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## CHAPTER EIGHT

## DAMIEN HIRST'S DIAMOND SKULL AND THE CAPITALIST SUBLIME

LUKE WHITE

## INTRODUCTION

Writing about Damien Hirst is tricky. There is a body of extant literature—Julian Stallabrass's book *High Art Lite* in particular—which sets out an effective and damning critique of the “young British art” of which Hirst was a leading figure, mapping its turn away from a socially committed avant-garde position towards an altogether more self-seeking art, subsumed into spectacular, “postmodern” cultural consumption.<sup>1</sup> This is, indeed, “capitalist art,” produced within and entirely accommodated to capital: it is made for purchase by an elite class of global capitalists—advertising gurus such as Charles Saatchi and hedge-fund billionaires such as Steve Cohen, not to mention the oligarchs and tycoons from Russia and East Asia who have more recently risen as Hirst's clients. Accommodated to their needs and interests, it provides a highly ideologised vision of the world. It is, furthermore, a work of the media “spectacle” on which present-day capital relies, forming itself in response to the world of mass-cultural consumption of which art is increasingly a part. But as such it requires a somewhat different exposition from the vanguard art which art criticism generally concerns itself with. Accounts such as Stallabrass's—though I do not dispute the critique they make of the ways that such art fails to live up to the standards of the avant-garde—do not go enough distance to understanding how such works *do* function.

As “capitalist art,” Hirst's work is traversed by the ideological contradictions and social antagonisms of capital itself, and though it often slides into the ridiculous, at its best it has a power to captivate, holding its audiences through its staging (though not as such its critique) of the antagonisms of capital in highly condensed, multilayered images, embodied in sculptures with a haunting presence. Hirst's work—in particular his early output—has fascinated our culture, and left us with some of the most memorable and iconic images of art in the 1990s.

Even though Hirst may not be a “good” avant-garde artist, and even though I would not want to defend his mode of practice, his work is nonetheless a significant cultural phenomenon, a symptom of our contemporary society that needs analysis. Part of my answer to why his work has been so successful is that it is at least to some extent what Hirst borrows

from the eighteenth-century sensibility of the sublime, and the continuing influence of such an aesthetic in present-day commodity culture, which lies at the core of its power within our culture. It often seems as if Hirst has taken Burke's *Enquiry*, in however crude a manner, as a handbook for cultural production—which, of course, it was.

In this paper, I will be turning to one of Hirst's more recent works, the instantly infamous *For the Love of God* (2007): a cast of a human skull in platinum, covered with 8,601 prime quality diamonds, which are estimated to have cost £13 million. Notoriously, the work was placed on sale for the sum of £50 million. This work was for Hirst something of a return to form, stirring up the kind of media fascination and critical interest which his work had rarely produced since the mid nineties. Furthermore, however ideologically compromised—and conceptually absurd—the piece may be, Hirst has once more produced in it (for me at least) a genuinely haunting, knotty image.

My argument in what follows is that the skull is not just capitalist art, but, in that it is also rather obviously art about money, it is also an art of the capitalist sublime: an art which presents capital as its unrepresentable object of desire. My argument is in three parts. I start by looking at the representation that the skull makes of the unimaginable sum of money invested in it, and the value that it represents as an artwork. I then go on, comparing it to Hirst's earlier "shark" sculpture, to discuss the way that the skull maps us into an imaginary of global capital, which I identify with Fredric Jameson's "postmodern sublime." Finally, I turn to look at the ambivalence which remains at its heart: it is haunted by the violence and exploitativeness of capital, at the same time as it embodies its ideological phantasies.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. THE ENIGMA OF MONEY

Visiting the skull is a very different experience from reading about it. One is led in a small group up a narrow staircase, and into a pitch black room. One stumbles towards the skull, the only visible object, sitting in the centre (one presumes) of the room, under a vertical spotlight, behind the glass one of Hirst's trademark vitrines, on a plinth which raises it up to nearly head height. Under the single point of light in the room, it glitters, sparkles, shines—no burns—with a ravishingly beautiful light, the piercing beams of the fiery reds, earthy yellows and icy blues of its diamonds twinkling like—to coin a phrase—the stars brought down to earth.<sup>3</sup>

I am tempted to say that the work has a powerful "presence" which its media representations lack, and yet this, too, would not be quite right: the experience of the skull is marked more with an absence—with what Lacan called a "missed encounter with the real"<sup>4</sup>—than it ever entirely becomes present in front of us. It has an excessive material "thereness" which does not quite coincide with its iconicity or its "concept," the material and

“conceptual” seeming to slip past—to outstrip—each other. As we look at it, it seems to waver between these dimensions (between icon and object, concept and aesthetic experience, image and material thing) and is never graspable in any one of them. It is neither “here,” in front of us, nor “there” in the gallery’s parallel non-site of the media representations where we have already seen it. As we shuffle around in the dark, the only things that we can find to say, in hushed tones, are the various media clichés we have already read, but these don’t really seem to help make sense of what we are—or are not—experiencing; as litanies, they seem more a ritual defence than anything else. Our allotted two minutes with the skull is quickly up (for there is a strict time limit to the viewing), and we are ushered out of the room by security guards, blinking, dazzled, and bemused. Perhaps the brevity of the allowed visit is the masterstroke of the generally immaculate staging of the work. We are left with a troubling “hole” in experience, not knowing quite what we saw, felt or knew in front of the piece.

At the heart of the work, then, is a staged failure of presentation, an absence which marks the presentation of some unrepresentable Thing. The skull is an enigma, an obscure, sublime object of desire. My contention is that this unrepresentable Thing, this sublime object which is at stake in the skull is capital itself. As I stood in the gallery, I remembered Guy Debord’s famous description of the Spectacle as “capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes image.”<sup>5</sup> There is something I have never quite understood in the intent of the metaphor that Debord offers of an alchemical desublimation of abstract value into image (especially strange in that an image is not in fact altogether any more material than capital itself, even if it is now sensible), but this seemed nonetheless an apt description of Hirst’s skull, which appeared to have crystallised from a concentration of pure capital into something that still vibrated between being image and object.

A large part of what confounds our experience, is, of course, the very fact that we know the cost and the price of the work. It is this sum which the work presents to its viewers or comes to represent for them, in sensible form. Certainly in the newspaper discourse about the piece, this sum was the crunch point of the debate, and the evaluations of the work were often a matter of the adequacy of the skull’s visual impact to its cost. One columnist put it nicely in wondering whether standing in the presence of a suitcase filled with £50 million would have the same effect on a viewer.<sup>6</sup> In either case, we are dealing with the problem of the aesthetic adequation of an unimaginable sum. In Kantian terms we are dealing with something akin to the mathematical sublime, where the intellectual comprehension of a quantity also outstrips the apprehension of our sensible imagination’s intuitions. Does the aesthetic fire of diamonds somehow provide an intuition whereby such a sum of money finds a representative within the sensuous imagination?<sup>7</sup>

With money, it is not, however, just a matter of the human's innate incapacity to imagine, through direct experience, extremely large quantities. Money, as an intellectual phenomenon, an abstraction (however concrete its effects), belongs to the realm of the *Übersinnlich*, (the supersensible) and just as with the Kantian sublime, thinking money involves the fundamental mismatch by which the imagination must seek to find sensuous adequation for the non-sensuous.<sup>8</sup> *Übersinnlich* is thus not just the term which Kant uses for the realm of which the sublime gives us an intimation, but it is also the word that Marx uses, conscious surely of its connotations from philosophical aesthetics, to describe the abstractions involved in money and the commodity form: the commodity is "ein sinnlich übersinnliches Ding" (a sensible supersensible thing).<sup>9</sup>

Hirst's sculpture, drawing on these characteristics of the money/commodity form, ties us in knots between the sensible and the abstract. We know we are in the presence of £13 million of diamonds, and £50 million of art, but it seems impossible, standing there in the dark, to disentangle the effects of such a knowledge from the ravishing aesthetic effects of the diamonds. It is impossible to know to what extent we are responding to the *idea* of £50 million, or to the aesthetic instantiation of such a sum in the object—or, in fact, to the brilliant theatre of the work's presentation. What Hirst has done, of course, is to stage just such a problematic experience from all three elements. The work plays off the conditions of the sensorium fostered under capital, as described by Marx in the 1844 *Paris Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* through the figure of the jewellery dealer, who can no longer see the sensuous beauty of the jewels he sells, so mediated is his experience of them by their exchange-value. The dealer in gems, argues Marx, is sensuously stunted, because he sees "only the commercial value" of the gems he deals in. The abstraction of money, says Marx, in our modern world, makes us blind to the sensuous materiality and particularity of the world.<sup>10</sup> Such mediation is at the heart of the uncanny sense of missed encounter in Hirst's skull: it has, in part, dematerialised into the abstractions which mediate our experience of it. Like all commodities, though in an exacerbated form, it has become spectral,<sup>11</sup> never entirely either exchange- or use-value, but suspended between the two. In this sense, the work is not "conceptual," as many people have mistaken it; it revolves precisely around the gap between the intellectual and the material, sensuous thing.

## 2. THE SKULL'S GLOBAL SUBLIME

It is not, however, just the sum of money which is at stake in Hirst's skull. Rather, it is more properly this sum *as capital*. The newspaper reports already make this quite clear in their interest in the distinction between the £13 million *investment* in the piece and the £50 million

price tag it carried—and hence the mysterious £37 million difference between the two.<sup>12</sup> This is “surplus-value”: no longer simply money as measure, but that strangely intangible, obscure, even unstable and evanescent thing at the heart of capital accumulation. Such surplus is at once substanceless but also, paradoxically, a “weighty” sum. Something vast, powerful, real, and yet also ghostly—illusory like an image from the phantasmagoria.

It is also capital, as a power in the world rather than just money, which is at stake in the phantasy scene within which the work is produced and through which it addresses its audience. This phantasy scene is not a new one within Hirst’s work; it has been there from the outset. The skull replays a trick first played on me in the Saatchi gallery many years ago by the young Damien Hirst with his equally infamous “shark sculpture,” *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Somebody Living* (1992). With this piece, just like the skull, experience of the sculpture in the gallery was preceded by rumour and media images, and just as with the skull, the result was a strange sense of self-dislocation as the work itself slipped between the site of the gallery and the non-sites of its media representations, between its overly material instantiation in front of us and its “concept.” Like the skull, rumours of the cost and price of the piece were prominent in media discourse. Part of the awe and wonder of the work was the awareness of the £70,000 which was said to have been spent on producing it, and which Saatchi had paid for the sculpture. The fact that this seemed an awesome sum for the production of a piece of contemporary art—and the fact that Hirst now needs to invest millions in order to have the same effect—marks something of the change in the artworld over the intervening fifteen years.

Hirst’s discussions, in interview, of the production of *Physical Impossibility* reveal the phantasy scene which underlies it, and which I also hold underlies *For the Love of God*. He describes how the work grew from an experience working making phone calls for a market research company. It was from the resulting increased confidence in his telephone manner and in what can be achieved with the telephone that Hirst organised and raised sponsorship for the Freeze exhibition that launched his career.

From it also emerges a phantasy of the power of telecommunications, when backed with money, to set an enormous logistical machine in motion across the world from one’s armchair or desk—to have something as huge and exotic as a 14-foot tiger shark caught on the other side of the planet, refrigerated and shipped, to have a vitrine built by expert technicians, and have a team preserve the shark and assemble the piece... Hirst described this phantasy in interview with Gordon Burn:

You can get anything over the phone. I actually wondered if there was no limit to it. I wanted to do a shark and thought, No, that's ... impossible; you can't do that. ... I thought, Shit, you can get it over the phone. ... With the phone you become totally international. You can go beyond continents. You can go anywhere in the world with a phone.<sup>15</sup>

This phantasy clearly mimes the movement of the Kantian sublime, of “das Gefühl einer augenblicklichen Hemmung der Lebenskräfte und darauf sogleich folgenden desto stärkern Ergießung derselben” (the feeling of a momentary inhibition of our life-forces followed by their gushing out all the more powerfully), as we are faced first with a sense of absolute powerlessness in the world scene (“no that's ... impossible”), but then, with an ecstatic vision of an expansion of the self into the “beyond continents” of telecommunicational power, an image of the “Unendlichkeit” (endlessness) and “unbegrenzten Vermögens” (unbounded capacities) which Kant associates with the sublime.<sup>14</sup> Hirst's phantasy is clearly a phantasy of the power of global capital and its communicational networks, and what it is to inhabit the heart of their web. These networks within which Hirst's sculpture situates itself are exactly those which Fredric Jameson theorises in his vision of a “postmodern sublime,” as forming an unthinkable and unrepresentable totality within which the subject of global capital must attempt—however vainly—to map him- or herself.<sup>15</sup> Jameson's description of the postmodern sublime makes a lot of sense of the fascinated wonder and perplexity *Physical Impossibility* elicited in audiences who already knew the price tag, and who, in front of its pristinely technological surfaces, could only imagine its scene of production. We too, then, partake in Hirst's phantasy of the global sublime, as the consumers for whose benefit (and gallery entrance fee) the spectacle is being staged. A not-insubstantial part of the pleasure of the sculpture may well be in the phantasy of the command of a global process which this offers.<sup>16</sup>

Where I depart from Jameson's analysis, however, is with regard to his understanding of this sublime of global capitalism as an entirely new thing. Jameson discusses the sublime of Burke and Kant as posited in relation not to the totalising “second nature” of capitalist modernity, but to nature itself. However, it is my contention that capital—with its formlessness, its constant passing beyond its own finitude, its implacable force—has always been at the heart of the notion of the sublime, a notion which, after all, arose to prominence in Western criticism and aesthetics alongside the massive transformations of the institutions and practices of modern capital which P. G. M. Dickson has termed a “financial revolution,” and alongside the rise of the discourse of economics itself.<sup>17</sup> If I am right in this contention—one, unfortunately, which I cannot fully explore within the confines of this essay—then the natural sublime of Romanticism and its successors is itself a displaced and reassuring projection of a

relation of the modern subject to capital, and the Jamesonian sublime is at the heart of a modern as well as a postmodern sensibility.

Hirst's phantasy scene, loaded as it is with the Jamesonian sublime, thus in fact has its precursor in that foundational text of political economy, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, where Smith describes the power of consumption of even the lowliest worker in capitalist economy, thanks to the economic organisation of commodity production and the division of labour. Such consumption stretches the labourer's economic power across the globe and over a myriad of other producers, and makes him, thinks Smith, more powerful than the most absolute despot of a "primitive" tribal culture. Smith writes:

Observe the accommodation of the most common artificer or daylabourer in a civilized and thriving country, and you will perceive that the number of people, of whose industry a part, though but a small part, has been employed in procuring him this accommodation, exceeds all computation. The woollen coat, for example, which covers the day-labourer, as coarse and rough as it may appear, is the produce of the joint labour of a great multitude of workmen. The shepherd, the sorter of the wool, the wool-comber or carder, the dyer, the scribbler, the spinner, the weaver, the fuller, the dresser, with many others, must all join their different arts in order to complete even this homely production. How many merchants and carriers, besides, must have been employed in transporting the materials from some of those workmen to others who often live in a very distant part of the country? How much commerce and navigation in particular, how many ship-builders, sailors, sail-makers, rope-makers, must have been employed in order to bring together the different drugs made use of by the dyer, which often come from the remotest corners of the world?<sup>18</sup>

Smith's catalogue of workers is notable in foregrounding, just as Hirst's telecommunications phantasy does, capital's networks of command, commerce and communication. His description of proto-industrial production shares with Hirst's shark the task of envisioning and mapping an unimaginable geo-economic scene. Smith continues at great length to list the similarly vast numbers, and the unthinkable geographic spread, of those employed in the global affair of producing the simple tools, food, habitation and furnishings of the lifestyle of the "daylabourer," and, in a gesture which discounts the actual destitution of such a figure, concludes:

if we examine, I say, all these things, and consider what a variety of labour is employed about each of them, we shall be sensible that, without the assistance and co-operation of many thousands, the very meanest person in a civilized country could not be provided, even according to, what we very falsely imagine, the easy and simple manner in which he is commonly accommodated. Compared, indeed, with the more extravagant luxury of the great, his accommodation must no doubt appear extremely simple and easy; and yet it may be true, perhaps, that the accommodation of an European prince does not always so much exceed that of an industrious and frugal peasant, as the accommodation of the latter exceeds that of many an African king, the absolute masters of the lives and liberties of ten thousand naked savages.<sup>19</sup>

Like Hirst, Smith produces a reassuring—and sublimely thrilling—image of the omnipotence of the consumer, and the echo between the two suggests that Hirst’s phantasy inheres in the ideological imaginary of a capitalist modernity which has long been “global” in its ambitions.

The sublime in its heyday, too, functioned as an aesthetic of colonial or imperial forms of globalisation, and in Hirst’s shark there are echoes of eighteenth-century uses of the sublime in imperialist *mirabilia* such as John Singleton Copley’s *Watson and the Shark* (1778). Copley’s painting, like *Physical Impossibility*, uses the figure of a shark to image capital at work, and would have positioned its first viewers within a scene of intercontinental commerce, allowing them to imagine their presence in London in relation to the distant places into which their wealth reached. It depicts a scene from the life of Brook Watson—who by the time the picture was painted was already a pillar of London’s merchant community, and who would go on to be both Lord Mayor of London and a Baronet—as he is rescued from the jaws of a shark by a crew of trusty subordinates whilst on a trading expedition to Havana. It is an image of capital’s daring exploits, fighting against a counter-purposive nature at the limits of empire and of human control—a wild, sublime nature which its audience could imagine as being so very unlike the familiar and domesticated nature of pastoral England. Like Copley’s painting (which in its own day also made a “sensation” at the Royal Academy) Hirst’s shark brings back to the homely centre of empire something of its wild and exotic margins.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. THE AMBIVALENCE OF THE CAPITALIST SUBLIME

Of course, the point of this discussion of *Physical Impossibility* is to enable us to discover once more the same mechanisms of address in *For the Love of God*. Once more we are faced with an instantiation of what can be mobilised in cultural production—this time by £13 million. The Hirstean phantasy thus reiterates itself on an altogether larger scale, and one which, although even £50 million is still a drop in the ocean of the planetary flows of capital, takes another step towards adequation of a sum that might be significant within this. Such a significance is marked by the much-reported fact that the sourcing of the diamonds for the work caused a “blip” in the global diamond market.<sup>21</sup>

Like the shark, it brings something of the wild and exotic fringes of what once was empire into the London gallery, with its allusions to ancient Aztec art. But it also brings the geography of empire back in the form of its relation to the diamond trade itself, a brutal industry in which fantastical profits are made off the back of some of the poorest and most exploited workers, and which has fuelled bloody civil wars in countries such as Sierra Leone. Hirst and his galleries were quick to emphasise that the diamonds used for the skull were “all ethically sourced, each with written guarantees in compliance with United Nations

resolutions.”<sup>22</sup> However, all that such guarantees entail is their not having been used to finance a guerrilla army: ethical sourcing is no guarantee even that the diamonds are not the object of armed struggle, and it says nothing about the character of the regime which governs and profits from the mining. Beyond this, it says even less of the conditions of diamond miners, people often displaced from their traditional means of life and forced into work at below-subsistence levels of remuneration by those above them who have a monopoly over the supply chain. Though less spectacular than the bloody warfare it has often stimulated, the diamond industry is even in its peacetime incarnations and running according to UN regulation, hardly less deadly or rapacious, harbouring within itself a form of violence which is lethal and systematic but normalised as part of the regular, legal functioning of a trade.<sup>23</sup> The most unpleasant dimension of Hirst’s skull—and of some of the things that Hirst has said about it—is a certain disavowal of this violence. Will Self, for example, reports a conversation with Hirst:

When ... I’d suggested to Hirst that some people find it crass, this unprecedented condensation of wealth, in the light of so much human suffering for a want of a few quid, he muttered gnomically, “Dunno mate, it’s unavoidable really... I mean, I think it offers people hope.” But the following day he sent me a text message: “When you asked me yesterday about all the money that was spent on the skull when people are starving, I was just thinking that people don’t mind money being spent on beautiful things, it’s ugly things that are the problem, and there’s plenty of ugly f\*\*\*ing buildings in the world that cost way more than the skull.”<sup>24</sup>

The claims made for the work to transcend death through beauty, in an art taking refuge from the contingent political and social contexts of the contemporary world in supposedly grand and universal themes, are all the more disturbing when death and violence are in fact at the heart of the production of the work itself. What kind of a transcendence of death can the work offer in this case, and how obscene is it to play its beauty against the brutality of its production? In interview, Hirst has at least registered his belated realisation about the diamond trade: “That’s when you stop laughing. You might have created something that people might die because of. I guess I felt like Oppenheimer or something. What have I done?”<sup>25</sup>

The skull, like much of Hirst’s oeuvre, maintains an unfortunate muteness in front of these issues. Such issues, however, although not an explicit thematic of the work, remain part of what “haunts” it; not exactly a “content,” since such concerns are hardly held “within” the sculpture, but rather, more like Derrida’s *perergera*, these are matters which, though ostensibly peripheral, nonetheless find themselves inscribed at the very heart of the work.<sup>26</sup> The presence of the diamond trade and the uncomfortable ethical dilemmas raised by the work—whatever

its “intentions”—permeate the discourse which it has elicited, and form an unavoidable coordinate of interpretation.

This is, I think, due to an irreducible ambivalence which is structured into the capitalist sublime, which, just like capital itself, is riven by the social antagonisms which constitute it. If Hirst’s work, presenting the thrill of capital as mastery and power, is ideological, we must remember that ideology, after all, can only disavow social contradiction by first raising it in an image which always threatens to turn dialectic.

Hirst’s shark, too, is haunted by capital’s violence. The phantasy which I proposed to lie at its heart is not just one of power. There is a certain reversibility in the phantasy, with the mortified flesh of the shark also providing a point of identification for the viewer: Hirst has said that “empathy with dead meat” is an important aim of his work.<sup>27</sup> The telephone research work from which Hirst’s phantasy emerges is not an experience of mastery through technology at all, but of numbing powerlessness, being stuck in a cubicle, speaking pre-scripted dialogue to someone a computer has already pre-dialled for you. The moribund flesh of the shark is an apt image of the common experience of the labouring body caught within and subjected to the flows of capital.

This zombie body returns to haunt Hirst’s sculptural phantasies of the power of capital, and marks the irreducible antagonism between capital and labour on which capital is based, and of which it cannot rid itself even in its most ideological incarnations. If Hirst’s phantasy, as I have argued, comparing it with Adam Smith’s, is a variation on the one at the heart of commodity consumption itself, this phantasy, too, has the same ambivalence at its heart. The power we exert in the act of purchase is only at the cost of our own subjection. There is an identificatory self-recognition in the commodity as desired object, where our own commodification as labouring bodies is returned to us. Perhaps there is a masochistic element to this, and perhaps, even, capital captates our desire through a narcissistic, oceanic investment in the death drive (not a million miles away from the ambivalent and oceanic urges which have often been discovered at the heart of the sublime) as much as it does through the more rational and “positive” pleasures of mastery. Hirst’s work, though it stops short before raising such a mechanism to consciousness and critique, seems to exacerbate such a deathly narcissism of capital and commodity desire, feeding off this for its affects, and bringing it a form of visibility.

Thus Hirst’s work remains haunted by the violence of capital. If, as I started out arguing, the skull serves as a representation of “capital,” the face which this wears is, of course, most literally that of death, which is all too appropriate. The deathliness of Hirst’s *For the Love of God* manifests itself not just in the fairly banal image of the skull, but in its

sparkling but sterile, gunmetal-grey surfaces, the dystopian sheen of which reminds one, when one comes up against the object in all its materiality, more of a piece of futuristic, precision-engineered military hardware than of a piece of jewellery, redolent as it is of the cyborg's armoured skull in the *Terminator* films. There is something decidedly apocalyptic about the vision of this skull. In equal parts as it is beautiful, it is also chilling. This is capital: seductive but deathly, and all the more seductive in deathliness.

The imaginary of capital has long exhibited an intimacy with the morbid, and it partakes of a far older pact between power and the aesthetics of death, with Hirst's skull, for example, drawing on a tradition of the *memento mori* which saw its flowering at another moment of the imperial expansion of capital, with the expanding commercial network of the Dutch Republic.<sup>28</sup> But Hirst's avowed intention, attempting to trump death with the obscene beauty of the capitalist sublime, also inscribes him within a tradition stretching back to the death mask of Tutankhamun and beyond, of the representational logic of a wealth whose intense degree of accumulation—necessarily based on servitude and death—allows its transfiguration into aesthetic spectacle. Such a logic is obviously much older than modern capitalism, but it is nonetheless one inscribed in capital's heart. Today, such an attempt at the aesthetic transcendence of death as we have with Hirst's skull partakes of a specifically modern logic of the relation of death to the accumulation of power and wealth. Jean Baudrillard, for example, has diagnosed at the basis of modern power an increasing exclusion—since the sixteenth century—of death from the realm of the living.<sup>29</sup> It is such an exclusion of death, and the resultant fear of it, which ratifies the powers of the modern Church (with its promises that death is not the end for the faithful), the modern State (with its health services and its provision of the safety of law and order), and of the commodity (which also, through the images of advertising, offers us a kind of an eternal youth and glamour). Money itself, with its transfiguration of the fleeting world of the flesh (its becoming “ein sinnlich übersinnliches Ding”) into abstract and eternal exchange-value serves at the core of this nexus of promises of the defeat of life's finitude. Hirst's oeuvre, rotating around medicine, the bureaucratisation of space, a (rather flip) religiosity, the saccharine surfaces of consumption and the mysteries of value, thematically paces out the territories of such promises. Ultimately, of course, each of these promises of life is founded on a renewed pact with death, and it is this deathliness, lurking, as we have seen in this essay, in the phantasies of the commodity form and of the globalised political economy of capital, that reasserts itself in Hirst's bejewelled Terminator skull.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s* (London: Verso, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> I am using the term phantasy, spelt with a “ph,” to demarcate psychoanalytical notions of (unconscious) phantasy from the more conscious, “daydream”-type fantasies that we might entertain. The convention was adopted by James Strachey in the Standard Edition of Freud’s works.

<sup>3</sup> “Stars Down to Earth” is the title of an essay by Adorno. See Theodor Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 46-171.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Tuché and Automaton,” in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1994), 53-64.

<sup>5</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ben Knabb (New York: Rebel Press, 1992), 17.

<sup>6</sup> Alan Riding, “Entr’acte: Damien Hirst’s ‘Ethical’ Art,” *International Herald Tribune*, June 8, 2007, <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/06/08/news/entracte.php> (accessed June 10, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Project Gutenberg-DE, 2003, <http://Gutenberg.Spiegel.de/kant/kuk/kuk.htm> (accessed May 2004), §25.

<sup>8</sup> For Kant on the supersensible and the sublime, see for example *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, §26-8, where the term is used a number of times.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *Das Kapital*. vol. 1, chapter 1, *Werke*, vol. 23 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1968), 85.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Marx, “Private Property and Communism,” *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Mulligan (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959), archived on the Marx & Engels Internet Archive, 2000, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm> (accessed May 2007).

<sup>11</sup> I borrow the notion of spectrality from Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Tom Morton writes: “Two minutes, 8,601 gemstones, the well-publicized £15 million production costs and a £50 million price tag—this work was about nothing if not numbers (indeed, any buyer who broke down *For the Love of God* into its raw materials for resale would see £35 million worth of pure ‘art’ disappear into the ether).” Tom Morton, “Damien Hirst: White Cube”, review of *Beyond Belief*, *Frieze* August 2007. [http://www.frieze.com/review\\_single.asp?r=2769](http://www.frieze.com/review_single.asp?r=2769) (accessed August 28, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Damien Hirst and Gordon Burn. *On the Way to Work* (London: Faber, 2001), 45.

<sup>14</sup> Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, §23; §26.

<sup>15</sup> See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 34-8.

<sup>16</sup> Hollywood blockbuster effects cinema, too, places us within such a hyper-technological phantasy of production. In front of its super-slick aesthetic of digital production we are also addressed in terms of our consumption of the products of a hyper-technological entertainment industry and its sublime ability to present the unrepresentable.

<sup>17</sup> See P.G.M. Dickson, *The Financial Revolution in England: A Study of the Development of Public Credit, 1688-1756* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1967). The period covered by Dickson’s book takes us, of course, almost exactly from Boileau’s influential translation of *Peri Hupsous* to the publication of Edmund Burke’s *Enquiry* into the sublime. This period sees the foundation of the Bank of England and of Lloyds of London, a massive increase in joint-stock companies, and the development of a tradable national debt. Credit, in various forms and guises, came to permeate society and rule economic reality, making value into a phantasmagorical phenomenon—strange, unreal, but nonetheless, it seemed to commentators of the time, frighteningly productive and unruly in its material effects. Foregrounding this moment within the development of capital goes somewhat against the grain of the bulk of more orthodox histories which have sought the essence of capitalism within the industrialisation of the nineteenth century; however, as capital has once more metamorphosed in the late twentieth century, we are faced anew with the need to rethink the longer history of capital and our place within it. The extreme liquidity of early-modern capital, and its concentration not in the hands of industrialists but of bankers makes it an enlightening mirror for our own times. For more on this chapter of early modern capital, see in particular Fernand Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce*, vol. 2 of *Civilization and Capitalism: 15th-18th Century*, trans. Siân Williams (New York: Harper and Row, 1982). Accounts of the literary responses to the spectrality of capital as it emerges at this moment are given, for example, in Laura Brown, *Fables of Modernity: Literature and Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) and in Colin Nicholson, *Writing and the Rise of Finance: Capital Satires of the Early Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>18</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 6th ed., vol. 1 of 2, (Dublin, 1801), 12.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 13.

<sup>20</sup> For more on Copley's painting, see for example Louis P. Masur, "Reading Watson and the Shark," *New England Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (1994): 427-54. The word "sensation," as well as being the title of the major show at the Royal Academy of Charles Saatchi's collection of works by the "young British artists" of the 1990s, is also the term used to describe the effect of Copley's *Watson and the Shark* in Jules Prown's catalogue of the artist's *oeuvre*. Jules David Prown, *John Singleton Copley*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 2:273.

<sup>21</sup> See for example William Shaw, "The Iceman Cometh," *New York Times*, June 3, 2007, online ed. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/03/magazine/03Style-skull-t.html> (accessed October 10, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> White Cube Gallery press release, as cited, for example, in Riding, "Entr'acte."

<sup>23</sup> For more on the diamond industry and its appalling working conditions see Lydia Polgreen, "Diamonds Move from Blood to Sweat and Tears," *New York Times*, March 25, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/25/world/africa/25diamonds.html> (visited 23 June 2007).

<sup>24</sup> Will Self, "To Die For," *Telegraph* June 2, 2007, *Telegraph Magazine*: 28.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Shaw, "The Iceman Cometh."

<sup>26</sup> See Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 17-147.

<sup>27</sup> Self, "To Die For," 27.

<sup>28</sup> The new attitudes towards and ways of dealing with material reality which this network fostered, and which enabled its growth, brought back home an "embarrassment of riches" (to cite the title of Simon Schama's book on the era) whose anxieties were registered in the complexities of the still lives which at once catalogued this new wealth but also served as a reminder that its pleasures tie us to the mortal body. See Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York: Fontana, 1988). Schama reads the still life as recording the material culture of the Dutch Republic, founded as this was on new forms of materialistic thought. Such a materialism, argues Schama, presented profound anxieties for a culture so deeply pious as the Dutch one. But beyond this piety, the anxiety registered in the still life genre, with its insistence on the passing nature of wealth, is the anxiety of capitalist modernity itself, with its newly irreversible sense of historical time, raising as it does the spectre of finitude. Interestingly, Hirst's iconography is even more tightly woven with that which emerges from the Dutch culture as presented by Schama, who opens his book not with a discussion of still life images, but by describing the insistence of the motif in Dutch prints of the beached whales which were being washed ashore on the Dutch coast. Such images, like Hirst's shark, spoke at once of miraculous spectacle but also of the more worldly forms of knowledge and profit which would be made of the bodies of the stranded leviathans. Like Hirst's shark, these were also strange visitors, washed up on the shores of the homeland, from the exotic and alien waterways of a globalising commercial empire.

<sup>29</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993), see esp. .