

INTRODUCTION

The *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics* is a contribution to the social analysis of the fate of sensuality and the development of needs within capitalism. It is a critique in so far as it represents the mode of functioning of its object domain alongside its conditions of possible existence, its contradictory character and its historical development. The intention is not to offer yet another condemnation of advertising manipulation and the like. The tendency of such literature is to draw conclusions by analogy from surface phenomena regarding the supposed basic character of society. Such theories remain in part caught up in surface appearances, which they use to make into absolute assertions about the nature of society; and in part they set up immediate relationships between each isolated phenomenon and a speculatively derived whole. This sort of approach cannot differentiate between the unintended effects of certain processes and the almost conspiratorial effects deliberately produced by a hidden subject.

We do not have to go far to find examples of such dubious theory. It is perhaps worth mentioning in this context my own essay 'Zur Ästhetik von Manipulation' ['On the Aesthetics of Manipulation'], in which these mistakes are apparent.¹ In writing that essay -and I was following famous examples -I gave the impression that I knew absolutely everything about 'the whole'. Accordingly, I approached the individual phenomena by interpreting their features immediately in terms of a theory of 'the whole'. Nevertheless, this first essay -in which incidentally the term 'commodity aesthetics' was coined - contains an insight into a problem unresolved by critical theory, a school of

¹ W. F. Haug 'Zur Ästhetik von Manipulation' in *Das Argument*, year 5 (25) (1963), reprinted in Haug, *Warenästhetik, Sexualität und Herrschaft. Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Frankfurt: Fischer-Taschenbücherei, 1972).

thought which had initially impressed me greatly. In line with this insight a critique of manipulation should explore the conditions within which manipulation can operate, if only to be able to counteract it. However, manipulation could only be effective if it 'somehow' latched on to the 'objective interests' of those being manipulated. 'The masses,' I maintained, 'are being manipulated while pursuing their interests. Manipulative phenomena, therefore, still speak the language of real needs even if it is as if it were an alien expression of those needs which are now estranged and distorted beyond recognition.' I summed up this premise, which contained a programme for research and a political perspective *in nuce*, in one sentence: 'The objective realities of happiness and unhappiness form the basis of manipulation.'² Only a critique which adheres to these moments in its object of criticism can become a determined negation, determined in the sense that it knows what it is aiming at and thus with whom it is allied.

Theorizing 'from the standpoint of resulting phenomena' (Marx) encounters a wealth of empirical phenomena, which may often seem very interesting, but which remains more or less at the mercy of the object domain in its formative concept. 'It is, in reality,' Marx comments on the methodology of a critique of religion, 'much easier to discover by analysis the earthly kernel of the misty creations of religion than to do the opposite, i.e. to develop from the actual, given relations of life the forms in which these have been apotheosized. The latter method is the only materialist, and therefore the only scientific one.'³ The following work applies this method of unfolding the phenomena under investigation from their fundamental economic relations. At the same time it necessarily proceeds from the elementary unit to complex

² Ibid., p. 25 in *Das Argument* 3

³ Karl Marx, *Capital* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), vol. I, pp. 493-4, note 4.

combinations. Our method begins, therefore, with the derivation of its concepts in an analysis of simple exchange. We shall trace the evolution of the functions and interests inherent in exchange relations, up to the emergence of monopoly capitalism. We conclude by considering, in a related field, how this aesthetics is used for the legitimization of state power, as illustrated by the example of fascism as a type of pseudo-socialism. The investigation thus proceeds along several strata in a development from what might be termed base to superstructure.

Although Marx had only acknowledged the relations being studied here in passing, and never analysed them himself -if one overlooks some flashes of insight in his 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts' -the concepts and functional analysis on which this book builds were nevertheless already formulated in *Capital*. The task is not simply one of describing, classifying or interpreting the empirical phenomena, but of deriving them from their economic basis. But this presents the same consequence in the field of commodity aesthetics, as that of which Engels warned *Capital's* English readers: "There is, however, one difficulty we could not spare the reader: the use of certain terms in a sense different from what they have, not only in common life, but in ordinary political economy." Bourgeois economic theory 'has generally been content to take, just as they were, the terms of commercial and industrial life, and to operate with them, entirely failing to see that by so doing it confined itself within the narrow circle of ideas expressed by those terms.'⁴ The derivation of these phenomena and the reconstruction of their development demand a language different from their own.

⁴ Friedrich Engels, 'Preface to the English Edition', in Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 111.

Inevitably in the present context a number of new terms were coined in order to define the sensual phenomena in their specific economic form and function. These terms, such as 'aesthetic abstraction' 'technocracy of sensuality', 'aesthetic promise of usevalue' and 'aesthetic innovation', are defined in the course of this investigation. This terminology, which was introduced in two essays of mine (1969/170),⁵ has now passed the test as an analytical tool, as it has since been usefully employed in several studies and discussions. The most comprehensive concept to be introduced is that of 'commodity aesthetics' itself. It designates a complex which springs from the commodity form of the products and which is functionally determined by exchange-value -a complex of material phenomena and of the sensual subject-object relations conditioned by these phenomena. The analysis of these relations reveals the subjective element in the political economy of capitalism in so far as subjectivity is at once a result and prerequisite of its functioning. In as much as these phenomena are derived from the basic functional system of commodity production, this critique differs not only from theories that immediately wish to interpret 'the whole' starting from every individual phenomenon, but also from those that consider separate phenomena in isolation -and usually without derivation -taken from the complex of commodity aesthetics, e.g. advertising and design. Under this methodology not even the selected phenomena can be adequately comprehended.

The concept of 'aesthetics' is used here in a way that will confuse readers who associate it exclusively with art. Firstly, it is employed in the sense in which it

⁵ W. F. Haug 'Zur Kritik der Warenästhetik' a radio talk printed in *Kursbuch*, 20 (1970), 140-58; reprinted in *Warenästhetik, Sexualität und Herrschaft*; and 'Funktionen des Ästhetischen zur Scheinlösung von Grundwidersprüchen der kapitalistischen Gesellschaft', lecture given at the New Society of Fine Arts, West Berlin and printed in the catalogue to the exhibition 'Functions of Fine Art in our Society' as well as in *Das Argument*, year 13 (64) (1971), 190-213. Both essays are incorporated in the present work.

originally appeared in the language of scholars, as *cognito sensitiva*, a term used to designate sensual understanding. Beyond that, it is used as ambiguously as the context requires, sometimes stressing subjective sensuality, sometimes the role of the sensual object. The term 'commodity aesthetics', specifically, narrows it down in two respects: on the one hand to 'beauty', i.e. an appearance which appeals to the senses; and, on the other hand, to a beauty developed in the service of the realization of exchange-value, whereby commodities are designed to stimulate in the onlooker the desire to possess and the impulse to buy. In so far as that which is beautiful about a commodity appeals to people, it engages their sensual understanding and the sensual interest which in turn determines it. The transformation of the world of useful objects into commodities triggers instinctual responses, and the functional means by which not only the world of sensual objects but also human sensuality itself is remoulded again and again. 'The moulding of sensuality', therefore, is another term used to articulate questions central to this investigation.

I received encouragement to explore this dimension from Norbert Elias, who investigates the evolutionary stages of 'affect moulding' in the Western bourgeoisie in his theory of the civilizing process.⁶ However, where Elias derives the mechanics of the process he describes from a formalization of its phenomenal traits, the critique of commodity aesthetics offers an insight into the concrete economic functional circuits involved, which help to explain with more precision certain processes of affect moulding.

⁶ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* vol. 1 *The History of Manners*, trans. Edmund lephcott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978); vol. 2. *State Formation and Civilization*, trans. Edmund lephcott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982).

The task I set myself, therefore, was to derive the phenomena of commodity aesthetics from their economic basis and to develop and present them within their systematic connections. This could not be achieved by way of empirical analysis. Empirical material is only introduced occasionally, as in a spot-check for exemplary analysis. This procedure has the inevitable disadvantage, it seems to me, of inaccurately shifting the emphasis, if the reader does not constantly keep in mind the limited scope of these illustrations. At each stage of the development, the reader will be able to think up further, perhaps better, examples. For our subject matter is without doubt striking; it goes beyond any fantasy, yet its clarity can outdo any didactic intention of plain-speaking. But precisely therein lies the danger. If approached without due care, and without a well-constructed theory and system of concepts, the material, while seeming obvious, often points us in the wrong direction. It *is* fantastic, but if one allows oneself to be fascinated by it, we will end up producing absurd theories.

The reader is therefore advised to pay particular attention to the development of the concepts. They are offered as tools and are meant to enable the user to understand each phenomenon as it is determined by economic forms and functions and to describe its origin and function respecting different modes of causality and effect.

The field of commodity aesthetics, whose systematic exploration began with this book, merits more detailed study, because of its indisputable significance in underpinning the power relations of late capitalism. For this reason, this book may conclude in the same way as Horkheimer and Adorno's chapter on 'The Culture Industry' in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, with the lapidary phrase 'To

be continued ...'⁷ But if critical theory has not proved suitable for continuation in the sense that, because of its underived and analogicalhermeneutic concepts, it has only ever managed to paraphrase itself endlessly, then this study may be put to the same test.

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Translated by Robert Bock, reworked by the autor.

⁷ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Amsterdam: Querido Verlag N.V., 1947), p. 198. Translation by John Cumming: *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Allen Lane, 1973).