

What We Talk About When We Talk About Art and Value

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I am delighted to be focused on the question of the relevance of Marxist value theory to the theory of Art in the wake of Dave Beech's guiding work. Dave has rightly demonstrated that the most influential strains of Marxist art theory have relied on a pervasive assumption, namely, that artistic production in bourgeois society (however this is defined in terms of place and period) occurs *within* the capitalist mode of production. By introducing political economic concepts foreign to the art theoretical tradition—the real and formal subsumption of labor in the development of capitalist social relations, for example—he makes perspicuous an important truth: art productive labor, by virtue of the normative conditions it must meet in order to count as producing the kind of use values art affords, is by and large non-subsumable labor. Although, concerned with a ruthless critique of everything worth criticizing in contemporary class society, the Marxist theory of art in general (and the Frankfurt School in particular) failed to provide a robust economic analysis in Marxist terms of the nature of artistic production. Filling in the gap with respect to a perennial question about art's economic exceptionalism is, therefore, long overdue and especially welcome.

With my time today, I'd like to take a longer look at the gap itself. There is a question as to the overall commensurability of the mainstream of Marxist art theory (at least in the academy) and the political economy of art of the kind we find in Beech's text. Dave says as much when he distinguishes, in the first paragraphs of his book, between the "cultural, social and political incorporation [of art] by capitalism, on the one hand, and its economic incorporation on the other." He does suggest a number of reasons why the likes of Adorno and Bloch did not sully themselves with a hard nosed value theory, but instead focused their energies on hermeneutics. They can be expected to have felt the threat of being labelled economic determinists, and they had Second World counterparts to distinguish themselves from.

However, the two discourses (cultural and economic) are repelled by more than sentiment. They arise from different methods, both rightly and naturally associated with Marx himself. Marxist art theory is predominantly an extension of and amendment to Hegel's philosophical critique of religion and its artistic forms of representation. Value theory, as we find it in the four volumes of *Capital*, on the other hand, is a science of concrete social relations which is presented in the form of a critique of the mainstream

of political economy as Marx found it. It is worth, then, asking after the relationship of the critique of ideology to the critique of political economy.

There are those who insist that just such a relationship must be drawn out given the contours of contemporary capitalism. The circumstances of the present are meant to have blurred the lines. In a recent article in the *New Left Review*, Sven Lütticken points to art's double aspect in Marxist analysis. "When it comes to value and labor," he writes, "art functions as a subject in two distinct ways: a subject of analysis, and also itself a quasi-subject that actively challenges and produces concepts." Lütticken pushes back against what he reads as Beech's classicism. He contends that art's expressive and representative functions play such an important role in the value relation today that it "spells trouble for the labor theory of value." Just how much trouble Lütticken doesn't say, but it is impossible to glean from what he has written because the divide between the two versions of art-as-subject is not made explicit.

The Critique of Art from Hegel to Marx

The first thing to do is to rehearse for the purposes of clarity what the Hegelian critique of religion and art was and how it serves as background for Marxian ideology critique.

In building an art theory proper (and not merely a theory of beauty or of the senses), Hegel was contributing to our understanding of human consciousness, and more specifically to that of the representations of the mind. He argues that human mindedness is not passive, but active, something that individuals *do*. Further, acts of coming to know are not ultimately a feature of individual consciousness, but necessarily involve institutions that mediate and regulate our knowing activities. Mindedness, then, is not merely a condition, but a historical achievement that communities enjoy, suffer in, and continue to build with and for one another.

The fullest expression of this social form of mindedness—or as Hegel calls it, spirit—must include, as a moment of its development, a coming to terms with the socially mediated bedrock of knowing as such. Spirit, in other words, comes to know itself as Spirit. And this coming to know about the ultimate basis for truth over and above individual life takes its initial form as religion. Religion, for Hegel, is an institution that allows communities to grasp the socially constructed basis for knowledge activities. And this grasping involves art. In Jean Hyppolite's summation: "[Religion's] comprehension of spirit by spirit is a comprehension in the element of

representation, and that is doubtless why art is a moment of every religion and more particularly is characteristic of a certain form of religion.” Art, in this theory, is the representative vehicle for religion’s consciousness building project.

Religious institutions, for Hegel, are a necessary moment in a historical process of social maturation. As such, they give way to higher forms of spirit’s self-knowledge as spirit. Philosophy supersedes religion in giving spirit a genuinely absolute knowledge of itself. In philosophical discourse (and here Hegel has, primarily, his own philosophical work in mind), our communal self-consciousness comes to represent itself as itself, without positing a transcendental beyond, that is, without an opposition of transcendence and immanence. With the Hegelian system, the dichotomy of “on earth” and the “as it is in heaven” is meant to go dead for us.

Left Hegelians in the period leading up to the Revolutions of 1848 took over this Hegelian critique of religion. However, the kind of philosophy or science for which this critique was meant to be a prerequisite varied thinker to thinker. For the young Marx, the kernel of truth in religion’s understanding of transcendence was its protest against worldly conditions as they are. He writes in 1844: “*Religious* suffering is, at one and the same time, the *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions.” Religion and its arts are the institutions of communal self-understanding through representation, the full meaning of which can only be unlocked by a science of social relations and their dynamics. Marx states outright that the critique of religion is “the prerequisite of all criticism.” And while he had yet to fully formulate it at the time of his early response to Hegel, it is reasonable to suggest that the category naturally extends to Marx’s mature critical theory, namely, the critique of political economy.

As Peter Bürger, in his classic study of the Critical Theory tradition and the historical Avant-garde, demonstrates: Adorno [and others, but Adorno will be my focus] models his method of ideology critique on Marx’s early, unsystematic—but highly suggestive—thoughts on religion. Religion, recoded as ideology, requires critique so that the mind of a potentially revolutionary subject (collective or individual) might be motivated to carry out a progressive historical task. Lukacs and Adorno take on the task of critiquing the ideology (essentially religious in a Hegelian sense, even if unchurched) inherent in (or expressed through) individual artworks, novels or musical compositions. Here is Bürger: “For Marx, the critique of religion and the critique of society belong together. Criticism destroys the religious illusions (not the elements of truth in religion)

in order to make man capable of action. [...] In applying this model to individual literary works and groups of works, this goal cannot be taken over *tel quel*.”

And, indeed, Adorno does not. He understood his project as tied to the overarching historical thesis that he developed with Max Horkheimer—that the Enlightenment critique of religion (and its avatars, myth and superstition) failed because Enlightenment itself took on the dogmatic form of its opposite and, here is the well-known phrase, “reverted to myth.” The avant-garde artwork [say, a Schoenberg piano work exhibiting free atonality] by submitting a protest against a decadent and self-undermining Enlightenment, preserves the heart of his heartless world.

The Category of Art in the Theory of Value

We have seen how the category of art took on the role it did in Marxist theory by virtue of its function as vehicle for spiritual self-representation. As we move to discuss value theory, the question becomes: does the Marx of the critique of political economy have something like spirit in mind when he derives the contradictions of capital from the discovery of surplus-value.

Answers to this question have tended to focus on the meaning of the section that ends the first chapter of *Capital* volume one: Marx’s description of the “fetishism” of commodities. It is that section of his critique that directly addresses representation. And here again, we encounter religious knowing. The passage is worth quoting in full:

“The commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labor within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labor as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.”

Because the value of commodities is determined by the abstract, rather than the concrete, labor time socially necessary for their reproduction, value appears to be

determined independently of human beings. This is simply the way it appears to the naive observer by virtue of the conditions under which the observation takes place. It is analogous to the naive observer who quite naturally concludes that the sun revolves around the earth. On my reading of this section, the fact that the religious analogy is just that, an analogy, is key to understanding Marx's meaning.

Fetishism is a term Marx borrowed from the anthropology of his day, but it is roughly the same concept as Hegel's nature religion. The supra-individual is understood to simply *be* some part of the natural world. The properly spiritual is represented as born within something objective. The purpose of making this analogy is to distinguish a naive few of the value of commodities from a scientific view of their determination. Marx mocks political economists of his time and before for maintaining what he deems to be an embarrassingly naive view. With the introduction of the concept of abstract labor, the so-called "fetishism" evaporates for now-properly-oriented reader.

It almost goes without saying that my reading differs considerably from the mainstream of Marxist critical theory. It was Georg Lukacs who, in the 1920's first inflated the concept of fetishism to a totalizing system of social self-representation. In Hegelian terms that would have been intimately familiar to him, Lukacs saw in the fetishism of commodities the very shape of spirit peculiar to [and I dread this term for its lack of specificity] "bourgeois society." Here is Lukacs: "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 capitalist society in all its aspects. Only in this case can the structure of commodity-relations be made to yield a model of all the objective forms of bourgeois society together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them."

The thought that bourgeois society has seriously reverted and remains in the thrall of a kind of nature religion lays the seeds for Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the Enlightenment project. And for all his difference with the German pair, the stress on communal structures of representation will underwrite all of Lukacs's art theory. This reading of the commodity fetish so saturates the Western Marxist tradition, that even so hard nosed a value theorist as Robert Kurz has recourse to a version of it.

He writes: "The central concept of the esoteric Marx, which represents this critical thematization, and with it the emancipatory departure of modernity, is the concept of "fetishism". From this concept, Marx shows that the seeming rationality of capitalist modernity only represents, in a way, the internal rationality of an absurd

objectified system: a kind of secularized belief in things, which is manifested in the abstractions made palpable of the system of commodity production, of its crises, absurdities, and destructive results for the human being and nature. In the autonomization of the so-called economy, in the fetishism of labor, value and money oppose human beings and their own sociability as a foreign and external power. What is scandalous is that this hideous, phantasmagorical and destructive autonomization of dead, economized things took the form of the axiomatic and obvious.”

It is with this concept of the Zombie Nature Religion of modernity, Capitalism the form of religious knowing, that the art theory of bourgeois life gets going. The stakes of art's exceptionalism, I want to suggest, lie precisely in its ability to step outside and criticize this secular devotion at the level of representation. Bloch assigns to art the task of symbolizing the “not-yet” and thereby holding out a place in communal self-consciousness for the overcoming of fetishization. Adorno asks the art theorist to interpret the avant-garde as self-critique of modernity. Lukacs sees in art's representative function a potential propedeutic for the concrete understanding of material conditions. And so on.

What happens, however, to the category of art [capital A, now] if we abandon the spirit theory of capitalism? Within the critique of political economy, one sees right away that art never shows up as such. Art is not a properly economic concept. We can hold the concept together by saying that there are a certain set of skills and achievements that go under this heading. The use-values to which these are put, however, differ considerably.

The work that a graphic designer does in designing a logo for a corporation, for example, is artistic in the sense that the skills are, in some sense, art skills. This labor, however non-subsumable it may be (and I think it is, in fact, non-subsumable) does have a function for a capitalist who acquires the title to the product of this labor. A logo is part of a brand, and branding helps a given capital secure a price for its products that exceeds their value. Apple, to take an obvious example, is able to charge a premium for its branded computers.

A question arises here: is it meaningful for the theory of value to equate this kind of art to the writing of a novel or to the staging of an opera? Each of these cases must be taken in turn and analyzed in terms of its relation to the capital circuit, or the charging of rents, etc. And this analysis would yield a concrete understanding of how each type of labor that we would otherwise group together with others as “art productive” takes place with respect to capital (rather than with respect to Capitalism).

So it is that we can see the scientific understanding of the social relations in our value system as (unlike in Lütticken) simply talking passed the art theory of the commodity fetish tradition. And taking up the scientific perspective does not lock us out of an understanding of art and its emancipation, a recurrent theme in the mainstream of Marxist art theory. The arts are shot through with miserable and contradictory relations of production. I am a music scholar, so to take a music example: an oboist must spend years in a practice room achieving the necessary skill for employment in a small and ever dwindling market for concert musicians. The level of skill required makes it nearly impossible for her to take up more than once instrument seriously, so she must specialize. The repertoire is not determined by the free association of musicians and listeners, which is patently obvious when one examines the various virtuosic orchestral excerpts that she painstakingly commits to memory in anticipation of playing them in an audition context. There is plenty to dislike about the conditions of musical labor in the classical music world and an understanding of these conditions produces, like a photonegative, an idea of better, freer conditions under which this labor could go on.

Emancipation is a question of our concrete social relations delivered from a system whose sole focus is the self-valorization of value. For a Marxist, this is not primarily a matter of transcending a limit to knowledge, which transcendence is aided and abetted by a well-oriented consumption of artworks. It is an overcoming of the value relation, rather than the commodity form. I, for one, am content not to go about describing how art-ing will go about in social relations which are committed to developing human powers, which are their own end.