mere receptivity of a pleasure through sense impressions“ (*Critique of Judgement*, 59, A254). This claim, which seems to exclude commodity beauty, is further developed by Hegel: „The beautiful ... must be true in itself“ (*Aesthetics*, trans. changed; cf. W 13, 151). No one would ever assert this of the beautiful appearance of the commodity; no one except commodity aesthetics itself. This beauty appears, rather intuitively, to us as something inherently untrue. Its reception is at least ambivalent. The commodity also falls short of the following criterion of the freedom of the contemplating subject of all „interests, aims, and purposes“ which it „wills to assert ... in face of the being and properties of things“ (ibid., 153). The commodity also apparently misses the Kant-Hegelian criterion of emancipating things from the servitude of utility. Commodity aesthetics illuminates precisely the interest in useful things. And yet this demarcation does not hold in other respects.

Without any doubt, what Hegel says about the work of art is true of commodity aesthetics as well, namely, that „the *beautiful* object, in its own existence, makes its own Concept appear as realized and displays in itself subjective unity and liveliness“ (trans changed; cf. 155). To say that the beautiful commodity in its aesthetic existence makes the concept of its use value appear as realized, and displays in itself subjective unity and liveliness, is to describe a typical TV spot. Whether it be cleaning agents, cars or packaged nibbles - a scene of happy life as end-in-itself is unfolded around whatever is advertised. Not only artistic beauty, but also that of the commodity „is the Idea as immediate unity of the Concept with its reality, the Idea, however, only insofar as this its unity is present immediately in sensuous and real appearance“, *in sinnlichem und realem Scheinen* (Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 157). It is the real imaginary of the ‘good life’ of commodity consumption. Its untruth is not to be grasped formally. It is only susceptible to that critique which genetically reconstructs the mediations. Kant's dictum that there is „no science of beauty, but only critique“ (*Critique of Judgement*, 44, A174), is doubly true of commodity aesthetics.

Commodity aesthetics stands in a parasitical relation to all art as to all symbolic forms in general, and to all „ideological powers“ (Engels). By living off of them, it devours their possibility. In a certain sense, commodity aesthetics becomes an aesthetic parody in the „use of forms in the age of their impossibility“ (Adorno 1961, 214). In principle, the „overwhelming objectivity of the commodity character, which sucks up all human residues“, consumes all comprehensibility of art, even (as the Benetton commercials have shown) that which is absolutely irreconcilable. One part of art reacts to this by resisting comprehension as such, another precipitates itself into the „aleatory [...] as a desperate answer to the ubiquity of semblance“ (Adorno, *Aesthetic*

Theory, 1973, 166). Another part of art reconquers comprehensibility by giving form to the parody.

That commodity aesthetics encloses the very horizon of art from which only single artworks momentarily break away, is evident in the eternal return of the new.

„*Nouveauté* is aesthetically the result of historical development, the trade mark of consumer goods appropriated by art by means of which artworks distinguish themselves from the ever-same inventory in obedience to the need for the valorization of capital, which, if it does not expand, if it does not - in its own language - offer something new, is eclipsed. The new is the aesthetic seal of expanded reproduction“ (Adorno, *ibid.*, 39).

Günter Anders, directly countering Adorno, believed that Brecht broke out of this circle in that he „restored the original gesture of speaking“ under the condition of constantly being addressed by the media. Brecht „reckons with humans who have been formed by these means and is writing now against these means.“ Brecht's „profile“ can be only seen „correctly“, continues Anders, if one takes into consideration „the nowadays most massively advancing ‘false address’ as a foil“, whose interpellation Brecht takes up and refunctions -- through estrangement, introducing distance (cf. Haug 1996, ch. 5).

IV. CONCLUSION

Now we understand why Marx is attracted by the Shakespearian logic of opposites, though, on the text-level, he only speaks about the logic of indifference: the pursuit of abstract wealth becomes the source, from which

modern appearance is streaming. Capital's indifference towards use-value, which from its standpoint is of only transient relevance, expresses itself in its most fantastic staging. The abstraction from use-value appears as aesthetic use-value promise. Marx compares capital to a eunuch acting as the pimp, procuring a commodity for each desire: indifference proclaiming difference, real-abstraction as illusionary concretion-for-others.

Recently, in the huge catalogue for the exhibition „In the Designer Park. Living in artificial worlds“, at the Matildenhöhe Museum, Darmstadt, Gernot Böhme (2004) argued that the frequent marginalisation of the commodity itself in the commodity aesthetics proves, that one can no longer speak of the centrality of the use-value promise. Therefore he prefers Baudrillard's concept of a *valeur/signe* whose function would be what Bourdieu has described as social distinction and inclusion in a „distinguished“ group. With this argument he seems to fall back into misunderstanding use-value as a kind of technical norm. Such a technical conception holds valid only for some technical products (in terms of material quality and quantity). These items are determined for productive use, mostly, and they are elementary. More complex productive products as Machinery have their own commodity aesthetics. The closer we come to consumptive use, the more inappropriate are technical approaches to use value. They suppose a *Homo oeconomicus* outside of every culture and its ways of life. However, use-value is a cultural reality, and its destination is to satisfy human needs, as Marx is right to insist, „whether they [the needs] arise, for example, from the stomach or from imagination“.

Böhme argues that “commodities are no longer presented in their use value, but as elements of a life style“ and „in the context of this way of using them [*Gebrauchszusammenhang*] the aesthetics of the commodities became important“. But this argument is self-defeating: no longer as use value, but in the context

of being used; no longer aesthetic use-value promise, but the aesthetic of commodities being staged in the context of some lifestyle use... It's like the psychoanalytic joke about the Bavarian mother who, when the doctor had diagnosed an Oedipus complex in her son, took the ladder aside and comforted him with the words: „Oedipus-shnoedipus, everything is fine as long as you love your mother.“ So, when in commercials imaginations of satisfaction enter the scene at the prize of marginalizing the commodity, they do so in the very right of commodity aesthetics.

Böhme, who makes me say a lot of stupid things, observes a recent shift in commodity aesthetics: its expansion into the production sphere:

„Restaurants [...] are open towards the citchen [...], and in the car industry the promotion sector merges with the last stage of the assembly process: This is the transparent manufacture of the *Volkswagen*-Company in Dresden. If until now the production sphere was associated with oil and dirt, with proletariat and alienated labour, here the genesis of a car -- of the luxury car Phaeton -- before the eyes of the client turns into an aesthetic event.“ (993)

Yet, before we generalize too quickly, let us remember: Commodity aesthetics is parasitic. It wouldn't be the first parasite to be enormously productive in appearance. Better we use the plural: appearances. The market is split, as is society, and so is commodity aesthetics. The Chickeria and its lifestyle imaginations form only a segment. And Volkswagen doesn't make the billions it is supposed to in the luxury sector. However, this sector can deliver a certain *imaginary* surplus, since every commodity aesthetics tends to culminate in images of happiness that constitute a use-value promise which surpasses every possible use value.

*KAUFHAUS DES WESTENS*³A RETROSPECTIVE⁴

I. THE WORLD OF THE CLASSICAL DEPARTMENT STORE

"In these department stores you get absolutely everything." A limited everything, it is true, for not everything can be bought. You cannot buy youth, nor love, nor happiness. But the *Kaufhaus des Westens* or „Kadewe“, as the Berliners say, offers you the 'unbuyable' at every turn. The goods for sale lie concealed in a gel of health and beauty. And therefore this kind of market institution is more than merely a collection of things. It forms a 'world', a distinct entirety. Where everyday life has 'either/or', the *Kaufhaus* operates with 'as well as'. Differences in taste are of no moment here, those who disagree, who quarrel 'outside', are calmly and peaceably served side by side. Absolutely everything is possible, regardless of whether things go together or not. The elements maim each other, nothing is complete, everything remains fragmentary. No style prevails over any other. Only one aspect makes the store into an 'entire world': the fact that - within invisible barriers - there is 'everything'.

Since we recognize a cult as such only once it has disappeared or become obsolete, we must regard the *Kaufhaus* as though it were a future museum. We must look at it 'historically', we must distance ourselves from it in order

³ Literally "Department Store of the West" – name of the most prestigious shopping institution of Berlin (West) and during the Cold War a metaphor for the "Golden West" in general from an eastern point of view, when West-Berlin was kept as the "show-case of the West".

⁴ Written in 1980; published in German in *Constructiv*, ed. Akademie der Kuenste, Berlin 1990, in English in *Sosiologiske Årbok* (Oslo) 1996. Translation from the German by Elizabeth S. Seeberg, revised by Karen Ruoff Kramer and by the author.

to gain a closer understanding. Goods from graves show us the development of everyday utensils, they lead us to an understanding of their use. But this wouldn't reveal the main point: in the face of this enormous abundance, the fact that future spectators would overlook that here an economy had gone to its limits. Here the company's capital brought together the products of fragmented private production. The firm, although still private, seemed no longer specialized within the social division of labour. Within the form of private division of labour it represented the entirety.

Two realities overlie one another: public distribution of goods and private enrichment by means of trade. A store of goods and a place from which they are distributed: an 'immense collection' of useful things, and - in between - the people who work with storage and distribution. But together with the staff responsible for their administration and distribution, the useful objects - these modest, everyday things for everyday use - slip into arrangements which go far beyond them.

What applies to everyday life, applies still more to the world of the classical department store: although it is known to all, it is far from being understood. As this world is one of captivation, our eyes must learn to think and our mind to see. We want to be where 'it' is. Feeling that the world of the *Kaufhaus* is designed to deceive us, we don't want to leave it with this suspicion and with abstract criticism, we strive to learn how to live and become appropriators and transformers of our culture. If the arrangement of this *établissement*, at the same time that it captivates us, nevertheless makes us feel cheated, then the reason is that it represents capital investment. The mere use of this pertinent concept in the present context is strangely enough considered to be critical. The phrase 'capital investment' is reminiscent of 'capital indictment' (*Kapital-An[k]lage*).

II. CAPTIVATING ARRANGEMENT(I): THE OUTWARD APPEARANCE OF HAPPINESS

The most common consumer goods of every day life - shoes, clothes, cushions - are displayed so ceremoniously as if they were sacred relics, monstres in a never-ending procession. Altars of sanctification turn the room into a temple, a temple which abruptly changes into a night club. Presented representation alternates with Do it yourself.

Models of the happy life outfitted with these things are organized with and around them. The dummies prefigure a scenic version of life with these objects. They are display packages, human dummies, dummy humans. They represent our gratified wants. They are real, and yet they are merely imaginary, part of the real imaginations surrounding the goods, just like the skilfully retouched photos of skilfully made-up faces, or of beautiful, young bodies, or parts of bodies.

Often the goods themselves by their arrangement glimmer and glitter their way into the transcendental, they are like a gleaming lustre, an army of unique luxury packages. By their serialization or their being piled up with their equals an aesthetic metamorphosis is induced, enhanced by illumination, into a ballet of things, a spectacular revue, a cream-cake of shoes, a glass-house where belts grow rampant, bathing trunks, watery-vegetative ladies' hats, shawls. Ghostly dresses which no one wears, float freely in space. Or take the lamp department - here you will find not simply an assortment of lamps from which to choose, lamps to look at - no, here the lamps look, they are shining representatives of views, which organize our gazes. Mutually exclusive styles are confined in this collection. The lamps are

staged in space, a constellation of lamps, a world of lamps, a firmament set with lamps.

A mad heaven on earth - that is how the world of the *Kaufhaus* of the West presents itself. At one spot this heaven is hung with curtains, at another it is constructed of cushions, at a third, it consists of an immense accumulation of reels of sewing silk.

These are no commonplace items, no ordinary lamps, shoes, umbrellas, hats, curtains - they are representatives of imaginary happiness, cushions of happiness, even buttons and threads of happiness. They form an innate part of a strained imagination of happiness. Their substance has flowed to the outside, their outward appearance is bound up in their *raison d'être*: to be an expression of this happiness. And thus in the Department store everything thrusts itself to the exterior.

If this world is excavated at some future date, or if someone were to show pictures of it, or if it were exhibited in a museum, the spectators would surely come to the conclusion that it was an expression of a cult which worshipped idolised, clearly sacred shoes, buttons, hats etc. Perhaps people of the future will come to the conclusion that they represent a kind of Noah's Arc of things, one that rescued specimens of all objects in use before the Deluge.

CAPTIVATING ARRANGEMENTS (II): THE WAY TO THE INSIDE

Why does the 'outside' affect the 'inside' so greatly? Fascination is captivity, it means being bound up as in a tight bundle, being held spellbound - in other words, precisely the opposite of a capacity to act, of self-conscious communal cultural praxis. What fascinates, is this enormous

collection of use-values, this store of wealth. At the sight of it, the captive producers are captivated yet again, as long as they do not realize that this is their own, social product, which would be devoid of any wonder if it were not for the productive unleashing of their own industry, their own creativity: it will remain impenetrable like the enigma of the sphinx as long as they do not learn, proving it by their action, to recognize their own part in it.

This first fascination is 'overlaid' by a second one, confirming it, effectuated by the way in which the goods achieve aesthetic independence and estrangement. All aesthetic languages are imitated here, those of art as well as those of religion, as well as those of the amusement park, revue and night club, hobby-land and holiday-land. And this process of 'aestheticization' is the bearer of the meaning of happiness; the 'aestheticized' things present themselves as things of happiness.

The dummies, and the other human images connected with the commodities, prefigure the dealings with these, not however in the sense of simple user-instructions; they present the subject of commodity aesthetics, the bearer of commodities, as an ideal model. What is thus prefigured is more than a mere disguise. It is an answer to the question: "Who am I?" Foremost 'socially' accepted answers to this question. These images prefigure the accepted look.

This kind of derangement, letting things prefigure our identity, follows from the derangement of a social structure which assesses people not according to their participation in production, but in consumption. The disturbed relationship between private persons and society makes itself felt also in the disturbed relation to their own identity. Identity is always social identity. Privacy isolates the individuals. Commodity aesthetics opens collections entitled "Who are you?", turns their pages to present elements of mass-

produced identity - ready-made egos. So the Department store is also this: a collection of samples, in which values and patterns of conduct are sold together with the goods. They are offered with the authority of a body which claims to control social acceptance. It is backed by the authority of those who, in order to appropriate the work of others, control production. Controlling the products, they now encroach on the producers' definition of their identity. On this stage the products seem to determine the identity of those who produced them. In this deranged form of commodity fetishism, the social dominion of Capital over wage-labour makes its appearance.

Hence yet another, especially powerful fascination of the Department store. It is arranged as an academy of social identity. It offers being-someone through the purchase of commodities, being-through-having - not through doing, through skill, through community. This turns the world of the Department store into a world of alienated sociability. We try to learn to see, in other words, to recognize also by using our eyes. Will we, when we catch sight of the dummy 'looking' in the mirror, be able to recognize the deranged mirroring of sociality? Will we be able to discern the transitions between dummies, images and human beings? Will we see the derangement, where instead of a communally active winning of identity a society of objects is arranged, from which we are to purchase our essence? Will we be able to see this society of things as the other side of the reification and alienation of our social relations? Will we see the derangedness of a social existence which is meant to live and move within moulds, organized in the Department store around commodities? Within which the products are to function like existentials of the producers?

'Identity' - why is it important? Identity is my Being-for-others. Who I am for the others is shown by the effect I have on the others. Repulsive or attractive? As many groups and ways of reference as I have, as many ways of

impressing, upon which I am dependent: From the relationship with my employer, to whom I must appear as useful labour-power, to that with those individuals to whom I want to appear sexually attractive, because they attract me sexually. The world of the Department store has such means of attraction/repulsion at its disposal. The commodities are displayed like successors of magic love potions. Magic relied upon objects to which one ascribed the power to make one attractive for other people. The commodities are presented as powers in the shape of things, from which such an 'attraction' is emanating. What attracts us in these objects is our own power to attract others, whom we desire: the power of attraction as it is promised by commodity aesthetics, being more important than those others. The yearning, which falls for this commodity-magic, turns into addiction. The images in the world of the Department store appear as a reflection of what the others want to see, as imaginations of desire. Will we look into the mirror like the dummy? Idle, lonely, but well outfitted? Do we now desire our Image?

What these commodities as things represent is the attraction of people by people. The subject who makes him/herself the bearer of this particular shirt, this pair of trousers, that belt, will, when so attired, become attractive. These things will magically attract the eyes of the others. The images prefigure this by means of cuttings, perspective, lighting, aestheticizing, retouching. We look at them, and in so doing, our eyes follow the prefigured trajectories of this magic. The hope for magic of this kind grows out of private hopelessness. To hope that essentially human capacities would flow toward us beyond common activity and from mere things! Human weakness caused by private isolation, compensated for by the power of mere things! And thus, if indirectly, it is our own strength which captivates us. Private

property has isolated us from one another, the relation of capital has opposed us to each other. Will we be able to reorganize our social essence?

People attract people - those who dispose over the arrangement of the Department store make use of this attraction when they sell the customer/emperor new clothes of identity, in order to lay their hands on what is the essential from their standpoint, his own portion of social power (most often acquired in bitter subjugation) - his money. This decisive element - interest - renders itself invisible in the arrangement of the Department store. Unlike in Andersen's fairy-tale "The Emperor's New Clothes", the imaginations are real. King or Queen Customer is not unclad. And the commodities are nonetheless imaginary. The customers cannot take home what they have seen, they can only take a plain object for everyday use. The reified strength, which compensates for his human weakness, exists only as representation. The customers will try to take home with them not only new clothes, but also the representation of their magic. They yearned for their own powers of attraction when they bought these things to wear. When they wear these new trousers, they will imagine that they have become attractive. Maybe their self-confidence, strengthened by the power of the new clothes, may really let them appear more attractive for a while. But the imagination wears off, at best together with the finish of the new bought clothes. Normality reappears. The daily round has caught up. Will addiction force them to acquire reinforcement for their imaginations? Or will they try to realize their hopes where the only not merely imaginary way leads on - in the realm of normality, in the everyday world, in their very own social activity together with others like them?

III. STAFF ENTRANCE

The world of the Department store is a world of impressions. But precisely because it is installed to impress, the impressions remain imperfect, for the installation as such, the impressing set, the 'asset', the deranging arrangement, is not experienced. The customers, as they are supposed to be, gain their impressions within this (capital-) asset; they do not experience the installation itself, which they have entered by an inviting customer entrance.

The staff entrance leads into a different world. An army of employees, most of them belonging to the under-paid strata, walk through these doors every working day. A low degree of trade union organization covers them, so that many of the rights and privileges agreed upon are only barely utilized - although it may be better in the Department store than in small shops. Even though selling requires an apprenticeship, the sales staff includes many semi-skilled people, trained on the Job, most of them women. The management exploits their socially weak position. Unorganized and isolated, they are at the mercy of their superiors, most of whom are men. Since the regulations do not afford them sufficient protection, so that they can be sacked almost arbitrarily, they accept poor working conditions. Aching feet, trouble with their backs, the notoriously dry air in the store, stress resulting from understaffing ... Who cares about breaks, about recreation rooms, the food in the canteen, the possibilities of further training, about holidays? Quite audacious and hardly conceivable the mere question: is there such a thing as the right to useful and meaningful work?

To the extent that the installation is the concern of the investors, the meaning of the sales work is defined by the profit it brings. What is beneficial to capital is not necessarily beneficial to the customer. How will the salespersons act in the antagonism between capital and customers? The two parties experience and fight out this antagonism in very different ways. The customers are distracted while the investors concentrate on setting traps for them. The

borderline-case is the unsuspecting, guileless customer who falls into all the traps set by this lurking installation. He will be like "John in Luck" who exchanges seven year's wages for ever less valuable things, until the equivalent has become a mere burden in the form of a millstone, which, with a sigh of relief, he drops into the well, light-heartedly heading for further wage-slavery. His exchange-partners rub their hands with glee. - This is a fairy-tale, more extreme than real life, for hardly anybody is quite that stupid. But it is not all that easy to stay prudent in the world of the Department store. Closefisted in money matters, the world of the Department store is overabundant in promises. So we already hesitate: maybe it is true this time: Things we need, things that work better, things that look better - perhaps we really can get them there. Indeed, the wishes of the prospective buyers are 'served', in all possible detail. But how? First, they are offered images which are imaginary satisfactions for the dissatisfied. These images are arranged around one commodity or one group of commodities. They are figments of the pursuit of happiness, persecuting the customer's purchasing power. This is one side. And the other? The staff have been given their place within this arrangement. Their place of work - between commodity aesthetics and the cash register - is determined by this positioning just as their work is. As front-line fighters they hold the fort of capital interests against the customers, and yet are themselves customers, not 'capitalists'.

The goods for sale are our means of life. And the majority of the 'customers' are 'staff elsewhere, pouring out of the staff entrances and into the public entrances when their working day is over. The 'sales persons' sell for wages which they exchange for the things they need to live. Together with the majority of the 'customers', they form the huge army of the working people who produce, transport and distribute the means of life and 'keep the books' about it all. They do it together without knowing each other. All of them

together form the "collective labourer, i.e. a combination of workers" (Marx, *Capital*) - albeit a dispersed one. The Department store collects their product from this *diaspora*. Whatever has been produced in the innumerable sites of socially divided labour, within the country and beyond its frontiers - all the "produce of the earth, all that is derived from its surface by the united application of labour" (Ricardo), here its specimens are assembled. Those who made each of these things, or brought them here, did so without perceiving their connection with all the isolated others. Here they all look at the totality of their products, while they, without an iota of recognition, push their way past each other. And just as they do not recognize each other, they do not recognize their own work either. In the Department store they imagine to be in an 'entirely different world'. And thus their collective product, i.e. the combination of their products, captivates the dispersed producers.

The working personnel from production, administration, service - here they meet the personnel of sales work. How will this meeting turn out? Will the sales staff experience themselves as the opponents of the 'customers', or will they experience these to be of their own kind? How, for example, will they 'advise the customer'? They are hardly likely to tell him or her the plain truth. Would they, in fact, be able to do so? Are they sufficiently trained in merchandise knowledge to know what lies hidden under the shining finish, or to know what the customer can expect after having opened the parcel? Do they have the chance - and the right - to acquire the information about the properties of the goods at sale, which has been made available in the public interest?

The answers to these questions depend on the social relations of forces, on trade unions politics, on the public sphere, on the position of women, on activities, on environmental politics... The weaker the position of labour, and

the more indifferent the general public, the more unlikely it becomes for the sales personnel not to succumb to the snares of the world of the Department store. The managers may well apply the following rule: if you see through the snares of commodity aesthetics, out you go! In order to be able to sell their own working capacity, the salespersons must to some extent adapt their own personal appearance to the illusory beauty of commodities. The salesperson is supposed to prefigure the buyer, signposts in the path of consumption, not merely the guardians of the commodities, but 'wearing' them, being 'equipped'.

Thus the staff lives not only within the staff world of the Department store, but also within the Department store's world of illusion. The contradiction permeates them all. They are wage-labourers who 'know' that wage is converted "toil and trouble of the body", as Adam Smith put it. To spend it means to dispose of lifetime which had to be spent and consumed in alien interest. And they are 'consumers' of commodities, eventually suffering from their 'unpractical' construction, their short-livedness, their bad effects on health etc. - or enjoying the well-made product. Therefore they are in any case also on the side of the 'customers'. They have been played nasty tricks upon by the same arrangement. Will they nevertheless stay in the game? Up to what point? Will they talk with each other about it? Exchange experiences? Support each other? Or will isolated resistance peter out? Will they, unorganized or only passively organized, become the manipulated manipulators in the interest of capital?

Yet from the midst of this supermundane world of imagery, from the midst of the extraordinary traces of the ordinary, looks of sober attention meet us. Only addiction which is bound to search where nothing is to be found, except for persecuting presentations, will be disappointed. Where the salespersons contrast with the reified pretensions of commodity

arrangements, since they miss their perfection, the way our ordinary human world is superimposed by capital betrays its fragility. Fortunately the salespersons are merely imperfect models for the buyer, overstrained by the expectation to imitate the pretended. Clothes, the handling of the requisites, make-up, smiles, gestures - the prefiguring images are almost always superior. If we try to reproduce them, we almost always fall short. Then we have to be ashamed of ourselves. Until we recognize in this prefigured beauty an instrument of our own subjugation. Our aspirations for self-conscious culture were suffocating under the cosmetics of capital. Therefore it will be a relief for us to see how the Templars of the Department store fall short of the aesthetic level of the imaginary spaces that are built around the commodities. The human bearers of the sales mask are the weak spot of this world of pretence. Beside the signs of stress and fatigue, we suddenly find gone astray indications of care, arising from a background of experience. Is this a delusion, or are we suddenly met with competence and interest, even with sympathy?

And then, one day, we meet these distribution workers, who normally almost disappear behind the demand to be the agents of trade profit and commodity aesthetics, unexpectedly out in the street, in front of the store, with trade union demands. Strike! Are the priests striking against God? Here they stand, outside the arrangement, not having been placed here by the management, half intimidated by their own courage, half laughing they dare to assemble, protesting, demanding, manifesting. Now that this religion of everyday has temporarily been suspended, the cult of the commodity temple seems like a bizarre memory of yesterday. What did this incense-swinging service to commodities mean? True, it was a matter of marketing, but why the cult?

On the cult of commodities depends the cult of consumption and of that sphere in which, in a society of private owners, it generally takes place - the private sphere. The main difference between us human beings and animals is the conscious, social transformation and control of our life conditions, *poiesis* and *praxis*, work and socializing activity. And yet our pleasure in 'praxis' is spoiled by 'poiesis', and the sphere of work, if experienced as alienating, becomes a sphere of repulsion. In such a case, the representation of the private sphere becomes shining like a sphere of attraction. Private life promises the reverse of work, where work is felt to be work for others. That is not due to co-operation as such, but to its social form. To have to work without a say in what and how one is to work, under 'alien' order and interest, constrained to sacrifice possible personal development to profitability. And so one looks at the clock, after only an hour of work. Is the hour hand not going to move at all today? if only it were time for our coffee break! Or if it were time to leave off! After work the real life seems to start - provided one is not too tired. Or will it be only a matter of the 'second shift' as for most of the saleswomen, who have to look after their home, their husbands and their children. But these problems are completely foreign to the shining image of private life. The immediate vision of labour is leisure.

Correspondingly, the commodity cult in its manifest 'video-text' is about leisure, but this is exactly the expression of its latent concern with labour. If leisure haunts labour, the archimedian point of this imaginary world of leisure is - labour. The commodity cult is all about labour, though in the form of a circumvention which is revolving around it. It is kept alive by the negative image of wage labour. The eloquence of commodity beauties and the imagery of gratification through consumption is based on the silencing of work. The altars of this cult display the returns of estranged labour. The

Department store circumscribes-circumvents the meaning of this life, in so far as it is determined by the arrangements of capital. Society 'excludes' this sphere, as it 'excludes' any other temple: as its complementary opposite. This exclusion invests these things with the secret meaning: they seem to represent something from beyond. These hats, shawls, shoes, represent the very meaning of the life of wage labour. (No matter whether the pay is called salary, fee, remuneration, or simply wages.)

The beauties of the Department store acquire their meaning by its opposites. If we arrange all the 'beauties' on one side, and their opposite counterparts on the other, we get on the reverse a portrait of the world of work or world of labour. So we see how this capitalist society in a veiled way sees itself: as a world in which one takes pills to cure one of experience, where one seeks 'diversion' and 'distraction', where one 'flees' into one's holidays. The world of the Department store is the anti-world of wage labour.

EPILOGUE (1990)

There is a story behind this text, a story which forms part of its subject. The article was written in 1980, intended for a Photo book about the star department store of Berlin, the *Kaufhaus des Westens*, and it was discussed with members of the works committee of this store and representatives of the trade union. Then the publisher decided that a book with so "embarrassing" an introduction would "be in better hands at a different house". In the face of this threat, the photographer also changed his mind: no department store would "agree to have a book sold" with this text, he told me. So the book appeared without its text – as here appears the text without the photos it comments.

This is how the world of the Department store defends its appealing appearance. Its private censorship does not outlaw like the state - it merely shows you the door. The critics are free to find a different publisher. "And if they haven't died, they are still looking for him happily ever after."

COMMODITY AESTHETICS AS A MOTOR OF GLOBALIZATION⁵

1. ON THE OBSOLESCENCE OF CRITIQUE

What Brecht says about crimes--they become invisible by their sheer extent--also seems to apply to the ways in which commodity aesthetics produces its effects. If the critique of commodity aesthetics "seems somehow antiquated today," Wolfgang Iser observed, "this is not because it would have been proved invalid, but because reality has surpassed it by intensification" (Iser 1990, 19). But as long as this increase of commodity aesthetics has not been analyzed and *théorisé*, and as long as its critique has not been 'overhauled' and focussed anew, 'cultural critique' relapses into the criticized 'culture.' This falling back cannot be prevented by accusing the senses of being "agents of falsehood," as Iser does, nor by refuting sensuality as such according to his pseudo-graffiti, *was angenehm ist, macht uns kaputt* -- "what pleases will ruin us." Neither does it strengthen the critique to proclaim that the "first principle of the world of media is to replace reality with its simulated exaggeration" (16f). Such a critique steps into the trap of generalization and self-indulgence. It is not the medium which is the message; rather, the message materializes by the manner in which a medium pursues the recipients and their specific conditions; this pursuit of the public is conditioned by the way in which the media are subject to the relations of production. "In order not to capitulate in the face of the new situation, one first needs to recapitulate" (Haug 1997, 39),

⁵ This essay is based on a paper given in December 1997 at Duke University, Literature Program; a German version was published under the title "Warenästhetik als Globalisierungsmotor" as a chapter of my book *Politisch richtig oder Richtig politisch. Linke Politik im transnationalen High-Tech-Kapitalismus* (Hamburg: Argument 1999) and subsequently translated into Japanese and Greek. The present English version with its 'German English' has been established by the author, who is greatly indebted to Martin Potschka and E. San Juan Jr. for their original translation, and to Karen Kramer, director of the Berlin *dépendance* of Stanford University,

that is to reconsider the prior achievements of theoretical critique and also to take into account how the analyzed phenomenon has evolved in the meantime. Given the intensified imaginary of commodity aesthetics, we must analyze continuity and change in its constitution, in its role in realizing capital gains, and in its relation to use-value and to the needs of potential buyers. The principal function and rules of commodity aesthetics have not changed: it serves the realization of commodity capital, and its 'Archimedean' point to do so lies not in what is promoted but in who is courted. Its basic form is the aesthetic promise of use-value (cf. 1986, 17; 1997, 121f). What has changed is the technical base for the re/producibility of the appearance (*Schein*) of commodity aesthetics, and the positioning in the message of both the promoted commodities and, even more crucial, the courted buyer under changing social conditions. The globalization of markets has generated, as Stuart Hall (1991) puts it, an "aesthetics of the hybrid, mixing, diaspora, or creolization".

The advanced transformation of consumer goods into corporate products or 'trade mark articles' that hold a monopoly on aesthetic use-value (Cf. Haug 1986, 24ff) has by and large replaced the elementary or 'generic' products. The critique of commodity aestheticism of the Fordist era was maybe spontaneously evident because its object broke into a world that held still an abutment of experiences that had been won in practical contact with the operative components, the production or composition and the modes of usage of things themselves outside the commodity-aesthetic promise of use-value. This general knowledge determined a position of possible resistance. Just like folk medicine once was suppressed and supplanted by the academic-- and by now largely chemo-technical-- medicine, so the knowledge of recipes

rooted in handicraft and home-economy has in the mean-time been replaced by instruction sheets for ready-made products.⁶

No less important for the evident pertinence of critique was the fact that an alternative to the ruling order of capitalism seemed to exist. In the meantime, the precipitous development of the mode of production, together with the resulting collapse of both State socialism and of visions for social-democratic reform within capitalist societies, have led to a historic shift of horizons. For a whole generation and its characteristic mentality, all alternatives have evaporated, and the *fata morgana* of commodity aesthetics has taken over. Where Post-Fordist commodity aesthetics occupies the horizon almost without alternatives, it is no longer an issue. It is as if its overwhelming and unchallenged presence withdrew it from visibility. This invisibility overdetermined the signature of the Post-Communist situation.

The state-historical divide of 1989/1991 was preceded by decades of erosion of the socialist alternative, while the horizon of the 'East' was filled by the neon-colored utopia of western world of commodities. *Ex oriente lux*, but *ex occidente luxus*. Television -- in particular after its range had been globalized by satellite-based transmission -- conveyed the pleasant semblance beyond all borders. That it also transported insights about civil society and the strength of a social and democratically regulated capitalism only corroborated this sham and evoked the impression of a better life altogether.

In the aftermath of the 'fall of the [Berlin] wall,' and given the difficulties of political intervention from the left, symbolic fights over 'political correctness' came to dominate the scene. On the left, the ascendant extremism of the 'total market' provoked the radical opposition to drift into a counter-extreme utopia

⁶ Hardly anybody knows anymore, for example, that a mixture of spirit and ammonia with water yields a window cleaner at a fraction of the cost of ready-mixed trade mark articles.

of a pure use-value economy.⁷ This perspective of a retreat of the whole society from the highly differentiated modern industrial society into a supposedly ideal world of small agricultural communities is charged with a potential for violence and destruction. These sectarian, encapsulated ideologies and their undialectic opposition to historical progress are nurtured by the disillusionment of an undialectical belief in progress; they conceal the fact that if their coming true would transform the great majority of the people into useless eaters, doomed to disappear. However, the ruling extreme of neoliberal market utopia also harbors its potentials of direct violence, not to speak of its indirect destructive effects. Its Freedom is that of the struggle for survival, to which it tends to expose both human individuals and whole cultures. Its paradigmatic ideal is proclaimed by Brecht's *Mack the Knife*: "The strong man fights, the weak man dies." War becomes no less acceptable for this Social-Darwinistic ideology, while the vanishing of system competition unleashes its possibility. The post-communist era of the unlimited market indeed started with a series of wars. The high-tech crusade of the US against Saddam, financed by the other capitalist metropolies, a war of the allied forces of the North against a scapegoat of the South, was accompanied by a wave of ethnicised civil wars in which the underdogs ambushed each other, mesmerized by the brave new world order. In view of these unleashed bloody forces it is easy for us to overlook the unbloody forces that unleashed them. The paradigm could be studied in Europe immediately 'after the fall': The sucking force of the rich market-Europe achieved Yugoslavia's disintegration - - assisted, of course, by the demagogic blindness of the Serbian leadership.

⁷ This is not to be confused with attempts to turn the misery of those excluded from formal economy into a virtue by institutionalizing *niche*-markets for direct exchange of goods and services (*Tauschringe*).

2. SEMBLANCE PRECEDES BEING -- TOWARDS THE PRE- OR HALF-CAPITALIST SOCIETIES

The world order of the market sends ahead as its messenger the beautiful appearance of its commodities. Their image excels their reality by far and at far distance. The corrugated-iron huts in the *favelas* are overshadowed by TV antennas. Television is hooked up long before the eventual arrival of a water supply. The expansion of transnational high-tech capitalism into pre- or semicapitalist societies here finds its most powerful motor. "Is there a more globalizing activity from within than commerce ...?" asks Benjamin R. Barber (1998). He quotes the promotion slogan, "On planet Reebok there are no boundaries." He omits mentioning that insolvent poverty may form an insurmountable limit for commodities, and that those globalizing activities are a spooky trade for the majority of people. Not for the commodities, only for their aesthetic casting are there neither borders nor limits (or at least almost none). For the larger part of the world's population, the promises of commodity aesthetics have no realizable counterpart. This virtuality, however, does not impair the power of those promises, but rather enables them to exert their influence. Exactly where the aesthetic use-value promises of the world of commodities arrive *without* commodities, they thereby promise *another world*. Commodity aesthetics not only extends its border further and further into the realm of cultural industries whose products become less and less distinguishable from it, but this border also loses its meaning in the immense poverty belt around the globe compared to the glamour with which both branches of the illusion industry dazzle. For those without access even to commodities of subsistence, the commodities of the entertainment industry serve as propaganda movies on the mode of life.

For peoples of pre- or semicapitalistic regions of the world, commodity aesthetics therefore operates as the most powerful motive force for

globalization, an irresistible magnet of attraction. The 'global village' is a shallow joke compared to the ushering of the village into globalization. The route first points to the city. An entrenchment of candidature aimed at participating in capitalist civilization encircles it. Globalization starts as a paradoxical urbanization of the homeless which are streaming into the global city.

In Gregory Navas' epic movie *El Norte*, which cannot be praised enough, the North is shining to the people of the South - from a far distance and by means of glossy print advertisements - as the Holy Land. The movie starts in a Guatemalan village, with the inhabitants exploited by big landowners who produce for the world market leaning on the bloody suppression of the people by the army. Two young people, brother and sister, browse over an old North American magazine. The text is in English, and hardly anyone understands what is written in this foreign language. What is understood as Promised Land of an inconceivably different life are the pictures, but they are those which illustrate not the articles but the advertisements. For the villagers, the shiny glossy-print appearance of a water toilet in front of a white tiled shiny background embodies the desire for the miraculously Other, the 'North'. The movie narrates a heartbreaking story of the two protagonists whose surmounting of the American 'wall' and subsequent existence as illegals without a green card in the US turns into a descent into hell, sacrificing the life of the young woman and the soul of her brother.⁸

Not different in structure, albeit at an incomparably higher standard of living and supply of goods, the former citizens of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) then took part in the imaginary of the capitalist West. Until one day the slogan exploded: "If the D-Mark⁹ does not come to us, we will come to

⁸ Comparable tragedies are narrated in Marge Piercy's novel *The Longing of Woman* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994) or Boyle's *Tortilla Curtain*.

⁹ German Mark.

the D-Mark." This decided the downfall of the GDR. Once number eleven among the richest national economies in terms of its standard of living, the GDR collapsed as though hit by a nuclear strike once its currency was converted to that of Western Germany, the currency of an economy that was far superior not only in terms of the standard of living but still more so in terms of productivity. This was a 'didactic play' in globalization. Once the commodities of the West flooded the country, products whose images and names had for so long been at home in the collective imaginary, the domestic products turned into non-sellers. Not even their superior use-value and often lower price could help. Even the 'Dutch tomato,' proverbial for its lack of taste while looking perfect, supplanted its poor local kin, which one could still recognize by its taste.¹⁰ Maybe this fact was on the mind of the Zapatista Subcomandante Marcos when he talked about the "capital bomb" as no less destructive than a nuclear bomb (cf. Marcos 1997).

3. DIFFERENCE AND DOMINANCE: POVERTY TOURISM AND GLOBAL MASS CULTURE

Just how different is the journey which reverses the route of migrant workers, i.e. the poverty tourism of the rich! To the consumers from the centres of capitalist wealth globality is offered in easily consumable bits through mass tourism to the 'South'. The distant difference can be reached by a charter flight. In the air the process is doubled when video screens entertain with movies wholly geared to promote tourism. Their operation combines digital surrealism with the aesthetic stimuli of tourist ware. The tourist experiences globalization as patch work. In the style of video clips, several shots per

¹⁰ Cf. Brecht's dictum (*Dreigroschenprozess*), which served as the motto to the German edition of the *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics* (1971) and was skipped by the editors of its English version: "You will no longer recognize the fruits by their taste." (*Ihr werdet die Früchte nicht mehr am Geschmack erkennen.*)

second chase each other, snippets across the world are sequenced according to stimulus-value. They are mostly taken from the world of poverty, and exactly poverty is excluded from their representation. Only in form of the picturesque and photogenic do its domesticated trace elements enter the image.

Nietzsche's "lasciviousness for other races," is breathlessly served here seductively with appealing appearances. In this selective serialization, the world acquires the character of a prospectus and presents itself as a supermarket of incentives to consume, an assembly of snapshot motives. A sumptuous sensuousness of 'sight seeing' consumerism unfolds. The exhibited body and alien gaze are phantastically assembled into a phenomenology of desired desires, an imaginary abundance that is offered to a "voracious void" (cf. Kojève 1947).

Stuart Hall's analysis of the "English Eye" (1991), which stands for the gaze of the subjects of the classic European colonial power, may be applied to the gaze of the 'rich' poverty tourist: It perceives everything without realizing that it itself is something that directs its gaze upon the world. "It becomes synonymous with perceiving per se. Nevertheless it is, of course, a structured and a cultural representation, which always is binary, i.e. strongly centred. By knowing where it is and what it is, it positions everything else." Except that the Other manifests itself to the poverty tourist, who originates from wealthy enclaves, under the perspective of a desire for 'jouissance.' And this subjects the Other to a judgment according to the criteria of 'aesthetic' consumerism. In his lasciviousness, the poverty tourist is escaping from himself.

What Hall has said about the rigid traditional Anglo-Saxon mentality, which at the same time functioned as a pattern of masculinity, lies lurking below this postmodernist hedonism which, on the surface, it negates:

"One passes around the entire globe: once one knows what everybody else is, one is what the others are not. Identity is thus always a structured representation that perceives something positive only through the narrow eye of the negative. It has to pass through the eye of the needle of the Other, before being able to construct itself." (Ibid.)

The consumer constructs himself via an offer that has already sieved out everything that might make the Other unpalatable. Capital "attempts to create a world in which things are different. And this makes it so pleasant, but the differences really do not matter," claims Hall rather ambivalently. The poverty tourist, as though watching through a bullet proof glass, enjoys the Difference in its aesthetically abstracted form, that is abstracted from its reality.

With poverty tourism, the centre sets out for the periphery and allows its absorption into its own imaginary. In this setting-out for the periphery, the centre dominates no less but only in a different way, and the touristic version of this setting announces a new mode of its dominance in the process of globalization. "Homogenization and absorption, on the one hand, plurality and diversity on the other," which Hall conceives as "the characteristic new patterns of the dominating cultural postmodernity", prefigure the global West-centred mass culture which 'speaks American' (not English, as Hall believes), but does so in a variety of regionally specific and fractured forms.

Commodity aesthetics is being permanently chased through the filter of market acceptance. The thrust by which it globally casts its spell over people, particularly the have-nots, can be explained by its dialectical structure and function. It embodies the not-yet-reality of the realization of value. In every regard, it obeys the logic of the reverse. It longs for buyers and yet only speaks about happy people. The unhappy lot glances into the world of commodity aesthetics as into a paradise. What it features as the main thing, the Different,

is indifferent to the interest ruling through it, given the egalitarianism of money which recognizes only differences of quantity. If capital has learned to "negotiate" - that is to "incorporate and partly reflect differences, which formerly it tried to bear down," as Hall says, a sharp restriction, similar to the aesthetic abstraction of the commodity, has to be observed: only the cultural representations are involved, the power relationships are not negotiable. Aesthetic representatives of the *damnés de la terre* migrate into the sphere of symbolic redemption, and this is not unimportant for how those who are represented see themselves.

Commodity aesthetics finds its Archimedean point in the desires it serves, selectively amplifies and reorients. Irrelevant are *autà tà prágmata*, the actual disposition of things, acts or personal situations. Desires count as interfaces for use value promises in the mode of the illusion or the imaginary space. The perspective aims at inducing the decision to buy. Commodity aesthetics rules through presented wish-fulfilment, filling people with wishes. In rich societies where capitalist consumerism has already colonized the patterns of living, its gospel is confronted with weary and desensitized people whose imagination is regularly sobered up by the 'fulfilling' of these desires, which 'leaves so much to be desired'. In the capitalist centres, the consumer "strolls around the displays like a bored TV viewer who plays with the remote control" (Nientiedt 1990). When, on the other hand, commodity aesthetics enters the shanties of a pre- or semicapitalist world, where it is longingly swallowed, the North fills the South with desires by delivering to its masses who live in poverty "des irréalisables ... à réaliser," to quote Sartre (1943, 612). Under such conditions the meaning of poverty changes; it turns into the presence of an absence. In the exclusion from the consumption of the typical commodities of the transnational high-tech capitalism, the poor keep them present as something

missing. What Marx says, in his *Grundrisse*, about the "civilizing influence" of capital, acquires a vicious glamour along the north-southern axis.

4. THE HIGH-TECH PRODUCTION OF APPEARANCE

The high-tech mode of production with its satellite-based telecommunications, better called 'irradiation' for their one-sidedness, has globalized the range of commodity aesthetics. At the same time, it revolutionized its technical re/productibility. It is now based on digitalization or digital creation of images that are no longer copies (*Ab-bilder*) but at best draw their manipulable material from copies. More accurate than the term 'image' for grasping the aesthetic specificity seems to be the notion of a moving image or 'movie'. However, these audiovisual sequences no longer are reproductions of something recorded, or something that could be considered some kind of original even if staged or played. The old 'films', conceived in terms of photochemistry as a mechanically exposed surface, at best now provide material which after digitalization becomes the subject of electronic computing technology. While the moving and soon also 'sounding' images always have been products of the calculated application of a complex machinery, they are now computed by machines.

Videoclips function as a prototype of mass cultural global-ware. "Computer assisted cutting that allows for synchronizing every millisecond of music to a particular frame has turned out to be of key importance (the so-called 'Mickey Mousing'). This has meant that a uniform clip-aesthetic has emerged that prevails across all program segments" (Holzer 1997, 168). Not only the dream of the surrealists to imagine something that at the same time would be something totally different - a match box as a bat, a giraffe with drawers--, but just about everything ever invented by magic fantasy has been eclipsed by this

new mode of production of the imagery. A car mutates as seamlessly into a tiger and the tiger, if this is intended, into a chocolate bar. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are nothing compared to the morphing in commercials, except that its unlimited availability turns the larger part of it into flat rubbish, a transmogrified concealment of utter boredom.

In this mode of production of digitally constituted semblance capital has finally found its adequate aesthetic technique, because it doesn't really care for the use-gestalts of its products but only for their value-gestalt; this is why it can negotiate about cultural representation. The "McWorld-culture" need not be uniform, as Barber believes. It need not be, because - to invoke Hall once more - "differences don't really matter." Nothing of all that which capital presents in the Wagnerian audiovisual "synthesis of the arts" (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) of commodity propaganda really matters for capital. The metaphysical nothingness of all possible Gestalts, goods, sentiments or values is Money, the one resource, which represents command over all the resources. People are bound to respond to the colorful apparition of this negativity, because it is their life condition to appropriate through buying. From the point of view of value, any Gestalt is but the transient unessential existence of a formless but arbitrarily formable matter. This is the condition to which the high-technology of the imaginary has degraded not only the world of objects but also the world of images. These representations hardly represent anything anymore except themselves. To oppose "the continuum of what communication affords to communicate, and the pretty consumption" by means of "divergence and heterogeneity," as Wolfgang Iser proposes, therefore only means to embrace the model of modern "pretty consumption." Stuart Hall seems to address such an escape from the frying-pan into the fire when he writes: "While you live out the difference and admire plurality, you absorb this

concentrated corporative, or in fact transcorporate, over-integrated, over-concentrated and condensed power".

In the centres of capitalist wealth, even children have their hands on experience with these digital technologies of appearances. Here one may recognize, in the procedure of making a representation disappear in its presentation, a procedure well known from computer games. Here is the realm of a coolness, which Welsch describes as a defensive "callousness" and "desensitization at high, almost drug-like, thresholds of excitation." Welsch interprets this as a sign for a "new anaesthetisation" in its double sense of drug and deadening.¹¹ Whereas for people who are neither familiar with this cultural technique nor accustomed to the daily wheeling-and-dealing with the use-oriented side of this commodity-world - and this means more than half of humankind - those phenomena surpass any notion of what is conceived to be possible in a magical or religious sense. If anything seems possible, because everything is possible to that alien art of semblance, then the borders of reality dissolve, and the only desire left is to trespass the border of this wonderland.

5. AESTHETIC COSMOPOLITANISM

Commodity aesthetics thus functions as a missionary wonder-drug for market-acceptance in an environment where the market does not exist, or is still marginal and embryonic. Images of desire draw peoples into the markets and hence into capitalist industrial society - even if only included in 'exclusion', confronted with the panicking racism of the more privileged all-too-many, the welfare proletarians of a new type. The results of these secondary driving forces of globalization, triggered by the commodity

¹¹ "Aesthetic animation happens as anaesthesia – in the double meaning of intoxication and deadening. Aesthetization proceeds [...] as anaesthetization." (Welsch 1990, 14)

aesthetics of the transnational high-tech capitalism, are accompanied by hecatombs of victims, and this "McDonaldization" (Ritzer 1996) of consumption acts as a cultural deprivation for a humankind, which is globalized by this process. And still, there always remain moments of „cultural unification“ of humankind as Gramsci envisioned it, although alienated and reified. The success story of the 'Fordist' commodities of mass consumption - jeans, 'hamburgers' and Coca-Cola -- is finally globalized under conditions of high-tech-capitalism. Of course, inclusion of the entire world population into the globalized imaginary of capitalist commodity aesthetics is paralleled with exclusion of the majority even from a consumerist-reified realization of the promises of use-value. The shattered universalism of the resulting *mondo cane*, where a humanity, which is torn apart into poor and rich, turns into a spectacle for itself, reflected in the false mirror of commodity charms, is nonetheless charged with the weak messianic potential of a human species, which in this alienation for the first time constitutes itself as humanity. Its phoney announcement in life-style erupt at places where it seems the most negated: in the air-conditioned ghettos of commercial and residential areas of dollar-owners that are guarded by private police, in the aggregated commodity galleries of the malls and its private-public spaces, those "new churches of commodity culture," of the "*civilisation marchande*" (Barber). The sales rationale for standardized mass products favors styles that fit the world market. This feeds back into the capitalist centres where globalization of sales strategies in the meantime dictates fashion-designers to at least pay attention to the oases of prosperity among the deserts of poverty and to minimize their design for new clothes, i.e. to develop a new aesthetic *lingua franca* for this purpose. "The more the luxury-industry has to make it in markets in the Far East, the Americas, in Russia and central Europe, all at once simultaneously, the more it will follow a language of design that avoids any risk of thwarting appreciation, hence it will not be eclectic French, expressive Italian, or street-British, but a

universally understood expression of American sportivity. This "stems from an aesthetic calculus that is prefigured by sales strategies and which levels off all differences in the name of globalization. ... Because the new fashion with its simple patterns reduces all difference to a democratic evenness: ethically compatible, ecologically correct, socially accepted, gender-neutral." (Kaiser 1998) The emancipation of such tendencies from the ghettos of the world-apartheid regime of the rich might realign them. Nothing would cause civilization to change more profoundly and liberate it from its status of a dependent variable of capitalism than the participation of those who so far have been excluded from even its most elementary benefits. Of course these benefits will not be given to them for free, and their revolts will fail as long as they are not met halfway by movements from the affluent centres, which counters the grimace of global consumerism with an alternative perspective of prosperity and good life - and will do so with hegemonic power. Stuart Hall therefore does "not believe that the notion of globalization means an uncontested space without contradictions" (58). The contradictions, says Brecht, are our hope. But hope is an offspring of sadness, as Spinoza teaches, because it remains marked by the absence of real *potentia agendi*. To understand the contradictions is not enough; practical contradiction is needed.

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