

Commodity

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A commodity is commonly understood to be anything that can be bought or sold, whether an object or service, natural or fabricated, made or appropriated for sale. Works of art can be considered commodities in all these ways. They are by definition made, not natural, but they can consist of appropriated nature. The aesthetic appreciation of nature can also be commodified to some degree, for example, purchasing a trip to a natural wonder. But art is not necessarily a commodity. It may be made without the intention or social context of being bought or sold. And even where it is a commodity, it may not be experienced as such. An artwork may be bought and then become available to others for free, for instance, in a museum. Of course, if one needs to buy a ticket to enter the museum, then the experience is conditioned by this supplementary commodity. Nonetheless, the activity of buying and selling can be distinguished radically from the activity of experiencing. Buying a book is not reading it. One can buy a book and never read it, and one can read it without regard to having bought it. The commodity may be a condition of art, but it can be so external and remote that it determines the experience of art to a vanishingly meagre degree. And yet, the condition remains and the extent of its effects can be difficult to discern. This has fuelled the suspicion

that the experience of art is more profoundly, if obscurely, conditioned by its commodification.

Marx also understood commodities broadly as anything bought or sold, but his analysis of their significance and composition is altogether more specific. He insisted on their historical specificity as the dominant form in which wealth appears in capitalist societies, distinct from the forms of wealth and exchange in non-capitalist societies, such as plunder or barter. He emphasised the significance of money and monetary exchange in a free market for the constitution of commodities in capitalist societies. More decisively for industrial capitalism, he sought to demonstrate that the prices of commodities are determined by the value of the labour (or socially necessary labour time) invested in them, and that the profits within these prices derive from using wage labour to produce more value than it costs. These considerations inform his analysis of the commodity into a use-value or capacity to satisfy a need, and an exchange-value or capacity to be equated with the value of other commodities. Marx argued that the exchange-value between two different commodities is quantifiable not because of their use-values, since they are qualitatively different and unquantifiable, but rather because of the quantity of labour invested in them; not the specific kinds of labour invested in making the use-values, which are just as qualitatively different as the uses, but labour abstracted of all this specificity and measured according to the average time it takes to produce the commodity sold. If the commodity is not sold, the labour is rendered worthless. The market remains the ultimate judge of value. Hence, while Marx reveals how commodities on the market are determined by the industrial exploitation of abstract labour, the value of this labour remains determined retroactively by the buying and selling of commodities.

Marx's analysis of commodities was dedicated to explaining industrial capitalism and says almost nothing about art, but he does offer an instructive reflection on artists as productive or unproductive workers. He says that Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* »in the way a silkworm produces silk, as the expression of his own nature«, and that, even though he then »sold the product for £5 and to that extent became a dealer in a commodity«, he did not thereby become a productive worker, that is, he did not produce capital for a capitalist; whereas »the Leipzig literary proletariat who produces books ... at the instructions of his publisher is roughly speaking a productive worker, in so far as his production is subsumed under capital and only takes place for the purpose of the latter's valorisation«. ¹ In other words, a work of art becomes a commodity once it is sold, whether or not it was produced with this intention, but it does not thereby become a form of capital unless it results from the sale of the artist's labour to a capitalist who is then able to organise it for the purpose of making a profit.

These remarks do not form part of Marx's principal theory of art as a form of ideology, namely, that art (together with philosophy, religion, politics and law) forms a superstructure that is built upon and determined by an economic base constituted by the forces and relation of production. The critical purpose of this theory was to argue that these superstructural forms are not autonomous and do not constitute the essence of humanity, but rather that they are determined by the production for human needs, thereby inverting the traditional hierarchy of human spirit and animal need and labour. Marx says nothing about the ideological

¹ Karl Marx: »Results of the Immediate Process of Production« In: *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. B. Fowkes. Harmondsworth, 1990, p. 1044.

character of *Paradise Lost* or the work of the Leipzig hack, presumably because their commodification is an economic consideration, although his theory of ideology indicates that this should determine them. But Marx took pains to point out that this determination was not a simple causal relation and allowed exceptions, as did Engels.²

Despite Marx's conception of ideology as determined by production, he also recognised art as itself a form of production. He criticises the specialisation of artists in particular arts as a form of the division of labour. But he also laments how the artistic character of work is destroyed by the division of labour and suggests that art provides a model of non-alienated labour.

Marxist theories and histories of art display the influence of all these elements in Marx and many of the tensions between them. The theory of art as a form of ideology has dominated this tradition and Marx's qualifications of this theory infuse many of the controversies over its determinism. Marxists have often managed to integrate art's status as ideology, as labour and as commodity, but there are also differences and controversies over their emphasis or significance, and this is especially true of art's status as a commodity, which has often been neglected or marginalised.

The outstanding exception is Lukács. In his famous essay, »Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat«, he announces a radical reorientation: »the problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in economics, but as the central, structural problem of

² See Engels letter to Bloch, 21 September 1890.

capitalist society in all its aspects«. ³ The implication is that the commodity is not merely a form of the economic base, but of the superstructure too; not merely a form of exchange, but also of ideology. Lukács found the clue to this approach in Marx's theory of the fetishism of commodities. Marx argued that the value of commodities derives from their production, but that this is obscured in their exchange on the market, where it appears to derive from the material properties or usefulness of a commodity relative to other commodities. The constitution of value within the social relations of production is hereby fetishized, assuming the fantastical form of a »social« relation between things. Lukács saw this fetishism or »reification« (literally, »making into a thing«) as structuring the social relations of capitalist society as a whole. It resulted in a general alienation, not merely an economic alienation, in which subjects are separated from their practical constitution of objects, leading to the formation of an independent and dominating realm of objectivity, a »second nature«, that subjects are then induced to passively contemplate.

Lukács is not concerned in this essay with art, but the implication is clear: that art too is structured by the commodity form. This approach can be detected in his writings on art, however, we do not find what we might have expected there, namely, Marx's analysis of commodities applied directly to works of art. Rather, we find its altogether more indirect application, mediated by the terms Lukács derives, such as the alienation of subjectivity from objectivity. These terms then infuse the ideological and formal analysis of the artwork. Lukács subsequently

³ Georg Lukács: »Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat« In: *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. R. Livingstone. Cambridge, Massachusetts 1971, p. 83.

withdrew from what he came to see as his overly subjectivist conception of alienation, but the dialectical logic underpinning it remains evident, for instance, in his analysis of how the realist novel illuminates the total structure of capitalist society, and his criticisms of how expressionist or naturalist literature merely mirrors its surface, its »fetishized world«.⁴

Today we can observe a more explicit discourse on whether or how art is a commodity. This may not have been Lukács' intention, but, at least in retrospect, it appears to be a horizon opened by him. But it is also informed by other figures, notably figures also influenced by Lukács, for whom art's status as a commodity assumes a more explicit significance. Benjamin's writings on Baudelaire include reflections on how Baudelaire's poetry sought to both confront and compete within the literary market.⁵ Benjamin's *Arcades Project* was a study of 19th-century shopping precincts as a phantasmagoria of bourgeois consciousness, for which the fetishism of commodities was a methodological key. Adorno was in many ways more sympathetic to art's autonomy than Benjamin, but had his analysis of Baudelaire in view when he characterised art's purposelessness in conjunction with the dominance of exchange-value in the commodity as resulting in a kind of commodity fetishism.⁶ But Adorno does not exactly reduce art to a commodity or commodity fetish, and his economic analysis of art is very limited. Adorno's

⁴ Georg Lukács: »Realism in the Balance« trans. R. Livingstone In: *Aesthetics and Politics*. London 1977, pp. 28-59.

⁵ See Walter Benjamin: »The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire« trans. H. Zohn. In *Selected Writings. vol. 4 1938-1940*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London 2003, pp. 3-92.

⁶ See Theodor W. Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. R. Hullott-Kentor. London and New York 2004.

general social theory is less directly oriented towards fetishism and alienation than Lukács', and more to exchange-value or the principal of equivalence, whose historical constitution extended well beyond Marx's history of capitalist society. This inflects his conception of industrialisation and the 'culture industry', which does not strictly conform to Marx's theory of capitalist production.

A comprehensive history of the commodification of art has yet to be written, but a great deal of it, if not all, exists in parts or sketches. Arnold Hauser provides probably their most comprehensive compilation, offering important insights across his writings, not only in *The Social History of Art*. But, despite his own influence by Lukács, Hauser does not exactly conceive of the commodity as the central problem of art in capitalist society.

The origins of art's commodification are commonly traced to the Renaissance, but Hauser suggests they can be traced back as far as, but not earlier than, the Hellenic period, which indicates the presence of an art market in the strict sense of a free trade in art works that are exchanged for money on the basis of a more or less consistent demand and supplied by correspondingly organised production.⁷ The early Middle Ages then marks a collapse of this trade, which only resumes gradually with the Renaissance. By the 15th century there is evidence in Italy of detailed commercial terms for the commissioning of works of art, both of their subject-matter and materials, and of artistic labour, with higher prices for the work of renowned masters than their assistants.⁸ This is not a market for

⁷ Arnold Hauser: »The Art Trade« In: *The Sociology of Art*, trans K. J. Northcott. Oxon and New York 2011, p. 509.

⁸ Michael Baxandall provides an outstanding study of this in his *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*. Oxford (second edition) 1988.

readymade products, but such a trade is beginning. Hauser draws attention to the emergence of a class of merchants in the Netherlands in the 15th century, specialising in the trade of art from studios in Antwerp, Bruges, Ghent and Brussels.⁹ This class presupposed a more or less consistent demand and supply of art, a market, in which personal commissioning was replaced by impersonal buying and selling of works from the stock of these dealers. This commodification had a profound effect on the experience and production of art, introducing many phenomena we can still see today. Buyers began to experience works of art as readymade items, amongst which they could choose according to their preference or taste, but which were not made to their instructions. Artists began to make works independently from their buyers and without knowing the specific context for which their works were destined; indeed, without knowing whether their works would, in fact, be bought. Artists had made art for money before, but this had been mediated by their social relation to the commissioner; now they made art for an impersonal market and so more directly for money. Hauser observes how this market led to the specialisation of artists in different genres to meet demand, and to the impoverishment of artists as speculative production and copies proliferated.¹⁰ Of course, the dealer now became the new personal relation for

⁹ Hauser 2011 (as note 7), p. 511. See also Arnold Hauser: »The Baroque of the Protestant Bourgeoisie« In: *The Social History of Art, vol. 2, Renaissance, Mannerism and Baroque*, trans. S. Godman. London 1962, pp. 191-208. Hauser's insights are supported by numerous later studies, amongst the more recent being Filip Vermeulen: *Painting for the Market. Commercialization of Art in Antwerp's Golden Age*. Turnhout 2003.

¹⁰ Hauser 1962 (as note 9), pp. 203-4.

buyer and artist, but his actions were also determined by the impersonality of the market, which he, in a sense, now personified.

The scope of this market was initially limited. Hauser draws attention to the persistent independence of artists from dealers in France and Italy and the continuing power of princes and the church in commissioning and appropriating artworks, meaning that many were never exchanged through a market. The period from the Reformation to the French Revolution broadened this scope, as the authority of the church and nobility, and their collections of art, were dismantled. With the economic and political hegemony of the bourgeoisie, it enters a new era in which works of art circulate more freely as commodities than ever before.

If the bourgeois period presents a culmination in the commodification of art, it also signals a decisive protest. With romanticism, the freedom of the artist and of art assumed an unprecedented status, which was opposed to the impersonality of the market and the mechanisation of industrialisation. Art's commodification is identified as the mortal threat to this freedom. This protest resounds through the development of modern art. It is invoked repeatedly and remains urgent to this very day. But it involves some deep contradictions. The freedom of artists is evidently fuelled by the ambivalent freedoms conferred by the market's dismantling of traditional forms of authority. The market for art imposed impersonal regulations on artists, but also liberated them from the personal regulation of commissions and patrons, as well as the workshops and guilds that had developed to serve them. The compulsion to make art for an unknown buyer also provided the conditions for art to be made freely, as an end in itself by a sovereign artist. The protest at art's commodification therefore reveals a protest at the artists' own conditions of existence, exposed in their tortuous predicament of

needing to sell or starve. This tragedy of the romantic artist is then, for some, condemned as idealistic, to be repeated as comedy or farce. More cynically, this protest could function as a strategy to raise the artist's status and, thereby, the price of their works, as Benjamin observed of Baudelaire. For Hauser, romanticism's attempt to withdraw from art's commodification marked a withdrawal from the material and practical conditions of the world as such.¹¹ One might add that this enabled art to be seen as an other-worldly religion.

Art's commodification as such does not conclude the issue of how it forms a part of capitalist society. As Marx indicated, the commodification of art, even where it is exchanged through a free market for money, does not produce capital unless its profit is produced by labour employed by a proprietor or capitalist. An individual may sell a work of art that s/he produced in a free market for money, rendering it a commodity as a form of commercial or bourgeois society. A merchant may buy these works and sell them, rendering them commodities as a form of mercantile capitalism. But these commodities are in neither case a form of industrial capitalism, since neither are produced 'industrially' for profit, that is, neither involve the employment and organisation of labour for the purpose of extracting more value for the employer than they cost him to make. The Lukácsian orientation to the commodity as such tends to abstract from these important distinctions, but it also offers a more fundamental critique of capitalist society as such.

Industrialisation presents a profound transformation of the arts. Many are subsumed by it, becoming more or less unexceptional forms of proletarianized labour and industrial capitalism. Others remained independent and continue to be

¹¹ Arnold Hauser: *The Philosophy of Art History*. Cleveland 1963, pp. 336-7.

so today. In the smallest enterprises there is some degree of ambiguity as to where individual production ends and industrial production begins, and, despite what Marx suggests, the mere employment of wage labour is not always considered decisive. Many of the decisive features of industrial capitalism, especially the development of machinery and its effects on labour, are not decisive to small enterprises employing a few wage labourers in the arts or elsewhere. Arts that profit directly from the personal imprint of the artist, such as painting or sculpture or their later manifestations, form exceptional or monopoly enterprises that, even when they include wage labour, tend to suspend its exploitation as the source of their profits.¹² Still, even those arts that could be preserved from mass production or proletarianization were subjected to derivative forms of it. Thus, paintings by individuals can be sold as prints made by wage labourers who have become increasingly unskilled as print technologies have become more automated. In this sense, all the arts have been effectively subsumed by industrialisation.

But there is a more subterranean transformation at stake here, in which the very idea of art shifts, gravitating away from the arts that were industrialised and towards the arts that could resist it. These non-industrial arts, or their non-industrial qualities at least, especially the artist's unique touch, could then be found in the past, generating a sense of their enduring resilience and value. But this conceals their modernity, their emergence in reaction to industrialisation. This shift is also a legacy of romanticism and one that proved comparatively effective and enduring. The protest against art's commodification may have failed, but this

¹² On the limits to industrial capitalism in the commodification of the visual arts, see Dave Beech: *Art and Value. Art's Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics*. Leiden and Boston 2015.

very failure, the commodification of free art, was ironically successful in enabling artists to evade industrial capitalism.

Of course, socialist regimes and even some capitalist regimes established state institutions or oversaw the establishment of private institutions in the 20th century, often built on earlier initiatives, that have provided support for the arts outside the market, such as public galleries, theatres, universities and so on. Increased free time from work in some wealthier societies has also enabled amateurism to spread beyond the narrow confines of earlier periods, although its status still tends to be overshadowed by the sphere of professionalism.

The emergence of so-called 'post-industrial' societies in the latter part of the 20th century suggests a new era, but its diagnosis remains contentious, especially the notion of post-industrial capitalism. Industrialisation remains a fact of life for many within these societies, and the movement of industries offshore clearly does not reduce their significance for capitalism globally, or even within the de-industrialised regions insofar as capital continues to be accumulated there. But even if one focuses on these de-industrialised regions, the character of their capitalism is ambivalent. Automation, de- and re-skilling, unemployment and precariousness, are all conspicuous features of industrial capitalism since the 19th century, as is the importance of financialisation and the general commercialisation of social life. This may have intensified in some respects, but its apparent novelty is largely an effect of the neoliberal dismantling of the state protections and social limits to capitalism instituted earlier in the 20th century. However, the ideological horizon of neoliberalism has not been a return to industrial capitalism, but rather to small businesses and individual entrepreneurialism, that is, a petit bourgeois society that would scarcely enable the production of capital in Marx's terms. This,

at least, has been the veil cast over this period, which has seen a return to 19th-century levels of inequality, albeit fuelled less by producing value and more by appropriating it through privatisation, debt and rent. One contention has been that the production of value within post-industrial capitalism also assumes a more appropriative mode. Rather than capitalists employing and organising labour, workers are left to organise themselves, to produce their own commodities, as goods or services, or even as their own skills or labour-capacity, the capitalists then appropriating profit from these commodities, either through debts advanced on their enterprises, purchasing copyrights to lucrative goods, or employing labour below the cost of its production or reproduction. A similar strategy is discerned in relation to social activities never intended as work, such as selling advertising on websites made popular and thereby profitable by their users. None of these forms correspond to Marx's conception of industrial capitalism, since their value is not produced by labour employed by a capitalist. They appear rather to be forms of simple commodity exchange, that is, forms of commercial or bourgeois society – not even that in the case of websites. But this exchange is often unequal. This suggests a form of appropriation more characteristic of merchant capitalism. However, there is also a sense in which capitalists are not simply buying cheap and selling dear, but of organising conditions in which this is possible. Labour is organised not directly, but indirectly. This suggests not merely mercantilism, but a quasi-productive or quasi-industrial form of capitalism.

Whether or not these developments result in new forms of art's commodification is difficult to discern, if only because art has long since been subjected to this complex of simple, mercantile and industrial or quasi-industrial commodification. The exorbitant prices in the market for some works of visual art

testifies to the wealth of the new rich, but this is not unprecedented, nor is the treatment of art as an asset as such. What is new is the global scale of this market and, more significantly to the form of art's commodification, the extent to which it has become a market for investments anticipating or speculating on rising prices and future returns. However, this market is not always open or free, with carefully managed trade to support high prices.

A more implicit and problematic contention is the proposition that the post-industrial subject, precarious and flexible, self-organising and entrepreneurial, is comparable to an artist.¹³ This presents an extraordinary reversal or inflection of romanticism's protest against industrialisation, as the qualities that distinguished the artist from both proletarian and capitalist are transformed into the qualities required by everyone in the post-industrial age. Not least of these would be the romantics' ambivalence to commodification: the semblance of independence that proved so profitable. The theory of this post-industrial condition does not presuppose a corresponding development of art beyond romanticism, but the relatively limited and artisanal skills constituting the romantics' commodities do not dispose of the general capacities of this post-industrial subject. They correspond rather more to the radically expanded range of artistic capacities that became established by the 1970s, contemporaneously with the supposed emergence of the post-industrial subject. Indeed, since this time, the artist as such has often appeared explicitly as an entrepreneur.

¹³ See for instance Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello: *The New Spirit in Capitalism*, trans. G. Elliott. London and New York, 2005.