

Wolfgang Fritz Haug

Critique of commodity aesthetics vs. “unconditional affirmation” (Wyss)¹

Wolfgang Fritz Haug’s classic “Critique of Commodity Aesthetics” has just been republished in an extended, updated version in the edition suhrkamp series: “Followed by commodity aesthetics in high-tech capitalism”, as the new subtitle would have it. The excerpt below takes us back to the days of German unification around 1989 – and straight into the present of advertising and brand communication.

In his book “Ästhetisches Denken” (aesthetic thinking) Wolfgang Iser confesses that even if to him critique of commodity aesthetics appears “slightly antiquated today”, the reason for this is “not that it was refuted but that it was increasingly overtaken by reality”. What Brecht says about crime, namely that it becomes “invisible” once it has reached a certain scale because we wearily look away or march with the stronger battalions, would therefore also hold true for commodity aesthetics. If that which is critically analyzed eludes attention even though it has become ever-increasingly relevant, then economic, political and cultural conditions no doubt foster this effect: the wide-spread precariousness of all relations that drove individuals to individualization, i.e., the termination of the social compromises reached under Fordism and the neo-liberal, uninhibited unleashing of the forces of the market and competition. Moreover, there is the fact that political expectations have been dashed and society's capacity to act on its own account have eroded, leaving it only to its own resources; not to mention the over-commercialization of culture. Intensified and reproduced by the media, the ideological discourses (and the duplicated and concentrated state of mind resulting from it), feedback and intensify that very mindset. For example, when Beat Wyss writes that he prefers affirmative “advertising aesthetics” over a

¹ From *Form. The Making of Design*, Sept. 2009.

critique of commodity aesthetics. The former results from the decision to unhesitatingly consider advertisement purely from an “aesthetic” viewpoint. Of course, it requires sacrificing the intellect along the way. For you are supposed to turn a blind eye to the fact that what advertizing presents in an aesthetic way is commodity capital. The administrators of the ruling system appreciate such a mode of averting our gaze from the dominant rulers. For the intellectuals, the stance implies capitulating to power or, as Freud put it, “identification with the aggressor”. Wyss senses the loss involved, but projects it onto the intellectual stance that he sacrifices. He complains that a critical mind in this terrain amounts to “being enslaved to the commodity between critique and mimesis,” and cites Walter Benjamin as the “prime example” thereof. On the other hand, Wyss praises Andy Warhol for demonstrating coolly and calmly “how the beauty of appearance is created”. Trends to ironically cultivate commodity aesthetics provide succor for such ideological affirmation and this perhaps includes “ironic consumption”, which Norbert Bolz illustrates with the example of people eating at McDonalds even though they could afford something better. Bolz exaggerates somewhat when he ascribes this not exactly representative description of the rich person who opts for junk food to the supposedly new trend to consume “not only goods but [...] also consumption”. Bazon Brock, on the other hand, believes that “the way you can talk about the product is more important than the opportunity to consume it”. If the ‘consumption of consuming’ is supposed to signify more than “just tin”, as Friedrich Engels once put it, then it points up the reflective quality of all consumption, which constitutes the latter’s cultural dimension, namely attaching importance to the ‘how’ and “speaking about” what has been consumed, i.e., instilling it with meaning.

While others have shed their previously critical views, Bazon Brock insists that from the time of the student movement debate “about the power of advertising and commodity aesthetics”, he has been advocating the view that “advertising will turn out to be the revolutionary force, for with its unhesitating severing of the happy message from social reality, it will create a vacuum of empty promises that will eventually implode.” And yet, back then he was referring to capitalism.

Now he applies his “Revolution of Yes” to the collapse of Eastern bloc communism: “Ever since telecommunications technology, which has overcome all earthbound borders, has spread the West’s ad offerings, saying that everyone is welcome to reach the supermarkets’ shelves at will, to have polite bank officials furnish them with sufficient capital, and to move around freely in the paradise of the unemployed who are taken care of, it has only been a matter of time before they are given chance to accept an invitation to enter the empire of freedom of consumption.” The first circumstantial evidence was overwhelming. After the Wall came down, a mass exodus into Western products began. Two years earlier, the long lines outside the adidas store in Budapest, where people were waiting “to get access to commodity wonderland”, gave us a foretaste of the things to come. Even back then, the ironic thing about it was that the Western commodities were produced in Hungary. And while the company claimed that at least the materials used stemmed from the West, as early as 1987 Peter Lückemeier wrote in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* that “the real reason why the products are so popular is, however, most likely not their quality but their Western flair. For years, adidas has been equipping the top athletes of the socialist countries with its products. Yet, this alone can hardly explain the fascination they exert. With the adidas products, Hungarians do not only acquire a tracksuit or a pair of sport shoes but also the *joie de vivre*.” Submitting to the power of the brand myth, the correspondent concluded with the following reflection: “A brand name is anything but sound and fury.” If names, however, are sound and fury, and nonetheless powerful, then it follows that sound and fury are powerful signifiers. We have to posit their power in context. That, after all, is the point of critique.

The mass exodus into Western goods was followed by the exodus of goods to the peoples of the East, and they were preceded by the “sound and fury” of commodity aesthetics. It did not take long before human experience began to grind the myth down. Shortly after German unification, the MD of the Frankfurt branch of the US advertising agency MC&LB complained that “ever more often, Western means of advertising are being destroyed.” Due to a lack of adequate

staff, it was impossible to produce them locally. While there were plenty of unemployed persons in the East seeking jobs, they were not fit for the purposes of brand advertising. “Advertisers from the former GDR,” claimed the agency’s MD Germany, “are used to thinking about the production but not about the consumers.” And as regards those whom the advertising targeted, he suggested it was possible to detect an “increasing aggression towards the inundation with goods that the people in the East cannot afford at the moment.” Author Gabriele Eckart, herself from the former East, describes experiences which would indicate that the lack of spending power was not the sole reason for Easterners’ doubts about the Western world of commodities. She had received a visa and was thus able to take up an invitation to attend the Frankfurt Book Fair and embark on a reading tour in the West. In East Germany, she had mostly held lectures “in churches”, i.e., addressed that side of society that sought to turn its back on the ruling system of the day. “After the euphoria I felt during my first few days,” she noted in her account, which was published in SPIEGEL magazine in 1987, “I started to get nervous. It all seemed a bit too much to me. Too many cabs, bananas and types of cheese. Unlike East Germany, here it is the things that queue in line for customers, so there are queues on both sides. She had the feeling, just as previously Brecht had had while in the United States, that she “discerned something businesslike in the kindness of the conductors, waiters and sales assistants, as if everybody wanted constantly to sell something to me.”

When Bazon Brook simply defines advertising in his book *Der Barbar als Kulturheld* “as a form of communication about objects of everyday life” or “as nothing but the strategically optimized form of the linguistic medium of communication”, he strips the concept of advertising off its core. For its core is the antagonism which benefits from this form precisely by concealing it. In an act of resolute intellectual self-mutilation (and the same act, but in reverse form, was practiced in the East) he demands of himself and all others that we dispense with the “distinction between surface and depth, packaging and being”. He avers that in the future we should instead “cease to ask the critical question as to the relation of nature and appearance”.

The more people grow disenchanted with politics, and the more culture-critical commitment dwindles, the more room there will be for consumerism. The “fun society” of the late 20th century, with its neo-liberal foundations, marginalized culture critique. “In contrast to old [...] media critique” people now welcome ‘significance design’ through advertisements,” Hans Steinert stated in his book *Kulturindustrie*.

He considered the “old media critique” “lachrymose”. Where once there was critique, an enlightened cynical affirmation spread, he said. Norbert Bolz recommended that the design theorists “set out to reinterpret the old critical terms such as ‘commodity aesthetics’ and ‘culture industry’, which would essentially mean: relieving them of their negative thrust.” According to Bolz, after all, culture is an industry, aesthetics is “the theory of designed commodities, and today commodities can only be sold by aesthetics”. He called for the “commodity fetishism to be stripped off its evil touch” and claimed that we needed to “understand: Feelings are not directed at people, but at things.” However, “postmodern consumption”, he opined, filled “the vacuum of strong emotions” in which we live.

In this way, in the discourses of the day, the promise of a use value couched in commodity aesthetics was duplicated and turned against the products of the commodity aestheticians themselves, indeed on the entire sector of those who made the aesthetic promise of use value. And this branch of business was assigned the task of modeling human feelings. Even someone like Axel Honneth eventually stated that “it is the commodity market alone and its wealth of symbols, which can all be emotionally charged, that keeps the anti-utilitarian motifs of the Romantic ideal of love alive today.”² Karl Marx’s critique of the fetishistic inversion of “the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labor as a social relation” into “a relation which exists apart from and outside the

² Axel Honneth, foreword to Eva Illuoz, *Der Konsum der Romantik. Liebe und die kulturellen Widersprüche des Kapitalismus*, (Frankfurt/Main, 2003).

producers”³ has been appropriated and turned into a resolute Yes affirming the things the way they are: “Emotional design assures the transfer of ‘interpersonal’ values into the world of things.”⁴

Mark Siemons has with great perspicacity described the mental state of that epoch in which “reality”, “truth”, and “critique” become the butt of the zeitgeist: “While the economy has integrated ever more sectors of public life into its business model, the public discourse itself seems to increasingly obey the rules of the game of brand communication.”⁵ Siemons proves this with a statement by a student of Niklas Luhmann, namely Dirk Baecker, who emphatically emphasized, “that politicians no longer focus on solving problems but instead on determining which people might under certain circumstances reward the solution of what problems in the form of votes.” In line with the Swiss Hans von Bergen’s notion of “New Marketing”: “So it is not what was once called ‘reality’ that is supposed to define action, but that which one could assume others consider to be reality. [...] The idea is to perfectly serve the end consumer. No wish is to be left unfulfilled.” We can see from this just how much truth there is to the tales that convey the insight that wish fulfillment can be a real threat to the person with the wishes.

Wolfgang Fritz Haug, born in 1936 Esslingen, Germany, was Professor of Philosophy at the Free University of Berlin from 1979 to 2001. In the 1970s, there were heated debates about the term “commodity aesthetics” which he had coined – also and especially in this magazine. See for example the review by Ulrich Boehm in form 58, 1972: www.form.de/archiv. His key works include “Critique of Commodity Aesthetics” (1971), his “Vorlesungen zur Einführung ins Kapital” (1974, re-published 2005), his “Neue Vorlesungen zur Einführung ins Kapital” (2006) “Fascism and Ideology” (1980) and the “Historisch-kritische Wörterbuch des Marxismus,” of which he has been editor since 1994. Today Haug is, among other things, a member of the Scientific Advisory Board of ATTAC. www.wolfgangfritzhaug.de

³ Karl Marx, *Capital I*, tr. Ben Fowkes, (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976), p. 165.

⁴ Bolz 1994, p. 81. The author continues: “Already Karl Kraus had mocked that sleeping with a woman was nothing but a bad alternative to masturbation.”

⁵ Siemons, op. cit.