

Aesthetics of the “Sensuous Supra-Sensuous”

Sami Khatib

I.

In *The Three Penny Lawsuit* (1930) Bertolt Brecht raised the issue of art’s “realist” capacity in the age of capitalism:

The situation has become so complicated because the simple “reproduction of reality” says less than ever about that reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG reveals almost nothing about these institutions. Reality as such has slipped into the domain of the functional. The reification of human relations, the factory, for example, no longer discloses those relations. So there is indeed “something to construct”, something “artificial”, “invented” [“etwas aufzubauen”, etwas “Künstliches”, “Gestelltes”]. Hence, there is in fact a need for art. But the old concept of art, derived from experience, is obsolete. For those who show only the experiential aspect of reality do not reproduce reality itself.¹

Without such an artistic construction, a *Gestelltes*, nothing *real* can be seen of capitalist reality. A merely realist aesthetics of capitalism as a science of sensible, perceptible appearances would thus fall short. In capitalism, relations between humans do not appear as such but as relations of things (*Dinge*), that is, commodities. In other words, the social essence of objective class relations *between* people never directly appears as the subjective experience *of* these people. Objective power relations appear as subjective while their objective dimension is experienced as a relation of things. In *Capital*, vol. 1 (1867/72), Marx called the autonomization of this inverted relation *Entfremdung*, alienation. The workers are alienated by a *fremde Macht*, alien power, that does not appear as such:

This paper contains reworked passages of my earlier essays “Sensuous Supra-Sensuous’: The Aesthetics of Real Abstraction,” in Samir Gandesha and Johan F. Hartle, eds., *Aesthetic Marx* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 49-72, and “Marx, Real Abstraction and the Question of Form,” in Sami R. Khatib, Holger Kuhn, Oona Lochner, Isabel Mehl, and Beate Söntgen, eds., *Critique: The Stakes of Form* (Zürich, Berlin: Diaphanes, 2020), 69-92.

¹ Bertolt Brecht, “The *Three Penny Lawsuit*,” Brecht, Bertolt, *Brecht on Film and Radio*, trans. Marc Silberman (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 164-165; cf. Bertolt Brecht, “Der Dreigroschenprozeß: Ein soziologisches Experiment,” in *Schriften zur Literatur und Kunst 1*, Gesammelte Werke, vol. 18 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), 163.

Since, before he [the worker] enters the process, his own labour has already been alienated [*entfremdet*] from him, appropriated by the capitalist, and incorporated with capital, it now, in the course of the process, constantly objectifies itself so that it becomes a product alien to him [*fremdem Produkt*]. Since the process of production is also the process of the consumption of labour-power by the capitalist, the worker's product is not only constantly converted into commodities, but also into capital, i.e. into value that sucks up the worker's value-creating power, means of subsistence that actually purchase human beings, and means of production that employ the people who are doing the producing.²

While in the everyday alienated labor is experienced as an act of personal dispossession and expropriation, the later stages of capital accumulation and its effects do not appear as a personal social relation; rather, capital manifests itself as an objectified alien power, an abstract relation of things, that is, a domination *by things*. György Lukács (1923) theorized this specifically capitalist form of alienation as *Verdinglichung*, reification.³ Social relations between things (value relations of commodities) express social relations between people (wage relations, class); and, vice versa, social relations between people appear as relations of things (relations between commodities). The material relations of commodities, products, means of production, and the entire complex of the industrial division of labor are *modes of appearance* of social relations between different types of commodity owners (capitalists, wage laborers). However, the social essence of these modes of appearance has no other medium: they appear aesthetically only *as appearance*. This seemingly tautological insight is addressed in Marx's first sentence of *Capital*, vol. 1: "The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an 'immense collection of commodities'; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form."⁴ Hence the empirical analysis of the material composition of these commodities does not reveal anything about their social function and the essence of the wealth of capitalist societies. This is why Marx begins *Capital* with the conceptual genesis of a social form, the commodity form, which in its mode of appearance as concrete commodity contains the essence of social relations in capitalism, that is, class antagonism. In a complementary approach to Marx's conceptual value form analysis, Brecht's art aimed at presenting these social relations aesthetically—on stage.

These are the stakes of Brecht's Epic Theater and its celebrated "V-Effekt," *Verfremdungseffekt* or estrangement effect: dislocating, denaturalizing and estranging the capitalist mode of appearance of alienated social relations. In doing so, Brecht's theater stages

² Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 716; henceforth abbreviated *Capital*.

³ "The essence of commodity-structure has often been pointed out. Its basis is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity', an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature [Grundwesen]: the relation between people." György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967), 83.

⁴ Marx, *Capital*, 123.

something that cannot be sensuously represented in a realist or naturalistic manner. Capitalist reality is uneven and asymmetric; it homogenizes heterogeneity, creates social cohesion through dissociation; it is a world constructed by abstractions, separations, contradictions and antagonisms. In order to present such a reality aesthetically, one needs an *indirect* mode of presentation that relies on artistic devices and constructions. For alienation and de-alienation are not reciprocal operations. Alienated (*ent-fremdete*) social relations can never be made familiar, intimate; the social bond cannot be grounded in some pre-modern or non-alienated social relations, i.e. an “authentic” community, *Gemeinschaft*. Rather, the passage from alienation to de-alienation is itself a mode of alienation.

In the German language, one can denote this passage through a change of the prefix: *Ent-fremdung* (social relations formed by capitalist alienation) is denaturalized and, thereby, made conscious through an act of *Ver-fremdung* (estrangement as artistic technique of Epic Theater, exposing and denaturalizing the naturalized mode of alienated social relations in capitalism). Brecht’s artistic construction, the *Gestellte*, is such a device of estranging the capitalist mode of alienation. Such estrangement does not aim at a contemplative stance towards alienation but performs a practical intervention, displacement and interruption, which modifies and changes the naturalizing effects of capitalist alienation. In other words, in Epic Theater the essence of a character’s class relation does not become visible as such; rather, the character’s class position appears in a different position (*Stellung*), which exposes unfamiliar features of the most familiar. As Brecht put it: in order to present the social function of the capitalist means of production, a factory for instance, “there is indeed ‘something to construct’, something ‘artificial’, ‘invented’ [“etwas aufzubauen”, etwas “Künstliches”, “Gestelltes”].⁵ Invention might not be the best translation here for *Gestelltes*; rather than being new or invented, Brecht points to a set up, artificial (and therefore unfamiliar) *Stellung*, position, of what is already known. Brecht’s estranging move from one position to another remains in the realm of aesthetics yet points to the supra-sensuous essence of social positions in capitalist reality.

Changing the register from theatre to theory, we could conceive of Marx’s project of the “critique of political economy” and its centerpiece, *Capital*, vol. 1, as a de-naturalizing “construction” [*Gestelltes*] in the realm of theory. In a note to his theses “On the Concept of History” (1940), Brecht’s friend Walter Benjamin commented: “The liquidation of the epic moment must be accepted, as Marx did when he wrote *Capital*. He realized that the history of capital could be constructed only within the broad, steel framework [*Gerüst*] of a theory.”⁶ Such a theoretical armature—*Gerüst* also connotes *Rüstung*, armor—has to withstand the temptations of illustrative representation, figurative intuition and empiricist positivism. Marx is concerned with the real world of capitalist reality, its structures and driving forces. How then to *present* this reality in theory without relapsing into the misty realm of empty abstractions? In this paper, I argue that Marx’s presentation of capital relies on a new type of

⁵ Brecht, “The Three Penny Lawsuit,” 165, cf. Brecht, *Der Dreigroschenprozeß*, 163.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003),

aesthetics, an aesthetics of the sensuous supra-sensuous, presented in the medium of theory. As we shall see, such an aesthetics relies on Hegelian dialectics, yet is not reducible to it.

II.

In his *Lectures on Fine Art*, Hegel presented the work of art as a “middle term between pure thought and what is merely external, sensuous, and transient, between nature and finite reality and the infinite freedom of conceptual thinking.”⁷ In the stages of its history, art demonstrates “the depth of a suprasensuous [*übersinnlichen*] world” in the medium of “sensuous [*sinnliche*] reality and finitude.”⁸ Such a theory brings art close to the domain of religion; one might push Hegel even a bit further and make him say that art, in modernity, takes over religion’s role as reconciling mediator between the sensuous and supra-sensuous world. Of course, Hegel’s formulation can be dismissed as 19th century vintage idealism; however, one should not forget that in modern capitalism the “aesthetic force of production is the same as that of productive labor”;⁹ art’s autonomy and labor power are based on the same labor power that produces commodities. And furthermore, without going into detail about the “impure” origins of Hegel’s supra-sensuous world of pure thought, what interests us here is Hegel’s surprisingly materialist insight into the concrete *actuality* of a supra-sensuous dimension in the aesthetic world of finitude and transience. As a mediation of sensuousness and the supra-sensuous, art cannot be divided between binary predicates such as concrete or abstract, real or imaginary, actual or potential, material or spiritual. Art as a middle term and dialectical movement demonstrates the material actuality of spirit.

Hegel’s dialectical coupling of sensuousness and supra-sensuousness returns in Marx, yet under different, materialist, conditions. Beyond Marx, a non-Hegelian afterlife can be found in Walter Benjamin’s early aesthetic theory of the Baroque *Trauerspiel*. Before unpacking this genealogy, let us begin with Marx’s famous chapter on the “fetish character of the commodity,” in which he introduces the aesthetic status of the commodity:

A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a use value, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it satisfies human needs; or that it first takes on these properties as the product of human labour. It is absolutely clear that, by his activity, man changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary,

⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. I, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1975), 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002), 5.

sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a sensuous supra-sensuous thing [*sinnlich übersinnliches Ding*].¹⁰

Bearing Hegel’s aesthetics in mind, the argument is not that Marx simply exchanges the work of art for the commodity. Rather, what interests us here relates to Marx’s mode of presentation. The supra-sensuous dimension of otherwise sensuous commodities is not thought-induced, the result of a merely intellectual abstraction of the theorist. The commodity’s supra-sensuousness is “real,” yet cannot be represented in a “realist” manner. In the commodity there is a different reality, a sur- or sous-reality, at work that calls for a different theoretical set-up. To be sure, the realm of sensuousness already exceeds the scope of experience: no one has ever “seen” an atom; however, we would agree that atoms belong to the realm of the sensible.

Kant’s First Critique¹¹ already demonstrated that transcendental aesthetics and sensuousness are not the same: the aesthetic faculty of sensibility and the logical capacity of understanding are divided, yet only their combination allows for cognition.¹² Hence, the scope of empirical science is not limited to Kant’s transcendental aesthetics. Marx’s discovery of the commodity form, however, introduces a different science that cannot be split between a logical (conceptual) and aesthetic (sensible) realm. Rather, it concerns objects that are real in the material sense, yet whose social substance—value—transcends the realm of sensuous aesthetics. In short, it is Marx’s discovery of the commodity form itself that calls for an aesthetics of the sensuous supra-sensuous. As we shall see, the aesthetic peculiarities of the commodity form do not conform to the Kantian division of the transcendental realms of aesthetic and logic, sensibility and understanding, intuition and conceptual thinking. What Marx calls commodity fetishism is neither an optical nor epistemic illusion on the part of the subject of cognition but the result of the split nature of capitalist reality itself. Commodities as “sensuous supra-sensuous things” are a necessary form of appearance of abstract, yet really existing value-relations: the social structure appears in them in an inverse way. It is not that ideologically produced illusions veil material relations but rather that things produced by capitalist society—commodities in their concreteness—“veil,” that is, invertedly express abstract social relations.

III.

A Marxian aesthetics of the sensuous supra-sensuous hinges on our understanding of what is meant by abstraction in the course of commodity exchange. Abstraction, here, does not designate an intellectual operation of the mind but a really performed action of commodity exchange, which fuses the realms of the sensuous and the supra-sensuous. At first sight,

¹⁰ Marx, *Capital*, 163; trans. modified, cf. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, Erster Band, Marx-Engels-Werke (MEW), vol. 23 (Berlin: Dietz, 1962), 85; henceforth abbreviated *Kapital*.

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹² *Ibid.*, B 75.

commodity abstraction designates the act to equating two empirically different things as commodities by abstracting from their particular “thing-ish” attributes. Following Marx’s *Capital*, the commodity has a dual nature: use value and exchange value. Whereas the former, use value, seems unproblematic as it refers to sensuous intuition as an empirical thing, exchange value expresses an abstract social category, value. As bearer of exchange value, a thing in its character as commodity expresses something that exceeds its inherently qualitative “thing-ish-ness.” According to Marx, things as commodities are posited as equivalents because they can be reduced to a common “substance.”¹³ What Marx in his earlier political-economical manuscripts calls “the common *social substance* of all commodities”¹⁴ in *Capital* he defines as “abstract” or “abstract human labor” in opposition to “concrete labor.”¹⁵ But what does abstraction mean here?

Abstraction derives from the Latin verb *abstrahere*, which commonly means to drag away, remove forcibly, abort, or divert. In philosophy it might also denote an intellectual process of separation by means of reflection: grouping concrete predicates under an abstract denominator. In modern Western philosophy, the intellectual process of abstraction mostly moves from the concrete to the abstract. As we shall see, in Hegelian dialectics and also in Marx’s dialectical materialism we find a different function of abstraction as the real movement of concretion from simple abstractions to concrete totality. For the moment, however, let us concentrate on the series of redoubling abstractions that Marx introduces in *Capital*, vol. I.

From the initial stage of the commodity’s dual character Marx moves on to concrete labor and abstract labor and then to abstract labor as the “substance” of value. Commodities as value-invested “sensuous supra-sensuous” things are measured, mediated and thereby redoubled by money. Value in turn is expressed by (quantitative) exchange values. This expressive relation is not stable but moving and transforming: it expresses a relation of self-valorization, that is, capital. This series of redoubling abstractions is relational and differential, it neither has a proper origin nor a natural substratum.¹⁶ However, it has a subject—the workers whose expenditure of labor power produces concrete labor the differential value of which is addressed by abstract labor. One might object that there are passages in *Capital* 1 where Marx seems to define abstract labor as “an expenditure of human labour power, in the

¹³ Marx, *Capital*, 128.

¹⁴ Marx, *Kapital*, 405f.

¹⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 137.

¹⁶ The “improper,” that is, historical origin of this social essence is, of course, *ursprüngliche Akkumulation*, original accumulation. I have argued elsewhere that the English term “primitive accumulation” is misleading in this context if read in a merely historicist manner. Original or “originary” accumulation, the violent separation of labor power from the means of production that allows for the extraction of “abstract labor” and “surplus value,” does not only designate a primitive stage of capitalism that took place “once upon a time,” but the non-historicizable origin and starting point of each stage of capitalist accumulation. See: Sami Khatib (with lecture notes by Ernest Ah), “The Perpetual Recurrence of Primitive Accumulation: Reading Karl Marx with Rosa Luxemburg,” in Natascha Sadr Haghghian and Ernest Ah, eds., *Beyond Repair* (Berlin: Archive Books, 2020).

physiological sense,”¹⁷ as “essentially the expenditure of human brain, nerves, muscles and sense organs.”¹⁸ Against this physiological definition we are to insist on the social and differential-relational nature of value and its “substance,”¹⁹ that is, abstract labor. For Marx, here, substance is not an empirical essence (in the sense of natural or physiological substratum) but a social relation, constantly moving and transforming itself.²⁰

In the historical process of capital accumulation, however, the “real” subject of value, the bearer of living labor, i.e., the proletariat, is repressed and replaced by the subject of capital, i.e., an “automatic subject”²¹ of self-positing. Marx calls the seemingly autonomous movement of the self-valorization of value the fetish of capital.²² Capital never fully succeeds in repressing this subject: the failure of repressing the proletariat and its dimension of history returns in each and every stage of class struggle. The history of class struggle introduces a non-sublatable dimension of negativity in the self-affirming cycles of capital accumulation. Living labor persists, even in its most deprived and alienated forms.²³ Capitalist alienation thus produces history *as* negativity.

IV.

This overview gives us an idea about the versatility of abstraction in Marx without falling into the traps of a vulgar Hegelian “panlogism” of homogeneous operations of abstraction. Not every abstraction operates the same way. Regarding the initial stage of Marx’s presentation of the value form, we have thus to distinguish between two different operations that nevertheless occur *at the same “time.”* The dual character of the commodity, the split between use value and exchange value, already expresses an abstraction—an abstraction from use value—which allows for the isolation of each commodity’s common qualitative substance, that is, its value. Thereby, the initial abstraction from use value, implied by each commodity’s dual-

¹⁷ Marx, *Capital*, 137

¹⁸ Marx, *Capital*, 164.

¹⁹ Marx, *Capital*, 128.

²⁰ In the history of Marxism, it was Rubin who first made this point clear by differentiating “1) physiologically equal labour,” “2) socially equated labour,” and “3) abstract labour, as used by Marx, or preferably, abstract universal labour (a term which Marx uses in the ‘Critique’).” See I. I. Rubin, “Abstract Labour and Value in Marx’s System,” 1927, stable URL <https://www.marxists.org/archive/rubin/abstract-labour.htm>. The English translation is taken from I.I. Rubin, S.A. Bessonov et al., *Dialektik der Kategorien: Debatte in der UdSSR (1927-29)* (Berlin: VSA, 1975).

²¹ Marx, *Capital*, 255.

²² Cf. chapter 24 (“Interest-Bearing Capital as the Superficial Form of the Capital Relation”) in Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 515ff.

²³ An elaboration of this dimension of history as negativity can be found in my article “The Drive of Capital: Of Monsters, Vampires and Zombies,” *Coils of the Serpent: Journal for the Study of Contemporary Power* 8 (February 2021), 101-113.

character, redoubles itself on the level of exchange value.²⁴ Each exchange value acquires its magnitude in a differential manner with respect to any other exchange value. Marx defines exchange value as the form of appearance of value; value, in turn, is a social relation. Value relations cannot appear as such; they need exchange relations: x commodity A = y commodity B etc. Hence, the value of commodity A does not precede the exchange relation in which it appears. Although expressive, the exchange value appears *before* that which is expressed by it, i.e. value. Value thus does not exist in itself as a stable essence.

This initial abstraction, however, does not cancel out its material aspect. Use values keep on existing, yet their function changes: they become the material vehicle of the movement of value. Commodities as material or symbolic objects thus become the “sachliche Hülle,”²⁵ “objective shell,” of value, expressing social relations. If commodity-things function as the concrete screen of abstract social (value-)relations, how can we grasp the commodity’s aesthetic dimension and its peculiar fusion of sensuousness and supra-sensuousness? Marx’s way to account for this almost alchemical amalgamation is to be found in the oxymoronic German compound “Wertgegenständlichkeit,”²⁶ a term that can only be imperfectly translated as the “value-objectivity.” The compound “Wertgegenständlichkeit” presents a paradoxical venture: it fuses a social category, *Wert* (value), and an objective entity, a *Gegenstand* (object), endowed with a material body.

In capitalist everyday life, the only way to measure, mediate and move the spectral materiality of *Wertgegenständlichkeit* is money in its threefold function: measurement, means of circulation, and capital. Money is a quasi-transcendental—a necessary condition for the possibility of quantifiable relations of value and its “substance”, abstract labor. Money as the general equivalent allows for the socio-temporal transformation of concrete labor (measured by chronometric time) into abstract labor (implying the totality of all social relations in capitalism). Money is the register that allows for this conversion—a literal transubstantiation—and, at the same time, is the very result of the exchange of commodities. As these stages of redoubling abstractions show, commodity abstraction is not an intellectual operation but a real movement with material effects; it fuses the realms of the sensuous and the supra-sensuous. As Alfred Sohn-Rethel put it: “Wherever commodity exchange takes place, it does so in effective ‘abstraction’ from use. This is an abstraction not in mind but in fact.”²⁷ This abstraction “in fact,” however, organizes many facts or, more precisely, creates and organizes a network of emerging and transformation “facts” of abstraction. In her reading of Hegel as a thinker of the “social ontology of abstraction,” Jamila Mascat has offered a more precise understanding of the function abstraction has in modernity: “abstraction is synonymous with ‘the system of all-round interdependence’ that sustains the totality of the

²⁴ I rely here on Samo Tomšič’s path-breaking account in *The Capitalist Unconscious* (London: Verso, 2015), 29.

²⁵ Marx, *Kapital*, 105.

²⁶ Marx, *Kapital*, 66.

²⁷ Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel (London: Macmillan, 1978), 25.

social whole.”²⁸ It is this “system of all-round interdependence”²⁹ that gives birth to concrete reality as a concrete totality made of and from abstractions.

This is why Marx’s critique of political economy does not begin with the world of appearances, concretely existing things, agents on the market, persons and activities which can be seen, perceived or otherwise sensuously intuited. The method of “ascending” from the base level of abstract social relations to the concrete, “grown-together” (*cum-crescere*) level of experienced social reality is outlined in Marx’s earlier draft *Grundrisse* (1857/58), in which he lays bare his own dialectical-materialist departure from Hegelian dialectics: “The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration [*Zusammenfassung*, gathering together] of many determinations, hence unity of the manifold [*Einheit des Mannigfaltigen*].”³⁰ Such a concrete unity is made of and from abstractions. Social concretion is thus a synthetic process of sewing together abstract (that is, less complex, simple) determinations. As a result, we can extract from Marx and Hegel a theory of the “social ontology of abstraction” (Mascot) according to which abstraction is not only the result of a culturally situated transhistorical capacity of the human mind but also the name of a historically specific social relation of modern (capitalist) societies. Indeed, abstraction, mathematical or conceptual, predates modernity. Mascot, therefore, differentiates abstract thought from modern “social abstraction”:

Abstract thought is not a historical outcome produced by modernity, as it designates the proper mode of thinking that belongs to the ahistorical faculty of understanding. By contrast, social abstraction qua *really existing abstraction* constitutes a specific achievement of the modern era, an era torn apart by divisions and antagonisms unknown to the previous ages. Abstraction conceived as a historical phenomenon appears as the most truthful result of a time that has shattered the ancient ethical life, by opposing the individual and the community, by distancing the divine from the human and by substituting infinite reason for finite reflection.³¹

Modern capitalist society is a society in which the social bond is made of abstractions, which appear as separations and social antagonisms. Private property as the exclusive command over goods and living labor power demonstrates how social cohesion is produced by and through division. In each and every concrete private (share in) commodity-ownership, social abstractions are contained without which there would be no social relation.

²⁸ Jamila M. H. Mascot: “Hegel and the advent of modernity: A social ontology of abstraction,” *Radical Philosophy*, vol. 2, no. 1 (February 2018), 30.

²⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 221 (§183).

³⁰ Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin, 1992), 101f. I have changed the existing trans.; cf. Karl Marx, *Grundrissen der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, Marx-Engels-Werke (MEW), vol. 42 (Berlin: Dietz, 1983), 35.

³¹ Jamila M. H. Mascot: “Hegel and the Advent of Modernity: A social Ontology of Abstraction,” *Radical Philosophy*, vol. 2, no. 1 (February 2018), 42.

Combining our initial reading of Marx with Mascot's commentary on Hegel, we could conclude that sensuous supra-sensuousness *is* the aesthetic quality of social ("really existing") abstraction. In light of our earlier remark on Hegel's *Lectures on Fine Art*, it might not come as a surprise that before and after Marx the fusion of the sensuous and the supra-sensuous was theorized in terms of the aesthetic symbol.

V.

Without delving into art history, one of the most basic definitions of the symbol might be the fusion (syn-bolon, throwing together) of a sensuous image and a non- or supra-sensuous meaning. At first sight, the commodity as a political economic category and the symbol as an aesthetic form have not much in common. Jochen Hörisch, however, argues that the commodity form is structured symbolically:

The commodity as a thing partakes in the sphere of meaning and value; it is, by virtue of commodity abstraction, signifier and, at the same time, as a thing signified by commodity abstraction, the signified.³²

Due to its dual character, use value and exchange value, the commodity can function as a symbol in its original meaning as symbolon, designating a process of casting, throwing things together. The two modes of existence of capital, commodity and money, can fuse distinct spheres—the planes of the (supra-sensuous) signified and the (sensuous) signifier, essence (value relation) and appearance (commodity-thing).

As Benjamin argued in his book on the Baroque German *Trauerspiel* ("Mourning Play"), the idealist understanding of the aesthetic symbol leads to *falscher Schein*, the "false semblance of totality."³³ Whereas fragmentary, scattered brittleness is the domain of allegory, the symbol is inextricably connected to illusionary beauty. It is in this sense that Benjamin presents allegory as the aesthetic signature of the age of secularization in early modern times starting in the late sixteenth century. With the implosion of the medieval universe of transcendently guaranteed meaning, allegory and the emblems of death and decay arise: "Allegories are in the realm of thought what ruins are in the realm of things."³⁴ In contrast to allegorical ruinedness, Benjamin frames the symbol as an aesthetic device of illusionary totality. The symbol, however, is not necessarily of illusionary nature. When it is limited to its original domain, that is, for Benjamin, theology, it renders the paradoxical "unity of the sensuous and supra-sensuous object."³⁵ Therefore, the illusion of a false totality as put forward

³² Jochen Hörisch: *Kopf oder Zahl. Die Poesie des Geldes* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), 247, translation mine.

³³ Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2019), 186.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 188.

³⁵ Cf. "Die Einheit von *sinnlichem* und *übersinnlichem* Gegenstand, die Paradoxie des theologischen Symbols wird zu einer Beziehung von Erscheinung und Wesen verzerrt," in Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, Gesammelte Schriften, vol. I, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann

by late-romanticist aesthetics has to be distinguished from a theological, yet irretrievably lost unity of the sensuous and supra-sensuous object. When Marx describes the spectral materiality of the dimension of value inherent to the commodity form, he uses the same adjectives: things as commodities become *sinnlich übersinnliche* things.

Reading Marx with Benjamin, in modern capitalism the aesthetic and theological meaning of the symbol intersect. The quasi-transcendental medium of money creates the illusion of a false totality—as if money were a neutral medium that truly unifies the manifold of things and social relations. This false totality, however, is not a simple illusion but the formal substitution of an inaccessible, impossible unity expressed by the theological symbol. It is precisely this unity of sensuousness and supra-sensuousness that lends the commodity form its “theological” semblance. Whereas the theological symbol always presents a singularity the meaning of which can only be signified by itself, the value form of the commodity is structured by an infinite chain of differential signification. Every commodity “speaks” itself through another commodity. It is not by chance that in *Capital* Marx compares the mutual commerce of commodities and their values to language:

We see, then, that everything our analysis of the value of commodities previously told us is repeated by the linen itself, as it enters into association with another commodity, the coat. Only it reveals its thoughts in a language with which it alone is familiar, the commodity-language [*Warensprache*]. In order to tell us that labour creates its own value in its abstract quality of being human labour, it says that the coat, in so far as it counts as its equal, i.e. is value, consists of the same labour as it does itself.³⁶

This comparison of language and commodity relations is not external. Commodity-language speaks through speech-acts of reversible self-signification: x commodity A “speaks” y commodity B. The commodity’s use value or *Warenkörper*, value-body, is capable of signifying the other commodity’s exchange value. And vice versa, by speaking the universal language of money, commodities as exchange value can express the value of any use value without external referent. This mode of self-signification, however, ultimately exceeds the realm of symbolization. The commodity thus is, as Hörisch suggests, not only a symbol but a super-symbol always already on the verge of being a fetish.³⁷ As a fetish a commodity acts as a socially animated thing endowed with seemingly mystical powers of self-motion and self-signification.

If one shifts the perspective from value to the materiality or “thing-ish-ness” of the commodity, the dialectics of the commodity form reveal its polar opposite. Whereas commodities as exchange values allude to symbolic signification in a “naturalizing” way without cracks or gaps, commodities as use values could appear as the fragmentary and ultimately

Schweppenhäuser, vol. I (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 338, emphasis mine. Eiland correctly translates: “The unity of sensuous and supersensuous object—the paradox of the theological symbol—is distorted into a relation between appearance and essence.” Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, 166.

³⁶ Marx, *Capital*, 143, trans. modified, cf. Marx, *Kapital*, 66.

³⁷ Cf. Jochen Hörisch: *Kopf oder Zahl. Die Poesie des Geldes* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1996, 248.

contingent bearer of value. In other words, within the exchange relation commodities perform their use value dimension in a de-naturalized *allegorical* way—whatever their specific use value may be. In the mid- and late 1930s, especially in the *Arcades Project* and the studies on Baudelaire, Benjamin assembled a series of fragmentary leitmotifs that, if they had been elaborated, could have formed the theoretical kernel of an allegorical reinterpretation of the Marxian commodity form: “The commodity has taken the place of the allegorical mode of apprehension.”³⁸ “Broken down matter: the elevation of the commodity to the status of allegory. Allegory and the fetish character of the commodity.”³⁹ “Allegories stand for that which the commodity makes of the experiences people have in this century.”⁴⁰

From a Marxist vantage point, it might be surprising to suggest a parallel reading of Marx’s fetish character of the commodity and the Baroque allegory. Moving from his earlier studies on German Baroque *Trauerspiel* to his studies on the *Arcades Project* and “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century” Benjamin in a letter from 1935 hinted at this shift of research interest: “Whereas in the former it was the concept of *Trauerspiel*, here it is likely to be the fetish character of commodities.”⁴¹ Summing up his earlier book, he writes:

Allegory, as the sign that is pointedly set off against its meaning, has its place in art as the antithesis to the beautiful appearance ‘*Schein*’ in which signifier and signified flow into each other. Dissolve this brittleness of allegory, and it forfeits all authority.⁴²

In the *Arcades Project*, however, allegory assumes a different status illuminating the historical trajectory of the commodity’s use value dimension in fully developed capitalism. For Benjamin, it is the allegorical way of seeing that is able to perceive the brokenness of things that otherwise function as arbitrary shells of value. Things as ruins only come into view when use values—whatever their specific use—have become obsolete or dysfunctional. Indeed, ruinedness is a mode of being deprived of wholeness or proper use. In this way, allegorical meaning, an arbitrary mode of signification, and the predominance of exchange value over use value converge, suggesting a slightly different understanding of what we earlier called a Marxian aesthetics of the sensuous supra-sensuous. In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin writes:

Through the disorderly fund which his knowledge places at his disposal, the allegorist rummages here and there for a particular piece, holds it next to some other piece, and tests to see if they fit together—that meaning with this image or this image with that meaning. The result can never be known beforehand, for there is no natural mediation

³⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Central Park,” *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, eds. Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 188.

³⁹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 207 (H 2,6).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 328 (J 55,13).

⁴¹ Gershom Scholem, ed., *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932-1940*, trans. Gary Smith and Andre Lefevere (New York: Schocken, 1989), 159.

⁴² Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 374 (J 83a,3).

between the two. But this is just how matters stand with commodity and price. The “metaphysical subtleties” in which the commodity delights, according to Marx, are, above all, the subtleties of price formation. How the price of commodities in each case is arrived at can never quite be foreseen, neither in the course of their production nor later when they enter the market. It is exactly the same with the object in its allegorical existence. At no point is it written in the stars that the allegorist’s profundity will lead it to one meaning rather than another. And though it once may have acquired such a meaning, this can always be withdrawn in favor of a different meaning. The mode of meaning of the commodity *is* its price; it has, as commodity, no other meaning. [...] An inferno rages in the soul of the commodity, for all the seeming tranquility lent it by the price.⁴³

Indeed, we can detect an allegorical mode of signification in the relation that use values entertain vis-à-vis their exchange values and prices. Ultimately, the allegorically assembled meaning, embodied and staged by the material residues of use value, is superseded, annulled by its exchange value, or eventually its price. No price, no meaning is fixed *a priori* or grounded in a natural substratum or a specific configuration of material. The material residues of the commodity’s use value dimension become the contingent embodiment of value, which appears as exchange value and, ultimately, figures as a price. In temporal terms, the commodity thus presents a *split*; its use value and exchange value exist as *unity* only in space. In terms of their diverging temporal trajectories, exchange value does not come into being along with use values: use values are produced in linear time, whereas exchange values can only retroactively be determined on the market within the quasi-transcendental form of money. There is no objective price of a commodity other than its price tag. And yet, this contingent, arbitrary realization of the commodity’s value is nevertheless objective. Its objective validity retroactively supersedes its contingent genesis in a denaturalized way. Value and meaning unfold from the end, sublating the entirety of the modes how they were created. “The mode of meaning of the commodity *is* its price; it has, as commodity, no other meaning,” Benjamin rightly says.

With this reading, however, the fundamental ambiguity of the allegory—its inner dialectical tension between enigmatic fragment character and expressive character as the expression of a conventional meaning—is deflated. If the “[a]llegorical emblems return as commodities,”⁴⁴ allegory-commodities are ultimately meaningless—the result of an equivocal, arbitrary, radically contingent mode of value signification. The commodity’s final price tag eliminates all stained traces of its historical genesis of production and use. Against all odds, Benjamin, however, sided with the perspective of meaning and use value, which he attempted to rescue as allegorical brittleness against the fetishistic semblance of unstained universal exchangeability and autonomous self-signification. His wager was that things as useless ruins

⁴³ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 368–369 (J 80,2/80a,1), translation modified.

⁴⁴ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 183.

of matter—the material residues of deactivated use values, so to speak—unfold their critical dimension when seen from the perspective of what they are *not*: conventional meaning.⁴⁵

VI.

Departing from this Benjaminian predicament, we do not need to favor either perspective over the other; neither use value nor exchange value, neither the material residues of allegorical brokenness nor the semblance of a meaningful totality of symbolic signification. Instead of mourning the ruins of a seemingly lost access to meaning and use, we can detect elements of an aesthetics of the sensuous supra-sensuous in both Marx and Benjamin. Both perspectives share the critical insight in the mutual intertwinement of the medium of presentation and its presented objects. Aesthetics, here, does not refer to a philosophy of fine art, aesthetic judgment of the beautiful or transcendental forms of sensuous intuition; aesthetics is also not limited to aesthetic modes of producing meaning such as allegory and symbol; rather, aesthetics, here, refers to a relational network of really existing abstractions and modes of value signification. In such a world made from and of abstractions, aesthetics reaches beyond the visible and mappable. It is not that we cannot see everything, suffer from limited vision or bad vantage points; rather, Marx's aesthetics of the sensuous supra-sensuous signals the limits of the visual metaphor of theory.

The word “theory” is derived from the Greek word *theorein*, which means to look at, to spectate, to observe, to contemplate, to seize by gaze. Most of the history of Western philosophy, dating back to Plato, is written as a metaphorization and spiritualization of gaze. It was Plato's contempt for the deceptive apparitions of the sensible that made him introduce a pure gaze beyond perception and the limits of physical vision. Theory means to see beyond the perceptible. The Latinized noun “speculation” lies at the core of ancient, medieval and modern philosophy. Mladen Dolar rightly points to the fact that the “history of philosophy could be written as the history of optical metaphors from Plato's cave to Marx's *camera obscura*”⁴⁶ of ideology. The object of theory is not outside its vision, in safe distance but mediated by theory's own way of seeing. What is at stake here has far reaching consequences, undermining the traditional Kantian division of sensual intuition on the one hand and theoretical knowledge on the other. Marx's aesthetics of the sensuous supra-sensuous ultimately points to the visual metaphor of theory and the myth of pure theoretical vision. As Brecht said: something has to be built up. Such artistic (or other) constructions, however, do not function as props on the stage of theory as pure gaze; rather, the construction—its medium—partakes in the changing materiality of its presented, staged image. The commodity as a sensuous supra-sensuous thing is such an image: a presented image and image of presentation, an image without proper origin or referent.

⁴⁵ Cf. “The allegory of the seventeenth century is not a convention of expression but the expression of convention” (Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, 186).

⁴⁶ Mladen Dolar, “Anamorphosis,” *S: Journal of the Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique* 8 (2015), 127.